

† Damasus and the Invention
of Early Christian Rome

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In 1864 Giovanni Battista de Rossi (1822–94) dedicated the first volume of *La Roma sotterranea cristiana* to Rome's "second Damasus," the Risorgimento pope, Pius IX (1846–78).¹ The comparison is still striking. The new Christian archaeology, then so furiously revealing subterranean shrines and ancient tombs originally discovered or lavishly embellished by the "first" Damasus (366–84), owed as much in practical terms to Pius's patronage as to de Rossi's tireless excavations. Twelve years before, in January 1852, Pius had approved the Commissione di Archeologia Sacra, whose mandate included "the systematic and scientific exploration" of the Roman catacombs. Two years after that, on 11 May, he joined de Rossi (as he would elsewhere on other occasions) to view San Callisto's papal crypt, where a month earlier de Rossi had recovered the precious fragments of two large marble tablets elegantly inscribed with Damasus's name and verses.² But most significant, perhaps, Pius had urged de Rossi to produce the magisterial study that quickly replaced Antonio Bosio's *Roma sotterranea*, published in 1632.³ With some justice, then, this pope, so opportunistic and energetic in changing times, assumed the role that in de Rossi's eyes the fourth-century bishop had played in the Roman underground's first age of discovery.⁴

But Damasus's name was no less magical for de Rossi's disciples, who inherited his hunt for "i monumenti più famosi dell'età eroica del cristianesimo," for the pursuit, they could imagine, had truly begun in the days of Damasus.⁵ Orazio Marucchi's (1852–1931) handbook of Christian archaeology not only proclaimed Damasus the premier "poète des martyrs" but also pronounced him "nearly" the first Christian archaeologist.⁶ Sévère Charrier, in turn, openly applauded Damasus's entanglement of research and mission. Charrier's "premier archéologue chrétien" may have recovered and adorned the tombs of the saints to honor these "héros de la foi" and preserve their endangered history, but he also enlisted their help in the still

pressing struggle against the forces of heresy, schism, and paganism.⁷ Even so, Charrier supposed, Damasus's most enduring legacy was to be found in the guidance and instruction that his elegantly inscribed *elogia*, ringing the city, had offered to so many generations of pilgrims to *Roma sotterranea cristiana*.⁸

And, indeed, Damasus's *elogia* did educate several centuries of late antique and early medieval visitors to Rome's vast network of suburban catacombs. By the mid-fifth century, when the heyday of expansion and new burial was over, these subterranean galleries had become a meandering history exhibit. Thereafter late antique and medieval *itineraria* and *syllogae* attest not only to the continuing allure of these halls of fame but also to the resonant vitality of Damasus's ubiquitous monumental texts.⁹ Nevertheless, these days it is Damasus the impresario of the saints, not the historical archaeologist, who grips our imagination. There is no longer an unobstructed approach to Rome of the martyrs through catacomb *cubicula* refurbished and decorated by a fourth-century bishop whose energetic articulation of the cult of Peter and Paul was an unabashed assertion of Roman primacy, or whose hagiographic poetry constructed models of episcopal leadership and church unity deemed apposite for a Christian flock rent by schism and discord.¹⁰ Moreover, scholars who acknowledge the general will of commemoration to erase as well as preserve portions of the past, or who recognize the complex polysemy of late antique Rome's Christian cityscape, are not likely to collude unwittingly with a polemically adroit churchman's recovery and revival of Rome's early Christian story, especially one operating in an age of acute identity crisis.¹¹ And yet, Damasus's archaeology draws us in.

Excavating Identity

Past and present (as well as visions of the future) collided abruptly in mid-fourth-century Rome. The collision was the collateral damage of a Constantinian miracle that in a few short years thrust Christianity from persecuted to favored status. And though repercussions would long reverberate, the immediately post-Constantinian decades were summoned to respond first. Eventually, of course, Rome would become comfortable as *Roma christiana*. Across the fifth century, Roman time would take on the rhythms of Christian time, the festivals of the saints and high holy days gradually replacing public games and rites keyed to the cults of the old gods and deified emperors.¹² The Roman cityscape, though more slowly, would come to reflect fully the priorities of Christian building programs and liturgical needs:

the church of Santi Cosmas and Damian would finally be set adjacent to the Roman Forum in the late 520s, and in 609 Boniface IV would reassign Hadrian's Pantheon to Santa Maria ad Martyres, the first papal rededication of a major temple.¹³ Long before then, however, Christian impresarios of the Roman heritage had blazed trails back through the great divide that Constantine had thrown across Roman "history," for fourth-century Romans truly first confronted, publicly and en masse, the problem of being both Roman and Christian, which meant, for them, somehow renegotiating a civic identity that, for a millennium, had given no time or place to Christian cult or history.

The hagiographic elogia that Damasus installed in Rome's suburban martyrial shrines preserve the first steps of a resolution that would, in the event, prove flexible as well as durable. If it was not the sole purpose of Damasus's elogia to (re)write history in the service of contemporary identity, for his pontificate was troubled by various challenges that threatened to unseat him till the very end,¹⁴ it was surely the effect of this poetry to offer Rome's Christians (and christianizing Romans) an alternate vision of the past. At a moment when the future was nearly as uncertain as real knowledge of the (actual) past, when the mass migration of the Roman aristocracy to the new religion of the emperors (excepting Julian) was only about to begin,¹⁵ and when Christian literature was still, in the eyes of most Roman nobles, an oxymoron, Damasus's poetic vision of early Christian Rome—echoing Vergil, fashioning virtuous heroes, and promoting new celestial guardians—would operate as the base camp for exploring new modes of Roman self-understanding. Excavations of this sort might indeed be capable of reshaping civic identity and public memory.¹⁶

Such archaeology had been successfully practiced at Rome long before Damasus took to the catacombs. For nearly a millennium, Romans had been rediscovering themselves in a past of their own making. Rome was already well established as a city "endlessly rewritten," and Roman collective memory, embodied in public monuments as well as traditions and historical reflection, had long been evolving in tandem with the "ethical and political dispositions" of each age.¹⁷ But no other period of Roman history, before the fourth century, had so generously displayed itself excavating and restaging its "past" as did Augustan Rome, which, perched between republic and empire, straddling oligarchy and autocracy, faced its own brand of identity crisis.¹⁸

Home to a *princeps* adept at the "invention of tradition" and well supplied with writers sensitive to the "acceleration of history," Augustan Rome harbors valuable lessons.¹⁹ Herein, famously, Vergil mused upon the central

dilemmas of his time by imagining the bronze-age history that had summoned them into being. Meanwhile, Livy suggested that the legends of early Rome, as he recast them, could rejuvenate a Roman nobility hamstrung by three generations of civil war, amending the delinquency of the day and abetting the formulation of a civic ideology that could accommodate the dispositions of his recognizably new era.²⁰ Like the literature of the age, so too the more democratic media of sculpture and architecture. Thus the *Ara Pacis Augustae*, commissioned by the Senate and dedicated in 9 B.C.E., expressed a city's hopes for peace and plenitude by juxtaposing images of Aeneas, Mars, and Romulus with a processional frieze of contemporary Romans that included Aeneas's reigning descendant and the city's newest founder, Augustus.²¹

Indeed, just as images in later Rome's martyrial shrines would telescope past and present in order to imply historical continuity, the monuments of the Augustan city repeatedly looked back to venerable landmarks.²² The mausoleum of Augustus, for example, was a bridge, built up through four decades, over which selectively recast elements of the republican heritage were carried forward into the autocratic present: When construction of the mausoleum began in 28 B.C.E., Octavian (not yet Augustus) was a recent triumvir and still a military dynast, and the hulking tumulus recalled the funerary monuments of Hellenistic monarchs. When he died more than forty years later, however, the nostalgically revisionist *Res Gestae*, inscribed before his tomb, transformed Augustus's mausoleum into a monument to the city's long-lived princeps, the first citizen of the restored republic.²³ Yet by 14 C.E., when Augustus finally abandoned earth for the heavens, an even more elegant example of historical reenactment had already been papering over the fissures of historical discontinuity for more than a decade. In the prominently sited Forum of Augustus, a host of legendary founders and heroes, Aeneas and Romulus (again) among them, rubbed shoulders with such more recent men of war and politics as Sulla and Caesar.²⁴ This parade of venerable figures, summed up in the statues and archaizing elogia that lined the Forum's flanking porticoes, might recall the remarkable achievements of the Roman people and suggest, in unison if not harmony with Livy, the continued relevance of ancient exemplars, but it also culminated in an image of Augustus, stationed as *pater patriae* and (most likely) *triumphator* in a *quadriga* in the Forum's piazza.²⁵ This "pepped up" Roman history,²⁶ proceeding from Aeneas and backlit by the glow from multiple images of the divine Julian ancestors, Venus and Mars, like Vergil's subterranean parade of great Romans, led naturally to the arrangements of the new era.

Some three and a half centuries later, Damasus began to excavate another past, one that might make sense for (and of) his Roman present. Recovered, decorated, and inscribed with *res gestae*, the tombs of the martyrs and confessors would eventually anchor an updated foundational myth and provide the landmarks for a redrawn sacred cityscape. Peter, Paul, and Lawrence would be the fathers of a Christian *patria* becoming coterminous with Roman society itself. They would assume the city's celestial guardianship, replacing such former heavenly transplants as Romulus-Quirinus, the Di-oscuro, and the deified emperors.

Although this urban transformation, demonstrable in time, is more elusive in origin, Damasus's *elogia* reveal the mechanisms of appropriation and subversion that underwrote it from the outset.²⁷ It was not (and never could be) a matter of the simple rejection of all that the old past had to offer christianizing Romans; Damasus's invention of early Christian Rome around the tombs of the saints relied as heavily upon remembering as forgetting. Roman heritage, expressed in the phrases and verses of revered poets and in the venerable lexicon of elite commemoration, was at once claimed, manipulated, and transposed in order to make real Romans of the new *patres patriae*. Consequently Damasus's *elogia* are not only the literary forerunners of Prudentius's classicism but also the moral foundations of the supreme self-confidence with which the latter poet's Lawrence would demand the retro-conversion of even Iulus, Romulus, and Numa.²⁸

To such ends Damasus ransacked the classical poets to create verses that might be aesthetically acceptable and conceptually challenging to Rome's christianizing elite, surrounding the martyrs with allusions to Vergil.²⁹ The dictates of metrical convenience surely encouraged sampling Vergil's hexameters, but Damasus's art also advanced a subtler agenda. The echoes of earlier poets in Damasus's *elogium* for Stephen and Tarsicius, for example, subvert as they recall the original context.³⁰ When Damasus celebrated Stephen for carrying off "the trophy from the enemy" (*ex hoste tropaeum*), he shifted a snippet of Vergilian praise (*Georgics* 3.32) from Octavian to the protomartyr. Similarly, Damasus's description of a persecuting Roman mob as "mad dogs" (*canibus rabidis*) redeployed words Virgil had used to characterize the hounds of Iulus, driven to madness by the Fury Allecto (*Aeneid* 7.493–94). But line 7 of this poem, "when a raving mad gang was pressing [Tarsicius] to reveal [the sacramenta] to the uninitiated" (*cum male sana manus premeret vulgare profanis*), was constructed out of an especially striking conflation of Virgil and Ovid. "Male sana" was Vergil's reproach of Dido (*Aeneid* 4.8), while in the second book of the *Ars Amatoria* Ovid had asked, "Who

would dare to reveal the rites of Ceres to the uninitiated?" (*quis Cereris ritus ausit vulgare profanis?*). Thus Damasus sketched the specter of the deranged Dido, who had tried to derail an earlier tale of Roman destiny, behind the enraged anti-Christian mob and trumped the mysteries of Eleusis with the *sacramenta Christi*.³¹

In this *elogium*, as in others, Damasus offered educated readers verses worthy of the reflection that was the necessary first stage of a salvage archaeology intended to summon the shades of highly revered (pagan) poets while simultaneously interrogating their assumptions about sacrilege and sanctity, triumph and defeat.³² The strategy had, in a sense, already been employed by Juvenecus as later it would inspire Prudentius and Paulinus of Nola.³³ But here, at a crucial juncture in Rome's history, the public verses of the city's socially prominent bishop first demonstrated how Christian poets and their readers might keep their Vergil and their Ovid while continuing to polish and display their own literary sensibilities in acceptable fashion. Literary love and theft made possible both the embrace and disavowal of cultural performances that were potentially dangerous because too closely identified with the "other."³⁴ By a parallel kind of thinking, Prudentius would later advocate revering pagan cult statues as works of art.³⁵

In a similar manner, Damasus manipulated language that had long been at home in the arena of aristocratic self-definition. When necessary, he first naturalized the early church's heroes: with their Roman martyrdoms the Carthaginian Saturninus and the Greek Hermes earned a Roman *patria*; though sent by the East, Peter and Paul became Rome's special citizens (*suos cives*).³⁶ More crucially Damasus's martyrs reveal themselves as exemplars of deeply embedded notions of manly excellence traceable from the epitaphs of the republican-age tomb of the Scipios, through the *elogia* of the Forum of Augustus, to the eulogistic epigrams composed by Damasus's contemporary, the pagan senator Avianius Symmachus.³⁷ In the catacombs of Domitilla, the soldier-martyrs Nereus and Achilles toss aside their shields and weapons and rejoice to carry the "triumphs of Christ" (*Christi portare triumphos*) (Epig. Dam. 8). In the catacombs of Praetextatus, the deacons Felicissimus and Agapitus, comrades of the unconquered cross (*hi crucis invictae comites*), stick by their *dux*, the bishop Sixtus, and win the "triumphs of Christ" (*Christi meruere triumphos*) (Epig. Dam. 25). Along the Via Salaria Nova, Felix and Philippus, martyrs equal in *virtus*, win the "coronas of Christ," recalling military laurels as well as athletic honors (Epig. Dam. 39). In San Callisto's papal crypt, the martyred *comites* of Sixtus, like Stephen before them, carry off trophies from the enemy, *ex hoste tropaea* again, while the same tomb's

“pious” throng includes nobles (*proceres*), young and old alike, who display the venerable qualities of *pudor* and *castitas* (*Epig. Dam.* 16). Elsewhere, Crispius and Daria commute *damna* into *honor* and *decus* (*Epig. Dam.* 45). Yet, surpassing the merely secular *fama* usually allowed to republican heroes, the true rewards awaiting Damasus’s martyrs are the *praemia vitae*, a celestial afterlife more reminiscent of the apotheosis reserved for good emperors (*Epig. Dam.* 17).

One effect of this strategy of commemoration is the sublimation, if not erasure, of real differences. Historical outsiders, Greeks and criminals (at best) as the Romans once saw them, are recast as Damasus’s *elogia* dress a peripheral early Christian subculture in the normative language of classical poetry and elite approbation. Simultaneously a once marginal historical narrative, for *Roma christiana* was an unlikely survivor from a Flavian or Antonine perspective, is brought closer to center stage, where for many it now belonged, amid the new arrangements of the post-Constantinian world. Thus Damasus’s suburban *martyria*, refurbished and adorned, painted and inscribed, now challenged the version of civic identity still proclaimed by the statues and *elogia* of the city’s *fora*. But they also took aim at the loftier reaches of old Rome’s self-understanding.

In a cult area of the Basilica Apostolorum (San Sebastiano) on the Appian Way, Damasus installed a seven-verse cenotaph in honor of Peter and Paul, the city’s premier immigrant saints.³⁸ Their missionary itinerary—beginning in the East (“Oriens”), leading through Rome, and concluding in the starry heavens—is pressed into the poem’s three central lines (3–5), at whose structural and ideological center stand the martyrdoms that launched Peter and Paul heavenward (*per astra*). This “travelogue” is framed by four lines, two (1–2) that verify the saints’ former “residence” at the very spot being memorialized (an emphatic *hic*); and two (6–7) that authorize, over Damasus’s signature, not only Rome’s adoption of Peter and Paul as “her own citizens” but also the city’s right to address them as her “new stars.”

The challenge issued by this *elogium* is not aimed at the legendary mortal agents of Roman destiny but rather at those whose merits, like Peter and Paul’s, won them victory over death and the responsibilities of astral guardianship. That might suggest Augustus and other deified emperors who took up starry afterlives, but a more likely target of this *elogium*’s counterclaim is an earlier pair of apotheosized eastern heroes, Castor and Pollux.³⁹ The legends and cult of the Dioscuri were ancient at Rome, but these heavenly twins, who entered Roman history at the early fifth-century battle of Lake Regillus and were honored with one of the earliest monumental temples of

the Roman Forum, still had a vital purchase on the fourth-century city.⁴⁰ Carved in high relief and star-crowned, they greeted all who walked the busy Via Lata through Diocletian’s Arcus Novus;⁴¹ on coins of Maxentius they had stood, stars on their caps, shielding the wolf-suckling Romulus and Remus; as disembodied stars they hovered above the same scene on coins of Constantine and his sons;⁴² their *dies natalis* (8 April) was recorded in the calendar of 354 and celebrated with circus races;⁴³ and in 359, in the midst of a food shortage, Rome’s urban prefect performed a (successful) sacrifice at their temple in Ostia.⁴⁴ Peter and Paul, likewise arrivals from the East, were now imagined (and perhaps represented) as similarly ensconced in the “realms of ether,” where they could be called upon as the city’s “new stars.”⁴⁵ As the apotheosized agents of Christ, they were at least positioned to drive the Dioscuri from the field.⁴⁶

These observations about fourth-century Rome’s revised sense of history, with new (but not unfamiliar) heroes and guardians, are not meant to imply that there is no “actual” history of pre-Constantinian Roman Christianity. In fact, that history may be better known now than it was to most fifth- and sixth-century Romans. The point, rather, is that this fourth-century archaeology of Rome of the martyrs, whose best-known impresario is Damasus, offered contemporaries a vision of their past that was both palatable and worthy of the new age. Enshrined and monumentalized, this “history” made available to the growing body of Romano-Christians a well-heeled “myth of origins,” crucial to the construction of a viable civic identity. And as it happened, just as Charrier noted nearly a century ago, because Damasus’s *elogia* possessed the durability and commanded the reach of monuments, they would shape public memory for centuries to come.

National Cemeteries and Public Memory

Henri Lefebvre has suggested, and Roman imperial funerary monuments seem to confirm, that the impulse to civic “self-presentation and self-representation” readily lodges in sites where death can be both “represented and rejected.”⁴⁷ For this reason, perhaps, the tombs of deified emperors encouraged proclamations about history and identity. The mausoleum of Divus Augustus was topped by his colossal image but also housed his mortal remains in a circular burial chamber. Once prefaced by the *Res Gestae*, the mausoleum retrospectively justified the life and career of the princeps, while initiating a series of imperial funerary monuments that similarly “told Romans how their city should now be seen.”⁴⁸

A century after Augustus's death, a golden urn containing Trajan's ashes was placed in the base of the extraordinary column he had constructed, within the pomerium, at the northwestern end of his forum.⁴⁹ The column's sculpted frieze, unwinding in 23 whorls, with 2,639 figures (including 59 Trajans), had for several years already been announcing the Dacian *res gestae* of this *optimus princeps* while also testifying anew to the religious piety and military capacity of the Roman people.⁵⁰ With its reception of Trajan's ashes, however, the column also began to proclaim yet another hero-emperor's apotheosis.⁵¹ But while *Divus Traianus*, perched atop his tomb (like Augustus atop his), was "reaching for the sky,"⁵² pulling Rome with him, his urn, apparently highlighted by a window in the monument's base, attested to death's reality and the city's continuing claims. A generation later, Antoninus Pius and his wife, Faustina, mounted on the back of a winged male figure, even more emphatically soared heavenward from the base of their funerary column (a cenotaph).⁵³ Nevertheless, like Augustus and Trajan, these *divi* were not to escape the responsibilities attached to the grant of apotheosis. They remained firmly tethered to the sightlines of both a personified Campus Martius, where the ceremonies of cremation and consecration took place,⁵⁴ and a helmeted Roma, her arm resting lightly upon a shield embossed with a wolf-suckling Romulus and Remus, her feet nestled in a heap of arms and armor. Monuments like these graphically linked heaven and earth and thus interwove history and destiny. Before them imperial Romans might well remind themselves who they were and sense how their city should be seen.

The same bivalency of presence and absence that charges imperial funerary monuments also gave distinct meaning and handbook authority to late antique Rome's catacomb shrines. The martyrs, as bodies, bone, and ash, may have been fully present at their graves, but they had also been swept heavenward, where their unfettered souls enjoyed the rewards of virtue in the starry palace of heaven. Damasus's *elogia* insist on this polarity with a sense of urgency that underscores the paradoxical force of their claims. The saints were simultaneously here and there, intimately available (rather unlike the *divi*) yet powerfully remote. Seven lines of an *elogium* for the saints of San Callisto's papal crypt begin with *hic*: "Here collected lies a heaped up throng of saints. . . . Here the comrades of Sixtus. . . . Here young men and boys."⁵⁵ On the Via Labicana "this tomb" (*hic tumulus*) holds the limbs of Gorgonius, as Maurus's grave on the Via Salaria Nova (*hic tumulus* again) sheltered his *pia membra* (*Epig. Dam.* 32.1, 44.1). Even notable events might hallow ground. "Here [*hic*] once dwelt," began Damasus's *elogium* of Peter and Paul; while

Sixtus II, his *elogium* declared, was "in this very spot [*hic positus*], sitting down," at the exact moment of his martyrdom.⁵⁶

Yet, the Christ-given "rewards of (eternal) life" had to override the gravity of the tomb; bodies might be earthbound but souls shot upward.⁵⁷ The *animae* of San Callisto's *turba piorum* thus lived on in the "palace of heaven."⁵⁸ So, too, Felicissimus and Agapitus, similarly snatched up.⁵⁹ As the victorious Peter and Paul had followed Christ *per astra*, the martyr Tiburtius claimed heaven's heights in Christ's company.⁶⁰ Damasus's monuments, that is, were no less determined than imperial mausolea to crystallize history and identity in the very same tension between death acknowledged and death rejected that holds in balance the tomb of the apotheosized hero.⁶¹ No matter that the triumphs here commemorated were those of alternative heroes. Soon enough these forms of expression would leak from the tombs of the martyrs to the epitaphs of contemporary Christians who were prepared to relate their own merits and to imagine their own astral immortality.⁶²

That the shrines of the martyrs, hemmed in by countless other ancient and more recent graves, were so well poised to charge life and history with new meaning may, however, have more to do with the catacombs' resemblance to national cemeteries than to any parallels between the *martyria* themselves and the grand and isolated tombs of the Roman emperors. Certain private tombs (where the ghosts live on)—Scipio Africanus's at Liternun, Robert Johnson's in the Mississippi Delta, Elvis Presley's at Graceland—do become sites of pilgrimage where potentially dynamic cross-generational connections of social identity are forged or reinforced.⁶³ But monuments looming over hill-sides carpeted with the graves of "hero-martyrs," like memorials set upon ennobled battlefields, may tap a deeper, if more diffuse, vein of the collective consciousness.⁶⁴ And met in the solemn stillness of ground hallowed by self-sacrifice, well-chosen words, like the morally charged exegesis of civic space, will have an uncanny ability to bind (at least for the moment) personal identity to "national memory."⁶⁵

At classical Athens, it was the custom for a leading citizen to deliver a *logos epitaphios* in the *kerameikos* over the remains of those who died in the service of the city-state.⁶⁶ Each such speech, exemplified now by the oration of Thucydides' Pericles, was "a lesson in patriotism."⁶⁷ And although such orations endlessly restaged the city's political myths, constantly reverting to well-worn images of Marathon and promoting idiosyncratic visions of Athenian democracy, the history they taught was thereby no less "true for the Athenians."⁶⁸ More than two millennia later, at the dedication of the Gettysburg battlefield cemetery, Abraham Lincoln redefined America at a mo-

ment of seemingly irremediable identity crisis by reimagining his country's story. Sidestepping the Constitution and rooting the sacrificial carnage of Gettysburg in a principle of human "equality" expressed in the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln's *logos epitaphios* not only refigured the issues behind the American Civil War but also "remade" America.⁶⁹ That the revisionism of Lincoln's "American scripture" was a "swindle," and "one of the most daring acts of open-air sleight-of-hand ever witnessed by the unsuspecting" matters little, for its "truths," inscribed widely across the land, still help Americans define themselves.⁷⁰

In fourth-century Rome, the catacombs became the Christian city's national cemeteries. In this "imagineered protogeography" history would be pulled forward and reflection turned back; here, while the future became "a thing of the past," the past was also restaged to keep pace with the present.⁷¹ If Damasus's elogia must surely have provoked charges of foul play in some quarters, as permanent features of the catacombs' sacred topography they too eventually became "true for Romans."⁷² Read, reinscribed, and copied for generations, elaborated as *acta* and *passiones*, they ever announced the inherited obligations that are the load-bearing elements of civic identity.⁷³ When so much else falls into silence, monuments remain. Two decades after Damasus's death, as Prudentius explored the Roman catacombs, he encountered innumerable mute or reticent graves. It was, he told Valerian of Calagurris, the responsibility of the more forthcoming tombs of the saints to speak on their behalf (*Peristephanon* 11.7–23). Damasus's elogia had become a fundamental link between the Christian city and its heroic age.

The First Christian Archaeologist

In one sense, then, de Rossi's disciples were right. Damasus did stand in the vanguard of an archaeological enterprise that would be long engaged in recovering the history of early Christian Rome. But like Livy and Augustus before him, Damasus was also a present-minded agent of the Roman past, re-presenting (if not discovering) new stars, revamping the cityscape both to bring it into line with the times and to make its (newer) past more accessible.⁷⁴ Early in the fourth century, entering the dark and terrifying catacombs to visit the tombs of the martyrs and apostles had been like going "down living to hell."⁷⁵ By century's end, however, Prudentius had to jostle the crowds to get a look at the subterranean shrine of Hippolytus on the Via Tiburtina. The catacombs' corridors had become a chiaroscuro of dark splashed by pools of sunlight, while the saints' *aediculae* glittered with pol-

ished marble and precious metals (*Peristephanon* 11.155–68). Damasus had been busy. Most of the major catacomb complexes show signs of his intervention. New stairways, retrofit light wells, expanded galleries, and enlarged cubacula reveal his handiwork in the catacombs of San Callisto, Domitilla, Generosa, *ad duas lauros*, and elsewhere around the city.⁷⁶ And it was in these refurbished cubacula and underground basilicas that Damasus installed the inscribed tablets of marble that proclaimed the martyrs' merits and rewards.

This Rome of the martyrs first excavated in earnest by Damasus would be further revealed and elaborated in the decades ahead, though not necessarily in a well-coordinated manner. While Damasus's elogium installed at Lawrence's Via Tiburtina tomb, for example, had offered little more than a shop of horrors—scourging, mangling, flames, tortures, and chains—Prudentius soon fleshed out the tale with dialogue and action and staged a more ambitious assault on public memory. His Lawrence, slowly roasting to death, delivered the lengthy speech on the providential nature of pre-Christian Roman history that included his summons to Iulus, Romulus, and Numa to join the faithful. With similar optimism the *Peristephanon*'s contemporary Rome is a virtually uncontested *urbs Romula christiana* where the Quirites pour out their tears and count their blessings over the "bones" of the martyrs (2.310, 2.532–36, 2.561–65).

Yet, at the other end of late antiquity, the vision of Prudentius's written Rome was, in fact, essentially realized and the aims of Damasus's archaeology seemingly met. During the years when Gregory the Great (590–604) was assuring an overly acquisitive eastern empress that the saints still displayed their dreadful power at their tombs, a certain John was apparently in Rome operating as an agent of the Lombard queen, Theodelinda.⁷⁷ His assignment was to collect oil from the lamps burning in the Roman martyria and transport this precious cargo to the Lombard court at Monza.⁷⁸ For Theodelinda, and the empress Constantina, the essence of the city, and the sources of its image and identity, now lay outside its walls. Rome of the martyrs, the *Roma sotterranea* first opened to the public in the fourth century, was the Rome that now commanded nearly undivided attention.

Notes

1. Rossi, *La Roma sotterranea cristiana*, frontispiece: "Pio IX Pont. Max. alteri Damaso . . . auctor d. d." Elements of this essay have been presented at Brown University, Pennsylvania State University, Duke University, The Catholic University of America, and Iowa State University. Thanks to Joe Pucci, Paul Harvey Jr.,

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2. Ferrua, *Epigrammata Damasiana*, nos. 16 and 17 (hereafter *Epig. Dam.*). Ferrua's edition remains standard, though a new one is under way.
 3. See Giuliani, ed., *Giovanni Battista de Rossi*, with 62–65 on Pius. Background at Friend, *Archaeology of Early Christianity*, 76–81, 160–64; L. Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome*, 9–41.
 4. Kelly, *Oxford Dictionary of Popes*, 309–11; and see de Rossi, *Roma sotterranea*, 212–13.
 5. *Ibid.*, 213.
 6. Marucchi, *Éléments d'archéologie chrétienne*, 1:227: "On pourrait presque l'appeler le premier archéologue chrétien."
 7. Charrier, "Le premier archéologue chrétien."
 8. *Ibid.*, 572: "Ces épitaphs sacrées devaient guider et instruire les pèlerins."
 9. On such syllogae, see Ferrua, *Epig. Dam.* 13–17. For the Roman itineraria, see *Itineraria et Alia Geographica*; and Valentini and Zucchetti, *Codice topografico*, vol. 2. For the distribution of the elogia, see Guyon, "Damase et l'illustration des martyrs," fig. 1.
 10. Pietri, "Concordia apostolorum," 309: "L'intérêt de Damase pour les martyrs n'était pas seulement celui d'une pieuse archéologie." Cf. Pietri, *Roma Christiana*, 1590–96; and the well-illustrated Donati, ed., *Pietro e Paolo*. Février, "Un plaidoyer pour Damase."
 11. E.g., Hedrick, *History and Silence*. Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital*, with Damasus at 142–55.
 12. Salzman, *On Roman Time*; Salzman, "Christianization of Sacred Time and Sacred Space," in Harris, ed., *Transformations of Urbs Roma*, 123–34.
 13. See Salzman's overview, "Christianization of Sacred Time"; on Cosmas and Damian, see Krautheimer, *Corpus Basilicarum*, 1.3:137–43; S. Episcopo, "Ss. Cosmas et Damianus, basilica," in Steinby, *Lexicon Topographicum*, 1:324–25; and on the Pantheon, F. Tommasi, "S. Maria ad Martyres," *ibid.*, 3:218.
 14. For an overview with a Roman slant, see C. Pietri, "Damase, Évêque de Rome," in *Saecularia Damasiana*, 31–58. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum libri 27*.3.12–13, records the bloody beginning, but Damasus's ecclesiastical opponents long denounced him. Cf. *Collectio Avellana* 1.2 and 1.9–10 and 4 (*praefatio*) with "ambitione corruptus" and "quem in tantum matronae diligebant, ut matronarum auriscalpius diceretur." The *praefatio* (or *quae gesta sunt inter Liberium et Felicem*) introduced the *Libellus precum* addressed to Valentinian, Theodosius, and Arcadius in 384 by the Luciferians Marcellinus and Faustus. The Altar of Victory affair escalated in the last months of Damasus's episcopate. See Symmachus, *relatio* 3, in *Q. Aurelii Symmachi quae supersunt*, 280–83, with Damasus's role at Ambrose, *Epistula* 10.72.10, in *Epistulae et acta* (= Migne, *Patrologia Latina* [hereafter *PL*] 16, *Epistula* 17.10).

15. For review of the question see Hedrick, *History and Silence*, 54–56; with quantitative support and recognition of "significant advances" beginning in the pontificate of Damasus at Salzman, *Making of a Christian Aristocracy*, 73–80. See also Sághy, "Patrons and Priests."
16. See working definitions in Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 35; and Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 5–8, emphasizing a public remembrance of the past "less concerned with establishing its truth than with appropriating it for the present" and the recursive processes that revisit and reevaluate the past "in the light of the present." See also Lowenthal, "Fabricating Heritage." My reading on the debate over the concept's validity includes Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*; Nora, "Between Memory and History"; Knapp, "Collective Memory"; and Gedi and Elam, "Collective Memory."
17. Edwards, *Writing Rome*, xi; Knapp, "Collective Memory," 123.
18. Augustan writers dominate Edwards's *Writing Rome*, but see also Zanker, *The Power of Images*; Raaflaub and Toher, eds., *Between Republic and Empire*; Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*; and Habinek and Schiesaro, eds., *Roman Cultural Revolution*.
19. Begin, still, with Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds., *Invention of Tradition*. Augustus's recreation of the *Fratres Arvales* is a case in point, but Augustan revivalism generally appears as "a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition" (4). Nora's metaphor, "Between Memory and History," 7, describes the "rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good." Nora's essay is richly suggestive, although his modern *lieux de mémoire* are shrinking preserves while the fourth-century *memoriae* of the saints are colonizing outposts.
20. Livy, *Ab urbe condita, praefatio*, 6–10. On "identity" as a prominent Livian theme see, e.g., Miles, *Livy*; Jaeger, *Livy's Written Rome*; Fox, *Roman Historical Myths*; and Chaplin, *Livy's Exemplary History*.
21. Richardson, *New Topographical Dictionary*, 287–89; Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, 90–99; Galinsky, *Augustan Culture*, 141–55; M. Torelli, "Pax Augusta, Ara," in Steinby, *Lexicon Topographicum*, 4:70–74.
22. E.g., the sixth-century "portrait" of Turtura in the catacombs of Commodilla in which the deceased joins the martyrs Felix and Adactus beside Mary and the Christ child: Deckers, Mietke, and Weiland, *Die Katacombe "Commodilla"*, 1:61–65.
23. Initiation dated to 28 B.C.E. by Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 100.4. Richardson, *Topographical Dictionary*, 247–49; Zanker, *Power of Images*, 72–77; von Hesberg and Panciera, *Das Mausoleum des Augustus*; Magness, "The Mausolea"; with Davies, *Death and the Emperor*, 49–67 on the mausoleum's "multivalency." On this aspect of the *Res Gestae*, see Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 101; and J. Elsner, "Inventing Imperium: Texts and the Propaganda of Monuments in Augustan Rome," in Elsner, ed., *Art and Text*, 32–53.
24. Zanker, *Forum Augustum*; Richardson, *Topographical Dictionary*, 160–62; and V. Kockel, "Forum Augustum," in Steinby, *Lexicon Topographicum*, 2:289–95; with Zanker, *Power of Images*, esp. 193–215; and Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, 99–102.
25. On the forum's exemplary status, see Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 31.5; T. J. Luce, "Livy, Augustus, and the Forum Augustum," in Raaflaub and Toher, *Between Repub-*

- lic and Empire, 123–38. For the *elogia*, see Degrassi, *Inscriptiones Italiae* 13.3. On Augustus's image, see Zanker, *Forum Augustum*, 12. Note *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 35, where recall of the *quadriga* and the title, *pater patriae*, culminates that document.
26. Stephen Kinzer, "George Washington: Mr. Excitement? Mount Vernon, Alarmed by Fading Knowledge, Seeks to Pep Up His Image," *New York Times* (29 July 2002): B1: "Their goal is to reposition the father of the country for a new era."
 27. The pre-Damasan stages of such shifts in consciousness are now barely visible as, for example, are the earlier "lives" of many of the martyrs commemorated by Damasus.
 28. Prudentius, *Peristephanon* (hereafter *Perist.*) 2.443–44, in Prudentius, *Carmina*: "fiat fidelis Romulus, / et ipse iam credat Numa"; 2.455–56: "agnoscat ut verum Deum / errans Iuli caecitas." Not purely metaphorical.
 29. See Ferrua's individual commentaries in *Epig. Dam.*
 30. *Epig. Dam.* 15; also *Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae* (hereafter *ICUR*) 4.11078; preserved only in transcription.
 31. *Preremet vulgare*, however, is de Rossi's emendation of the manuscript's *prerimet vulgare*. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
 32. Pleasure may be another matter. Modern readers have often been unsympathetic, e.g., Ferrua, *Epig. Dam.*, 12, but Jerome thought Damasus "elegans in versibus componendis" (*De viris illustribus* 103). See positive assessments at Fontaine, *Naissance de la poésie*, 111–25; and Fontaine, "Damase poète théodosien."
 33. See Juvencus, *Evangeliorum libri quattuor*.
 34. Cf. Lott, *Love and Theft*.
 35. Prudentius, *Contra Symmachum* 1.502–5, in Prudentius, *Carmina*.
 36. *Epig. Dam.* 46.4–5: "sanguine [Saturninus] mutavit patriam nomenque genusque / Romanum civem sanctorum fecit origo." *Epig. Dam.* 48.1–2: "te [Hermetem] Graecia misit; / sanguine mutasti patriam." *Epig. Dam.* 20.6–7 (Peter and Paul): "Roma suos potius meruit defendere cives. / Haec Damasus vestras referat, nova sidera, laudes." Cf. Pietri, "Concordia apostolorum," 297–98. Late antique Rome may have been a city of immigrants; see N. Purcell, "The Populace of Rome in Late Antiquity," in Harris, ed., *Transformations of Urbs Roma*, 137–44.
 37. On Damasus's "baptism" of the genre of the *elogium*, see Fontaine, "Damase poète théodosien," 143; Trout, "Verse Epitaph(s)," 168–70.
 38. *Epig. Dam.* 20; also E. Diehl, ed., *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres* 951; and *ICUR* 5.13273; preserved only in transcriptions: "Hic habitasse prius sanctos cognoscere debes / nomina quisque Petri pariter Paulique requiris. / (3) Discipulos Oriens misit, quod sponte fatemur; / sanguinis ob meritum Christumque per astra secuti / aetherios petiere sinus regnaque piorum: / (6) Roma suos potius meruit defendere cives. / Haec Damasus vestras referat, nova sidera, laudes."
 39. Kraus, "Dioskuren," in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (1957): 3:1135; Pietri, "Concordia Apostolorum," 314–17.
 40. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 2.20.12, 2.42.5; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 6.13; Richardson, *Topographical Dictionary*, 74–75; I. Nielsen, "Castor, Aedes, Templum," in Steinby, ed., *Lexicon Topographicum* 1:242–45. The Dioscuri were also venerated early at the Forum's *Lacus Iuturnae*; see Nash, *Pictorial Dictionary*, 2:11–12; Geppert, *Castor und Pollux*, 134–37. The dictator A. Postumius, who "aed[em Castoris . . .] ex s[poliis hostium vovit]" was honored with an *elogium* in the *Forum Augustum* (Degrassi, ed., *Inscriptiones Italiae* 13.3.10).
 41. Nash, "Arcus Novus," in Nash, *Pictorial Dictionary*, 1:120–25; Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, 409–13; Geppert, *Castor und Pollux*, 180 (R 15) and 120–21, on the "pilos und/oder stern" iconography.
 42. Robertson, *Roman Imperial Coins*, 5:112 (Maxentius), 5:278–80 (Constantine; an *Urbs Roma* series). For the contorniate medallions, see Alföldi and Alföldi, *Die Kontorniat-Medaillons*, 2:126 (Nr. 45).
 43. Degrassi, *Inscriptiones Italiae* 13.2, p. 245: "N(atalis) Castor(is) et Pollu(ci)s, C(ircenses), m(issus) XXIIII." Cf. Salzman, *On Roman Time*, 118–31, 156.
 44. Ammianus, *Rerum gestarum libri* 19.10.4.
 45. See, e.g., the fourth-century gold-glass token depicting Agnes flanked by two stars (Elsner, *Imperial Rome*, illus. 159); cf. Donati, *Pietro e Paolo*, no. 91, and the epiphany scene of Santa Maria Maggiore.
 46. They did not go quietly. Prudentius's assault on Roman religion's great deception (*Contra Symmachum* 1.164–244 with 1.227–28, in *Carmina*) denounced them as the bastard sons of a fallen woman ("Gemini quoque fratres / corrupta de matre nothi"), but in the late fifth century Gelasius was still complaining at *Adversus Andromachum contra Iulercalia* 18. See *Collectio Avellana*, 459; Gelasius, *Lettre*, 177: "Castores vestri certe, a quorum cultu desistere noluitis." Shortly the martyr twins Cosmas and Damian joined the fray (Kraus, "Dioskuren," 1135–36).
 47. Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 34–35.
 48. For the quote see Elsner, "Inventing Imperium," 40. Further insights at Beard and Henderson, "The Emperor's New Body."
 49. Lancaster, "Building Trajan's Column"; Jones, *Principles of Roman Architecture*, 161–75. In the fourth century the oddity still provoked comment, e.g., Eutropius, *Breviarium*, 8.5: "Inter divos relatus est solusque omnium intra Urbem sepultus est."
 50. The column was dedicated in 113 C.E.; Trajan died in Cilicia in the late summer of 117. For review of questions regarding the column's funerary status, see Davies, *Death and the Emperor*, 30–34. On the column's frieze as *res gestae*, see V. Huet, "Stories One Might Tell: Reading Trajan's Column and the Tiberius Cup," in Elsner, *Art and Text*, 9–31. Religious piety is evident in the column's scenes of ritual and sacrifice.
 51. On the association of intra pomerium burial with hero cult, see Davies, *Death and the Emperor*, 32.
 52. Modifying Beard and Henderson, *Classical Art*, 181.
 53. Their ashes were in Hadrian's mausoleum: *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, 6:986; also Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, 346; *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Marcus 7.10; Davies, *Death and the Emperor*, 40–43. Titus had already appeared in the vault of his arch ascending by eagle.
 54. Richardson, "Ustrinum Domus Augustae," and "Diva Faustina Maior, Ara," in *Topographical Dictionary*, 404, 149. V. Jolivet, "Ustrinum Augusti," in Steinby, ed., *Lexicon Topographicum*, 5:97.

55. Epig. Dam. 16: "Hic congesta iacet quaeris si turba piorum. . . . Hic comites Xysti. . . . Hic iuvenes puerique."
56. Epig. Dam. 20.1: "Hic habitasse prius"; Epig. Dam. 17: "hic positus . . . sedentem."
57. Epig. Dam. 17.8–9 (Sixtus II): "Ostendit Christus, reddit qui praemia vitae, / pastoris meritum."
58. Epig. Dam. 16.2–3: "corpora sanctorum retinent veneranda sepulcra / sublimes animas rapuit sibi regia caeli."
59. Epig. Dam. 25.1–2: "Aspice, et hic tumulus retinet caelestia membra / sanctorum subito rapuit quos regia caeli."
60. Epig. Dam. 31.3: "aetheris alta petit Christo comitante beatus."
61. We know less about how pictorial representation reinforced this theme. Hippolytus's shrine included a painting depicting his burial; see Prudentius, *Peristephanon* 11.145–52. The early sixth-century mosaic from the apse of Santi Cosmas e Damian shows Peter and Paul introducing the two martyrs to Christ, who points to a phoenix and star, a corollary to the apotheosis scene of Antoninus and Faustina that merits further consideration. Krautheimer, *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae*, 1.3:137–43.
62. More in Trout, "Verse Epitaph(s)." Pope Felix built Cosmas and Damian "ut aetheria vivat in arce poli."
63. Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 38.56.1–4, and Seneca, *Epistulae* 86, both visitors. Provocative insights at Jaeger, *Livy's Written Rome*, 164–72; and Henderson, *Morals and Villas*. Notably the confusion over Scipio's burial place, as over Johnson's (e.g., Wyman, *Blues Odyssey*, 217), yielded multiple funerary sites.
64. E. Everett refers to "hero-martyrs" in his Gettysburg address (19 Nov. 1863) when describing the Athenian dead buried at Marathon and the Union dead of Gettysburg; Everett, *Orations and Speeches*, 4:623. Alcock, *Archaeologies*, 74–81.
65. Jaeger, *Livy's Written Rome*, 14.
66. Camp, *Archaeology of Athens*, 163–64, 261–64.
67. Loraux, *Invention of Athens*, 20.
68. Loraux, *Invention of Athens*, 132–71, at 171, emphasis in original.
69. Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*.
70. *Ibid.*, 38, noting contemporary grumbling. See most recently commemorations of the first anniversary of 11 September 2001. See Ignatieff in "What We Think of America," for whom "the power of American scripture [citing the Gettysburg Address] lies in this constant process of democratic reinvention" (49). On the dissemination of the Gettysburg address through inscription, classroom memorization, performance, and recasting, see Bullard, *Lincoln in Marble and Bronze*, too early to include the text's third inscription in the Gettysburg cemetery alone (on the Kentucky Monument of 1975); Bradon, *Building the Myth*; and Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln*, 133, 241.
71. The quotations are from, respectively, Soja, "Los Angeles," 427, on Disneyland; and Bob Dylan, "Bye and Bye," *Love and Theft* (CD, Sony Music, 2001), on the burdens of the past from a writer deeply invested in the American imaginary. See further Marcus, *Invisible Republic*, Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 204–32; and Dale, "Stolen Property," whose medieval Venetians "periodically reinvented the memory" of Mark's Venetian advent in accord with the evolution of their civic institutions (220).
72. Witness the pagan Praetextatus's sarcasm on another issue: Jerome, *Contra Joannem Hierosolymitanum ad Pammachium* 8 (PL 23:377C).
73. Several Damasan texts damaged during the sieges of the earlier sixth century were repaired or recarved by his episcopal successors; e.g., Vigilius's efforts (537–55) at Epig. Dam. 18.2 and 41. On the elogia as the seedbeds of *acta* and *passiones*, see Epig. Dam. 37; with Prudentius, *Peristephanon* 14; and *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina*, s.v. "Agnes."
74. Favro, *Urban Image of Augustan Rome*; and on Damasus's intramural building, see Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital*, 142–46.
75. Jerome's memory in action at *Commentarii in Ezechielem*, 12.40.5–13 (CCSL 75:556–57), with citation of Ps. 54:16: "descendant ad infernum viventes."
76. See the catalogue by Barbini in Pergola, *Le catacombe romane*; and the articles by A. Nestori, U. M. Fasola, P. Pergola, J. Guyon, and L. Reekmans in *Saecularia Damasiana*.
77. See Gregory the Great, *Registrum epistularum* 4.30 (CCSL 140:248–50): Constantina had requested "caput eiusdem sancti Pauli aut aliud quid de corpore ipsius" (248.5); she was offered *brandea* instead.
78. CCSL 175:284–95, with a reading to be tested elsewhere.