

## “A Trophy of the Cross”: Examining the Purpose of the Constantinian St. Peter’s Basilica

Old St. Peter’s Basilica, largely regarded as constructed beginning ca. 319-322 CE, stood preeminent among Constantinian churches. Its size and opulence were nearly peerless among its contemporaries, as reported by the later *Liber Pontificalis*; in wealth it was only surpassed by St. John Lateran and perhaps matched by SS. Marcellinus and Peter, in which Constantine’s mother Helena was buried (Lenski 2016). In comparison to the Constantinian St. Paul’s Basilica, old St. Peter’s dwarfs its fellow martyrium, which was only later expanded to match the Vatican basilica (Krautheimer 1986). This appears no accident, but instead indicates a special interest on Constantine’s part in the martyrium of Peter on the Vatican. That special interest, this paper argues, led to the creation of St. Peter’s Basilica in part as a trophy monument, or *tropaion*, which was dedicated years later in response primarily to Constantine’s victory over Maxentius at the battle of the Milvian Bridge.

*Tropaia*, originating in archaic Greece, were ancient victory monuments raised on the battlefield at the site of an enemy’s turn and flight, or *trope*. The Romans adopted this practice sometime around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, erecting cross-like battlefield trophies upon which they would display the arms of their conquered foes (Kinnee 2018). In the early Christian era, however, this symbol came to have new uses and meanings. Eusebius of Caesarea at *Historia Ecclesiastica* 2.25.6-7 describes a tradition from before the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica which identified the site as one of the “trophies of the apostles,” quoting the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Gaius of Rome. Eusebius later, in describing Constantine’s conversion and martial success at the Milvian Bridge, notes at *Vita Constantini* 1.28 that Constantine saw in the sky a “σταυροῦ τρόπαιον,” a trophy of the cross; Eusebius claims Constantine himself as his authority on this

story, and there is little reason to doubt this is the version of the story that Constantine told him (see Barnes 1981). The 2<sup>nd</sup> century author Minucius Felix also drew a direct comparison between the cross and the Roman *tropaion* in *Octavius* 29, as did Justin Martyr, indicating a preexisting tradition that identified the similarity of the two icons. Meanwhile, on a 327 Thessalonian *solidus* among other contemporary coinage, Constantine is depicted bearing a *tropaion* and a spear while leading two bound captives, indicating his regime's familiar usage of the ancient icon of victory.

Besides the classic battlefield trophy, however, there was also a preexistent canon of monumental imperial *tropaia*, most notably the *Tropaeum Alpium* of Augustus and the *Tropaeum Traiani* at Adamklissi. It is in this latter canon which I argue St. Peter's Basilica exists, albeit in an entirely new and idiosyncratic form. This paper considers how the form and adornment of the basilica, unique among Roman Constantinian *basilicae*, transform the church into a victory monument honoring the imperial dynasty, particularly Constantine himself, through commemoration of Peter and his martyr site. To support this argument, this paper examines the dedicatory golden cross erected over Peter's tomb and its inscription, as attested in the *Liber Pontificalis*; this cross both ties the imperial family directly to the commemoration of Peter's gravesite and establishes a direct relationship between the cross atop Peter's *tropaion* and the entire basilica itself. This paper also considers the triumphal arch and apse of the basilica, insofar as they further demonstrate the strong connection between the church and the imperial family.

Several scholars have investigated the form of Old St. Peter's Basilica, with attention to its unique transept and vast donations, as well as its function among other *basilicae* in further promoting the imperial family. However, few have examined it considering the preexisting

*tropaion* tradition at Peter's grave in tandem with the *tropaion* associated with the battle of the Milvian Bridge.

This paper also considers alternate explanations for the inscriptions and material evidence of Old St. Peter's, including its potential relationship to Constantine's defeat of Licinius, which seems to be referenced in the apse inscription of the basilica. Ultimately, however, it seems most likely, if St. Peter's is truly in part a victory monument, that Constantine viewed the defeat of Maxentius and his conversion to Christianity as the foremost factor in his construction of Old St. Peter's.

#### Bibliography

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