Visiting a ‘Home of the Saints’: S. Prassede in Rome

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The many Christian churches in late antique and early medieval Rome were places of worship, not only for the members of the church communities attached to them, but also for pilgrims and other travellers who would visit a church on a particular occasion or for a specific reason. This contribution analyses one such church, S. Prassede, and its developments over an extended period of time, i.e. from Late Antiquity until early modern times, with a particular focus on the *memoria* function of the church. As will be demonstrated, changing, and possibly even invented, constructions of *memoria* served the popularity of the church throughout the centuries.

**Carolingian Period**

Little is known about the earliest building of the church. However, based on the *Liber pontificalis* and other documents, scholars agree that at some point in the fourth century there must have been a *titulus* in the direct vicinity of where the Church of S. Prassede was erected later.¹ The *Liber pontificalis* states the church was not built on the exact location of the *titulus* but ‘in another place not far away’.²

In its earliest stage the location seems to have served as a place of worship for the Roman martyr Prassede.³ Pope Paschal I (817-24) is held responsible for extensive building activities in and around the church, improving a structure supposedly in ruins.⁴ The rebuilding and renovations led to a new prominence and visibility for S. Prassede. Scholars have tried to interpret Paschal’s aspirations within the context of his papal position.⁵ They regard his building activities, which focused on three churches (S. Cecilia in Trastevere, S. Maria in Dominica and S. Prassede, the latter being Paschal’s first church building project⁶), as public and visible statements of his papal power within the larger political power structures in, but also outside of Rome. Through his building activities Paschal is said to have positioned the papacy and his own personal ambitions in rela-

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¹ Miedema 2014: 110
² *Liber pontificalis* s.v. S. Prassede: 155
³ Miedema 2014: 110
⁴ Miedema 2014: 110
⁵ Miedema 2014: 110
⁶ Miedema 2014: 110

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Fig. 1. Isometric reconstruction of S. Prassede as in 825. From: De Blaauw, Fig. 5 (after Emerick).
tion to or even in competition with the western kingdoms and the Eastern Byzantine Empire. The chosen location of S. Prassede was prominent as it was situated along the processional route used during the papal liturgy. As it became one of the stational churches, the pope would celebrate mass at S. Prassede at least once a year at a key moment in the liturgical year: the Monday of the Holy Week, when Romans and pilgrims from outside Rome must have attended mass in large numbers.

The entire Church of S. Prassede, including the annular crypt, the atrium and the quadriporticus, was designed in a consciously traditional way, copying important characteristic features of St Peter’s (Fig. 1). Medieval visitors ascended to the atrium and entered the church through one of its three doors on the east of the building.
instead of entering it (as it is now) through the right (i.e. northern) aisle. As far as the liturgical furniture inside the church is concerned, especially the ‘Paschalian liturgical stage set’ (Fig. 2), ‘the design of this church was unique’, that is: ‘new and startling’.¹⁰ Emerick argues that the ninth-century arrangement of the (spolia) columns was meant to draw attention to the celebrant, thus to the main altar; a pergola served the same purpose.¹¹ The church was flooded by light through numerous windows, and the famous mosaics of the apse and the triumphal arch must have made an overwhelming impression. The apse mosaic (Fig. 3) portrays Christ, flanked by Peter and Paul presenting the titular saint Prassede next to Paul and her sister Pudentiania next to Peter. In addition, next to Paul and Prassede the founder Pope Paschal with square blue halo is depicted, and at the other end a further male saintly figure is presented, whose identification is uncertain.¹² Although it is unclear if Prassede’s body was indeed buried in the church,¹³ she was certainly depicted and mentioned in the mosaics of the apse. Furthermore, according to the mosaic inscription Paschal brought PΛVRIMA S[AN] C[T]ORVM [...] CORPORĀ into the church.¹⁴ He seems to have opted for a strong focus on relics, and a long inscription in marble mentions no less than 2300 relics from saints being translated by Paschal to the church.¹⁵ The inscription places most relics ‘under this sacred altar’,¹⁶ but it adds that some of them were carefully distributed throughout the building: in the oratory of St Zeno supposedly Zeno himself ‘and the two others’ were buried, in ‘the oratory of Blessed John the Baptist, at the left hand of the above-mentioned basilica, which is also recognized as the sacristy, [...] Maurus and [...] other forty

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Fig. 3. Rome, S. Prassede, apse mosaic. Photo: Nine Miedema.
martyrs’, in ‘the oratory of the blessed Virgin of Christ Agnes, which high up in the monastery is situated, […] Pope Alexander, […] priests Eventius and Theodulus’. The *Liber pontificalis* especially emphasizes that Paschal removed the bodies of martyrs ‘with great affection and veneration’. Scholars have tried to position his relics translation into the larger context of the importance of relics for the early Church. According to Mancho, the great relics translations in Rome started already in the seventh century, and Paschal, driven by religious, political, and economic motivations, placed himself into that longer tradition. Goodson, on the other hand, stresses that Paschal’s relic translation was revolutionary in two respects. First, veneration of relics had, before Paschal, taken place outside the city walls; and second, the sheer number of corporeal remains to be translated to this one church within the walls was unprecedented.

Whereas the oratories of St John the Baptist and St Agnes did not survive the building activities of subsequent popes, the so-called Zeno Chapel has; it still contains most of its original mosaic decoration. The chapel, attached to the right aisle of S. Prassede (outside the nave and aisle, but marked by a splendid entrance – for a detail, see cover photo), was dedicated to St Zeno, but also seems to have been designed as a place of remembrance for Theodora, the mother of Pope Paschal. The meaning of Theodora in the chapel has puzzled scholars for the past decades as they have tried to understand Paschal’s intention, giving his mother a prominent role and yet dedicating the chapel to St Zeno. Notably, the mosaics offer a portrait of Theodora (Fig. 4), but in the *Liber pontificalis* she is not mentioned. In her interpretation of Theodora’s role in the chapel, Goodson sees a direct connection between Theodora and her papal

Fig. 4. Rome, S. Prassede, mosaic with Theodora (left) in the Zeno Chapel. Photo: Nine Miedema.
son, as ‘Theodora’s position in the chapel, on the left-hand side of the northern niche echoes the position of Paschal in the main apse mosaic, where he stands among the saints and Christ’.23 Furthermore, Goodson emphasizes that the Zeno Chapel was designed as a funerary chapel for Theodora, which seems to endorse Davis in his ideas that the chapel ‘is based closely on the architecture of two Roman mausoleums, one pagan (the tomb of the Cercenii), the other presumably Christian (the so-called chapel of St Tiburtius adjoining SS Marcellino e Pietro)’.24 However, it is uncertain if Theodora was indeed buried in the chapel. The above mentioned marble inscription refers to the presence of Theodora’s body in the chapel: ‘manu dextra ubi utique benignissimae suae genetricis scilicet domnae Theodorae episcopae corpus quiescit’.25 There is some scholarly debate about the age of the inscription – its upper part seems to date from the ninth century, the lower part was probably renewed during the fifteenth century.26 Davis even argues that the (entire) inscription dates from the eighteenth century and ‘was intended as a more legible version of a 13th-century original’, ‘but may have been based on a 9th-century document’.27 Nilgen’s explanation, based on the different fonts used in the inscription, that the lower half (which contains the reference to Theodora) was not part of the original inscription, leads to the possibility that Theodora had in fact not been buried in the chapel. Nevertheless, Goodson claims that it was precisely the combination of relics of Zeno and other saints as well as Theodora that offered Paschal ‘a vehicle for the redemption of the soul of Paschal’s mother and a glorification of the episcopal family’.28 In other words, Theodora, celebrated symbolically or in reality in death in this chapel, and presented in the mosaic with a square halo, could be seen as yet another confirmation of Paschal’s claim to a prominent position in the church.29

Another aspect that has caught scholarly attention is the fact that the Zeno Chapel is often considered to be one of the most prominent examples of Byzantine influence on art in Rome in the ninth century, not only in the portrayal of the images but also in the presentation of the hierarchy of Christ, the mother Virgin, apostles, saints, and martyrs.30 Krautheimer sees in the mosaic panels of S. Prassede both a Carolingian revival of ‘Roman late antique Christian monumental art’ as well as the influence of Byzantine models.31 However, this merging of two traditions has led to scholarly discussions if the mosaics in S. Prassede show differences from or similarities with both the western and eastern traditions.32 The Byzantine influence on the artistic expressions in S. Prassede during Paschal’s papacy has often been connected with the presence of Greek refugees in Rome who had fled there because of the second period of Iconoclasm in Constantinople. Byzantine influence is not only to be detected in the iconographic programmes in the church, but also in the adjacent monastery built by Paschal, where he gathered ‘a holy community of Greeks, which he placed therein to carry out carefully by day and night praises to almighty God and [again] his saints resting therin, chanting the psalms in the Greek manner’.33

Some scholars even go so far as to argue that in the mosaic programmes as well as in the presence of the Greek monks in the monastery at S. Prassede, Paschal’s iconophilism can be detected.34 Even though this point would be difficult to validate, it is clear that ever since the first wave of iconoclasm in Byzantium in the eighth century, the Greek community in Rome that had already been there for many centuries had experienced an increase of Greek refugees from the East.35 Surely, Greeks who ended up in Rome, as any other group would, brought with them their own language, their own cultural and religious practices, and their own artistic styles and customs, but simultaneously they took over customs of life in Rome.36 Many Greeks might have lived in the Greco-Oriental quarter along the banks of the Tiber, at the foot of the Aventine hill, as well as along the Via Ostia. As Ekonomou argues, this quarter of the city might in the sixth and seventh centuries be seen as the centre of Byzantine Rome with its own church, S. Maria in Cosmedin.37 However, in the early ninth century, when more Greeks, especially clergy and monks, fleeing from iconoclasm, had arrived in Rome, Paschal might have had them in mind as
well as a community that he wanted to provide with a particular location for worship, when he (re)built S. Prassede and the adjacent monastery.

*High Middle Ages*

The function of S. Prassede in the cycle of stations of the liturgical year secured that the church continued to attract some attention throughout the centuries, even after the Greek monks left the monastery.38 It is, however, difficult to reconstruct the exact developments of the building after the ninth century.39 Scholars have combined stilistical arguments (prone to change due to developing scholarly insights) as given by singular aspects of the building with text sources (often written centuries after the renovations in question). Buchowiecki suggests, for example, that the campanile (on top of the left arm of the transept, destroying part of the Carolingian frescoes) was built when Benedetto Caio (1073–87) repaired the crypt;40 but according to Caperna the campanile dates from the second half of the thirteenth century,41 built

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**Fig. 5.** Reconstruction of Pope Paschal’s choir in S. Prassede as in 825. From: Goodson, Fig. 29.
roughly at the same time when the diaphragm arches within the church were added. The cosmatesque remains of the high altar which are nowaday in the crypt are difficult to date precisely as well, but the stilistically similar cosmatesque grave of Cardinal Pantaleone Anchier was erected in 1286; during this time, the right arm of the transept was obviously already used as a separate chapel, probably first dedicated to All Saints, later to the Crucified.

These sources indicate that there were substantial changes to the building during the thirteenth century. Notably, this changed the design of the Carolingian church as described by Emerick: the diaphragm arches reduced the visibility of the apse, the triumphal arch and the frescoes; as the arms of the transept were closed, the latter were definitely no longer visible, which means that the memoria of those saints depicted in the frescoes who were not mentioned in the Carolingian marble relic inscription was interrupted. Furthermore, the concentration on the high altar (Emerick) was by now given up: apart from the oratories of St Zeno and probably St John the Baptist, which may still have been in use in the thirteenth century, both located beyond the aisles of the church, the Chapel of All Saints now formed part of the transept and right aisle.

Perhaps the fact that Giovanni Colonna, who kept the title of S. Prassede from 1211-45, is said to have donated the column of Christ’s flagellation to S. Prassede in the year 1223, was even more important for the history and function of the church and the memoria it communicated than the changes in the building structure. By allegedly bringing this relic to Rome, S. Prassede remained, as in Paschal’s time, a ‘neocatamombal’ ‘home of the saints’, but now the Roman martyrs were complemented with a relic of even higher significance, diminishing Paschal’s and especially Theodora’s memoria.

This is affirmed by the earliest manuscripts of the pilgrim’s guides for Rome, the Indulgentiae ecclesiastion urbis Romae, for example by the rotuli of St Gall (late fourteenth century), which second to none refers to the column:

\[ \text{In ecclesia Bracedes jbi est quarta pars columpne ad quam flagellatus fuit Cristus, et super columpnam jacet corpus sancti Valentini martiris et multa corpora sanctorum martirum, et quarte partis remissio peccatorum.} \]

Late Middle Ages

During the fifteenth century, the perception of the church as a ‘home of the saints’ changed once more. After the end of the Great Western Schism, several attempts were made to reinvent the relics kept in S. Prassede—surprisingly, without making use of the Carolingian inscription in marble, although it was still in the church, ‘as we com in at the dore’, as John Capgrave testified in 1450. The different catalogues of relics compiled by Nicolò Signorili (c. 1430), by the anonymous author of the extensive Wolfenbüttel manuscript (in German, 1448), and by Davanzati (1725) deserve further research, which, however, can not be accomplished here. But crucial for an interpretation of S. Prassede in the fifteenth century is the reference to a new element, which, though obviously borrowed from the late antique vita of Prassede, within the descriptions of the church first seems to be mentioned in 1447:

\[ \text{Zu sant Praxedis, da ist grosser ablas. Vnd sunnder da ist ein cappell, do thuren auch die frawen nit ein gen, in der cappellen ist vergebung aller sund alle tag. In der cappellen ist auch ein virteil der seowl, doran unser selwer der sewl der da ist ein cappell, in der selben cappellen ligt auch der heylige merterer vnd frevnde gottes sant Valentin. Item darrach kumbt man zu einem eysen gitter, vnd das ist ob einem prunnen [= ‘well’], vnd darein hat sant Praxedis das plut der marterer getragen, als das da geflossen is von der vorgenanten kirchen bey den fleischpencken, als die Tyber ist drey tag geflossen mit plut. Vnd do die heylige Praxedis also trug, als das da geflossen is von der gassen vber die steynen stygen hinein} \]

In Pilgrim’s guides for Rome, the Indulgences of the Church of Rome, for example by the rotuli of St Gall (late fourteenth century), which second to none refers to the column:

\[ \text{In ecclesia Bracedes jbi est quarta pars columpne ad quam flagellatus fuit Cristus, et super columpnam jacet corpus sancti Valentini martiris et multa corpora sanctorum martirum, et quarte partis remissio peccatorum.} \]
get mit andacht, der hat vergebung aller sund, 
wann vber die stieg hat sie das plut getragen, 
as man noch rote mal sicht auf den steynen, 
as sie das plut hat gereret, als sie es trug in den 
prunen in der kirche. Vnd wer ein pater nost-
er da pet bey dem prunen, der hat besundern 
grosen ablas. […]

The well,62 allegedly containing the martyrs’ 
blood which Prassede according to her vita col-
lected, redirects the attention to the Roman 
martyrs, and to Prassede; ‘wol IIJ tausent mar-
terer’ are now remembered (fol. 9v), but Pas-
chal’s name is left out in the fourteenth- and 
early fifteenth-century guides to the Roman 
churches.

The supposed location of the well is nowa-
days still marked in the neo-Cosmatic floor de-
signed by Antonio Muñoz in the early twenti-
eth century (Fig. 6). Caperna rightfully deplores 
the fact that Muñoz left ‘[n]essuna relazione’ on 
what is hidden now under the new pavement of 
S. Prassede.63 Obviously a hexagonal well was 
removed which (in this form) dated from the 
seventeenth century (Fig. 7).64 It is unknown 
what the well exactly looked like before the sev-
enteenth century; earlier texts do not mention 
a well enclosure of marble or masonry, but only 
a metal grid and/or a round stone stone with a 
metal fence.65

Looking back at the Carolingian design of 
the church as described above, it seems neces-
sary to rethink the ‘grande venerazione’ ‘sin da 
tempi rimoti’ of the well.66 We would like to 
 hypothesize that the well did not yet exist dur-
ing Paschal’s time: if the titulus would have been 
 near the spot of the legendary well, it would 
 have been surprising if Paschal would have built 
his new church as a lieu de mémoire for the well.

Fig. 6. Rome, S. Prassede, neo-Cosmatic floor, detail marking the supposed location of the blood well, as 
since 1918. Photo: Nine Miedema.
somewhere else, ‘in alio non longe demutans loco’, as the Liber pontificalis states (see above). It should be remembered that Paschal is said to have brought the bodies of many martyrs from different cemeteries in and around Rome to S. Prassede, not to have built his church on the exact location of one of these catacombs. It would have been surprising as well if, instead, Paschal’s new church would have been built on the original site of the well without incorporating it into the design of the church, either by placing the high altar on top of the well (as the example of St Peter’s would have suggested) or by mentioning it in the mosaic or marble inscriptions. Furthermore, the ‘Paschalian liturgical stage set’ within the Carolingian church, which concentrated on the high altar, would have been severely disturbed by a second place of worship in the middle of the central nave.

Thus, it seems possible that the well is a fifteenth-century ‘invented tradition’, or rather: an ‘invented lieu de mémoire’: reading in the vita of the holy Prassede that she collected the blood of the Roman martyrs, a search for the place where the blood was deposited, maybe during repairs of the pavement of the church, might have ‘recognized’ any antique structure of the insula beneath the church, even a simple wall, as being (part of) the legendary well. The tendency to an affective realization and visualisation of the atrocities the martyrs suffered, as shown especially by the Berlin manuscript quoted above, seems to fit well into late (rather than high or early) medieval religious culture.

Regardless of the age of the well, in 1913 the Fondo per il Culto decided to restore the floor (finished in 1918); while the aisles were repaved without Muñoz (who had in 1914 become Soprintendente) being able to interfere, he decid-

Fig. 7. Rome, S. Prassede, central nave with the blood well as before 1918. Photo: Courtesy of the Centre for Art Historical Documentation (CKD), Radboud University Nijmegen.
edly influenced the design of the central nave’s pavement – though never mentioning the well, on whose removal both the Fondo and Muñoz as well as the Consiglio Superiore per le Antichità e Belle Arti seem to have tacitly agreed – evoking criticism for example by archeologist Orazio Marucchi.\textsuperscript{70} If our hypothesis that no antique well existed is true, the clergy in charge of the redecoration of S. Prassed might have wanted to attract as little attention as possible to this (alleged) fact, and thus had no interest in documenting the excavations. It does catch the eye that the new inscription which marks the old site of the presumptive well reads [chi-rho] CONDITORIVM RELIQUIARVM SANCTORVM MARTYRVM IN AEDIBVS SANCTAE PRAXEDIS (Fig. 6), thus neither mentioning a well nor the blood of the martyrs – nor, for that matter, Paschal.

A short glance at the further developments of the descriptions of S. Prassed in the fifteenth century must suffice here – the most popular printed late fifteenth-century pilgrims’ guide in Latin is, as far as is reconstructable now, the first description of Rome to merge the Carolingian as well as the high and late medieval features of S. Prassed. This guide returns to Paschal’s relic inscription, although it only quotes the first few lines:\textsuperscript{71}

Ad Sanctam Praxedem. Temporibus sanctissimi ac beatissimi apostolici domini Pascalis pape introducta sunt veneranda sanctorum corpora in hanc sanctam et venerabili basilicam beate Christi virginis Praxedis, que predicit]us pontifex diruta et cimiterium seu corporis iacentia auferens sub altari summo proprijs manibus collocavit in mense Julii die XX, indictione X.

In capella Libera Nos a Penit Ibem et ortus paradisi est columna in quam ligatur fuit dominus noster Jesus Christus in passione sua, et super dicta columna sunt corpora sanctorum martirum Ualentini et Cenonis. Et in medio capelle sub lapide rotundo sunt corpora XL martirum, et in sinistra manu super quem postuum est plumbum cum quo columna fuit mutata, quem mulieres tangunt, ex quo mulieres non possum intrare capellam; sub isto lapide sunt sepulti XIJ summi pontifices. Et sunt indulgentie quotidie XIJ M annorum et tocidem quadragenarum et tertia partis remissio omnium peccatorum.

Jn medio ecclesie vbi ferror um circumdat lapi
dem rotundum sub illo lapide dicitur esse san
quis sanctorum martirum quem beata Praxedis cum quadam spongia colegiens in hunc puteum
 lapide rotundo conclusum infunde bat et multa sanctorum corpora in Christo zelauit, per quo
rum merita concedat nobis deus celorum regna.

Jtem in hac supradicta venerabili capella est al	tare super quo Pascalis papa predictus celebravit quinque missas pro quadam anima defuncta, quibus finitis visibiliter vidit illam deferre beatam virginem in gremio omnipotentis dei, vt euidenter pat in pariete dicte capelle supra fenestram ferream. Quo viso miraculo au
ctoritate apostolica dimisit quad si quis celebrari fecerit, extrahat veniam animam de purgatorio.

Panvinio (1570-84), again combining references to the well, the column and the many relics listed by Signorili, is the first author to quote the entire Carolingian inscription – thus re-establishing not only the memory of Pope Paschal, but also of Paschal’s mother Theodora.

Conclusion

During the Carolingian period, four aspects of S. Prassed stand out: (1) its location along the processional route for the papal mass on the Monday of Holy Week which would attract many pilgrims and visitors; (2) the importance of relics to worship, reinforced by Paschal’s translation of thousands of relics to the church; (3) the importance and presence of Theodora, Paschal’s mother, in the Zeno Chapel; and (4) the possible connection with the Greek community in Rome materialized in the style of the mosaics especially in the Zeno Chapel.

Whereas the first aspect remains relatively stable during the centuries to follow, the memoria of (3) and (4) proved to be of short duration. Although Paschal obviously exerted himself in order to secure the memoria of his personal activities as a pope (arising from religious, political and economic ambitions) and of Theodora, those visiting S. Prassed from the tenth century onwards were obviously hardly interested in the founder pope and his mother. As for the
relics of the church, all written witnesses agree upon the fundamental importance of S. Prassede as a ‘home of the saints’ – but the question which saints exactly were to be venerated in the church was answered in various ways. The column of Christ’s flagellation shifted the attention of the visitors from the numerous lesser-known Roman martyrs to the martyr with the highest possible authority, probably from the thirteenth century onwards. Supposedly during the sixteenth century that all accessible sources (Carolingian relic inscription including Paschal and Theodora, blood well, and late medieval relic inventories) merged into an exhaustive documentation of all those deserving worship in the Church of S. Prassede.

Notes


2 Liber pontificalis (hereafter LP), c, c. 8: ‘in alio non longe demutans loco’. Davis, pp. 9-13 is the description of Paschal’s work on S. Prassede (chapters 8-11 of Paschal’s life).

3 The legend tells that Prassede collected the blood of persecuted Christians during the reign of Antoninus Pius (158-61), which is, however, incompatible with the fact that her vita also states that she was the daughter of Pudens, who hosted the apostles Peter and Paul in his home (Buchowiecki, iii, p. 593) – ‘die Widersprüchlichkeiten der Legende sind offensichtlich und es ist vergeblich, Personen und Tatsachen organisich zu gruppieren’ (Buchowiecki, iii, p. 594).


6 LP c, c. 8-11; Rotraud Wisskirchen, Das Mosaikprogramm von S. Prassede in Rom: Ikonographie und Ikonologie, Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsband, 17 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1990), p. 13; Goodson, Rome, pp. 81, 92.

7 Krautheimer, Rome, p. 124. The Carolingian popes seem, even by building and decorating churches in a specific manner, to have underlined the fact that they were the sovereign leaders of an independent state, the Republic of St Peter’s (Emerick, p. 140; cf. Noble). Paschal is said to present himself as a ‘champion of images’, against the iconoclastic emperors Leo V (Greek) and Louis the Pious (Frank) (Emerick, p. 141). By drawing attention to the high altar (see below), Paschal might have tried to reduce the possibilities of worldly political display, favouring a glorification of the celebrant and thus, indirectly, of the independence of papacy from the Frankish (and Greek) kings (Emerick, p. 149). Cf. Wisskirchen, pp. 14-18.
S. Prassede was one of the station churches, but ‘wohl nicht nach der ursprünglichen Ordnung’ (Buchowiecki, iii, p. 591); the station of this day was transferred from Ss. Nereo ed Achilleo to S. Prassede, which may have happened as a result of Paschal building his new church. Emerick interprets this as a statement claiming ‘to shape a ceremonial world in the capital of the Republic of S. Peter where he [= Paschal] could appear effectively as a leader’ (Emerick, p. 129; cf. Goodson, Rome, pp. 101–02, 136).


CBCR iii, p. 259. Emerick, p. 140 argues that Paschal was the first to copy St Peter’s, other than Krautheimer, Rome, pp. 122–23, who argued for a Carolingian Renaissance preceding Paschal. Goodson, Rome, p. 86, however, shows that ‘the so-called Constantinian basilica was an architectural form current throughout the period between Constantine and Paschal; there was no time ‘in the sixth to eighth centuries, during which basilican churches were not built’ (p. 87, examples: pp. 88–90), which means the choice of the form of the basilica was ‘not a revival of a long-dead way of building’ (p. 90). According to Sible de Blaauw, ‘Liturgical features of the Roman churches’, in Chiese locali e chiese regionali nell’alto medioevo. Spoleto, 4–9 aprile 2013, Settimane di studio della Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo, 61 (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo, 2014), pp. 321–37 (p. 334) the ‘western direction of the apse’ can be seen as ‘the most decisive aspect in the definition of a “Carolingian Renaissance of Early Christian architecture” in order to meet (Gregorian) liturgical needs.

Emerick, pp. 151, 141.

Ibid., pp. 133, 148.

10 Whereas Krautheimer, Rome, p. 126, recognizes one of the brothers of Prassede and Pudentiana in this male figure, Wisskirchen, pp. 28–29 refrains from identifying him. Paola Gallio, La basilica di Santa Prassede, 4th edn (Genova: Marconi, 2013), p. 12, points to the possibility of this man being a church official such as a deacon (Zeno? Ciriaco?). See for a similar scheme the apse mosaic of S. Cecilia. Krautheimer, Rome, pp. 126–27; Wisskirchen, pp. 29–31.

13 During the Late Middle Ages several other churches in Rome claimed to possess relics of Prassede (Nine K. Miedema, Die römischen Kirchen im Spätmittelalter nach den Indulgentiae ecclesiarum urbis Romae, Bibliothek des Deutschen Historischen Instituts in Rom, 97 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2001), p. 867).


15 Ursula Nilgen, ‘Die große Reliquieninschrift von Santa Prassede: Eine quellenkritische Untersuchung zur Zeno-Kapelle’, Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte, 69 (1974), 7–29; Caterina-Giovanna Coda, Duemilatrecento corpi di martiri. La relazione di Benigno Aloisi (1729) e il ritrovamento delle reliquie nella basilica di Santa Prassede in Roma, Miscellanea della Società Romana di Storia Patria, 46 (Rome: Società alla Biblioteca Valla­cilliana, 2004), pp. 127–50; Caroline J. Goodson, ‘Transforming city and cult: the relic translation of Paschal I (817–824)’, in Roman Bodies: Metaphoroses, mutilation, and martyrdom, ed. by Andrew Hopkins and Maria Wyke (London: British School at Rome, 2005), pp. 123–41; Goodson, Rome, pp. 165 (Fig. 34). 166–68, 327–33 (text and translation); Gallio, Fig. 29 (the inscription is still visible in the church).

16 Translation quoted after Goodson, Rome, p. 327.


18 LP c. 9. The Liber pontificalis thus repeats what is told at the beginning of Paschal’s life: he ‘sought out, found and collected many bodies of saints […] lying in destroyed cemeteries’ (Davis, p. 10).


20 Goodson, Rome, pp. 202–28. According to Emerick, p. 130, Paschal used unusual ‘clamor and pomp’ during this translation of relics in order to emphasize his own papal position; but there is no contemporary documentation on Paschal’s search for relics in the Roman catacombs. The relics were kept in a camera delle reliquie in the annular crypt below the altar, not in the altar itself (Emerick, pp. 143–44). Cf. Goodson, ‘Transforming’.

‘Home of the Saints’: S. Prassede in Rome

22 LP c. c. x: ‘Also in that church he built an oratory of Christ’s martyr St Zeno, and there he also placed his holy body, and fully adorned it with mosaic’ (‘oratorium beati Zenonis Christi martyris, ubi et sacratissimum eius corpus ponens musibo amplianter ornavit’). Krautheimer, Rome, p. 130; Davis, p. 12; Goodson, Rome, pp. 166–70.

23 Goodson, Rome, p. 168.

24 Davis, p. 12; Goodson, Rome, p. 166.

25 Goodson, Rome, p. 328: ‘on the right hand-side where truly the body of his benign mother, Mistress Theodora Episcopa, rests’.

26 Nilgen; Davis, pp. 10–11 (following CBCR iii, p. 235); Goodson, Rome, pp. 166–68.

27 Davis, pp. 10–11 (following CBCR iii, p. 235).


32 Brenk; Krautheimer, Rome, pp. 124–26; Wisskirchen; Cormack.

33 Brenk; Krautheimer, Rome, pp. 124–26; Wisskirchen; Cormack.

34 LP c. c. 9–10; Wisskirchen, p. 13; Davis, p. 11; Goodson, Rome, p. 187.


37 Ekonomou, pp. 42–45.

38 Pietro Fedele, ‘Tabulario S. Praxedini’, Archivio della R. Società romana di storia patria, 27 (1904), 27–78, and 28 (1905), 41–114 ((1904), pp. 28, 32) proves that already during the tenth century there were Latin monks in the monastery.

39 The church is mentioned (without further description) in the Mirabilia Romae (c. 1145, Mirabilia Urbis Romae: Die Wunderwerke der Stadt Rom, ed. by Gerlinde Huber-Rebe and others (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2014), p. 72), the Graphia auroae urbis Romae (second half of the twelfth century, Valentini and Zucchetti, iii, p. 83), and in Cencio Camerario’s (1192) as well as the Parisian catalogue (1320) of Roman churches (Valentini and Zucchetti, iii, pp. 230, 289). The Itinerarium Einsiedelense (Stefano del Lungo, Roma in età carolingia e gli scritti dell’Anonojo Augiense, Miscellanea della Società Romana di Storia Patria, 48 (Rome: Società alla Biblioteca Vallicelliana, 2004), pp. 4–5) and Giraldone Cambrensis (c. 1200) do not mention S. Prassede (Christian Hülsen, Le chiese di Roma nel medio evo: Cataloghi ed appunti (Florence: Olschki, 1927; repr. Hildesheim, New York: Olms, 1975), pp. 18–19; cf. pp. 53, 63, 68, 69 for further references to S. Prassede during the fifteenth century). The documents concerning S. Prassede published by Fedele 1904–05 (tenth to fourteenth centuries) reveal no details on the structure of the church.


41 Caperna, p. 17; cf. Anna Maria Affanni, La chiesa di Santa Prassede: La storia, il relitto, il restauro (Viterbo: Betagamma, 2006), pp. 20–21; Gallio, Fig. 88.

42 Gallio, p. 3 assumes this happened when the Vallombrosani took over the custody of the church; Caperna, pp. 16, 59–82, and Emerick, p. 132 claim it was done in the thirteenth century. Buchowiecki, iii, pp. 599, 603–04 points to the fact that if the arches must have been completed before 1388, as a burial stone of this date (Vincenzo Forcella, Iscrizioni delle chiese e d’altri edificii di Roma dal secolo XI fino ai giorni nostri, 14 vols (Rome: Bencini, 1869–94), ii (1873), no. 1504) was partly covered by one of the bases of the arches (cf. Gallio, Figure on pp. 32–34). Benigno Davanzati, Notizie al pellegrino della basilica di Santa Prassede (Rome: De Rossi, 1725), p. 211, mentions an inscription in the crypt which only consisted of the date ‘MCXIX, volendo forse denotare, che questo S. Luogo fosse restaurato nell’anno medesimo’.

43 Emerick, p. 143; cf. Gallio, Fig. 24.

44 The grave still stands in the right arm of the transept (Gallio, Fig. 20), but probably not at its original site (Buchowiecki, iii, p. 621). A contemporary inscription proves that the grave was erected in 1286 (Forcella, ii, no. 1496; Gallio, Fig. 20).
Nine Miedema & Daniëlle Slootjes

45 There is hardly any reliable source for this occurrence. Buchowiecki writes (iii, p. 624): from the saints mentioned in the Carolingian inscription. Buchowiecki unconvincingly adds: 'Wahrscheinlich hat aber Paschalis auch die Reliquien der anderen für die Fresken genannten Martyrer in die Kirche übertragen' (p. 624; cf. Zaccagnini, pp. 93, 101, who observes that Prassede, Pudentiana, Pudens and Paulus were also depicted in the frescoes, 'realizzati in un posto d’onore, in quanto più bassi rispetto agli altri e quindi meglio visibile dai devoti'; Goodson, Rome, p. 239, n. 182, who assumes Basilissa was also mentioned in the inscriptions and states (p. 241) that Paschal meant to show that his own deeds mirrored those of the saints in the frescoes, especially Hilaria and Prassede, who devoted themselves to the enthronement of relics).

46 The frescoes had most likely only been visible from the presbyterium and schola cantorum (Fig. 5; cf. Goodson, Rome, Fig. 29). Claudia Zaccagnini, 'Nuove osservazioni sugli affreschi altomedievali della chiesa di S. Prassede', Rivista dell’Istituto nazionale d’archeologia e storia dell’arte, 54, Série 3, 12 (1999), 83-114 (p. 114) describes the decoration of the apse, triumphal arch and transept as 'episodi agiografici di natura “terrena”' in the frescoes, enhanced to 'lo splendore dei gruppi di eletti che ricevono il premio per la loro fedeltà spirituale' in the mosaics. Buchowiecki, iii, p. 624: from the saints mentioned in the fresco’s inscriptions (Iulianus and Celsus, Leo and Marcianus, Hilaria, Iason and Maurus, Chrysanthus and Daria) only the last two are also mentioned in the Carolingian inscription. Buchowiecki’s interpretation is that there is only the St Gall, the Stuttgart, and the (fifteenth-century) Munich manuscripts mention the column, as well as Leopold of Vienna as well, see n. 51). Valentinus passed the column as standing in the Zeno Chapel: Joseph Haupt, 'Philippi Liber de terra sancta in der deutschen Übersetzung des Augustiner Lesemeisters Leopold, vom Jahre 1377', Österreichische Vierteljahresschrift für katholische Theologie, 10 (1871), 511-40 (p. 525): 'Dossel ein chappelln ist do ist ein gancz stuchk der säul do vnser herr an geslagen ist vnd getar chain fraw hin in gen'. Miedema, pp. 466-67, adds in the late seventeenth century that the column stood in the right-hand niche, coming in from the aisle.

45 An inscription record donations, CV[M] ALTARII. OB. REVERE[N]TIA[M] O[M]NI[V]VM S[AN]CTVM. After entering the church, which can hardly be the original site of the chapel. Davanzati, p. 193 located it in 1725, '[d]alla parte destra della medesima porta', thus at the right-hand side of the nave, immediately after entering the church, which can hardly be the original site of the chapel.

48 There is hardly any reliable source for this occurrence. Contemporary documentation on Giovanni Colonna’s life can be found in Matthaei Parisiensis [...] Chronica majora, ed. by Henry Richards Luard, Reprint britannicarum mediæ ævi scriptorium, 37, 7 vols (London: Longman, 1872-83), iii (1876), pp. 219, 444-46; iv (1877), pp. 59, 165, 168, 250, 287; v (1880), p. 65, and in papal documents published and analysed by Pierre-Vincent Claverie, Honores III et l’Orient (1216-1227): Etude et publication de sources inédites des Archives vaticanes (ASV), The Medieval Mediterranean, 97 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), but the column is not mentioned here. Two sixteenth- and seventeenth-century inscriptions refer to Colonna bringing the column to Rome (Forcella, ii, no. 1548; La Descrittione di Roma di Benedetto Mellini nel codice Vat. lat. 11905, ed. by Federico Guidobaldi and others, Sussidi allo Studio delle Antichità Cristiane, 23 (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 2010), pp. 478-79). The first reference to the Colonna family (without Giovanni’s name) being connected with the column seems to be Giovanni Rucellai, 1430 (Valentini and Zucchetti, iv (1933), p. 411). The year 1223 is first mentioned by Mellini, p. 479, who copied a 1566 inscription referring to this date.

51 Of the Latin manuscripts used by Hülsen, p. 154, only the St Gall, the Stuttgart, and the (fifteenth-century) Munich manuscripts mention the column, as well as Leopold (1377, see n. 51). Miedema, Die römischen Kirchen, pp. 746-56, especially p. 749, relics no. 4. – Nicolás Rosell, who died in 1562, in mentions S. Prassede in his De misisibus civitatis Romae, without giving any further details (Valentini and Zucchetti, iii, p. 189).

52 Transcription after the facsimile given by Clemens Müller, 'Die Sehenswürdigkeiten der Stadt Rom, ausgezogen aus der Chronik', in Vedi Napoli e poi nuo­mi: Grand Tour der Monche, ed. by Peter Erhart and Jakob Kurathi Hüeblin (St Gall: Verlag am Klosterhof, 2014), pp. 96-111 (adding a modern interpunction; italics mark dissolved abbreviations). The Latin text has been edited before by Hülsen, p. 154, using five late fourteenth- and a fifteenth-century manuscript; only the St Gall, the Stuttgart, and the (fifteenth-century) Munich manuscripts mention the column, as well as Leopold (1377, see n. 51). Miedema, Die römischen Kirchen, pp. 746-56, especially p. 749, relics no. 4. – Nicolás Rosell, who died in 1562, in mentions S. Prassede in his De misibahibus civitatis Romae, without giving any further details (Valentini and Zucchetti, iii, p. 189).

54 The indulgence mentioned in this text is unauthorized, as are most of the indulgences in the Indulgentiae
eclesiarum urbis Romae. The only verifiable indulgence for S. Prassede was granted by Nicolas IV on 13 March 1296, as fedele 1905, pp. 107-08 (one year and 40 carenae).

55 Manetti claims Pope Nicolas V restored S. Prassede (‘Vita Nicolai V. summi pontificis actore Jannotic Manetto Florentino’, in Ludovicus A. Muratorius, Rerum italicarum scriptores, i.ii.2 (Milan: Societas Palatina in Regia Curia, 1734), pp. 907-60 (pp. 930-31): ‘Stationum Ædes [...] reparare ac reformare decreverat, atque hoc [...] officium in plurimus minoribus,’ for example ‘Beatæ Praxedis, republicionibus constructionibusque inchoavit’). However, ‘I restauri [...] di Nicolò V [...] non sono individuabili’ (Apollonj Ghetti, p. 10).

56 Capgrave, p. 148.

A scholarly edition of Signorili’s Descriptio urbis Romae is a desideratum, as Valentini and Zucchini, iv, pp. 151-208 and Hülsen, pp. 43-52 only publish extracts from the text. We will quote Signorili using Onseriphi Panvinii [...] De precipvis vrbis Romae sanc­tioribusque basilicis [...]. Liber [...] (Cologne: Maternus Cholinus, 1584), pp. 318-20. We have not been able to consult Panvinii’s 1570 edition.


59 Davanzati, pp. 283-436. Davanzati, pp. 397-99 quotes two inscriptions in ‘Tavole di Marmo’ (p. 397), possibly made when Carlo Borromeo (1538-84) built the reliquaries on the balconies attached to the triumphal arch (Gallio, Fig. 66; cf. Mellini (third quarter of the seventeenth century), p. 496: ‘sono scolti i nome d’esse relique’). No trace of these inscriptions is left. – Benigno Aloisi in 1729 especially focused on the crypt of S. Prassede (Coda, pp. 17-78).

60 Quoted from Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz, MS germ. fol. 1168, fols 98v (using modern interpolation; italics mark abbreviations). Cf. the excerpts from this codex in Miedema, Die römischen Kirchen, pp. 751-52. This manuscript, which belongs to a group of five containing a rather extensive version of the Indulgentiae (Miedema, Die römischen Kirchen, pp. 51-52), was written in or little later than 1436; an ‘I’ presents itself as an eyewitness to Pope Nicolas V celebrating mass in S. Giovanni in 1447 (fol. 4’). – A comparison of Panvinio’s 1584 text with the Vatican manuscript Vat. lat. 3536, one of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century manuscripts containing Signorili’s text (originally written c. 1430; see n. 57 above), fols 58v-60v, shows differences between Signorili and Panvinio, which, however, do not concern the well, as it is left out in (the Vatican manuscript 3536 of) Signorili’s text.

61 That women had no access to the chapel is also mentioned for example by Leopold of Vienna (1377), see n. 51. Davanzati, p. 231 adds that this resulted from the narrowness and darkness of the chapel and was supposed to protect women, so that ‘non vi nascesse qualche confusione’.

62 We would like to thank Maarten van Deventer (Radboud University) for his substantial help on the interpretation of the blood wells in S. Prassede and S. Pudenziana. Caperna, p. 141, n. 8, assumes Fra Mariano da Firenze (1517) was the first to mention the well, but this date can be corrected to 1447 by using the German manuscripts. See Miedema, Die römischen Kirchen, pp. 751-52, relics no, 18, and Fra Mariano da Firenze, Itinerarii Urbis Romae, con introduzione e note illustrative del Enrico Bulletti, Studi di antichità cristiana, 2 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1931), p. 179: ‘Non longe a porta ecclesiae in medio sui sub rotundo lapi­de ferreis cratis circumdato, puteum est sancتورum martyrum sanguine repletum a sancta Praxede cum spongia et lentineamibus collectum du Christi ma­tyres torquebantur trucidabanturque’.

63 Caperna, pp. 128, 127. Muñoz’s letters on this subject were summarized by Caperna, pp. 141-42; some important further documents were published by Calogero Bellanca, Antonio Muñoz: La politica di tutela dei monumenti di Roma durante il governatorato, Bullet­tin della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma. Supplementi, 10 (Rome: ‘L’Erma’ di Bret­schneider, 2003). Bellanca, p. 321 shows, for example, that Muñoz suggested to reuse ancient marbles from the Baths of Caracalla for the pavement in S. Pras­sede, in order to keep the costs of the floor as low as possible.

64 Titular Cardinal Antoniotto Pallavicini (1489-1503) is said to have repaved the church. Pompeo Ugonio, Historia delle Stationi di Roma che si celebrano la Quad­nagesima (Rome: Bonfadino, 1588), fol. 290v: ‘rinuò il piano della chiesa’ (copied by Mellini, p. 466). It is possible that Pallavicini only renewed the presby­tery’s floor (Apollonj Ghetti, p. 10; CBCR iii, p. 236; Emerick, pp. 153, 156, n. 52). Le cose maravigliose (1558) state the well was closed by Leo X (1513-21) (Le Cose maravigliose dell’alma città di Roma (Rome: Valerio Dorico, 1558), [n.pp.]), but some fifty years earlier, John Capgrave already remarked, ‘[t]he well is now closed with a round stone and grated a boute with irun’.

– In the eighteenth century Davanzati, p. 289, also refers to Leo X as having closed the well ‘con pietre, e calce’ after having taken ‘a prova dell’esistenza del suddetto sangue’; Leo wanted to ‘togliere in avvenire il luogo alla curiosità de’ popoli, ed a gli inconvenien­ti, ed indecenza’. Davanzati, p. 290 also describes that in 1686 (note: 1688, as Forcella, ii, no. 1553 shows) the well was ‘abellito’ by Leone Strozzi (Caperna, p. 141, n. 18, cf. p. 126, erroneously mentions the year 1618, when Leone Strozzi was not yet born); according to
Giuseppe Finocchio, ‘Riflessioni sul pavimento presbiteriale della chiesa di S. Prassede’, in Atti del XV colloquio dell’Associazione Italiana per lo Studio e la Conservazione del Mosaico [...] (Aquileia, 4–7 febbraio 2009), ed. by Claudia Angelelli and Carla Salvetti (Tivoli: Scripta manent, 2010), pp. 303–14 (p. 310) and Caperna, p. 126 the pavement was altered again in 1742. The nineteenth-century situation, which is probably basically identical with the eighteenth-century arrangement, is documented in drawings and etches by Clemens Wenzeslaus Coudray (1805; Rolf Bothe, Clemens Wenzeslaus Coudray: Ein deutscher Architekt des Klassizismus (Cologne: Böhlau, 2013), Fig. 245), J. M. Knapp (1823), Giacomo Fontana (1838), L. Rossini (1839–43), and Luigi Canina (1846) (Caperna, Figs 82, 19, 120, 5). A few photographs also survive: e.g. CBCR iii, Fig. 211 (Alinari), Caperna, Fig. 160 (Anderson), Fig. 161. They all show a hexagonal structure of some one metre high; in some cases the well is closed.

65 The Wolfenbüttel manuscript (1448) adds it was a high metal grid: ‘ain hoch eisni gätter’. See Miedema, Die römischen Kirchen, p. 752; Miedema, Rompilgerführer, p. 122. The printed Latin Minabilia Romae vel potius Historia et descriptio urbis Romae speak of ‘potius Historia et descriptio urbis Romae’ (Mirabilia, p. 70; first Latin prints probably c. 1480, earliest dated print: 1489; quoted here from a 1500 edition (l 81: Rome: Johannes Besicken and Martinus de Amsterdam, 16 August 1500; Miedema, Die römischen Kirchen, p. 13 with n. 43), fols 45v–46v. A critical edition is currently prepared by Miedema.

66 Caperna, p. 126–28. Muñoz later (1928) also had to defend himself against reproaches from Arduino Colasanti, Direttore Generale delle Antichità e Belle Arti (Bellanca, p. 324). Furthermore, there were disagreements between Muñoz and his engineer Umberto Bertolini about the design of the nave’s floor; Muñoz enforced his own design, about which he wrote in 1921: ‘La perizia dei marmorari medio-evali ancor oggi perdura nelle maestranze moderne di Roma, come può vedersi [...] nell’ultima opera che può dirsi più propriamente cosmatesca, nel pavimento di S. Prassede, compiuto nel 1918 nello stile di quelli antichi già ricordati’ (Antonio Muñoz, ‘Studii e restauri nelle chiese di Roma’, Capitolium, 3, 9 (1927), 441–51, can hardly be called scholarly documentations of the excavations (Caperna, p. 128).


69 In 1452, Muffel even asserted one could walk underground in a ‘gruft’ from S. Pudenziana to S. Prassede, obviously assuming the church was built on catacombs (Nikolaus Muffel, Descrizione della città di Roma nel 1452: Delle indulgenze e dei luoghi sacri di Roma [Der ablas und die heiligen stet zu Rom], ed. by Gerhard Wiedmann (Bologna: Patron, 1999), p. 82).