Review: Ss. Vincenzo e Anastasio at Tre Fontane near Rome: History and Architecture of a Medieval Cistercian Abbey
Ss. Vincenzo e Anastasio at Tre Fontane near Rome: History and Architecture of a Medieval Cistercian Abbey by Joan E. Barclay Lloyd
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This book is the first modern monograph on a remarkable medieval building complex, located some two and a half miles south of the Aurelian city walls of Rome and a little over a mile from the basilica of St. Paul’s at the Via Ostiense. Its origins as an early medieval monastery and as a memorial marking the supposed site of the apostle Paul’s martyrdom are probably closely connected to the grand Early Christian basilica that was built on the apostle’s tomb. From the perspective of architectural history, the extant buildings are fascinating because they constitute an early Cistercian foundation in Italy built on the soil of the ancient metropolis of the emperors and popes. The Cistercian and Roman traditions both have clearly defined architectural languages, and the Tre Fontane is their meeting point.

With this publication, Barclay Lloyd offers the fruits of her recent research in the field of medieval Roman monasteries, friaries, canonicums, and nunneries. Research conditions were particularly favorable during and after the restoration of the Tre Fontane church and monastery during the 1990s. A sizeable but manageable volume, the book is divided into two parts, entitled “History and Architecture” and “Documentation.” This organization reflects the author’s pursuit of a highly systematized presentation of material and argument. In fact, the second part is a kind of catalog presented in running text, which contains all of the data regarding the fabric and referred to by the sources, so that the reader is able to follow and verify the story told in the first part. Even so, the chapters of part one remain very close to the architectural, archaeological, epigraphic, and documentary evidence. Chapters two and three provide contextual information on the Cistercian Order, its organization and its architecture. Chapter six offers a useful overview of the scholarly literature regarding the complex. In chapters four, five, seven, and eight one recognizes the scheme of Richard Krautheimer’s Corpus Basilicarum. They contain a general description, an analysis of the graphic and archaeological evidence, and a reconstruction of the building chronology. The same model has inspired the serviceable chronological listing of events and documents in part two C. The sixty-four pages of plates include architectural drawings from earlier publications as well as some new plans by the author (figs. 89–90). The well-written and well-produced book is made even more useful by its extensive bibliography and an index.

Based on an architectural survey (made in collaboration with Jeremy M. Blake), an analysis of building techniques, and new research into the relevant historical and visual documentation, this book offers first and foremost a meticulous description of the existing building (including medieval murals) with an account of its chronology. The results are graphically translated into a set of measured plans, sections, and an isometric reconstruction, appended at the back of the book. A second level of discussion concentrates on typological questions regarding Cistercian monasteries and churches. The author does not enter into questions of style, semiotics, or architectural symbolism, and even monastic liturgy and its spatial implications remain beyond the scope of the discussion. This self-imposed restriction to the hardest type of architectural evidence may be justified by the extensive international bibliography on Cistercian architecture already extant, but at the same time it limits what specialists can expect from this building monograph.

Moreover, doubts may arise concerning the success with which the methodical approach of Krautheimer’s Corpus has been applied here. The rigid separation of evidence and interpretation, building and history, text and context has resulted in a somewhat illogical sequence of chapters in part one, with much overlap and countless repetitions. In part two the building itself and its illustrations are described as such—the same material already having been discussed in another context in the first section of the book. Regrettably, the most captivating aspect of the Krautheimer model—the synthetic conclusion, called “reconstruction” and “historical position” in his Corpus, in which all lines of argument and exposition are brought into perspective—does not find a real counterpart in this book. Nonetheless, the reader, genuinely interested in “one of the most fascinating and important examples of medieval Cistercian architecture to survive” (71), will be grateful for this new solid and well-documented dossier on the Tre Fontane complex.

This study offers a sound reconstruction of the numerous successive building phases of the Roman Cistercian monastery and proposes a consistent image of its original layout. In many respects, Barclay Lloyd concurs with the more fragmentary studies by recent authors such as Angiola Maria Romanini and Pio Pistilli, but with her systematic analysis of the entire structure, profiting from the latest evidence revealed by the restorations, this reconstruction of building and chronology is the most balanced and convincing architectural survey in the Tre Fontane bibliography. The author’s principal finding is that the entire complex, in all its essential characteristics, is twelfth-century in concept, and even largely twelfth-century in fabric. The east range of the monastery—reserved for the monks—was built immediately after the foundation of the monastery under pope Innocent II in collaboration with Bernard of Clairvaux, about 1140. Subsequently, all of the other wings were built until the square was closed with the north range, completed before 1200. The monastery is a regular Cistercian establishment, with specific standard features such as the refectory at right angles to the cloister ambulatory opposite the church. A beautiful, recently restored Gothic space with frescoes, located directly to the north of the church transept in the east wing of the monastery, is identified by the author as the abbot’s chapel. However, the enigma of the tower-like termination of the west, or lay brothers’ range, could not be resolved. A typical feature in ancient representations of the monastery, it disappears and reappears over time and under circumstances undocumented by the available evidence.
In contrast to the detailed analysis and discussion of the monastery wings, the contours of the church remain vague in this account. There is generous attention to technical details, but the architectural character of the structure does not come into focus. Perhaps the author found that she could not add much to earlier published studies, but the result is a lack of balance that makes the book less complete than it could have been. In keeping with earlier authors, the main outlines of the church are recognized as typically Cistercian. The church is compared with the famous Bernardine models like Clairvaux and Fontenay. Barclay Lloyd agrees with the view that it follows the plan of Clairvaux II (ca. 1140), to which filiation this Roman monastery belonged. Indeed, the impression given by the current interior, with its open trussed roof and high clerestory walls, is deceitfully more Roman than the original, whose central nave had a pointed barrel vault. The low chancel exedra and dwarf transepts may be compared, as well, with Burgundian prototypes and parallels.

But the author refrains from treading the well-worn question of Burgundian versus Roman. She confines herself to observing the unmistakably Roman features of the masonry, the semicircular arches, brick pilasters, and cornices (e.g., 185–86), but in fact these are all secondary elements. The highly unusual traits of the Tre Fontane church remain largely unexplored. The continuous flat wall surface of the central nave above the arches is at odds with traditional Cistercian architecture in all its high medieval variants, but can be recognized in Roman church building from Early Christian times onward. The flat piers supporting arcades recall the fourth-century cemeterial churches, among which S. Sebastiano on the Via Appia was still standing nearby. On the other hand, the extremely low arches of the chancel and the transept wings do not seem to find parallels in Rome, nor in European Cistercian architecture. Regarding the question of whether Ss. Vincenzo e Anastasio was the first non-Roman church before S. Maria sopra Minerva, Barclay Lloyd hardly advances beyond the classic treatise by Hanno Hahn from 1957 and the later studies by Romanini and Pistilli.

Yet, the clear merits of this volume deserve to be underlined in conclusion. The study of medieval architecture in Rome is a field that has made great progress since the pioneering work of Krauthemer, but is still in urgent need of solid monographs such as this.

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