

*Constantine and the ghost of Maxentius*

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There is much controversy in recent scholarship on early fourth-century public buildings in Rome. Scholars disagree about whether the credit for these benefactions is due to Maxentius or to his successor Constantine; and as many as eight major structures have been reassigned from one to the other. At stake in these debates are questions about the political significance of Rome in late antiquity and the continuing ideological value of imperial benefactions there. In this chapter, I will identify the major points of contention, analyze some of their underlying causes, and offer a way not of sorting everything out but of understanding how the messy debates are themselves perhaps the most historically revealing thing. The ambiguities of the architectural patronage stem, I argue, from the broader complexities and contradictions of Constantine's response to Maxentius' legacy. To appreciate this, it will be useful first to outline briefly the historical circumstances behind Maxentius' spectacular rise and equally dramatic fall from power.

Constantine's complicated, ongoing response to Maxentius after his victory at the Milvian Bridge on October 28, 312, was, in an important sense, a response to Rome. Since the time of the Tetrarchy, emperors had openly made their primary residences elsewhere in the empire, scarcely bothering to make even token, ceremonial appearances back in the city of Rome. The emperor Maximian, for example, was based only as far away as Milan, but waited nearly fourteen years before setting foot in the ancient capital.<sup>1</sup> The erstwhile *caput mundi* was fast becoming irrelevant to the governance of the increasingly decentralized empire, as emperors focused their energies and resources on the defense of their fragile, threatened borders. The new cities they founded near these borders were adorned with the elegant palaces, circuses, and porticoes of imported marble befitting an imperial capital (Mayer 2002). This is not to say that Rome was altogether neglected during the Tetrarchy, as the lavish remains of the Baths of Diocletian and

<sup>1</sup> This number is based upon *Pan. Lat.* 7.8.7, which refers to Maximian's triumphal entry into Rome after his Mauretanian victory in 299 as his first (*primo ingressu*) into the city. Pasqualini 1979: 70–77; Nixon 1981; Coarelli 1986; Nixon and Rodgers 1994: 201, n. 32; cf. Barnes 1982: 58.

other structures amply attest (Coarelli 1999a). Despite such impressive benefactions, however, numerous sources reveal the city's displeasure with its Tetrarchic rulers. The harshest report comes from the Christian author Lactantius (*DMP* 17.1–3), who describes Diocletian fleeing Rome after his hostile reception there during his vicennalia celebrations in 304 (his first visit to the city). While Lactantius' obviously biased text should be taken with a grain of salt, other sources confirm the general impression of a humiliated and angry ancient capital, particularly those that explicitly lament the Tetrarchs' absence. A panegyric delivered in Trier in 289, for example, beseeches Maximian:

O Emperor, how much more majestic would that city [Rome] now be, how much better would she celebrate this her birthday, if she were viewing you, surrounded by your Senate, on that famous citadel of Jupiter Capitolinus. Now, doubtless, her citizens are imagining that you are present by flocking to the temples to your divinities and following the practice instituted by our ancestors, by repeatedly invoking Jupiter Stator and Hercules Victor.<sup>2</sup>

There are any number of remarkable features in this passage, not least of which is the direct complaint about the emperors' failure to put in an appearance at Rome on the city's birthday. Also noteworthy is the fact that Jupiter and Hercules are honored not in their generic or universal guises as the Tetrarchic *comites* but rather in the very particular form of their metropolitan Roman cults, Jupiter Stator and Hercules Victor. The Tetrarchs are thus praised, but in distinctly local terms, terms that ultimately honor the ancient capital at least as much as they do the emperors. These double-edged compliments and complaints masquerading as praise offer a glimpse of the tension brewing in Rome in the late-third and early-fourth centuries over the city's relations with the distant emperors.<sup>3</sup> It was this tension that led directly to Maxentius' usurpation.

The passed-over son of a Tetrarch and member of the Roman senate, Maxentius was living on a lavish country estate outside of Rome when, in 306, the emperor Galerius decided unwisely to revoke Rome's ancient tax privileges.<sup>4</sup> The resulting outrage led directly to Maxentius' acclamation as emperor by the citizens and senate of the ancient capital. He eventually

<sup>2</sup> *Pan. Lat.* 10.13.4. All translations of panegyrics are from Nixon and Rodgers 1994. The speaker continues this argument through to the end of his speech, which concludes: "You perceive, O Emperor, how much power there is in the heavenly benefits you have conferred upon us: we still enjoy your presence; we already long for your return" (*Pan. Lat.* 10.14.5). More of the same at *Pan. Lat.* 11.12.1–2.

<sup>3</sup> On the concept of a "praise–blame axis," see Bartsch 1994.

<sup>4</sup> The best biography of Maxentius remains Groag 1930.

managed, with the help of the city's substantial military and monetary resources, to gain control of all of Italy and North Africa. Unlike Constantine's, Maxentius' usurpation was never legitimized by the Tetrarchic college. Despite several attempts to dislodge him, Maxentius held onto power for six years before meeting his watery end at Constantine's hands, just north of the city walls.

Much of the modern historiography has followed Constantinian propagandists like Eusebius and painted Maxentius as a persecutor of Christians and a cruel, illegitimate despot.<sup>5</sup> But some recent scholarship has emphasized how deftly Maxentius manipulated Rome's wounded pride over the long absences of the imperial court.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Maxentius seems to have made the flattery and restoration of Rome the central theme of his regime. Maxentius' epithet of choice was *conservator urbis suae*, the preserver of his city, and to back up this claim he sponsored a series of splendid new buildings in the manner of the great architectural benefactors of the first and second centuries, an imperial practice that had lapsed in the intervening centuries (Daguet-Gagey 1997). His coinage featured the she-wolf and twins as well as the goddess Roma, who was also honored with the rebuilding of her fire-damaged temple on the Velia.<sup>7</sup> Originally constructed by Hadrian, and the largest temple in Rome, the spectacular Temple of Venus and Roma served as the center of the celebration of the ancient festival of the *Parilia* in honor of Rome's birthday, and the cult was closely linked to the Roman Senate, whose members served as priests.<sup>8</sup> The Temple seems to have been at the center of the lavish celebrations sponsored by the emperor Philip the Arab in 248 in honor of Rome's thousandth birthday.<sup>9</sup> Maxentius invested heavily in its reconstruction; one recent study estimates that 10,000 people worked on the project (Monaco 2000: 59). The Maxentian design respected the basic

<sup>5</sup> E.g., *Pan. Lat.* 12.3.6 and 4.3–5, 4.8.3; *Eus. VC* 1.35; *HE* 8.14.3–4. The most steadfast modern believer in the truth of these reports is Timothy Barnes, e.g. Barnes 1981, Barnes 1996 and Barnes 1998. For a cogent critique of his views, Cameron 1983.

<sup>6</sup> Coarelli 1986; Cullhed 1994; Curran 2000; Dumser 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Lupa on the coinage: *RIC* 6, Rome 190–91; Ostia 13, 16–20, 39–42, 51–52. Roma alone on the coinage: *RIC* 6, Rome 135, 143–44, 177–78; Ostia 2. Ticinum 106–09 depict Roma crowned by a figure (or figures) of Victory. Roma with Maxentius: Rome 166; Ticinum 110; and Aquileia 113–14. Roma in her temple: Rome, 162–65, 187, 194–205, 208–13, 258–63, 278–80; Ticinum 84–86, 91–95, 100–05; Aquileia 115–26. On Maxentius' rebuilding of the Temple of Venus and Roma, see now Dumser 2005: 195–282.

<sup>8</sup> Gagé 1936; Boatwright 1987: 99–133. The cult was overseen by twelve priests, the *duodecimviri urbis Romae*. Inscriptions show that all the men who held this office were senators (e.g., *CIL* 6.510). In the later fourth century, the title was embraced by the leading participants in the “pagan” *Kulturkampf* of that era.

<sup>9</sup> Gagé 1936 argues that the temple on Philip's *MILLIARIUM SAECULUM* and *SAECULUM NOVUM* coins, issued for the occasion, was the Temple of Venus and Roma.

outline of Hadrian's temple, but radically altered the fabric. Marble-faced brick substituted for *opus quadratum*, while the wood-beamed, post-and-lintel *cellae* were replaced by concrete barrel vaults terminating in opposed, semi-circular apses. The material splendor of the new Temple of Venus and Roma eloquently expressed Maxentius' *pietas*, his respect for and devotion to the ancient capital and its institutions, symbols, and privileges. Thus, when Constantine entered the city the day after his civil war victory, he would have been cast by much of the city's population in the dubious role of slayer of Rome's greatest benefactor in recent memory; he, in turn, was laying eyes on the ancient capital for the first time in his life.

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There is a degree of unease in the scholarship on architectural patronage in early fourth-century Rome, and it has little to do with the evidence of the buildings themselves. Any security on the subject of Constantinian and Maxentian benefactions is destabilized by a single line in the mid-fourth-century collection of imperial biographies composed by the historian Aurelius Victor. In his discussion of the aftermath of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Victor notes that "all the monuments which he [sc. Maxentius] had built magnificently, the city's sanctuary and basilica, the Senate has dedicated to Flavius [Constantine] because of his meritorious deeds."<sup>10</sup> Maxentius' hand in the rebuilding of the "city's sanctuary" (no doubt the Temple of Venus and Roma) would have been known even without this passage, from both numismatic and other literary sources.<sup>11</sup> But the Basilica, the most architecturally daring design in late antique Rome and to this day one of the city's most imposing monuments, is another story. Victor's casual remark is the only thread by which our knowledge of the sponsorship of this building hangs.<sup>12</sup> Without it, we would have no reason to question the overwhelming textual evidence in support of Constantinian patronage. Two of the three major fourth-century sources for Roman topography, the *Notitia* (Reg. IV) and the Chronograph of 354, refer to the building unequivocally as the Basilica Constantiniana, while the *Curiosum* gives it the neutral title "Basilica Nova" in its regionally-organized list and "Basilica Constantiniana" in its summary section.<sup>13</sup> By the mid-fourth century, in other words, this building was understood to be a Constantinian benefaction. This would have been a reasonable deduction to make, given the colossal seated statue

<sup>10</sup> Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 40.26: *adhuc cuncta opera, quae magnifice construxerat, urbis fanum atque basilicam, Flavii meritis patres sacravere.*

<sup>11</sup> *Chron.* 354, 148M: *hoc imp[erator] (sc. Maxentius) templum Romae arsit et fabricatum est.* On the coins, see above, n. 7.

<sup>12</sup> As noted by Coarelli 1986: 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Chron.* 354, 146 M; *Notitia*, Reg. IV; *Curiosum*, Reg. IV and summaries; Dumser 2005: 64–66.

of Constantine (the marble fragments of which are now in the courtyard of the Conservatori Museum) that filled the building's western apse, and the dedicatory inscriptions in his name that were once no doubt prominently displayed above its entrances (of which no trace remains).

What Victor's comment illustrates mostly clearly is the degree to which history is written by the winners; it is the exception that proves the rule. It reveals how much control Constantine was otherwise able to exert over the historical memory of his civil-war rival, and how thoroughly he was able to expunge the record of Maxentius' good deeds and claim them for himself. The scholarly jitters it has provoked are visible in what can perhaps be described as a "Victor effect" in the recent historiography, in which suspicions have been articulated about any number of monuments that have traditionally been ascribed to Constantine but could in fact be Maxentian. A related phenomenon is the recent flurry of identifications of previously unrecognized Constantinian appropriations of Maxentian buildings, or of Maxentian phases in Constantinian ones. I will discuss some of these cases in detail below, but a quick overview is worthwhile:

- The veracity of Victor's account was long thought to be confirmed by archaeological evidence at the Basilica itself, whose southern entrance and northern apse were believed to show signs of having been added in a secondary – presumably Constantinian – building campaign. These alterations would have had the effect not only of making the structure newly accessible from the *via Sacra*, but also of radically reorienting the interior space, from east–west to south–north. But the scope of Constantine's interventions has been significantly downgraded in the most recent literature: the southern entrance along the *via Sacra* is now thought to have been part of the Maxentian design, while the apse seems to have been added to the plan midway through construction in response to structural, rather than ideological, concerns.<sup>14</sup>
- The brickstamps from the Baths on the Quirinal, a complex credited to Constantine in ancient and medieval sources, may indicate that this project, like the Basilica and the rebuilding of the Temple of Venus and Roma, was in fact chiefly a Maxentian initiative which Constantine simply finished up and claimed as his own.<sup>15</sup>
- The colossal statue of Constantine from the Basilica is now widely believed to have been recarved from a portrait of Maxentius.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Buranelli Le Pera and D'Elia 1986: 247–49; Amici 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Steinby 1986: 142.

<sup>16</sup> Jucker 1983: 55–57; Coarelli 1986: 32; Ensoli 2000a: 88; Varner 2000: 14 and 2004: 287; Deckers 2005: 175. Harrison 1967 and Evers 1991 argued that the statue originally represented Hadrian.

- It has been suggested that the Arch of Constantine was erected originally as an Arch of Maxentius and appropriated and rededicated by Constantine after the civil war.<sup>17</sup>
- A Constantinian inscription recorded in two Renaissance drawings of the Rotunda complex on the via Sacra (the so-called “Temple of Romulus”), in combination with recently discovered archaeological traces of a major renovation to the building’s façade, has been taken as evidence for a Constantinian appropriation of this Maxentian structure.<sup>18</sup>
- It has been proposed that the location of the Lateran Basilica complex, and even the influential, round form of the Baptistery, may be a response to an earlier, Maxentian phase of the site, when it served as the barracks for Maxentius’ praetorian guard.<sup>19</sup>
- There is some evidence, albeit indirect and unpublished, that Constantine undid a Maxentian appropriation of the Neronian Solar Colossus in the Colosseum Valley, and in so doing, presumably made his own claim to the famous statue. In the course of a major conservation campaign at the Arch of Constantine in the 1980s, Adriano La Regina claims to have found fragments of an enormous inscription panel recording the rededication of the Colossus to Maxentius’ deceased son Romulus, built into the interior of the Arch’s attic. These were presumably removed from the statue’s base, buried in the attic of the monument celebrating Maxentius’ defeat, and replaced by a new Constantinian inscription.<sup>20</sup>
- I myself will be adding to this literature in a forthcoming article, in which I argue that the quadrifrontal arch in the Velabrum, called an “*arcus divi Constantini*” in one of the Regionary Catalogues, was in fact built by Maxentius and subsequently appropriated by Constantine.

Of these various reattributions and identifications, Steinby’s concerning the brickstamps at the Quirinal Bath complex has made the greatest impact on the literature.<sup>21</sup> The previously unquestioned attribution of the Baths to Constantine was well-supported by an ancient inscription (*CIL* 6.1750), notices in both Regionary Catalogues, Ammianus Marcellinus (27.3.8),

<sup>17</sup> Knudsen 1989; Hannestad 1994: 66; Ensoli 2000a: 87; Holloway 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Fiore 1981.

<sup>19</sup> Pelliccioni 1975; Krautheimer 1983: 15; Barcelo 1992; Brandt 2001.

<sup>20</sup> The fragmentary inscription panels were discussed in 1988 by Adriano La Regina in an unpublished talk at the ninth Incontro di Studio of the Comitato per Archeologia laziale; see Ensoli 2000a: 86, and Marlowe 2006: 239, n. 34 for further details.

<sup>21</sup> The bath complex is now buried beneath the Palazzo Rospigliosi-Pallavicini but was largely intact and carefully studied by antiquarians in the sixteenth century. Vilucchi 1985 and in *LTUR* 5: 49–51; Astolfi 2003.

and by Aurelius Victor, who notes that Constantine built a bath complex “not much different” from the others in the capital (*de Caes.* 40.27). The well-known statues of Constantine and one of his sons now adorning the balustrade of the Campidoglio and the vestibule of the Lateran Basilica were found in the vicinity of the Quirinal complex, further reinforcing the association. Steinby herself did not hide her shock upon discovering *in situ* a range of Maxentian brickstamps, “but not a single typically Constantinian stamp?” The complex, she concluded, must in fact have been built by Maxentius and subsequently somehow appropriated by his successor. Though there are serious problems with Steinby’s methodology (it hardly seems necessary to point out that Constantine would have had no reason to prohibit his builders from using up their supply of bricks stamped with Maxentian dates; see further Dumser 2005: 33–36), her hypothesis has been widely accepted, in no small part because it fits comfortably with the pattern of Constantinian appropriations of Maxentian benefactions established by Aurelius Victor. Generalizing from these examples, topographers of ancient Rome such as Pensabene downplay Constantine’s overall architectural impact on the city, noting that Constantine “limited himself to completing the projects begun by Maxentius.”<sup>22</sup>

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The implications of this revisionist scholarship are significant, for they reinforce older ideas about Constantine’s Christianity and his strained relations with Rome. Starting from the observation that his greatest architectural efforts were expended upon a series of Christian churches in the city’s outskirts, scholars such as Krautheimer and Alföldi painted an influential portrait of Constantine as fundamentally uninterested in – if not outright hostile to – the city-center and its pagan traditions, including the traditional ideals of the imperial benefactor, which they saw as clashing with his Christianity.<sup>23</sup> Constantine, in short, was seen as a Christian first, and as an emperor only secondarily.<sup>24</sup> This view, predicated upon the belief that Constantine became a fully committed, orthodox Christian after a celestially inspired battlefield conversion in 312 (Lact. *DMP* 44; Eus. *VC* 1.27–32), has recently been challenged from a number of directions by a body of more theoretically sophisticated scholarship.<sup>25</sup> None of these works,

<sup>22</sup> Pensabene 1992: 762. Similar sentiments are expressed by Coarelli 1986: 2; Varner 2000: 22, n. 56; Holloway 2004: 16.

<sup>23</sup> Typical are Alföldi 1948: 91–104; Krautheimer 1983: 7–40; Pohlsander 1996: 60–61.

<sup>24</sup> Similarly Barnes 1981; Elliot 1996; Frascetti 1999; Odahl 2004.

<sup>25</sup> E.g., Grünwald 1990; Cameron 1991 and 1997; Leeb 1992; Evans-Grubb 1995; Digeser 2000; Drake 2000; Wallraff 2001.

however, addressed the question of Constantine's architectural benefactions in Rome. At the same time, the renewed interest in Maxentian patronage largely served to reinforce those older ideas about Constantine and Rome. In many recent publications, a stark line ("una vera rottura," according to Coarelli 1999a: 33) is drawn between Maxentius, the great traditionalist, champion of Rome, and lavish architectural benefactor, and Constantine, the forward-looking Christian innovator who turned his back on the pagan city completely. Typical is the model offered by the *Aurea Roma* exhibit, held in Rome in 2000:

The rout of Maxentius and the triumph of Constantine in 312 mark a profound change in imperial urban policy in Rome. Although hardly irrelevant in terms of quantity, Constantine's building activity participates in a completely changed discourse . . . In few matters as much as their respective building policies in Rome do the Tetrarchic-Maxentian era and that of Constantine truly stand on opposite sides of a ridge dividing two worlds – one the final defense of an expiring world, the other an affirmation of new conceptions . . . Constantine refused to intervene in the central area of the city and – with the possible exception only of the Quirinal Baths – to undertake great public works. His interests were directed toward the creation of a Christian topography, deliberately marginal with respect to the imperial city. Constantine's choice of renouncement was a winning one. Within a few centuries, not even a memory would be preserved of the gigantic Tetrarchic works in the area of the Forum, whereas the urban history of Rome would be organized – down to the present day – around the poles of the Lateran complex and St. Peter's at the Vatican.<sup>26</sup>

This blatantly teleological view, in which Constantine is credited with making the "winning" move on the basis of what would happen within "a few centuries," reflects only how things look from our perspective, long after the fact. There is very little attempt to understand the contemporary motives behind Constantine's choices.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the attributions are seen as a zero-sum game, in which Maxentius' gain necessarily entails Constantine's loss. Either Maxentius cared about traditional architectural patronage, and, by extension, about Rome, or else Constantine did, but not both.

The problem with this argument is its overly polarized view of the two reigns, "stand[ing] on opposite sides of a ridge dividing two worlds," in defiance of the wide-ranging evidence for continuity and borrowing between them. When Constantine came to power in Rome, he showed great clemency toward Maxentius' supporters, for example. In addition to passing an edict against informers, he abstained from any sort of purge of the senatorial

<sup>26</sup> Valenzani 2000: 42–44 (my translation).      <sup>27</sup> An intelligent critique is offered by Hunt 2003.

or administrative ranks.<sup>28</sup> In fact, a remarkable number of the officials appointed by Constantine to offices such as the increasingly powerful urban prefecture had held this or other important offices under Maxentius.<sup>29</sup> Constantine seems to have been more concerned to appoint men from the narrow circle of Rome's oldest, wealthiest, and most established families than to use the office to distance himself from his predecessor in any political, ideological, or religious way.<sup>30</sup> This principle applied even when the officials in question had overseen the persecution of Christians.<sup>31</sup>

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Given the stability within the small circle of men who ran the city in the early fourth century, and the interests (presumably both financial and in terms of civic pride) they would have had in Maxentius' large-scale public works, there is little reason to think that construction of them would not have resumed as soon as the dust of the civil war had settled. What other choice would Constantine have had? One might expect that he would want to tear down such ostentatious symbols of Maxentius' Romaphilia (and popularity). But as Davies has recently shown, there is, in fact, very little (if any) precedent for the active destruction of buildings in Rome with a change in regime, even in the most notorious cases of *damnatio memoriae* (Davies 2000b). He could try to ignore the construction sites in the city-center, with their cranes, raw materials, work-crews, and half-finished structures, or even quietly redirect funds away from them; but such passive aggression would no doubt have angered a wide swath of the Roman population, an audience whom, given recent history, he knew he very much needed to win over. Surely the path of least resistance – and greatest benefit – for Constantine would have been to assume responsibility – and credit – for Maxentius' buildings, finished or not. Indeed, it would have been relatively easy to rewrite the recent past and pretend at the subsequent dedication or

<sup>28</sup> Clemency: Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 40.25; Zos. 2.17.2. Informers: *Cod. Theod.* 10.10.2; cf. Evans-Grubbs 1995: 23, n. 88 and 113.

<sup>29</sup> Chastagnol 1976. Chastagnol 1960: 180–83 and *passim* (as well as Chastagnol 1997) argues that it was under Constantine that the office of the urban prefect was granted most of the powers of civil and judicial administration in Rome. Coarelli 1986: 29 disagrees, arguing that these changes were instituted under Maxentius.

<sup>30</sup> The three urban prefects who served between 312 and 315 had all previously held the post under Maxentius. One of them, Caeionius Rufius Volusianus, had served Maxentius as both urban prefect and praetorian prefect. Two of them, Aradius Rufinus and Annius Anullinus, were related by marriage. Barnes 1982: 110–17; Curran 2000: 58.

<sup>31</sup> Annius Anullinus, for example, had served as proconsul of Africa under Diocletian and apparently enforced the persecutions there, for his name appears frequently in the *Gesta martyrum*. Constantine's policy changed only in 325, with the appointment to the urban prefecture of Acilius Severus, a Christian not born of senatorial rank but *adlectus*.

rededication ceremony that the projects had been Constantine's all along – there would be no need to mention their origins under Maxentius. The situation is comparable to that of Trajan taking over and completing the market and forum in Rome begun (as we know from both archaeological and textual evidence) under Domitian.<sup>32</sup> It is inconceivable that the Domitianic origins of the complex would have been recalled in any official context.

The high degree of pragmatic continuity between Constantine's and Maxentius' regimes thus offers one explanation for the apparent ease with which Constantine appropriated Maxentian projects like the Quirinal Bath complex. At the same time, however, some of these buildings show signs of radical interventions, visible in alterations to their basic design. Many scholars have suggested that with these adaptations, Constantine sought to make his mark on the Maxentian structure, to reify his act of appropriation, and to make the monument in some fundamental way his own. The best-known example of this is the Basilica Nova (fig. 7.1). It has been understood since Nibby's 1819 study that this building's massive northern apse belongs to a secondary construction phase, a fact which has been repeatedly confirmed.<sup>33</sup> From this, Nibby hypothesized that the facing southern entrance portico on the via Sacra was a later addition as well (the original entrance being through the narrow narthex on the building's eastern end), and that both were built by Constantine in conjunction with his appropriation of the structure, as mentioned by Victor (fig. 7.2). The whole of these adaptations would amount to more than the sum of their parts, for it would have the effect of completely reorienting the building, from east–west to south–north. Such a reorientation would, in turn, radically transform how the viewer experienced the extraordinary vaulted space within, as well

<sup>32</sup> Once again, it is Aurelius Victor who provides the crucial data: “Furthermore at Rome he [Trajan] improved and decorated in a more than magnificent fashion a forum and many other structures begun by Domitian” (*de Caes.* 13.5). Likewise Jerome, who, in his Latin translation of Eusebius' *Chronicon*, lists the Forum of Trajan among the “*multa opera Romae*” built by Domitian; see Anderson 1983. These reports are confirmed by Domitianic brick-stamps found in the lower levels and stairs of the Markets of Trajan: Bloch 1947: 53–55, 62; Blake 1959: 105. On this evidence, Anderson 1981 argues that basic plans for the markets as well as the cutting back of the Quirinal slope were completed under Domitian. See also Darwall-Smith 1996: 240–48. On Trajan as the “continuator” of Domitian's legislative and administrative policies, see Waters 1969.

<sup>33</sup> Nibby 1819; most recently, Amici 2005: 57–60 and figs. 2.46–50. The evidence is wide-ranging. For example, the foundations of the original, flat, demolished northern wall were visible and noted by Giacomo Boni in the nineteenth century, as reported by Ashby 1905: 76 (cited by Amici, n. 18). Furthermore, on the exterior of the roof, it is evident that the “ribbing in bipedales at the face of the apse . . . does not bond with the ribbing, also in bipedales, of the face of the barrel vault of the corresponding side aisle” (Amici 2005: 59, with fig. 2.49).



Fig. 7.1 Basilica Nova.

as how the structure fitted into its busy urban surroundings.<sup>34</sup> Nibby's hypothesis was expanded upon in 1932 in a major study of the structure by Minoprio; his interpretation of the Maxentian and Constantinian building phases was widely accepted.<sup>35</sup>

Recent archaeological work at the site, however, suggests that Constantine's interventions may in fact have been more limited, for the southern entrance is now known to have been part of the building's original design.<sup>36</sup> This leaves the northern apse as the product of a later building stage, though the ideological significance of this (still presumably Constantinian)<sup>37</sup> addition has likewise been questioned. The new, monographic study of the building emphasizes the structural purposes served by the addition of this curved element, arguing that it strengthened the northern wall against the countervailing forces of the Velian hill:

<sup>34</sup> The phenomenological effects of the reorientation are explored in Marlowe 2006.

<sup>35</sup> E.g., by Nash 1961: I.180; Boëthius and Ward-Perkins 1970: 502–03; Krautheimer 1980: 8–9, 28; Ward-Perkins 1984: 38; Richardson 1992: 52; Kultermann 1996: 58–59; Bauer 1996: 58; Claridge 1998: 115–16; Curran 2000: 81; Marlowe 2006: 231; and Johnson 2006: 280.

<sup>36</sup> First suggested, albeit cautiously, by Buranelli le Pera and D'Elia 1986: 247–49, with figs. 11 and 12; see now, definitively, Amici 2005: 38–42 and n. 16.

<sup>37</sup> Coarelli 1986: 32f dates the alterations to the late fourth or early fifth centuries; Claridge 1998: 116, Curran 2000: 81, n. 56 and Amici 2005: 72, n. 21 find the earlier date more plausible.

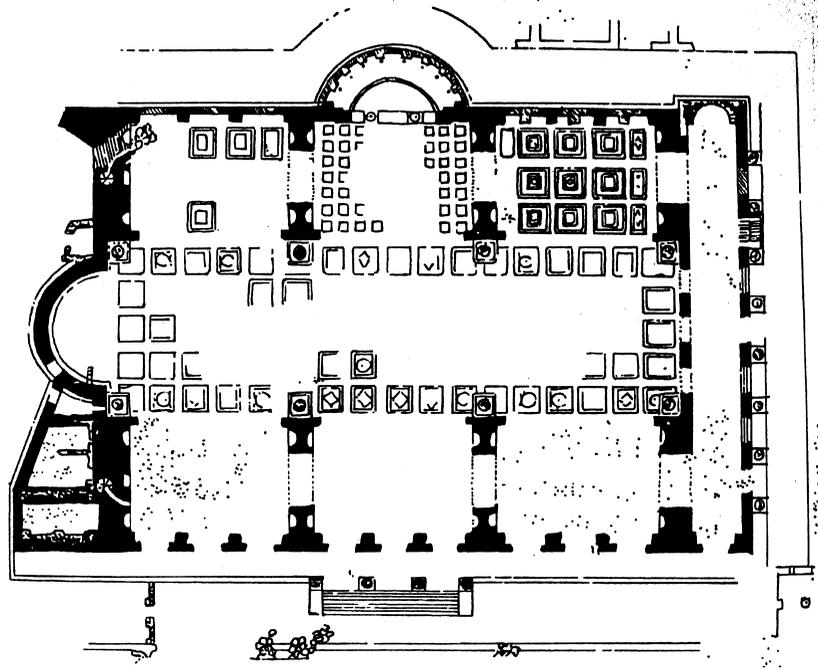


Fig. 7.2 Basilica Nova, plan.

Though there is no proof that the perimeter area to the north and the reinforcing elements [i.e. the apse] were completed during the Constantinian era, it probably became clear that the Basilica needed to be reinforced in a coordinated manner after the settlement that took place during the interruption of the construction work imposed by the civil war between Maxentius and Constantine. In any case, the reinforcing work was performed as a completion of the original architectural project, and not as autonomously developed additions.<sup>38</sup>

The assumption here is that such adaptations are either structurally or ideologically motivated *but not both*. Acceptance of this premise depends on how much meaning one wishes to attach to Constantine's architectural patronage in Rome; arguments can be made for either side. In support of the notion that the building's northern flank was found unexpectedly, in mid-construction, to be in need of reinforcement – and hence of the “non-ideological” reading of the new apse – is the late addition of an analogous, asymmetrical apse at the north end of the narthex.<sup>39</sup> The visual modesty of the narthex apse makes it hard to interpret in any terms other than the

<sup>38</sup> Amici 2005: 60.

<sup>39</sup> Amici 2005: 58 and fig. 2.52.

strictly practical. This is not the case, however, with the gargantuan apse that was added to the north wall of the nave, which, by any measure, was a highly dramatic solution to the problem of how to buttress that side of the building. Had there been a desire to avoid altering the basilica's interior perspective, other, less obtrusive options were available, such as the exterior buttressing arches that the designers had already employed against the building's eastern and western flanks.<sup>40</sup> There is no question that the apse's monumental form would have been quite impressive to the spectator entering from the *via Sacra*. Framed by two pillars in *antis*, two columns, and an entablature, its drum adorned by sixteen large, presumably statue-bearing, niches, and its vault stuccoed and coffered, the apse was designed for maximal visual effect. It must have made the building appear substantially longer across this axis, and exerted a kind of magnetic pull on the spectator, urging him in from the side aisle entrance toward the central nave of the building, where the full, jaw-dropping effect of the 35-meter high vaults would have been visible. Thus, even if the late addition of the apse was motivated by something as banal as "unexpected ground settlement" (Amici 2005: 159), it is undeniable that Constantine made a virtue of necessity. He changed the viewer's experience of the building in ways that would have reinforced his claim to it, a claim further articulated by the recarved colossus in the western apse and the installation of dedicatory inscriptions above the entrances.

Nibby's and Minoprio's notion that Constantine would make highly visible adaptations to a Maxentian structure chiefly for the sake of dramatizing his appropriation of it, even if not the whole story at the Basilica, was influential. It has strongly shaped the way recent archaeological discoveries at the so-called Temple of Romulus, just to the west of the Basilica along the *via Sacra*, have been interpreted (fig. 7.3). This somewhat mysterious building comprises a large round room, 15 meters in diameter, originally covered by a concrete dome pierced at the top by an oculus, and flanked by a pair of long, apsidal halls. On the rotunda's exterior, the central doorway is bordered on three sides by an elegantly carved entablature and framed by a pair of porphyry columns with white marble capitals, which support an elaborate cornice.<sup>41</sup> A curved façade reaches out toward the *via Sacra* and links the central door with the front ends of the flanking halls, in front of which large, green columns stood on high plinths. Inside the rotunda, a wide, monumental, off-axis marble-frame door at the back opened directly onto the southeasternmost hall of the *Templum Pacis*, originally built under Vespasian in AD 75. In conjunction with the rotunda's construction, this hall

<sup>40</sup> Amici 2005: 50 and fig. 2.41 and 2.42.

<sup>41</sup> Most of these elements are *spolia*.



Fig. 7.3 Temple of Romulus.

was radically remodeled, bisected across its width and outfitted with a transverse apse (fig. 4). These alterations transformed the room from a simple rectangular space into one that closely resembled a typical Roman apsidal audience hall.<sup>42</sup>

Maxentius' Rotunda on the *via Sacra* thus functioned as a passageway, offering direct access from this major thoroughfare into the renovated *Templum Pacis*. Its round form negotiated and masked the 22-degree variation in axis between the ancient structures of the Forum and the relatively newer zone of the imperial fora to the north. It also served to broadcast to someone passing along the *via Sacra* the otherwise undetectable transformation that had taken place in the interior space of the Flavian building to the north, and to direct them toward it. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing what kind of activities took place in the now-apsidal southern hall of the *Templum Pacis*, for which the *via Sacra* Rotunda served as such a grandiose vestibule. Its common identification as an audience hall for the urban prefect, however, is not implausible, given its form and size.<sup>43</sup> Finally, as the

<sup>42</sup> Other adaptations to this hall were made concurrently, including the raising of the perimeter walls and their perforation by a row of arched clerestory windows: Tucci 2001; Dumser 2005: 121. In the early sixth century, Pope Felix IV transformed this hall into the Church of SS. Cosma and Damiano, whose subsequent renovations, during the Baroque period, obliterated much of the evidence for the ancient hall.

<sup>43</sup> Frazer 1964: 115–20; Dumser 2005: 162–67 with additional bibliography. The hall is hypothesized to have been the preserve of a very high-ranking but non-imperial official such as

first of three major Maxentian structures that travelers leaving the Roman Forum encountered on the eastward journey up the *via Sacra*, the Rotunda advertised in grand style the generosity of the benefactor of the space the traveler was about to enter.

It would not be surprising if Constantine saw the need to do something about this elegant and ostentatious manifestation of his rival's beneficence. There is, in fact, some evidence that suggests a quite aggressive and highly visible Constantinian intervention here. During excavations in the early 1970s, the foundations of an earlier, rectilinear façade were discovered behind the extant, curved one.<sup>44</sup> It consisted of a flat wall running along the front of the rotunda with projecting walls at either end, forming a rectangular forecourt, and was apparently replaced almost immediately by the curved version.<sup>45</sup> This adaptation is something of a mystery: why go to the trouble of turning a rectilinear forecourt into a curved one? Boëthius and Ward-Perkins assert that "It is hard to suggest any other than purely aesthetic reasons for the modifications to the façade – a deliberate exploitation of the contrast between the convex rotunda and concave forecourt, both framed between the projecting wings."

There is no denying the aesthetic appeal of the contrasting curves. But if the change can be attributed to Constantine, we can imagine ideological motives as well.<sup>46</sup> After all, the rotunda seems to have been more about spectacle than function, serving primarily to aggrandize the Forum entrance to the new apsidal hall behind it. It was already in essence a billboard, a reification of Maxentius' stewardship of the ancient capital and its institutions (perhaps including the urban prefecture). By markedly altering

the urban prefect on the assumption that the emperor himself would have received audiences in the much grander (but similarly apsidal) spaces of either the Basilica up the street or the imperial palace on the Palatine Hill. The association of the *Templum Pacis* with the urban prefecture, based on the location here (i.e., on the other side of the north wall of the hall under discussion) of the Severan *Forma Urbis*, has come under strong criticism in the most recent literature: Rodriguez Almeida 2002: 72–74; Najbjerg and Trimble 2004: 577–83. Likewise, the older identification of the *via Sacra Rotunda* as a Maxentian dynastic monument, based on an overly literal reading of the round structure depicted on his *AETERNAE MEMORIAE* coinage, is convincingly refuted by Dumser 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Fiore 1981: 74–81 and Martini 1981: 96–100.

<sup>45</sup> The excavators also note that the curved façade abuts but is not bonded to the walls of the rotunda or to the projecting side halls, further indicating that the extant façade dates to a secondary building phase. The same conclusions had already been reached by J. B. Ward-Perkins some twenty years earlier but never systematically published; e.g. Boëthius and Ward-Perkins 1970: 505. The masonry characteristics of the curved façade are the same as those of the rotunda proper: Dumser 2005: 129.

<sup>46</sup> The transformation of the façade is credited to Constantine by Heres 1982: 196 as well as by the excavators Fiore and Martini.

its form, Constantine monumentalized his victory over Maxentius and his imposition of a new regime and civic order. The Maxentian rotunda in Constantine's hands was thus like a trophy: enemy arms piled up on the battlefield by the victor, no longer signifying strength and aggression but their opposite, defeat.

The triumphal connotations of this Constantinian appropriation may also have been underscored epigraphically. A detailed drawing of the Rotunda's façade by Pirro Ligorio, completed before the renovations of Pope Pius IV in 1562, records two parts of an inscription: IMP CAES CONSTANTINUS MAXIMUS TRIUMPH and PIUS FELIX AUGUSTUS.<sup>47</sup> These appear both in the upper left-hand corner of the page and again on the architrave of the building's façade. These epigraphic data should be used cautiously, as it may well incorporate Ligorio's own integrations, a practice for which he is well-known; there is also little precedent for an inscription running along an architrave whose surface is not strictly two-dimensional. This does not necessarily mean that the whole text is bogus, however, for Ligorio may have been imaginatively reassembling and re-installing phrases he had in fact read on fallen blocks around the site. Another drawing, by his contemporary Panvinio, likewise records an inscription from this building, but includes only the words MAXIMO . . . ME on one side and CONSTANTIN on the other; this can perhaps be understood as a more conservative transcription of the same fragments.<sup>48</sup> Such an inscription, if genuine, would thus have given a clear ideological charge to Constantine's architectural appropriation of this Maxentian monument.

It is worth noting briefly that this argument can be extended to a number of other buildings. Aurelius Victor explicitly mentions the Temple of Venus and Roma as having been taken over by Constantine, so if Constantine did indeed advertise his appropriations through physical interventions into the structures themselves we would expect to find evidence of it here. Unfortunately, the archaeological evidence for this temple is compromised by numerous post-classical adaptations of the structure, most notably the twelfth-century building of the church and convent of S. Francesca Romana into its frame, as well as the heavy-handed reintegrations under the Fascists. Nevertheless, an archaeological survey of its fabric was conducted from 1998 to 2000, and the preliminary reports do indicate that, immediately following the initial Maxentian building phase, the square niches on either side of the

<sup>47</sup> P. Ligorio, *Cod. Vat. Lat.* 3439, f. 40, cited and discussed by Lupi and Pettinau 1981: 58–59. On Ligorio's archaeological and topographical drawings, see Castagnoli 1952.

<sup>48</sup> Lupi and Pettinau 1981: 59; Grünwald 1990, no. 249; and *CIL* 6.1147. The "ME" can perhaps be read "MP", as in "[TRIU]MP[H]."

central apse were filled in, and a new architrave installed (Monaco 2000: 59). This is as much as can be determined from what is left of the building; presumably these alterations to the interior cellae, if Constantinian, would have been part of a larger, more visible campaign that would have made the Senate's rededication of the building to him visible from the exterior as well.

\* \* \*

Or not. As should be clear by now, none of the evidence for these proposed Constantinian appropriations of Maxentian structures is conclusive or unequivocal; how one chooses to interpret it depends a great deal on one's assumptions regarding Constantine's and Maxentius' relative roles as architectural patrons in Rome.<sup>49</sup> This inevitable ambiguity is the result of many factors: Aurelius Victor's destabilizing comment, the remarkable degree of administrative continuity between the reigns of Maxentius and Constantine, and the high stakes in all interpretations of Constantine's Christianity. In the final section of this essay I will suggest that the ambiguities were themselves advantageous to Constantine, and have direct parallels in Constantinian imagery and rhetoric. In order to see this, we must first look a little more closely at the implications of Constantine's victory over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge in 312.

This victory gave Constantine dominion over the entire western half of the empire; eventually he would wage war on Licinius, the last remaining Tetrarch, to seize the eastern half as well, thereby reuniting the Roman world under a single ruler for the first time in almost a century. In the meantime, however, Maxentius' reign had revealed something quite significant. It had shattered the Tetrarchic fiction that Rome was just another of the empire's many big cities, that the capital was wherever the emperor was.<sup>50</sup> Despite the radical reorganization and decentralization of the imperial administration

<sup>49</sup> In her recent dissertation on Maxentian architecture, for example, E. Dumser comes down strongly on the Maxentian side of the debate. Dumser 2005: 129–30 makes the argument that the switch to a curved façade at the via Sacra Rotunda took place under Maxentius (and not Constantine) by linking the change to another mid-construction alteration to the original design. Four planned windows in the drum of the rotunda were filled in with masonry before the revetment was installed on the interior walls. Dumser suggests that this change was motivated by the fact that the curved façade (unlike the originally planned flat one) blocked the light to the windows, and deduces that the curved façade must have been in place before the revetment, i.e., at a relatively early moment in the building process, i.e., under Maxentius and not Constantine. The argument is plausible but hardly airtight (and does not explain why the flat façade would have been replaced with a curved one in the first place); what it illustrates clearly, in conjunction with the alternative chronology outlined above, is how the privileging of different evidence can yield sharply different results in cases where hard facts are so lacking.

<sup>50</sup> "Rome is where the emperor is," in Herodian's formulation (1.6.5). Mayer 2002: 1–3 and *passim*.

in the third century, the city of Rome still maintained a remarkable degree of what we might call “symbolic capital,” namely its cultural, psychological, and material synonymy with the Roman empire and with imperial history. Maxentius had proven that this symbolic capital, in combination with the city’s financial and military resources, could be converted into real political power. Maxentius’ lingering ghost was the knowledge that the city of Rome presented a tangible threat to Constantine’s hold on power.

Constantine employed a number of cold, hard strategies to diminish this threat. He disbanded Rome’s praetorian guard, transferred the production of gold and silver coinage to a mobile imperial mint, and flooded the senate with new appointees from the provinces.<sup>51</sup> But alongside this virtual emasculation of the ancient capital, there is also evidence of a politics of persuasion. Constantine seems to have realized that the best way to prevent the senate and people of Rome from spawning another usurper would be to convince them that their interests were his interests. There is at least one non-Christian architectural benefaction in Rome that seems to have been entirely Constantine’s, and it is no surprise that it is a crowd-pleaser: a series of lavish embellishments to the Circus Maximus.<sup>52</sup> Even the rather staid Aurelius Victor reports enthusiastically that Constantine “completed the decorations on the Circus Maximus in a marvelous fashion” (*de Caes.* 40.27), while Nazarius’ panegyric offers a rather more purple description: “Lofty porticoes and columns glowing red with gold have given such uncommon adornment to the Circus Maximus itself that people gather there no less eagerly for the sake of the place than for the pleasure of the spectacle” (*Pan. Lat.* 4.35.5). Constantine increased the structure’s capacity with an additional outer ring of seating, and planned to install the 1,800-year-old Heliopolitan obelisk of Thutmose III, the largest in the world, on its spina, making him the first emperor since Caligula to attempt to relocate an original, Pharaonic Egyptian obelisk to Rome.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> On the disbanding of the praetorian guard: see *Pan. Lat.* 12.21.3; 4.33.6; Zos. 2.17.2; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 40.25; cf. Speidel 1994. On the reconfiguration of the imperial mint: Bruun 1961 and M. Alföldi 1963. On the Senate under Constantine: *Pan. Lat.* 4.35.2 and Amm. Marc. 21.10.8; cf. A. Alföldi 1948: 75; Chastagnol 1976: 53–60; Salzman 2002.

<sup>52</sup> Constantine’s interest in the structure may have been motivated in part by its dire need for repairs, for the Chronographer of 354 reports that 13,000 spectators were killed there during the reign of Diocletian, when part of it collapsed. His interventions, however, went well beyond simple repairs: Humphrey 1981: 129.

<sup>53</sup> Under Constantine, the obelisk made it as far as Thebes; the project was finally completed, by means of a specially built ship, by his son, Constantius II (Amm. Marc. 16.10.17, 17.4.12–18; Cass. *Var.* 3.51.8). The events leading to its installation in Rome are also recounted on its base: *CIL* 6.1163, 31249 = *ILS* 736. It has stood since 1587 in the Piazza S. Giovanni in Laterano.

In comparison with the massive scale of Maxentius' building projects in Rome or indeed with Constantine's enormous new spaces for Christian worship on the city's outskirts, Constantine's interventions in the material fabric of the city center appear rather superficial. Strictly in terms of quantity, it may well be correct that, as the *Aurea Roma* catalogue claimed, "in few matters as much as their respective building policies in Rome do the Tetrarchic-Maxentian era and that of Constantine truly stand on opposite sides of a ridge dividing two worlds." But this polarized assessment, as well as the current, revisionist, zero-sum impulse to figure out exactly who built what, loses sight of an important historical aspect, namely, the ideological advantages that *both* emperors sought in their self-fashioning as architectural benefactors of the ancient capital. The less (it turns out) Constantine actually built, the more remarkable his consistent efforts to associate his name with all these structures. It is the increasingly evident gap between rhetoric and reality that is truly historically revealing. Whether he himself actually built the Quirinal Baths and the northern apse of the Basilica Nova, or did as little as simply installing some new, self-aggrandizing statues and inscriptions there, the point is that he thought it worth his while to make sure he got the credit for a long list of public amenities in Rome, despite the city's irrelevance in the radically reconfigured political geography of the post-Tetrarchic empire.

The value of being seen as an architectural benefactor of the ancient capital was a lesson Constantine had learned from his defeated civil war rival, Maxentius. Constantine's aims with regard to his predecessor were deeply paradoxical: he waged war on his memory by emulating his deeds; he emulated him but called him an enemy of state. Nowhere are the ironies more directly evident than on a coin issued in Rome in 313 (*RIC* 6, Rome, 303–4). The coin exactly repeats the language and imagery of Maxentius' standard CONSERVATOR URBIS SUAE type, but changes a single word: the new emperor is the LIBERATOR URBIS SUAE. On the one hand, we can choose to emphasize this changed word, from *conservator* to *liberator*. If Constantine is a liberator, then Maxentius is a tyrant, from whose rapacious clutches Constantine mercifully freed the city. Indeed, the construction of Maxentius as a tyrant and Constantine as a liberator are standard elements in Constantinian imagery and rhetoric, as is apparent in the various inscription panels on his triumphal arch.<sup>54</sup> Constantine cancelled Maxentius' laws, chiseled his name out of inscriptions, and generally followed the pattern of the

<sup>54</sup> The main inscription in the attic refers to Maxentius as a tyrant, while one of the central passageway inscriptions hails Constantine as the *liberator urbis*.

*damnatio memoriae*. Eusebius assures us that Constantine's march on Rome was motivated by his awareness that "the imperial city of the Roman Empire lay oppressed by bondage to a tyrant . . . He declared that his life was not worth living if he were to allow the imperial city to remain in such a plight, and began preparations to overthrow the tyranny."<sup>55</sup> From this perspective, the change in legends on the two numismatic types, from *conservator urbis suae* to *liberator urbis suae*, is a very significant one, underscoring for Constantine the sharp distinction between himself and his predecessor.

Equally significant, however, is the fact that with the exception of that one word, Constantine's coin is identical to Maxentius'. The distinctive reference to "his city" and the depiction of a particular work of architecture are unchanged. No one in Rome in 313 could have looked at this coin without recalling the standard type of Constantine's predecessor. It is hard to believe that this is simply the product of a lazy mint-master, who could not be bothered to come up with new types for the newly installed conqueror of the city. In fact, most of the other Roman coins issued in this period respond quite carefully to Constantinian themes; the most common type, for example, depicts Constantine's patron deity, Sol Invictus.<sup>56</sup> But the reuse of the language and imagery of Constantine's defeated civil war foe on this one coin seems calculated to encourage a comparison between the two emperors, and to suggest that Constantine was, in some fundamental way, *like* Maxentius, even Maxentius' double. At the same time, the nearly identical nature of the two coins would have made the significance of the one changed word stand out all the more clearly.

Critical here is exactly what aspect of Maxentius' regime Constantine is "doubling." It is his relationship to "his city," i.e. to Rome, and its major architectural monuments. It is no accident that the structure depicted on the coin is the spectacular Temple of Venus and Roma, whose rebuilding was the most visible proof of Maxentius' respect for the ancient capital and its traditions. Constantine made it his business to put his mark on his predecessor's architectural benefactions, and thereby to demonstrate that he would take care of "his" city in just the same ways that Maxentius had done, even though he went to such pains in so many other contexts to brand

<sup>55</sup> Eus. VC 1.26. In sections 33–38 of his biography, Eusebius refers to Maxentius as a tyrant eleven times. Constantine's panegyrist Nazarius calls Maxentius a tyrant six times: *Pan. Lat.* 4.6.2, 7.4, 30.1, 31.4, 32.6, 34.4. Grünewald 1990: 64–71.

<sup>56</sup> Typical examples of Constantine's Sol Invictus coinage from Rome: RIC VII 19, 27, 33, 40, 48, 52, 57.

Maxentius a tyrant. If images like the *liberator* coin and acts like the senatorial rededication of the Basilica and Temple fostered a degree of ambiguity about the borders between Maxentian and Constantinian benefactions, so much the better for Constantine. Constantine claimed to have liberated the city from Maxentius, but he was clearly unable to free himself from Maxentius' ghost.

