

The Conversion of Temples in Rome

The conversion of temples into churches has traditionally been explained as a symbol of Christian triumph over pagan religions. This viewpoint has been called into question by modern scholars who maintain that temple conversions were driven primarily by pragmatic motivations. The present article puts both these perspectives to the test by examining the temple conversions in the city of Rome. Furthermore, it addresses the question of what temple conversions can tell us about Christian attitudes towards paganism in Late Antiquity and in the Early Middle Ages.

Introduction

In the field of Late Antiquity, there is an ongoing debate as to whether the end of antiquity was brought about by a clash of religions or by peaceful transformation. The archaeology of temple conversions is especially pertinent to this discussion, because it can yield valuable insights into the motivations of those who converted temples into churches. Thus, it can provide evidence for the existence of a general effort to demolish the pagan past, or, alternatively, for a gradual and essentially nondestructive metamorphosis into a new, Christian world.

Ever since Edward Gibbon's vivid account of the destruction of the Serapeum in Alexandria at the hands of Christians, scholars have tended to view the conversions of temples into churches as clear manifestations of an intolerant Church wishing to express its triumph over paganism.¹ The first scholar to study this phenomenon on the basis of the surviving archaeological evidence was Deichmann (1903–1993), who, in his classic treatment of this subject, compiled a long list of temples converted into churches throughout the empire, which led him to the conclusion that the transformation of ancient sanctuaries was the symbol of what he called the *ecclesia triumphans*.²

I would like to thank Leonard Rutgers, Noel Lenski, and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and criticism. Any remaining mistakes are, of course, my own.

¹ Gibbon 1776–1788, 3: ch. 28. On temple conversion, see Deichmann 1939; Trombley 1993; Sauer 2003. On temple destruction, see Fowden 1978; Sauer 2003; Saradi 2006. On desacralization of religious space and objects, see Caseau 2001. On the seizure of temple estates and the redistribution of temple wealth, see Lenski 2016, 167–78.

² Deichmann 1982, 65 (= 1939, 114): “Die Wandlung des antiken Heiligtums ist das Symbol der *Ecclesia triumphans*.”

More recently, students of temple conversion have attempted to downplay the ideological aspect of the phenomenon, emphasizing instead pragmatic motivations and a general inclination towards reusing buildings and building materials. For example, Vaes, who studied the Christian reutilization of the buildings of classical antiquity, concluded that this type of temple reuse was motivated primarily by practical considerations, specifically the high quality of the techniques and materials used in the building of ancient temples.³

In the following pages, I propose to examine the temple conversions in Rome vis-à-vis the competing notions of triumphalism and pragmatism. This particular focus is worthwhile for several reasons. First of all, the conversion of temples is likely to bring new insights to the ongoing debate as to whether the end of antiquity was brought about by a clash of religions or by peaceful transformation.⁴ Secondly, the case of Rome is particularly promising, since this city witnessed more temple conversions than any other, covering a chronological range from the seventh to the twelfth century.⁵ Finally, the study of temple conversions also ties into a long-standing debate concerning the Christianization of space in late antique Rome. Regarding the construction of the Lateran basilica on the very edge of the city, Krautheimer famously held that the Roman city center was initially avoided to spare the sensibilities of the pagan aristocracy.⁶ More recently, however, scholars such as Brandenburg have preferred to attribute the same phenomenon to a lack of space in the city center.⁷ Addressing a similar issue, the discussion of temple conversions in Rome is expected to shed light on such matters as well. In what follows, I will therefore revisit the temple conversions of Rome, individually and as a group.

The Evidence

There are altogether eleven known temple conversion sites in Rome, at the churches of San Bartolomeo all'Isola, San Basilio, San Lorenzo in Miranda, Santa Maria dei Martiri, Santa Maria de Secundicerio, San Nicola in Carcere, San Nicola dei Cesarini, San Sebastiano al Palatino, Santo Stefano delle Carrozze, Sant'Urbano alla Caffarella, and the oratory of Saints Peter and Paul (now Santa Francesca Romana). As is apparent from the map (see Fig. 1), they are located in the ancient city center, except Sant'Urbano, which is on the Via Appia. In addition, we know of three Mithraea in Rome that were built over

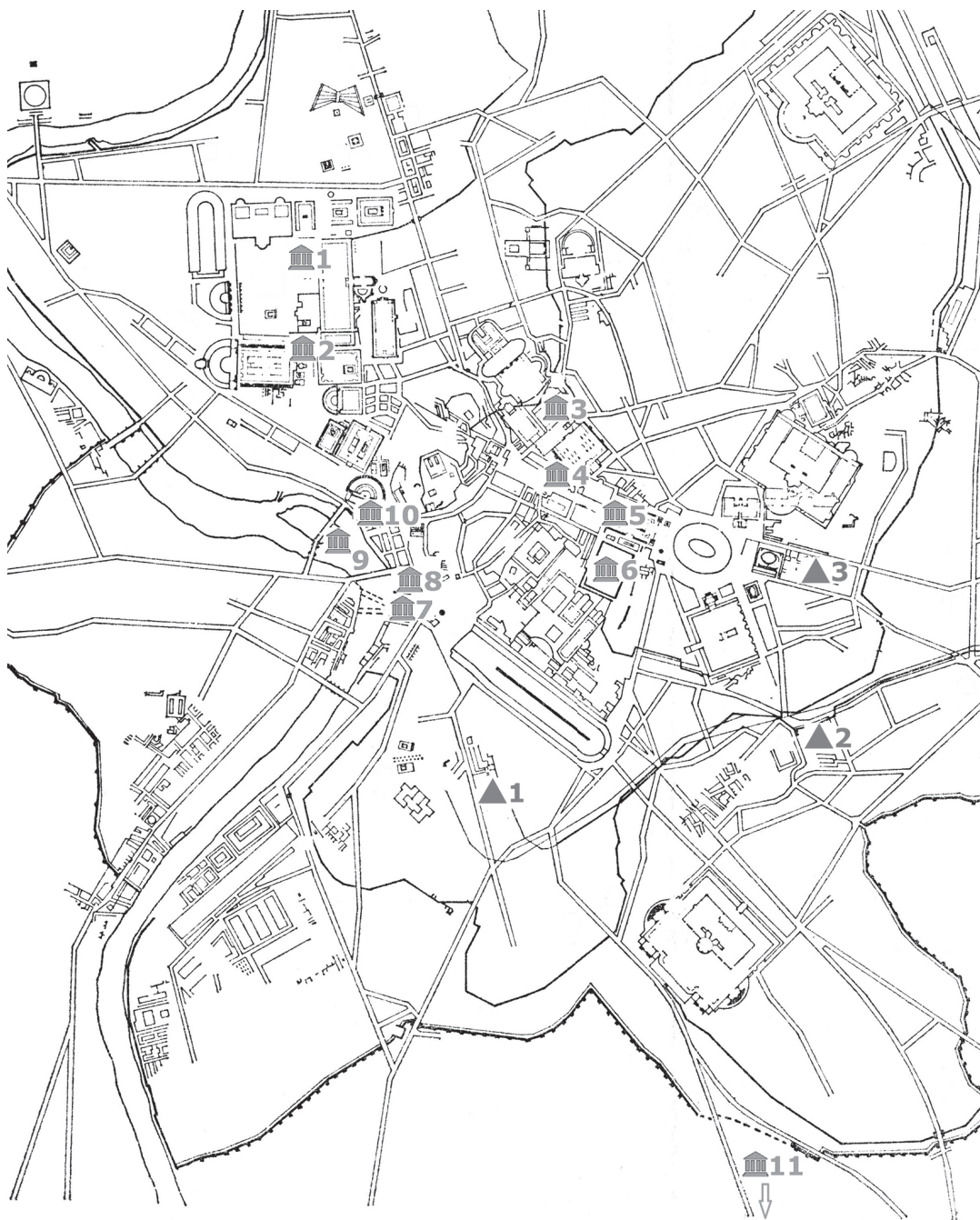
³ Vaes 1990, 23; see also Vaes 1986.

⁴ See Deligiannakis 2011, 323.

⁵ The situation in Rome was the subject of a very short article, Niederer 1953, who presented an incomplete list of temple conversions in Rome and offered no explanation for the phenomenon.

⁶ Krautheimer 1983, 28–29.

⁷ Brandenburg 2005, 36.



Map of converted temples and Mithraea in Rome (map by author). Converted temples (gray façade): 1 Santa Maria dei Martiri; 2 San Nicola dei Cesarini; 3 San Basilio; 4 San Lorenzo in Miranda; 5 Sancti Petrus et Paulus; 6 San Sebastiano al Palatino; 7 Santo Stefano delle Carrozze; 8 Santa Maria de Secundicerio; 9 San Bartolomeo all'Isola; 10 San Nicola in Carcere; 11 Sant'Urbano alla Caffarella. Converted Mithraea (black triangle): 1 Santa Prisca; 2 Santo Stefano Rotondo; 3 San Clemente.

by churches: at San Clemente, Santa Prisca, and Santo Stefano Rotondo, all situated well outside the city center. These Mithraea have traditionally been included in the temple conversions in Rome, but, as I intend to show below, they in fact form a distinct group chronologically, architecturally, topographically, and conceptually.

In order to evaluate whether the conversion of temples in Rome was driven primarily by ideology or by pragmatic considerations, we will place the phenomenon in a wider historical context by contrasting the new construction of churches with the conversion of existing public buildings into churches. For a fuller discussion of the temple conversion sites themselves, the reader is referred to the literature cited in the notes.

The Construction of Great Basilica Churches and Titular Churches (312–499 CE)

In the fourth and fifth century, there were no conversions of temples in Rome at all. Instead, all the evidence that we have points to the new construction of churches on a monumental scale. The fourth century saw the building of four major basilica churches, all of which were built from scratch: the Lateran basilica, St. Peter's, the Liberian basilica, and St. Paul's.⁸ Furthermore, about twenty-five titular churches were established all over the city in the same period and continuing into the fifth century.⁹ They include the following *tituli*: Aemilianae (Santi Quattro Coronati), Anastasiae (Sant'Anastasia), Apostolorum (San Pietro in Vincoli), Caeciliae (Santa Cecilia), Chrysogoni (San Crisogono), Clementis (San Clemente), Crescentianae (San Sisto Vecchio), Cyriaci (once in the Baths of Diocletian),¹⁰ Damasi (San Lorenzo in Damaso), Equitii (Santi Silvestro e Martino ai Monti), Eusebii (Sant'Eusebio), Fasciolae (Santi Nereo e Achilleo),¹¹ Gaii (Santa Susanna), Iulii (Santa Maria in Trastevere), Lucinae (San Lorenzo in Lucina), Marcelli (San Marcello al Corso), Marci (San Marco), Nicomedis (Santi Marcellino e Pietro),¹² Pam-machii (Santi Giovanni e Paolo), Praxedis (Santa Prassede), Priscae (Santa

⁸ One odd exception to this pattern is the church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme. Rather than being built from scratch, it was installed in the imperial Sessorian Palace to house a relic of the cross; see Brandenburg 2005, 103–8.

⁹ A synod of 499 lists 29 *tituli*. Of these, four are either possible duplications—Byzantis (=Pammachii?) and Laurentii (=Damasi?)—or are unknown—Matthaei (perhaps the lost church of San Matteo in Merulana?) and Romani. See Kirsch 1918; Reekmans 1989, 867. On the endowment of these churches, see Hillner 2006; 2007; Bowes 2008, 65–71.

¹⁰ See Carandini 2013, tav. f. t. 10.

¹¹ The *titulus* Fasciolae was evidently situated immediately northwest of the current church of Santi Nereo e Achilleo; see Pavolini 1999.

¹² A structure found southwest of the current church of Santi Marcellino e Pietro is now tentatively identified as the *titulus* Marcellini et Petri (=Nicomedis); cf. Carandini 2013, tav. f. t. 27.

Prisca), Pudentis (Santa Pudenziana), Sabinae (Santa Sabina), Tigridae (Santa Balbina), and Vestinae (San Vitale).

Whereas some of these tituli are assumed to have begun as inconspicuous house churches, it would appear that by 400 CE most of them were reconstructed or newly built in the shape of a *basilica absidata*, echoing the architecture of the great basilicas, albeit on a more modest scale.¹³ For example, the churches of Santa Prisca and San Clemente are generally believed to have been founded in the fourth century, but in each case we see the new construction of a large apsed hall at the beginning of the fifth century. Santa Sabina on the Aventine hill provides a good impression of what such a fifth-century basilica church might have looked like. It should be immediately apparent even to the untrained eye that, for all its variations, a *basilica absidata* is an imposing and easily recognizable monumental building that is emphatically not a Roman temple. The construction of these churches infused the urban landscape with new, Christian focal points, effectively transforming Rome into a city with a much more conspicuous Christian presence than before.¹⁴

Unsurprisingly, the building of all these monumental churches throughout the city went hand in hand with an ever-increasing repression of paganism.¹⁵ The final blow was dealt in 392, when all forms of pagan ritual, including sacrifice, were officially outlawed by the emperor Theodosius under the penalty of death.¹⁶ As a result, temples were stripped of their altars and cult idols. But interestingly enough, in Rome the temple buildings themselves were left alone, unlike in many places in the east.¹⁷ In the fifth century, there were still no conversions of temples in Rome.

What is perhaps most remarkable about the nondestruction of temples is that it stands in stark contrast to known instances of the destruction of Mithraea. Of particular interest for the present inquiry are three large Mithraea that were arduously destroyed, filled with rubble, and built over by churches: Santa Prisca (around 400),¹⁸ San Clemente (around 410),¹⁹ and

¹³ Apsed basilicas are visible or documented at sixteen of the titular churches; see Carandini 2013, tav. f. t. 10, 14, 15, 18, 20, 24, 25, 26, 27, 31. Furthermore, archaeological evidence permits the reconstruction of basilical churches at four *tituli*: Damasi, Gaii, Lucinae, Prisca; see Carandini 2013, tav. f. t. 9, 10, 13, 30; Krautheimer et al. 1937–1977, 4: plate 15. No evidence for the presence of an apsed basilica has as yet been found at the following five *tituli*: Equitii, Eusebii, Fasciolae, Marcelli, Prassede; see Carandini 2013, tav. f. t. 14, 15, 16, 20, 31.

¹⁴ On the Christianization of the topography of Rome, see Curran 2000; Spera 2013.

¹⁵ See Chuvin 1990.

¹⁶ *CTh* 16.10.12.

¹⁷ For the situation in the East, see Fowden 1978; Hahn, Emmel, and Gotter 2008.

¹⁸ On the Mithraeum: Andreussi 1996, 268–69; Coarelli 2007, 341–44; cf. Carandini 2013, tav. 168; tav. f. t. 30. On the church: Krautheimer et al. 1937–1977, 3: 260–76; Buchowiecki 1967–1997, 3: 629–49; Zanotti 1999, 162–63; Pensabene 2015, 573–76.

¹⁹ On the Mithraeum, see: Della Giovampaola 1996, 257–59; Claridge 2010, 319–23; cf. Carandini 2013, tav. 116; tav. f. t. 20. On the church, see Krautheimer et al. 1937–1977, 1: 117–36;

Santo Stefano Rotondo (around 450).²⁰ One striking feature of their “conversion” is that, until these Mithraea were rediscovered by archaeologists, there were no visible clues attesting to their presence. They had been completely erased.²¹

Viewed against the background of the city-wide building of new churches, the fact that three such churches were built on top of Mithraea must be understood to be highly ideological in nature. Quite tellingly, the cult rooms of the Mithraea were not reused in any way except to form part of the foundation of the new churches.²² Instead, the building of churches on these sites physically erased these particular remnants of the pagan past and overwrote them with a conspicuous Christian presence. Remarkably, we find no such acts of complete destruction in the former temples of Rome, either in this period or in the next.

The Conversion of Temples and Other Public Buildings into Churches (500–1200 CE)

In the sixth century, the foundation of new basilicas and titular churches came to a grinding halt. The last great basilica to be built from scratch was that of Santi Apostoli Filippo e Giacomo (556–561),²³ founded shortly after the close of the Gothic War, but this appears to have been an exception. A comparison of the synod lists of 499 and 595 shows that in the meantime no new titular churches were founded at all.²⁴ Instead, we see a marked shift towards the foundation of smaller, nontitular churches and *diaconiae*.²⁵ At the same time, we find the first instances of public buildings being converted into churches.²⁶ The common pattern appears to be that from 500 onwards, the Church built wherever it could, to the extent that it could afford to do so.

Buchowiecki 1967–1997, 1: 541–86; Guidobaldi 1993, 278–79; Webb 2001, 87–92; Claussen 2002, 299–47; Pensabene 2015, 208–16; cf. Carandini 2013, tav. 122.

²⁰ On the Mithraeum, see: Lissi Caronna 1993, 251; Claridge 2010, 345–47; cf. Carandini 2013, tav. f. t. 26. On the church, see Krautheimer et al. 1937–1977, 4: 199–240; Buchowiecki 1967–1997, 3: 943–79; Brandenburg 1999, 373–77; Webb 2001, 96–98; Pensabene 2015, 273–82; cf. Carandini 2013, tav. 144.

²¹ See Schuddeboom 2016.

²² This is all the more remarkable when we take into account that church builders actually went to the trouble of quarrying underground chambers from the foundations of the converted temples at San Basilio, San Bartolomeo, and Sant’Urbano; see also Santa Maria in Cosmedin, where a crypt was quarried from the podium of the Ara Maxima of Hercules. In the case of the Mithraea, the desire to erase these pagan cult rooms was evidently greater than the practical advantage of retaining them as underground chambers.

²³ Later dedicated to all twelve apostles: Santi Dodici Apostoli.

²⁴ Kirsch 1918.

²⁵ For an overview, see Guidobaldi 2001.

²⁶ S. Andrea Catabarbara (468–483) is sometimes mentioned as the first conversion of a public building into a church; see, for example, Kelly 1986 s. v. Simplicius. However, the so-called basilica

In about 527, the rectangular hall in the southern corner of Vespasian's Forum Pacis and the connected round hall on the Via Sacra (the so-called Temple of Romulus) were converted by Pope Felix IV (526–530) into the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano.²⁷ The nave of the church occupies the southern half of the hall, while the large apse protrudes into the northern half, and the early fourth-century rotunda with its ancient bronze doors—*spolia* from an older building—was retained as the entrance hall of the church. The architecture of both the rectangular hall and the rotunda was left intact, including the main entrance, which does not line up with the nave of the church but sits at an angle.²⁸ Even though the rectangular hall was never used as a temple and the function of the rotunda is still a matter of debate, this early conversion of ancient buildings into a church may be viewed as a precursor to the conversions of temples in Rome.²⁹

There are several more examples of secular buildings being converted into churches: for example, Santa Maria Antiqua in the guard-house next to the ramp to the Palatine (565–578),³⁰ Sant'Adriano in the Senate House (around 630),³¹ Sant'Angelo in Pescheria in the Porticus Octaviae (755 or 770),³² and Santa Barbara dei Librai in the Theater of Pompey (eleventh century).³³

The first conversion of an actual temple in Rome was that of the Pantheon into the church of Santa Maria dei Martiri (around 609).³⁴ According

of Junius Bassus, into which the church was built, was actually the lavishly decorated reception hall of a private domus; see Cecchelli 1993, 39; Guidobaldi 1995, 69–70; Brandenburg 2005, 218–19.

²⁷ On the ancient buildings, see Papi 1999, 210–12; Coarelli 2007, 89–91; Claridge 2010, 113–15, 173; cf. Carandini 2013, tav. 100b; tav. f. t. 19. On the church, see Krautheimer et al. 1937–1977, 1: 137–43; Buchowiecki 1967–1997, 1: 586–603; Episcopo 1993, 324–25; Tucci 2001; Webb 2001, 126–29; Claussen 2002, 360–85; Pensabene 2015, 314–18.

²⁸ Webb presents an inaccurate floorplan.

²⁹ Deichmann mistakenly believed that the rectangular hall was a sanctuary of the Lares, hence the inclusion of this building in his catalogue of temple conversions; Deichmann 1982, 85–86 (= 1939, 134–35) no. 80.

³⁰ On the ancient building, see Coarelli 2007, 77–78; Claridge 2010, 95–98; cf. Carandini 2013, tav. 48; tav. f. t. 19. On the church, see Krautheimer et al. 1937–1977, 2: 249–68; Buchowiecki 1967–1997, 2: 433–69; Zanotti 1996, 214–16; Webb 2001, 112–22; and Pensabene 2015, 355–57.

³¹ On the ancient building, see Tortorici 1993, 332–34; Coarelli 2007, 57–58; Claridge 2010, 71–75. On the church, see Episcopo 1996, 8–9; Claussen 2002, 20–38; Pensabene 2015, 350–54. Technically speaking, the Senate House was a *templum*; see Talbert 1984, 113. Regardless, I do not consider its conversion to be an example of temple conversion, because it is highly doubtful that anyone living in the seventh century would have recognized it as such.

³² On the ancient building, see Viscogliosi 1999, 141–45; Coarelli 2007, 271–72; and Claridge 2010, 253–56. On the church see Buchowiecki 1967–1997, 1: 384–91; Webb 2001, 165–66; Claussen 2002, 78–82; Pensabene 2015, 329–30.

³³ On the ancient building, see Gros 1999, 35–38; Coarelli 2007, 283; Claridge 2010, 239–41; Pensabene 2015, 324–26. On the church see Buchowiecki 1967–1997, 1: 433–35.

³⁴ On the temple, see Ziolkowki 1999, 54–61; Coarelli 2007, 286–89; Claridge 2010, 226–32; cf. Carandini 2013, tav. 276; tav. f. t. 14. On the church, see Buchowiecki 1967–1997, 2: 654–88; De Blaauw 1994; Tommasi 1996, 218; Webb 2001, 149–51; Pensabene 2015, 323–24.

to tradition, the Byzantine emperor Phocas gave this ancient temple to Pope Boniface IV.³⁵ Quite unlike the Mithraea discussed above, the conversion of the Pantheon is an example of the comprehensive takeover of a temple with minimal changes to its architecture. There are four more cases in Rome where an entire temple building was converted into a church: San Lorenzo in Miranda on the Via Sacra, Santa Maria de Secundicerio and Santo Stefano delle Carrozze in the Forum Boarium, and Sant'Urbano alla Caffarella on the Via Appia. San Lorenzo in Miranda was built into the remains of the temple of Antoninus and Faustina, leaving the *cella* walls and the ten monumental columns intact.³⁶ Even though there are no firm archaeological data for the date of conversion, and although the first documentary evidence for the existence of a monastic church on this site dates from 1074, it is generally assumed that the temple was converted in the seventh or eighth century.³⁷ In the Forum Boarium, the temple of the harbor god Portunus was converted into the church of Santa Maria de Secundicerio by a certain Stephanus, secundicerius of Pope John VIII (872–882).³⁸ The church occupied the whole *cella*, windows were cut into the *cella* walls, and at some time during the Middle Ages the intercolumniations of the colonnade in front were walled up. In 1925, these modifications were reversed, giving the temple its present appearance. The nearby round temple of Hercules Victor was converted into the church of Santo Stefano delle Carrozze at an unknown date.³⁹ One of the twenty columns is missing, and the roof and top part of the *cella* wall had to be restored in the twelfth century, but the building has otherwise survived the

³⁵ *Lib. Pont.* 69.

³⁶ On the temple, see Cassatella 1993, 46–47; Coarelli 2007, 92–93; Claridge 2010, 111–12; cf. Carandini 2013, tav. 103; tav. f. t. 19. On the church, see Buchowiecki 1967–1997, 2: 282–284; Coates-Stephens 1997, 218–19; Mondini 2010, 311–16; Pensabene 2015, 309. The grooves in the columns are thought to have been carved to fix ropes in an attempt to pull down the building in Late Antiquity; see Coarelli 2007, 93.

³⁷ See Platner and Ashby 1926, 14; Buchowiecki 1967–1997, 2: 282; Cassatella 1993, 46; Claridge 2010, 111. The good state of preservation of the columns and of the greater part of the *cella* walls seems to support this idea of an early conversion. Some scholars, however, have cautiously opted for a mid-eleventh-century conversion: Coates-Stephens 1997, 218, for example, and Bayliss 2004, 128.

³⁸ On the temple, see Buzzetti 1999, 153–54; Coarelli 2007, 316; Claridge 2010, 285–86; cf. Carandini 2013, tav. 172; tav. f. t. 19. On the church, see Buchowiecki 1967–1997, 3: 301–6; Coates-Stephens 1997, 216–17; Webb 2001, 178–81. On the medieval name of the church, see Osborne 1988. Since the fifteenth century, the church has been known as Santa Maria Egiziaca.

³⁹ On the temple, see Coarelli 1996b, 22–23; Claridge 2010, 287–88; cf. Carandini 2013, tav. 174a and tav. f. t. 25. On the church, see Buchowiecki 1967–1997, 3: 939–42. If the temple was converted in the eighth or ninth century, that would account for its good state of preservation. The church of St. Stephen is first mentioned, however, in 1140 in a papal bull of Innocent II (1130–1143). It was later dubbed Santo Stefano delle Carrozze (“St. Stephen of the carriages”), presumably to avoid confusion with its namesake on the Caelian hill. In the seventeenth century it was renamed Santa Maria del Sole, and it was deconsecrated by Napoleon in the early nineteenth century.

ages virtually intact. The church of Sant'Urbano alla Caffarella was built into the *cella* of the temple of Ceres and Faustina in the second half of the ninth century.⁴⁰ This temple, too, was converted in its entirety.

In addition, there were also churches whose architectural origins as pagan temples were considerably less conspicuous, since these temples were already in a severely dilapidated state when churches were finally built into them. The church of San Nicola dei Cesarini was built into the northernmost of the four republican temples, that of Juturna, in Largo Argentina in the eighth or ninth century.⁴¹ It occupied the *cella* and northern colonnade of the temple, which was apparently in a state of disrepair. The intercolumniations of the northern colonnade were built up to create a new wall instead of the northern *cella* wall, and an apse was created at the western end of the *cella*. In the eleventh century, another church, San Nicola in Carcere, was built into the temple of Juno Sospita in the Forum Holitorium, incorporating parts of the two adjacent temples.⁴² Of the middle temple, the whole podium was used, as well as seven columns, three of which can still be recognized in the modern façade. Seven columns of the southern temple (of Spes) and eight of the northern temple (of Janus) were incorporated into the exterior walls, which could not be seen in the Middle Ages, because the church was built in on both sides.

The following four churches were in effect new constructions (rather than adaptations of existing buildings) that were merely built upon the podia of ruined temples. Pope Paul I (757–767) had an oratory of Saints Peter and Paul built into the western vestibule of the great temple of Venus and Roma (around 760).⁴³ The temple itself was apparently in a state of decay by that time, since in the preceding century the Byzantine emperor Heraclius had already given Pope Honorius I (625–638) permission to strip the building of its bronze roof tiles. A little-known church of San Basilio was built upon the podium of the

⁴⁰ On the temple, see Coarelli 2007, 392; Maiuro 2008, 194–96. On the church, see Coates-Stephens 1997, 218; Pensabene 2015, 489–91.

⁴¹ On the temple, see Coarelli 1996d, 162–63; Claridge 2010, 243; cf. Carandini 2013, tav. 217; tav. f. t. 14. On the church, see Buchowiecki 1967–1997, 3: 395–401; Pensabene 2015, 560–65. It is also called San Nicola dei Calcarari after the nearby limekilns. On the date of the conversion, see Santangeli Valenzani 1994, 77–78. The church was completely renovated and reconsecrated in 1132 by Innocent II (1130–1143).

⁴² On the temple, see Coarelli 1996c, 128–29; Claridge 2010, 279–82; see also Carandini 2013, tav. 218 and tav. f. t. 19. On the church, see Buchowiecki 1967–1997, 3: 373–95; Kinney 1996; and Pensabene 2015, 557–60.

⁴³ On the temple, see Cassatella 1999, 121–23; Coarelli 2007, 98–99; Claridge 2010, 118–21; cf. Carandini 2013, tav. 102; tav. f. t. 20. On the church, see Krautheimer et al. 1937–1977, 1: 220–43, especially 222 n. 3; Buchowiecki 1967–1997, 3: 33–57; Coates-Stephens 1997, 200; Episcopo 1999, 83–84; Webb 2001, 130–32; Claussen 2002, 466–87; Del Monti 2010, 38–39; Pensabene 2015, 305–7. In the ninth century, the oratory was torn down and replaced by the church of Santa Maria Nova, which was rededicated in the fifteenth century to the Roman saint Francesca (1384–1440).

Table 1. Conversion of Temples in Rome (including Mithraea)

<i>Name of church</i>	<i>date of conversion</i>	<i>architectural condition of temple</i>	<i>degree of reuse</i>
Santa Prisca	ca. 400	intact*	none
San Clemente	ca. 410	intact*	none
Santo Stefano Rotondo	ca. 450	intact*	none
Santa Maria dei Martiri	608–610	intact	whole temple
San Lorenzo in Miranda	600–800?	largely intact	podium, <i>cella</i> walls, columns
Sancti Petrus et Paulus	757–767	dilapidated	podium
San Nicola dei Cesarini	700–900	dilapidated	podium, part of <i>cella</i> wall, columns
Santo Stefano delle Carrozze	700–900?	largely intact	whole temple
San Basilio	800–900	dilapidated	podium
Santa Maria de Secundicerio	872–882	intact	whole temple
Sant’Urbano alla Caffarella	850–900	intact	whole temple
San Sebastiano al Palatino	900–1000	dilapidated	podium
San Bartolomeo all’Isola	998–999	dilapidated	podium
San Nicola in Carcere	1000–1100	dilapidated	podium, columns, columns of adjacent temples

*filled in with rubble

temple of Mars Ultor in the Forum of Augustus (ninth century).⁴⁴ The site had already been quarried extensively and there was no longer a *cella* into which the church could be built. Also, most of the columns had been taken down in the fifth or sixth century;⁴⁵ only three remained standing and these were not used as part of the church. The church of San Sebastiano al Palatino was built from the ground up onto the western edge of the podium of the Heliogabalium

⁴⁴ On the temple, see Kockel 1995, 289–95; Coarelli 2007, 111–12; Claridge 2010, 177–78; cf. Carandini 2013, tav. 38; tav. f. t. 19. On the church, see Coates-Stephens 1997, 217–18; Claussen 2002, 168–69; Pensabene 2015, 313–14. For a floorplan and reconstruction of the monastery of San Basilio, see Meneghini and Santangeli Valenzani 2004, 99–100, figs. 80, 81; 187, fig. 178. Although the church is first mentioned in 955 in a papal bull of Agapitus II (946–955), a monastery apparently already existed at this site in the ninth century: witness the many sculptural elements found from that time. The church was rebuilt as Santa Maria Annunziata ai Monti in the sixteenth century, and in 1926 it was completely removed by Mussolini.

⁴⁵ Kinney 2013, 265.

on the Palatine (tenth century).⁴⁶ Lastly, the Holy Roman Emperor Otto III had the church of San Bartolomeo all'Isola built on the foundations of the ruined temple of Aesculapius on the Tiber Island (around 999).⁴⁷

As we have seen, the conversion of temples in Rome covers a wide chronological range, with different states of the buildings upon reuse, and with widely diverging degrees of reuse. How varied the evidence really is becomes particularly apparent when we present these data in tabular form (see Table 1).

Discussion

From the evidence presented and reviewed here, it follows that the eleven temple conversions in Rome do not fit Deichmann's general notion of a triumphalist Church in the slightest. Firstly, even though eleven temples might seem a considerable number, it was in fact a tiny percentage of the four hundred and twenty-four temples known to have been in existence in Rome in the fourth century.⁴⁸ Likewise, the great majority of churches in Rome were not built on ancient temple sites. Secondly, the conversions of temples occurred not in the fourth and fifth century, when Christians gained control of the city, but only from the seventh century onwards, long after the demise of paganism. If temple conversions were really meant to express the triumph of Christianity over paganism, it would be difficult to explain why the first known expression of this triumph took place more than 200 years after the foe had been confronted and vanquished. Thirdly, there is no real indication that former temples were treated any differently than secular public buildings, such as the Senate House or Vespasian's Forum Pacis. All this makes it highly unlikely that temples were "converted" as part of an orchestrated program of Christian triumph over pagan religions.

Two more questions arise, which need to be answered in turn. Why were these specific sites selected and not others, and why did the conversion of temples start so late? As to the first question, we ought to make a distinction between those churches that were built into temples that were still more or less intact, and those churches built into temples that were not. It seems self-evident that temples of the first category were chosen, in some measure at least, for their architectural quality (monumental columns, for example,

⁴⁶ On the temple, see Coarelli 1996a, 10–11; Claridge 2010, 156; cf. Carandini 2013, tav. 87; tav. f. t. 20. On the church, see Buchowiecki 1967–1997, 3: 837–42; Pensabene 2015, 513.

⁴⁷ On the temple, see Degrassi 1993, 21–23; Coarelli 2007, 348; Claridge 2010, 257, 258; Pensabene 2015, 321–322; cf. Carandini 2013, tav. f. t. 19. On the church, see *HKR* 1: 435–445; Coates-Stephens 1997, 214–15; Claussen 2002, 132–67; Pensabene 2015, 492–96.

⁴⁸ According to the regionary catalogues of Rome, *Notitia* and *Curiosum*; see Gibbon 1776–1788, 3: ch. 28.

bronze doors, and concrete dome). Just as individual building elements could be despoiled from an ancient building, so too a whole building could under certain conditions be adopted as a “Gesamtspolium,” so to speak. Here, the purpose was clearly not to erase the past, but, on the contrary, to preserve and perpetuate it.

Let me elaborate this point of the visual appeal of temples with some hard data. The Pantheon has 48-foot columns of Egyptian granite, crowned with capitals of Pentelic marble. The temple of Antoninus and Faustina boasts a colossal façade with 48-foot columns of Carystian green marble, which still bear the traces of an unsuccessful attempt to remove them as *spolia*.⁴⁹ The round temple of Hercules Victor has 36-foot marble columns, originally of Pentelic marble.⁵⁰ While the temples of Portunus and of Ceres and Faustina might not possess the same high monumental quality as the aforementioned examples,⁵¹ they can still be regarded as decent and more or less intact examples of ancient temple architecture. What is more, these latter two temples were located in very conspicuous places. Before the construction of quay walls along the river embankment, the temple of Portunus would have been a familiar sight to those arriving by boat on the Tiber. Likewise, the location of Sant’Urbano on a hilltop by the Via Appia ensured its visibility from faraway to those approaching the city overland from the south, and it made up for its small size with its columns of Pentelic marble. Clearly then, these five temples are examples of prominent sites taken over to preserve the visible remains of the past.

Next, we have the temples of the second category, which were in effect entirely new constructions on the foundations of ancient temples. In the cases of San Nicola dei Cesarini and San Nicola in Carcere, we found that there were only incomplete remains that could be reutilized, whereas in the cases of San Basilio, Saints Peter and Paul, San Sebastiano, and San Bartolomeo, the ancient temple sites were used for completely new buildings. This makes it particularly difficult to argue that the practical aspect of having an inexpensive, readymade building must have been a decisive factor. The fact of the matter is that in the majority of cases, the extent to which original pagan architecture was used, or could be reused, was quite limited.

One element common to the converted temple sites, however, is what I like to call their “topographical quality.” They are all located in prominent places

⁴⁹ Coarelli 2007, 93.

⁵⁰ Coarelli 2007, 316 notes that nine columns and eleven capitals were restored in Luna marble when Tiberius was emperor.

⁵¹ The temple of Ceres and Faustina is a smallish temple but with marble columns; the temple of Portunus is built of ordinary travertine.

in the historic showcase center of the ancient city. San Nicola dei Cesarini is located in front of the Porticus of Pompey, near the spot where Julius Caesar was assassinated. San Nicola in Carcere was built right next to the Theater of Marcellus, which has remained one of Rome's landmarks through the ages. San Basilio was built on the podium of the temple of Mars Ultor, in front of the colossal grey firewall that had once separated the Forum from the Subura. The oratory of Saints Peter and Paul was built at the highest point of the Via Sacra, overlooking the Roman Forum. San Sebastiano was constructed on the edge of the Palatine, from where one could (and still can) enjoy a splendid view of the Colosseum. San Bartolomeo, finally, also has a very attractive location, at the tip of the Tiber Island. By selecting these sites for Christian usage, Church leaders were breathing new life into some of the most prominent focal points of the old city.

Then there is the second question, as to the relative lateness of the temple conversions. One common explanation holds that there was a certain reticence on the part of the Church to use pagan sites for Christian worship because these sites were supposedly filled with filthy demons.⁵² If this were true, however, it would seem difficult to explain the building of churches on top of cult rooms of Mithras. If it was safe to build a church there after the destruction of the idols, why would it not be in the case of temples? Clearly this argument does not hold water.

In my estimation, the determining factor here is that, according to Roman law, the public temples of Rome, being sacred (*res sacrae*), were *res nullius*, which meant that they could not fall into private ownership.⁵³ Even if the building fell into ruins, the place in which a temple was built still remained sacred.⁵⁴ A temple was sacred because it had been consecrated by the proper authorities.⁵⁵ I would like to draw attention to the fact that this act of consecration is constitutive rather than declarative. In other words, according to Roman law, *res sacrae* are not consecrated because they are sacred, but they are sacred by virtue of having been formally consecrated. As a consequence, a temple would continue to be *res sacra* even when it was abandoned or when its cult was prohibited in the process of Christianization.⁵⁶

⁵² For example, Hanson 1978, 257–58; Salzman 1999, 130–31; Caseau 2001, 85–86; Talloen and Vercauteren 2011, 374.

⁵³ *Inst.* 2.1.7; *Dig.* 1.8.6.2.

⁵⁴ *Inst.* 2.1.8; *Dig.* 1.8.6.3; 18.1.73.

⁵⁵ *Gai Inst.* 2.9; *Dig.* 1.8.6.3; cf. *Inst.* 2.1.8.

⁵⁶ See also Daguet-Gagey 1997, 175: “Précisons, enfin, que la sacralité conférée publiquement au lieu avait une valeur perpétuelle; ce dernier ne perdait jamais cette qualité, quel que fût son devenir, et même si le sanctuaire qu’il supportait tombait en désaffectation, le culte ayant été prohibé ou peu à peu abandonné.”

That Christian emperors continued to protect the temple buildings of Rome is evident from their legislation. A law by Constantius and Constans, issued to the urban prefect of Rome, already prescribed that “although all superstitions must be completely eradicated, nevertheless, it is Our will that the buildings of the temples situated outside the walls shall remain untouched and uninjured.”⁵⁷ Arcadius and Honorius issued a law to the praetorian prefect of Italy, determining that “all public buildings and buildings that belong to any temple, those that are situated within the walls of the city or even those that are attached to the walls, [. . .] shall be held and kept by decurions and members of guilds.”⁵⁸ Finally, a law by Leo and Majorian, issued to the urban prefect of Rome, specifically demanded that “all the buildings that have been founded by the ancients as temples [. . .] shall not be destroyed by any person.”⁵⁹

Remarkably, in the conservative city of Rome, the temple continued to enjoy its legal protection long after the fall of the western empire. One will recall that Boniface IV (608–615) still needed authorization from the emperor Phocas to convert the Pantheon into a Church, and that Honorius I (625–638), likewise, requested the emperor Heraclius’s permission to recycle the bronze roof tiles of the temple of Venus and Roma. This legal protection explains why it is only with the formation of the Papal State in the eighth century, when the emperor’s properties in the West had come to be in the possession of the bishop of Rome, that we see the conversions of temples in Rome take off in earnest.⁶⁰

Finally, I return to the issue of the “converted” Mithraea and how they relate to the converted temples in Rome. It is evident that there is a marked contrast between converted temples on the one hand and Mithraea built over by churches on the other. In general terms, Mithraea and temples are completely dissimilar in architecture and property. In practice, the topography, type, nature, and date of conversions in Rome are also very different. When one looks at the available evidence, it becomes clear that Mithraea diverge from temples in almost every conceivable aspect. A temple is a monumental building, constructed from the ground up; a Mithraeum, on the other hand, was a room or cluster of rooms, created within an existing

⁵⁷ *CTh* 16.10.3 (342), trans. Pharr 1952.

⁵⁸ *CTh* 15.1.41 (401), trans. Pharr 1952.

⁵⁹ *Nov. Marc.* 4.1 (458), trans. Pharr 1952. These laws stand in contrast to those in the East, which call for the destruction of temples; see *CTh* 16.10.16, 25.

⁶⁰ The legal protection afforded to the temples of Rome also explains why, of the many temples of Rome, only one was converted into something other than a church: the temple of Hadrian, which was used as part of a Medieval fortification. On this temple, see Cipollone 1996, 7–8; Coarelli 2007, 291–93; Claridge 2010, 223–26.

Table 2. Temples and Mithraea

	<i>converted temples</i>	<i>converted Mithraea</i>
architecture	monumental building	inside existing building
property	no-one's property	usually private property
topography	mostly in historic center	outside historic center
type of conversion	conspicuous appropriation	complete erasure
nature of conversion	nondestructive	destructive
date of conversion	after 500 CE	before 500 CE
period of conversions	long: 600–1200 CE	short: 400–450 CE

structure. Temples are *res sacrae* and therefore *res nullius*; a Mithraeum, on the contrary, was legally *profanum* and therefore *res privata*.⁶¹ Temples are located mostly in the historic city center; Mithraea, conversely, were distributed evenly over the city, and the three converted Mithraea were situated well outside the historic showcase center of the ancient city. The conversions of temples in Rome were nondestructive instances of conspicuous appropriation of either the preserved remains or the sites of former temples; the conversions of Mithraea in Rome, on the other hand, consisted of the destruction and complete erasure of cult rooms, which were concealed and overwritten by the building of a new church. And finally, the conversion of temples in Rome occurred over a long period after 500 CE, whereas the conversion of Mithraea, by contrast, took place in a relatively short period before 500 CE. When rendered schematically, the pattern described here becomes readily apparent (Table 2).

There are two possible, interconnected explanations as to why there should be such a difference between the conversion of temples and that of Mithraea. The first, religious explanation concerns the fact that Mithraism is known to have been particularly hated by Christians.⁶² When one gained possession of a Mithraeum, the only appropriate action from a Christian perspective would be to destroy it completely.⁶³ This is in striking contrast to temples, where the removal of altar and idols would normally suffice, leaving the building itself intact. The second, legal explanation lies in the fact that it would presumably have been much more difficult to become the owner of a temple than of a Mithraeum. In the case of a temple, one was required to persuade the emperor

⁶¹ See *Inst.* 2.1.8; *Dig.* 1.8.6.3.

⁶² See Clauss 2013.

⁶³ See, for example, *Jer. Ep.* 107.2.

to donate that particular property to the church. That would not have been necessary for most Mithraea, the majority of which were privately owned. For all these reasons, the conversion of Mithraea and that of temples should be treated as two distinct phenomena.

Conclusion

This study of temple conversions has yielded several insights. The evidence has revealed that individual temples and temple sites were converted primarily because they were interesting from an architectural or topographical point of view. There is nothing to suggest that their status as former places of pagan worship made them any less or more attractive than other buildings possessed of similar architectural and topographical qualities, such as the ancient Senate House or the large hall of Vespasian's Forum Pacis.

The conversions of temples in Rome cannot, therefore, be explained by Deichmann's notion of an *ecclesia triumphans*. An oppositional model simply does not apply to the temple conversions in Rome. The accumulated evidence has shown definitively that, contrary to popular belief, the phenomenon of temple conversion in Rome was limited to the reuse of a relatively small number of buildings and sites, which occurred long after the demise of paganism and without any sign of triumphalism or wanton destruction.

Vaes's study, on the other hand, is too narrow in its focus on the reutilization of buildings and materials. Clearly, pragmatic consideration alone cannot explain the entirely new construction of churches on ancient temple sites. Moreover, a purely pragmatist view of temple conversion completely passes over the topographical significance of individual sites.

When studying early Christian attitudes towards the pagan past, we find that there was apparently not a single Christian policy towards former places of worship, but there existed different modes, violent and nonviolent, of approaching them. The phenomenon of temple conversion in Rome was essentially nondestructive, quite unlike the treatment of Mithraea, which should, therefore, be treated as a separate phenomenon.

All of this adds up to the following picture, which revolves around the fact that, throughout Late Antiquity, Rome was still replete with property that could be alienated only by the emperor. Until the formation of the Papal State, many buildings and places in Rome remained officially in public use, whether they were temples, public buildings, or public places. What portion of this real estate was made available to the Church was therefore principally a matter of imperial, not Church policy.

This simple fact explains why such a massive building as the Lateran Basilica had to be built at the edge of the city, whereas a smallish titular church such as San Marco could be built in the center. In the case of the

Lateran Basilica, the Church simply had to accept the real estate it was given by the emperor. Having taken this former property of Maxentius as *bona damnatorum*, Constantine could freely donate it from his *res privata*.⁶⁴ Conversely, although he had the authority to do so, the emperor could not very well have alienated public property in the city center, such as the basilica of Maxentius on the Via Sacra, without antagonizing the senators on whose political support he depended.⁶⁵ San Marco, on the other hand, was built on private property, free from political scrutiny, so there was no reason why it could not be built in the shade of the Capitol.

The same fact also explains why the conversion of public buildings into churches only occurred piecemeal and only from the sixth century onwards. Furthermore, it explains why in 609 the bishop of Rome still saw a need to ask the Byzantine emperor formally to donate the Pantheon to the Catholic Church. And finally, it explains why, with the sole exception of the Pantheon, all known temple conversions in Rome date from the time of the Papal State, when imperial donations were no longer required.

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⁶⁴ See Lenski 2016, 170.

⁶⁵ In the introduction, we discussed how Krautheimer regarded the peripheral location of the Lateran basilica as a sign of respect for the sensibilities of the pagan aristocracy, whereas Brandenburg attributed it to a lack of space in the city center. Interestingly, this article has shown Krautheimer and Brandenburg both to be correct. There was indeed a lack of space in the city center, and even though there is no evidence for an organized pagan resistance, the donation of sacred or public property to the Church would have needlessly offended non-Christians in the city.

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