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THE TWELFTH CENTURY CHURCH OF
S. MARIA IN CAPITOLIO
AND THE CAPITOLINE OBELISK

The late nineteenth century monument to Vittorio Emanuele II now dominates the northern spur of the Capitoline Hill – the ancient Arx¹ – and dwarfs its southern neighbor, the Franciscan church of S. Maria in Aracoeli. Prior to the construction of the Vittoriano the Aracoeli itself commanded the site. It rose high above its convent buildings to the north and east, and above the city government center grouped around the lower Piazza Campidoglio to the south.² Although remodeled and restored many times, the Franciscan church dates largely from the 1260's. It proves rather easy to strip away the later additions mentally, in order to achieve a clear picture of the *duecento* state of the building.³ It is quite another matter, however, to piece together the few remnants of the prior occupant of the Capitoline site, a Benedictine church called S. Maria in Capitolio, which forms the main subject of the present inquiry.⁴

The establishment of a church on the Arx does not seem to antedate the early eighth century. Whatever building stood there then and in the ninth century must have been quite small, and it is only with the Cluniac-inspired reform of monasticism in mid-tenth century Rome that S. Maria in Capitolio became a wealthy and important house of the Benedictine order.⁵ Nothing is known about the early buildings which served this monastery, however, for the

archeological evidence visible today concerns a church building erected in the twelfth century.

As I hope to demonstrate, the nave of that church probably occupied most of the site now covered by the transept of the Aracoeli (Figs. 1 a and 1 b). Its right aisle would then have stood to the east, roughly where the apse and transept chapels of the Franciscan church stood or now stand. The left aisle would have corresponded to the ends of the nave and aisles of the present building, as well as to the easternmost chapel opening off the south aisle. Thus, the façade of S. Maria in Capitolio looked south over the lower open space between the Arx and the southern spur of the hill.

These proposals for the location and orientation of the Benedictine predecessor to the Aracoeli are by no means new ones. More than sixty years ago Ch. Hülsen, followed by A. Colasanti, tentatively suggested the transept as the site of the earlier church. Yet neither was able to buttress his proposals with much archeological data. Some data does exist however, and to my mind it offers strong support for their suggestions.⁶

The geography of the Capitoline Hill may have played a role in the choice of the unusual north-south orientation. The only comfortable access to the northern spur of the hill (then as now) was from the open area to the south. The other slopes of the Arx were rather steep. In turn, the lower area to the south of the Arx was easily approached from the west by a fairly gentle rise, paved over by Michelangelo's Cordonata in the middle of the sixteenth century.

In what follows I will first discuss the limits of the site, and then turn to the actual remnants of the twelfth-century church – tower, walls and liturgical furniture – attempting a general reconstruction of it. Finally I will discuss the Capitoline obelisk, for I believe that it was erected about the year 1200 in front of the façade of S. Maria in Capitolio as an embellishment to the Benedictine church.

¹ For the Arx see E. NASH, *Bildlexikon zur Topographie des antiken Rom*, 2 vols., Tübingen, 1961–62, vol. 1, pp. 515–517.

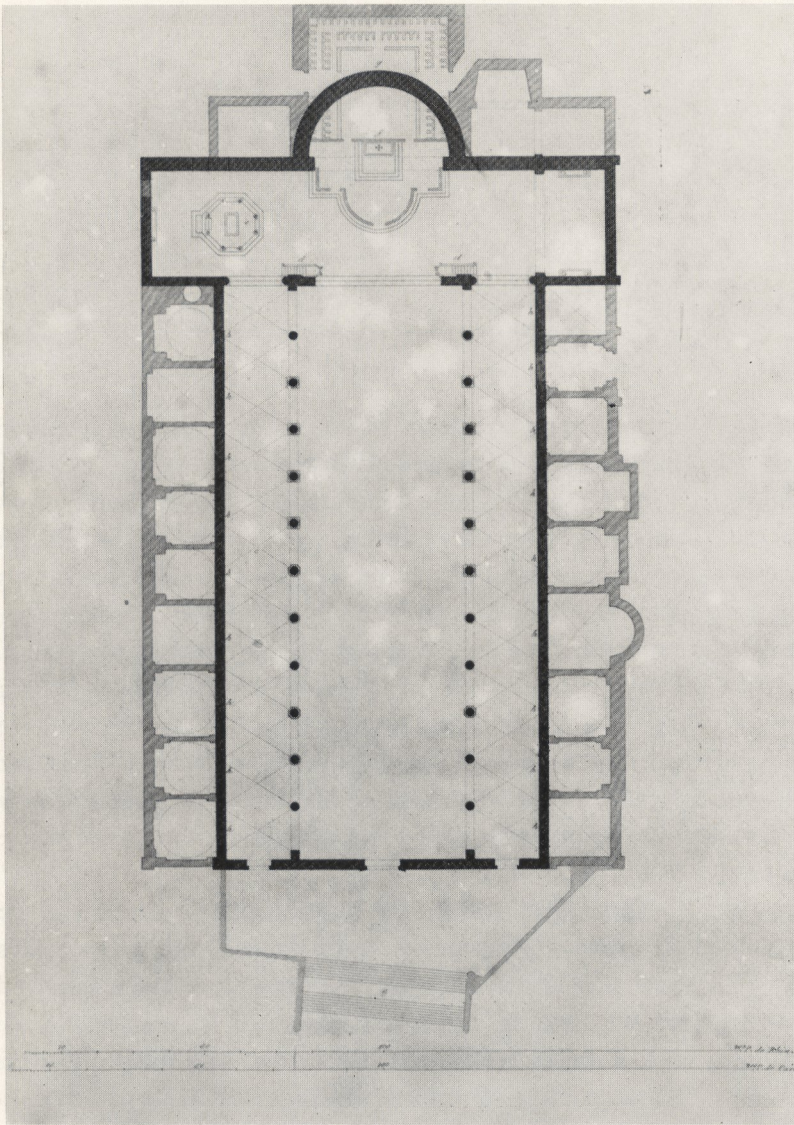
² For the Capitoline hill see J. ACKERMAN, *The Architecture of Michelangelo*, 2nd ed., 2 vols., London, 1964–66, Text, pp. 54–74; Catalogue, pp. 50–68; and Siebenhüner.

³ For S. Maria in Aracoeli see Casimiro; Colasanti; and R. MALMSTROM, *S. Maria in Aracoeli at Rome*, Diss. N.Y.U., 1973.

⁴ For S. Maria in Capitolio see CH. HUELSEN, *Le chiese di Roma nel medio evo*, Florence, 1927, pp. 323–324; Venanzi; HÜLSEN, p. 9; and Colasanti, pp. 6–7.

⁵ Consult G. FERRARI, *Early Roman Monasteries*, Rome, 1957 (Studi di Antichità Cristiana, 23), pp. 210–213; B. BISCHOFF, "Biblioteche, scuole e letteratura nella città dell'alto medio evo," *Settimane*, vol. 6, 1958, pp. 609–625; and P. RABIKAUSKAS, *Die römische Kuriale in der päpstlichen Kanzlei*, Rome, 1958 (Miscellanea historiae pontificiae, 20), pp. 42–49.

⁶ See Hülsen, p. 9, and Colasanti, pp. 6–7.



I

The north wall of the transept of the Franciscan building (Fig. 2) took its present form in the 1260's. Only a small part of the wall dates from that decade, however; most of it is earlier. The later additions are visible at the top of the wall, where one can see a brick gable end centered on an elaborately decorated rose window. The lower and earlier part of the wall (Fig. 3) is built of small tufa blocks, in contrast to the full brickwork above. Furthermore, the tufa wall is some 10 to 15 cm. thicker than the brickwork continuations (Fig. 1 b), and it too rises to a shallow triangular gable end, one standing just below the rose window of the Franciscan transept (Fig. 2).

Proof that the tufa wall antedates the Aracoeli is to be found, I believe, in the difference between the positions occupied by the two rose windows in the end walls of the Franciscan transept. As I have said, the northern rose projects upward into the triangular gable end. This caused the window to have been partly hidden from view inside. It was bisected by the transverse beams of the open timber roof of the transept. In contrast, the rose window in the south wall (Figs. 4 and 5) did not intrude into the gable end crowning the wall, and was thus completely visible inside, not having been obscured by the open timber trusses. I would argue that the awkward upward displacement of the northern rose window was caused by the prior existence of the tufa wall, and that the building to which it originally

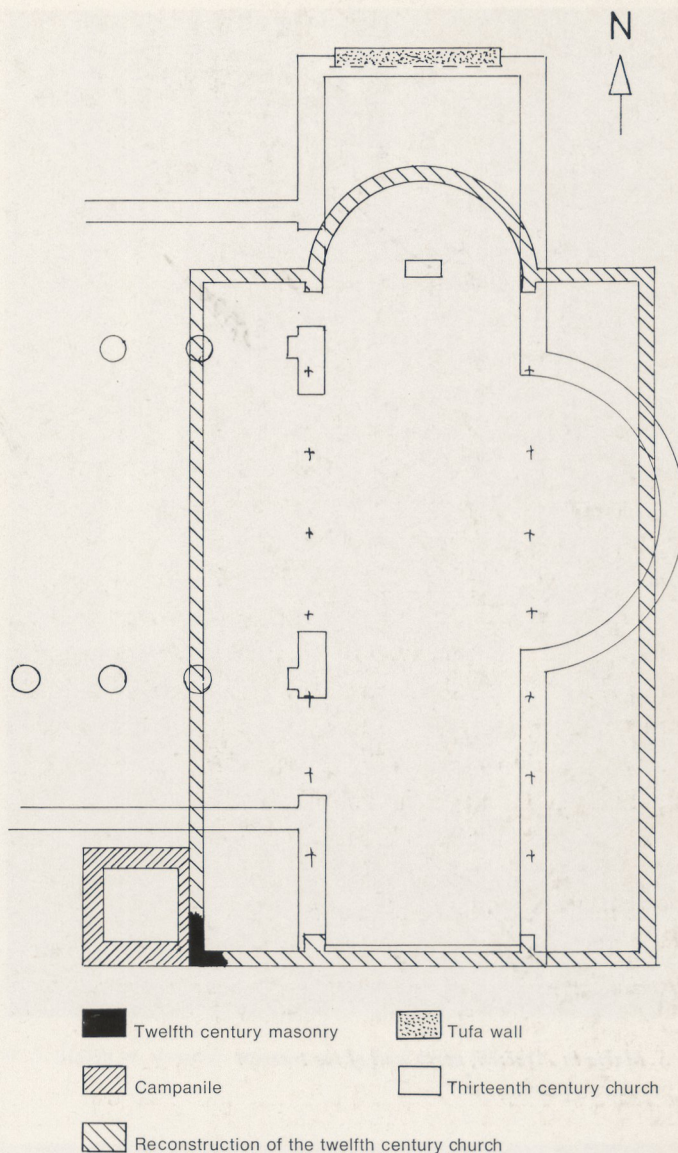
belonged, though probably built prior to the arrival of the Franciscans in 1250, was retained and used by them during and after the construction of their new church.

The original width of the tufa wall can not now be determined because its ends are hidden behind nineteenth-century convent buildings to the east and west of the north transept wall. Even so, the building to which the tufa wall originally belonged must have been fairly large. Its axis ran north-south on a line coinciding with that of the transept, and the building occupied the ground immediately to the north. It would appear to have existed down to the building of the Vittoriano, and seems to have been recorded on a few views of the site.⁷ One can only guess what role it played in the Benedictine monastery – refectory or dormitory, perhaps.⁸ A more precise date for its construction is difficult to establish, for little is known about the dating of tufa masonry, which is unusual in Rome. Yet there was one period when tufa seems to have been in fairly common use. That was during the second and third decades of the thirteenth century, when S. Lorenzo f.l.m. and S. Bibiana were built. One might therefore tentatively ascribe the tufa wall and its original building to ca. 1220.⁹

What is important in this context is that the site immediately to the north of the present transept was occupied by a substantial structure from perhaps 1220 onward. Hence the Benedictine church of S. Maria in Capitolio, still in use in the 1250's, could not have stood there. In addition, the existence of a large monastic building in this location suggests that the Benedictine church was close by.

II

More direct evidence for the site of S. Maria in Capitolio was published nearly thirty years ago by C. Venanzi. He observed that the southern face of the eighth chapel on the south side of the Franciscan church (Figs. 4 and 6) originally formed an exterior wall of a twelfth century campanile.¹⁰ He might have gone on to say that two more walls



1b. S. Maria in Aracoeli, reconstruction sketch of the twelfth century church (based on fig. 1a)

of the campanile are still preserved in large part (the eastern and western ones), making up the side walls of the eighth chapel. In addition, a fragment of the mostly destroyed northern one still exists. These walls are visible above the roof of the south side aisle of the Aracoeli (Fig. 7) and they show that the tower was ca. 5.40 m. by 5.65 m.¹¹

This campanile originally had at least five stories divided from each other by horizontal brick saw-tooth moldings

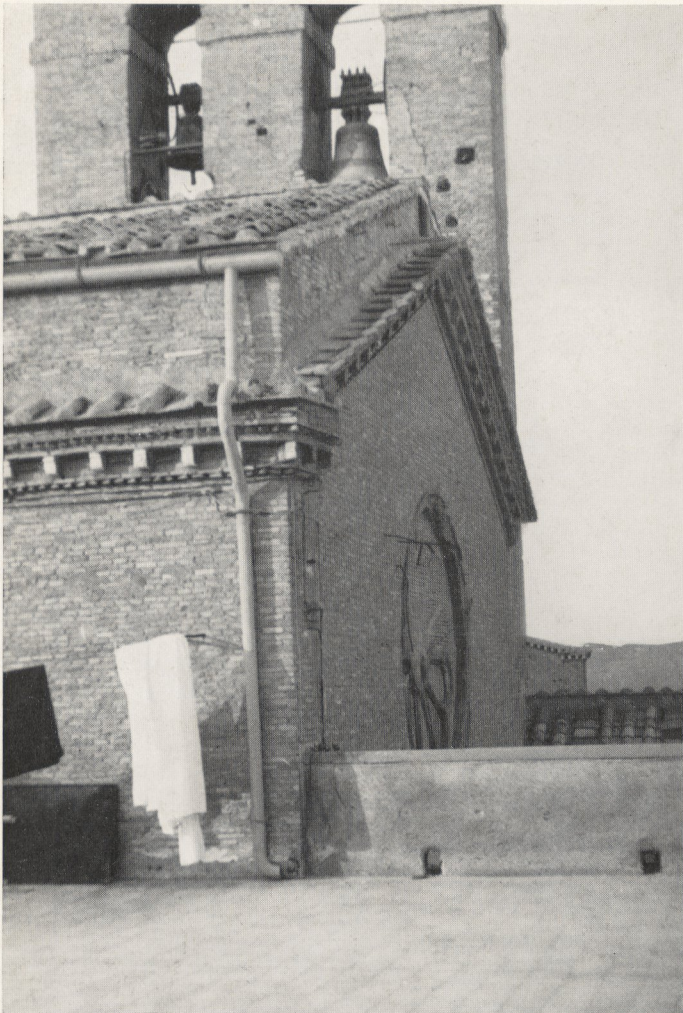
11 When the tower was converted into a chapel in the late thirteenth century the space was vaulted at a level which corresponds to the horizontal molding separating levels three and four. The east and west walls were roughly demolished down to the extrados of the vault, but enough remains of the full length of the east wall to allow the reconstruction of the plan of the campanile.

7 Consult J. HESS, "Die paepstliche Villa bei Aracoeli," *Miscellanea Bibliothecae Hertzianae*, Munich, 1961 (Römische Forschungen der Bibliotheca Hertziana, 16), pp. 239–254, esp. figs. 166 and 168.

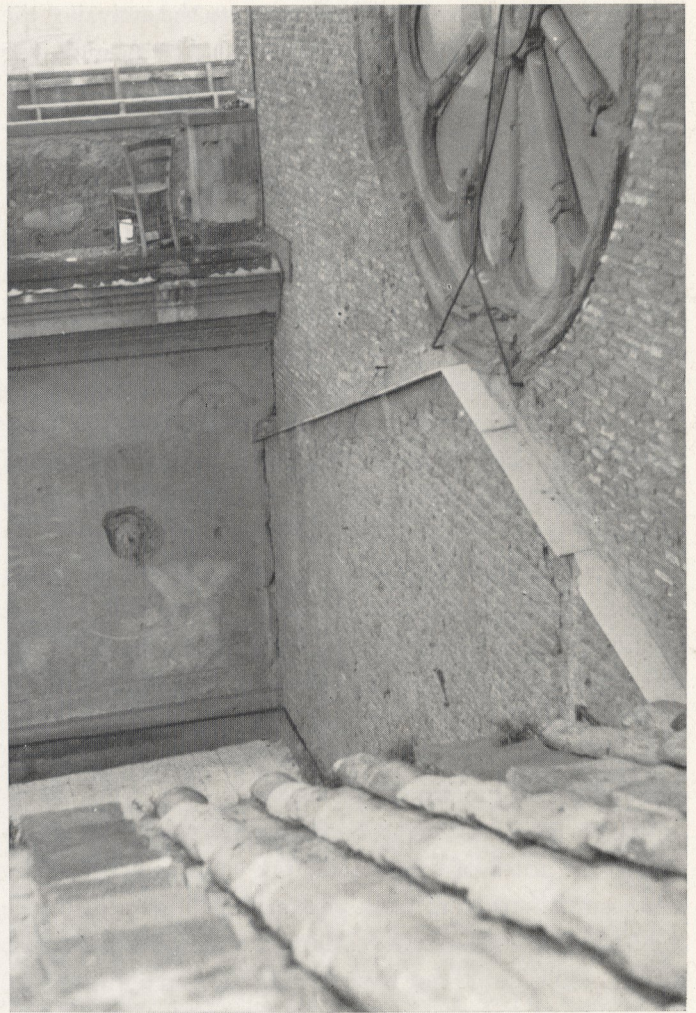
8 The ground floor space served as a sacristy from at least ca. 1480 onward if not from the later thirteenth century. This use continued until 1885 when the building was destroyed. Consult Cod. Vat. Lat. 11257, fol. 185 recto; Casimiro, p. 266; and J. VETTER, *L'Ara Coeli, Souvenirs Historiques*, Rome, 1886, pp. 113–114.

9 For early thirteenth-century tufa masonry see KRAUTHEIMER, vol. 1, p. 93, and vol. 2, pp. 36 and 41.

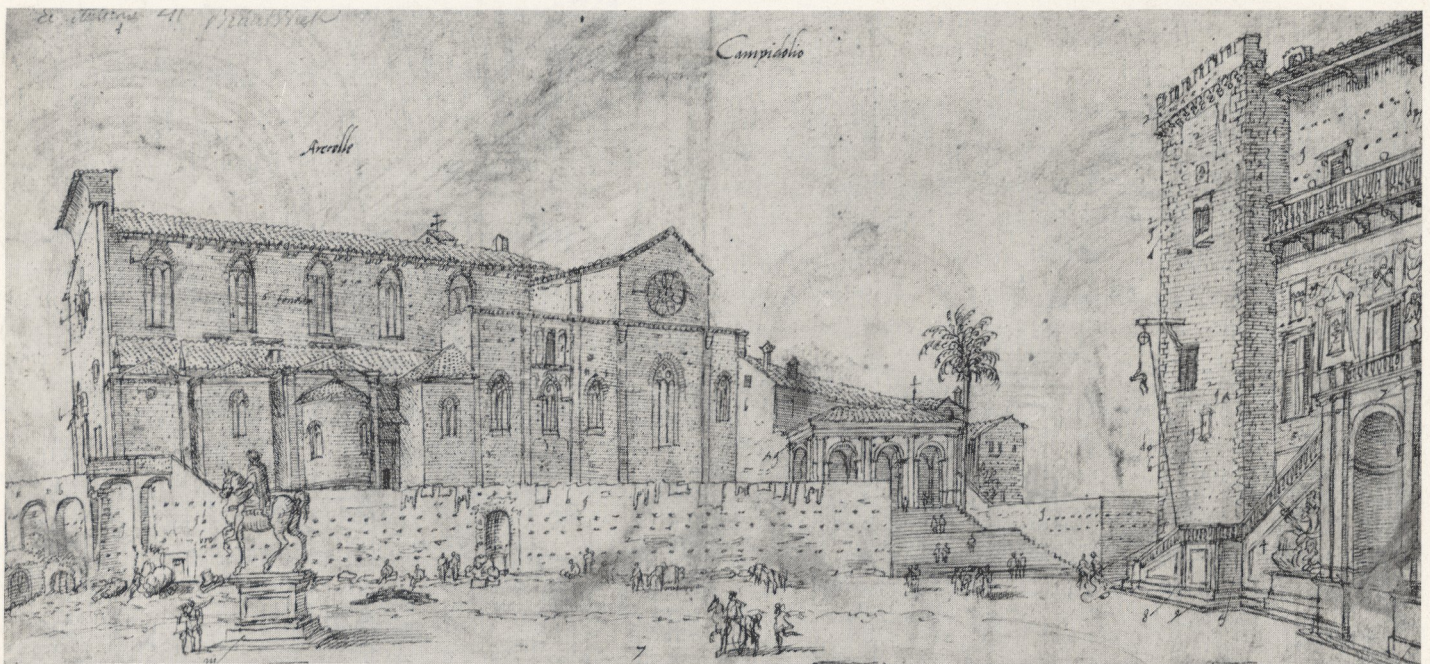
10 Venanzi, p. 6.



2. *S. Maria in Aracoeli, north wall of the transept*



3. *S. Maria in Aracoeli, early tufa wall incorporated into the north transept wall*



4. *Anonymus, ca. 1560 – Braunschweig, Herzog-Anton-Ulrich-Museum (Detail)*



5. *S. Maria in Aracoeli, south wall of the transept*

(Figs. 4 and 8). Only the lower four levels are preserved, and indeed the lowest three levels of the eastern and western faces are totally hidden from view. On the south side the first level was not articulated; the second and third levels each had three blind arches. The fourth level had three open arches on piers, while a fifth level, the bell chamber proper, must have had three open arches resting on colonnettes.¹² Enough is still visible of the fourth level of the western face (Fig. 9) to show that it must have been next to identical to the fourth level at the south; one presumes that the same was true of the three lower levels of the west face as well. The fourth level of the eastern face, on the other hand, was quite different (Fig. 10). It was not articulated by either blind arcading or open arches; it consisted of a plain brick wall set between horizontal moldings above and below. Inasmuch as the fourth level here was unarticulated, the

¹² No Roman campanile lacks this feature and it should be reconstructed here.



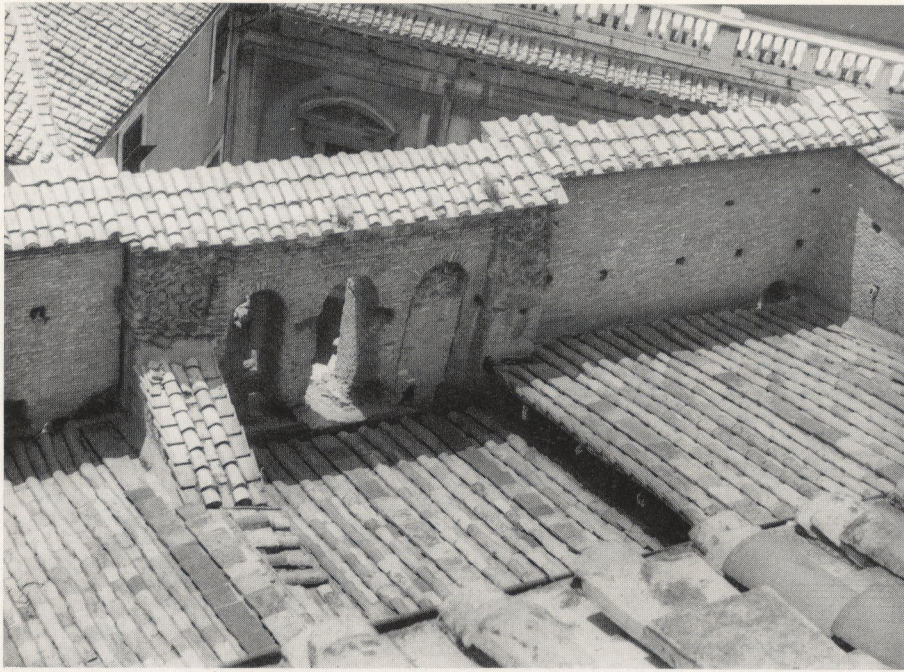
6. *S. Maria in Aracoeli, exterior of chapel 8 after 1967*

third and second levels below were probably unarticulated as well, save for the horizontal moldings marking the levels.

For a clear idea of the appearance of the campanile one needs to look no farther than S. Giorgio in Velabro, where the "twin" of the tower on the Campidoglio still stands largely unchanged (Fig. 11). To my knowledge it is the only other Roman campanile with three blind arches in levels two and three, followed by an open fourth level of three arches on piers, and crowned by a fifth story of three arches on colonnettes.¹³

Roman bell towers are notoriously hard to date. Given the close similarity between the towers on the Capitoline and in the Velabro one would tend to think of them as con-

¹³ Consult Serafini, *passim.*, and vol. 1, pp. 167-169, vol. 2 plates 50 and 51. His reconstruction of the tower at S. Giorgio (vol. 1, p. 167, fig. 454) is certainly wrong, as an examination of the masonry would show. At S. Giorgio the blind arcading in level two is found only on the façade (south) face. This might have been the case at S. Maria in Capitolio as well.



7. *S. Maria in Aracoeli, view of the campanile from above*



8. *S. Maria in Aracoeli, general view of chapels 7, 8 and 9*



9. *S. Maria in Aracoeli, southern arch opening in the west face of the campanile*



10. *S. Maria in Aracoeli, east face of the campanile*

temporary. The campanile of S. Giorgio is not dated, yet it is certainly earlier than the portico in front of that church, which must date from the early thirteenth century, witness its Ionic capitals. Hence, a date in the twelfth century is the best we can do for the tower of S. Giorgio, and by analogy, for the tower of S. Maria in Capitolio.¹⁴

In Rome, campanili were normally added at the façades of the churches they embellish.¹⁵ Often they stand over the end of one of the side aisles, using large tracts of masonry in the aisle, façade and clerestory walls to help support the tower rising above the nave roof. This arrangement can be seen at S. Maria in Trastevere, S. Bartolomeo all'Isola, and S. Giorgio in Velabro (Fig. 11), to mention only the most prominent.¹⁶ An alternative arrangement can be seen at S. Crisogono, where the campanile stands adjacent to the right side aisle, partly resting on the aisle wall, but mostly free standing.¹⁷ That side of the campanile rising over the

side aisle wall, parallel to the nave clerestory, was barely visible and was not articulated in its lower levels (beyond horizontal moldings), in spite of the rich development of the other three faces. Only at the top of the campanile, above the level of the nave clerestory, were all four faces treated equally. It is this type of tower that one finds on the Capitoline – the east face largely unarticulated, while the south, west and presumably north faces were enriched with blind or open arcading above the first level.

If the campanile of S. Maria in Capitolio did stand at the façade of the church as one would expect, then the church itself probably stood to the east of the tower, with its axis running north-south, and its façade standing in line with the south face of the tower. Only such an arrangement would account for the mostly unarticulated eastern face of the tower (Fig. 1b).

Support for this interpretation may be found at the south-east corner of the campanile. If one examines the southern face of the tower (Fig. 6), it becomes clear that the extreme eastern end of the lowest level of the wall is composed of two distinct pieces of masonry (Fig. 12). The two are sharply divided by a straight vertical joint running upward from the pavement and stopping at the lowest horizontal molding. The masonry to the west of the joint belongs to the campanile; that to the east belongs to an earlier wall incorporated into the base of the tower.

14 The Ionic capitals of the portico of S. Giorgio are similar to those found at SS. Vincenzo ed Anastasio alle Tre Fontane, which date in all likelihood from 1200–1212. More advanced Ionic capitals are found at S. Lorenzo f.l.m. (1216–1227). For comments on the date of the masonry, see below, esp. notes 18 to 20.

15 Serafini, *passim*. An exception would be the campanile of S. Lorenzo f.l.m.

16 Serafini, vol. 1, pp. 220–221, 162–164 and 167–169; and vol. 2, plates 98–100, 45–47 and 50–51.

17 Serafini, vol. 1, pp. 221–222; vol. 2, plate 101.



11. *S. Giorgio in Velabro, campanile*

Comparing the masonry of the campanile with that of the earlier wall it is clear that they are very similar indeed.¹⁸ The laying of the brickwork and the execution of the *falsa*

18 The masonry of the campanile is composed of a rubble core with brick facing (clearly visible in the fourth level above the aisle roof). In the facing the bricks were set at a modulus of five bricks and five mortar beds equaling 30 cm. to 31 cm., with the widest variations from 29.6 cm. to 36 cm. The bricks are spoils varying in length from 15 cm. to 25 cm. (with very few short bricks, *i.e.* those less than 10 cm. long); most of them are a yellowish-red color; and most are 3.9 cm. thick (thickness varies from 2.2 cm. – a “brick red” brick – to 5.1 cm. – a yellow brick). The mortar beds vary from 1.5 cm. to 4.5 cm., but are mostly 2 to 3 cm. thick. The *falsa cortina* lines are *very* regularly spaced every 6.1 cm.

*cortina*¹⁹ are clearly less careful in the early wall than in the tower, but beyond that it would be hard to distinguish one from the other. The presence of *falsa cortina* and the modulus of the brickwork used in both suggest dates in the twelfth century.²⁰

The wall surface to the east of the joint showed no signs of having been broken off and then remanaged. On the contrary, it certainly was a finished surface, as the *falsa cortina* showed.²¹ From this one can conclude that the tract of wall now visible to the right of the joint once belonged to a wall running east-west with which the south face of the tower was later aligned. I suggest that this should be considered the west end of the south façade wall of the Benedictine church.

One can go farther: the sharp vertical western termination of the early wall suggests that at this very point the east-west wall formed a right angle corner with another wall running north-south, which was later incorporated into the base of the east wall of the campanile (Fig. 1 b). Confirmation of this came in the summer of 1967 when a restoration of the south wall of the tower was in progress. Temporarily a very small part of the western face of the early north-south wall was exposed (Fig. 13). It was clearly made of finished masonry, and it too was decorated with *falsa cortina* striations in the mortar beds. Comparative measurements indicate that the early north-south wall was ca. 50 cm. thick, and that when the campanile was built another 30 cm. (more or less) were added to its western face to form a robust support for the tower rising above. The early north-south wall, then, would seem to be a remnant of the left (west) side aisle wall of the Benedictine church.

(with a few variations from 5.8 to 6.2 cm.). The masonry of the early wall to the right of the joint is very much the same, but the bricks are redder, there are more short bricks, and occasional pieces of rectangular tufa are mixed in with the bricks. The traces of *falsa cortina* visible before the summer of 1967 were too high on the wall to be measured.

19 The purpose served by *falsa cortina* is not fully clear. It was most commonly employed on the exterior surfaces of walls, and it was restricted there to walls built from scaffolding. Like the saw-toothed moldings and blind arcading, it seems to have been decorative. For more, see G. B. GIOVENALE, *La basilica di S. Maria in Cosmedin*, Rome, 1927, pp. 93–94, 243–244; Venanzi, p. 7; and Krautheimer, vol. 2, p. 293, and vol. 4, p. 18.

20 For twelfth century masonry, see Krautheimer, vol. 1, pp. 181, 228, 255, 312, and 325–326; vol. 2, pp. 171, 172, 210, and 293; vol. 3, pp. 68 and 273; and vol. 4, pp. 18 and 21. See also Giovenale, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

21 A restoration of the south wall of the chapel was carried out in the summer of 1967. At that time the brickwork on both sides of the vertical joint was repointed and in many places the old bricks were removed and replaced by new ones. The joint itself was retained in its original position.



12. *S. Maria in Aracoeli, vertical joint at the base of the campanile, summer 1967*



13. *S. Maria in Aracoeli, falsa cortina on the west face of the early north-south wall*

In addition to these architectural remains, parts of the liturgical furniture made for S. Maria in Capitolio are also still preserved. The ambo standing to the right of the triumphal arch in the transept of the Franciscan church (Fig. 14) is composed of pieces of different origins, five of which are of interest here.²² The three vertical panels which make up the projecting section of the pulpit, and two others standing to either side, originally formed part of an ambo made in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century,²³ as is

22 G. Giovannoni, *op. cit.*, attempts a reconstruction of the twelfth-century ambo. I am not convinced by it, suspecting that many of the pieces Giovannoni used in his reconstruction date from the later thirteenth century. The ambo was remade in its present form in the 1560's.

23 The panels measure ca. 1.25 m. by ca. 25 cm. and are decorated with mosaic work of glass and marble pieces set into the slab between narrow bands of marble. There are five more pieces from the same ambo which now form part of the pavement of the east end of the nave. All are in the center of the nave in the vicinity of the eleventh pair of columns; four are to the left of the axis of the nave, and one more is to the right. Three of them are the same size as those still on the pulpit; the two others measure ca. 30 cm. by ca. 40 cm. They became paving slabs in the 1560's, in all likelihood.

shown by the inscription spread across two of the panels:²⁴ LAURENTIUS CUM / JACOBO FILIO SUO (H)UIUS OPERIS MAGISTER FUIT. This well known team of sculptors worked in and around Rome about the year 1200.²⁵

A second piece of liturgical furniture may have been associated with the Benedictine church as well. It is the altar frontal commemorating the legend of Augustus and the Sibyl (Fig. 15) that now stands mostly hidden within the seventeenth century ciborium structure over the altar of S. Helena in the north transept of the Franciscan building.²⁶ The manifold questions and problems surrounding the frontal – its date, its present sunken position, its essential meaning – cannot detain us here. What is important in this

24 V. FORCELLA, *Iscrizioni delle chiese e d'altri edifici di Roma*, vol. 1, Rome, 1869, p. 131, no. 473. The words LAURENTIUS CUM appear on the right hand panel of the projecting section of the ambo, while the rest of the inscription is found on the panel adjacent to the projecting section at the left.

25 Giovannoni (*op. cit.*, p. 127) ascribes the work to ca. 1180; though possible, that seems too early. See also, G. GIOVANNONI, "Note sui Marmorari Romani," *ArchStorRom*, vol. 27, 1904, pp. 5–26.

26 The altar frontal has never been published adequately; see in the meantime, Casimiro, pp. 157–166.

context is the site occupied by the altar. More than sixty years ago Hülsen, followed by Colasanti, suggested that this site might have been the location of the high altar of the Benedictine church.²⁷ On the basis of what has been said above about the location and orientation of that building, if its high altar was not located exactly on this spot, it must have stood very close by.

Before turning to the Capitoline obelisk it would be well to review the evidence discussed so far (Fig. 1b). Access to the site on the Arx favored a church facing south. Any church on the Arx could not have extended northward beyond the end wall of the present transept. The location and design of the twelfth-century campanile suggest that the nave of the Benedictine church was located where the transept of the Franciscan building now stands, that its aisles stood to either side, and that its façade faced south. At the base of the campanile are remnants of two earlier walls standing at right angles to each other: the north-south one appears to have been the outer wall of the left (west) aisle, while the one running east-west seems to have been the façade wall. The site of the high altar may be recorded

27 Hülsen, p. 9 and Colasanti, pp. 6–7. For P. CELLINI'S views see "Di Fra Guglielmo e di Arnolfo," *BollArte*, vol. 40, 1955, pp. 215–229; and "L'opera di Arnolfo all'Aracoeli," *BollArte*, vol. 47, 1962, pp. 180–195.

14. *S. Maria in Aracoeli, Ambo on the right of the triumphal arch*



in the present location of the altar frontal incased in the chapel of S. Helena. Finally, an ambo was made for the church about the year 1200 by Laurentius and Jacobo.

III

The obelisk which stood on the Capitoline Hill during high medieval and Renaissance times was recorded in several drawings made by Marten van Heemskerck in the early 1530's. A particularly clear representation appears on folio 50 verso of Libro II of the Berlin sketchbooks (Fig. 16).²⁸ Only the upper third of the obelisk was ancient; a metal ball on a spike crowned the obelisk, and it was supported by four carved blocks, each one projecting diagonally at a corner of the shaft. The front of each block took the form of the head and front quarters of a reclining lion, and the lions' heads projected above the bottom edge of the obelisk standing over them.

As Heemskerck's sketch indicates, the heads of the lions were bulbous and three-dimensionally conceived, and their jaws were open. The front legs are shown only as far back as the joint between the upper and lower legs; the upper parts of the front legs were not carved. A sharp line is visible between the sculpted parts and the uncarved, rectangular support behind. The lion blocks rested on a re-used ancient plinth, which in turn rested on a square base with a profiled edge, an element more clearly visible on folio 11 recto of Libro I (Fig. 17). Both drawings clearly show that the four corners of the obelisk and plinth, not the faces, pointed to the cardinal directions. The plinth had no inscription.²⁹

The history of the obelisk since the early fifteenth century is well known, thanks to the work of Pellegrini, D'Onofrio, Noehles and Iversen.³⁰ Mentioned for the first time in 1407, recorded as we have seen by Heemskerck, taken down in ca. 1535, and re-erected in ca. 1582 in the Mattei villa on the Celio – all of this is secure. What remain uncertain, however, are the exact location of the obelisk on the Campidoglio, and the date of its placement there. As far as I can tell the only evidence which can help us with the question of position is contained in the Heemskerck drawings. Nine

28 CH. HÜLSEN and H. EGGER, *Die römischen Skizzenbücher von Marten van Heemskerck*, 2 vols., Berlin, 1913–16.

29 HÜLSEN and EGGER, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, Text, pp. 41–42, discuss the words written on the northeast face of the base in the drawing. They read *teneijt gesprenkelt*, the meaning of which is not clear.

30 A. PELLEGRINI, "Descrizione di tutte le colonne ed obelischi che trovansi nelle piazze di Roma, ... Obelisco della Villa già Mattei," *Il Buonarroti*, vol. 14, 1880, pp. 457–458; D'Onofrio, pp. 204–216; Noehles; Iversen, pp. 106–114.



15. *S. Maria in Aracoeli, altar frontal in the chapel of S. Elena*

of his drawings show the obelisk, but four are distant views of little use.³¹ Three others are closer views, but they do not include reference points existing today, and hence are not very useful.³² The two drawings which are helpful indicate the relationship between the obelisk and the Aracoeli (Figs. 17 and 18).³³

The drawing on folio 16 recto of Libro II (Fig. 18) shows the whole of the south flank of the Aracoeli, from a greatly foreshortened view of the façade at the west all the way east to a garden behind the convent, occupying the slope of the hill overlooking the Roman Forum. As the drawing shows, a small part of the convent complex was built up against the south façade of the transept of the church. There, a two or three story block projected at right angles to the transept façade. In front of it stood a three bay loggia composed of two columns and a pier at the southern end. The front plane of the loggia did not project as far west

as the center of the transept façade. In front of the Aracoeli a staircase of some fourteen steps connected the Arx to the lower open area towards the south. To the east of the staircase stood the obelisk.

The second Heemskerck drawing, folio 11 recto of Libro I (Fig. 17), shows more clearly the relationship between the obelisk, the staircase balustrade, and the pier of the loggia. All three elements stood close to one another, yet it is obvious that the loggia pier was located to the north and east, the obelisk to the west and south, and the column shaft marking the end of the balustrade still farther to the west. Because the front plane of the loggia stood to the east of the center of the transept façade, the obelisk would seem to have stood on or very near to the axis of the transept.³⁴

Through most of its existence on the Capitoline, then, the obelisk occupied a rather curious location. The fairly casual relationship between the Franciscan church, its convent loggia, and the obelisk suggests a mentality allowing

31 Libro I, fol. 6r; Libro II, fols. 12r, 56r, and 91v-92r.

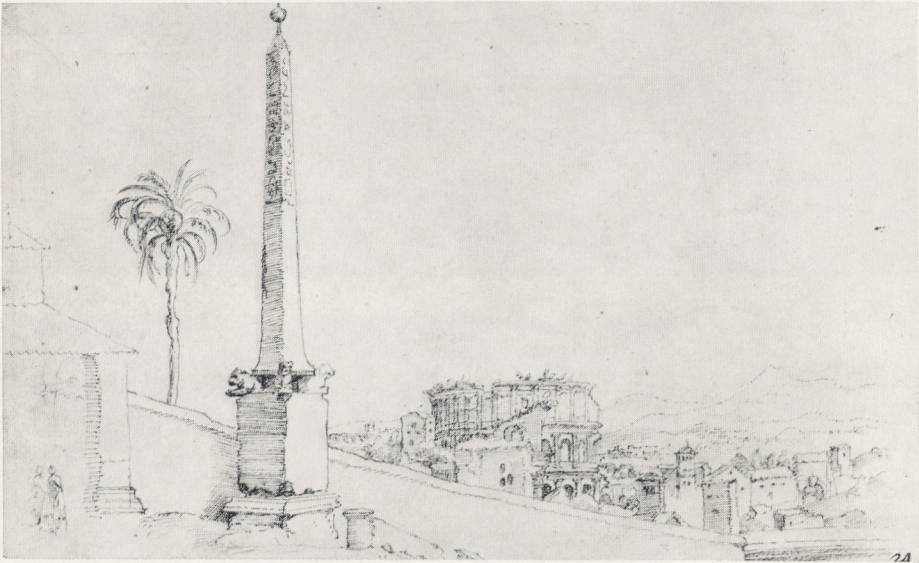
32 Libro I, fol. 61r; Libro II fols. 50r and 72r.

33 Libro I, fol. 11r; Libro II, fol. 16r.

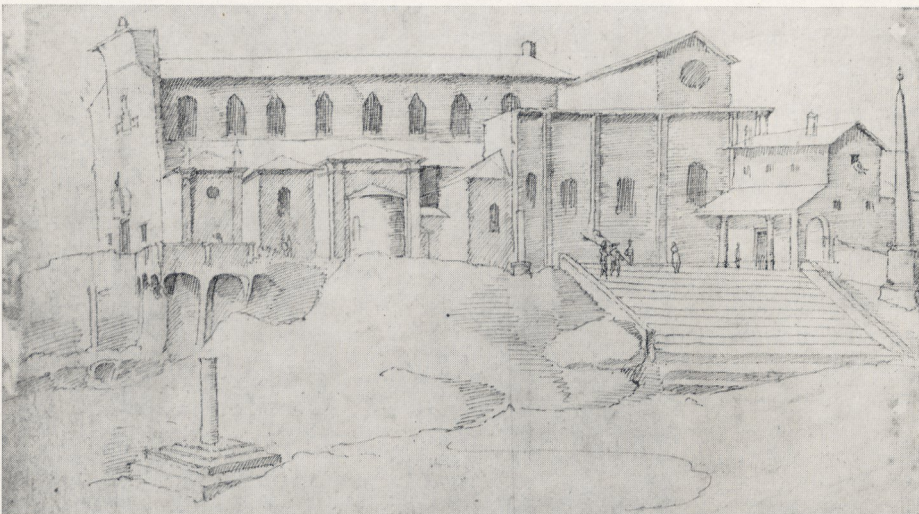
34 Siebenhüner's plan of the hill in about 1500 (*op. cit.*, fig. 19) shows the staircase and the obelisk in their proper relationship



16. Heemskerck, libro II, folio 50 verso –
 Berlin-West, Staatliche Museen
 preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett



17. Heemskerck, libro I, folio 11 recto –
 Berlin-West, Staatliche Museen
 preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett



18. Heemskerck, libro II, folio 16 recto –
 Berlin-West, Staatliche Museen
 preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett
 (Detail)

19. Lion in the Villa Mattei



20. Lion of the main portal of the Cathedral at Civit  Castellana



a seemingly unsystematic relationship between monument and its ambience. I would argue, however, that the obelisk did indeed bear a thoughtful and systematic relationship to its *original* Capitoline environment. This of course concerns the date when the obelisk was set up. I believe that it can be shown that this took place about the year 1200, well before the Franciscan church was built. The place it occupied at the beginning would have been directly in front of the faade of S. Maria in Capitolio, which was only later replaced by the south transept wall of the Aracoeli.

In the absence of written records, all arguments about the date of the erection of the obelisk revolve around the date one might ascribe to the lion supports beneath it. We need not rely only on Heemskerck's drawings, for Noehles identified a pair of lion supports now in the Villa Mattei (Fig. 19) as two of the four once supporting the obelisk.³⁵ Since Noehles showed that this pair already formed a part of the Villa's collection in the seventeenth century, there may be some historical as well as visual justification for

believing that they accompanied the obelisk to the Villa in 1582.³⁶

All of this is fairly secure, and Noehles deserves much credit for having discovered the relationship. I cannot accept his dating of the lions, however. Through a not very rigorous comparison of the Villa Mattei pair with those in the Lateran cloister (before 1241) and those of the throne at Anagni (1263–1276), Noehles assigns the Villa Mattei lions to a date in the middle of the thirteenth century.³⁷ This is not acceptable, because the Villa Mattei lions are far closer to a pair from about 1200 which form a part of the frame of the main door of the cathedral in Civit  Castellana (Fig. 20). They were executed by Laurentius and his son Jacobus, as an inscription over the door states.³⁸

What makes the two pairs of lions unusual within the stylistic context of medieval lions in and around Rome, and at the same time so similar to each other, are the careful saw-tooth clumps of fur along the lower edge of the forelegs (carried further on the more completely carved Civit  Castellana pair), and the inverted tear-drop shaped muscle

to each other, but because Siebenh ner has mistakenly made the axis of the staircase parallel to that of the transept, the whole triangular plot of ground has been incorrectly rotated counter-clockwise to the east. Evidently D'Onofrio accepted this (*op. cit.*, ed. 2, caption to fig. 98); it would appear to be the cause of his placement of the obelisk much too far to the east. E. BACON (*Design of Cities*, London, 1967, figure on p. 100) places the obelisk correctly, but mislocates the staircase. Noehles's description of the site is correct, but very general (*op. cit.*, p. 18).

³⁵ Noehles, pp. 20–21.

³⁶ Noehles, p. 20.

³⁷ Noehles, pp. 20–21. As for Noehles's observation that the lion supports might be earlier than the setting up of the obelisk, his own doubts are convincing: it seems highly unlikely that at some later point four nearly identical lion supports of an earlier date would have become available (*l.c.*). One might add that the form of the supports almost precludes their having been carved for any purpose other than as supports for the obelisk.

³⁸ See GIOVANNONI, "Note sui Marmorari Romani," *ArchStorRom*, vol. 27, 1904, pp. 5–26, and E. HUTTON, *The Cosmati*, London, 1950, pp. 11–12, and figs. 17–18. Noehles does not mention this pair.

on the shoulders. Unfortunately the battered and worn condition of the Cività Castellana pair makes further comparisons between the four lions difficult, but even so, I think that the bulbous plasticity so clearly evident in the Villa Mattei pair is still discernable in those at Cività Castellana.³⁹

It seems to me therefore, that the lions once supporting the Capitoline obelisk must date from a time close to that assigned to the Cività Castellana portal pair. As the latter belong to the earliest part of a substantial group of works at the cathedral carved by three generations of sculptors of the same family, and since a somewhat later piece in the group is dated to 1210,⁴⁰ a date of ca. 1200 would seem to be appropriate for both pairs of lions, and hence for the setting up of the obelisk on the Capitoline Hill.

That the obelisk was intended as an embellishment for the church of S. Maria in Capitolio seems self evident. In all probability it stood close to the façade, and there is reason to believe that it stood on the axis of the nave. That location speaks against its having been a memorial to some civic event, as suggested by Noehles, as does the absence of any inscription from the plinth. In addition, since the lion supports and the ambo inside the church were carved by the same team of sculptors, it is possible that both embellishments were added to the Benedictine church at the same time.

Yet the reasons for setting up the obelisk are not immediately clear, mostly because the available sources are silent on the whole matter. Indeed, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the meaning of the obelisk was rarely a matter for comment. Magister Gregorius, however, gives

39 A related if less regular pattern of clumps of hair can be seen on one of the lions flanking the main portal of S. Lorenzo f.l.m. (ca. 1220). One of the lions originally forming a part of the *schola cantorum* at Cività Castellana (ca. 1240) is close to our four in that it has similar tufts of hair and the same kind of muscle, but in the end it is very different. See G. GIOVANNONI, "Opere dei Vassalletti Marmorari Romani," *L'Arte*, vol. 11, 1918, pp. 262–283, esp. p. 281.

40 Giovannoni, p. 133.

a clue when he associates the obelisk at St. Peter's with Julius Caesar.⁴¹ With this kind of imperial connection current, one is tempted to link the Capitoline obelisk to a legend about the Emperor Augustus which had the Capitoline Hill, and specifically the church of S. Maria in Capitolio, as its setting.

In the earlier version of this legend (sixth century) Augustus erects an altar to the First-Born of God on the Capitoline Hill.⁴² The *Mirabilia* (ca. 1140) recounts the legend in a different form: the altar becomes a visionary one seen by Augustus. The site remains the same, however, for the vision occurs in a room of the imperial palace on the Capitoline Hill "... ubi nunc est ecclesia sanctae Mariae in Capitolio".⁴³ Innocent III alluded to the legend in his *Sermo II, in nativitatibus domini*, written about the year 1200, and the Cosmati altar frontal now in the chapel of S. Helena (Fig. 15) contains a small relief image of Augustus.⁴⁴

Within this context the obelisk may have been intended to mark the association between the church and Augustus in a grand and public way. In setting up the obelisk the legendary associations of the site were given concrete visual substantiation; indeed, the site acquired an ancient monument which "proved" that the legend was true.

41 HUYGENS, R.B.C., ed., *Magister Gregorius, Narracio de mirabilibus urbis rome*, Leiden, 1970 (Textus Minores, 42), Chapter 29, pp. 28–29. See also the edition of R. VALENTINI and G. ZUCCHETTI, *Codice topografico della città di Roma*, vol. 3, Rome, 1946 (Fonti per la Storia d'Italia, 90), pp. 137–173, esp. pp. 164–165. Gregorius calls the Vatican obelisk the tomb of Caesar; the Capitoline obelisk is not called the tomb of Augustus until the fifteenth century (Iversen, p. 108).

42 JOHN MALALAS, *Chronographia*, Book 10, sections 231–232 (MIGNE, *PG*, vol. 97, col. 357 and col. 358). A latin translation exists in the Vatican Library (Cod. Pal. Lat. 277); cf. B. PESCI, "La leggenda di Augusto e le origini della chiesa di S. Maria in Aracoeli," *Incoronazione della Madonna d'Aracoeli*, Rome, 1938, pp. 18–33.

43 VALENTINI and ZUCCHETTI, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, esp. pp. 28–29.

44 MIGNE, *PL*, vol. 217, cols. 455–460, esp. col. 457. For the altar, see above, note 26.

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