

# 1 | Introduction

This book is first and foremost a *storia*, a narrative of the history of Rome over the course of the ninth century CE, with its primary focus on the category of material culture, broadly defined. In the process of constructing that story, information will be derived from a wide variety of ‘texts’. In addition to written sources, these include standing remains, items in museum and library collections, and materials unearthed in archaeological excavations or recorded by antiquarians in the early modern and subsequent eras. The intention is to weave together these various strands of evidence in the hope of creating a comprehensive picture that exceeds the sum of its individual parts. Material culture – buildings, along with their painted, sculptural and mosaic decorations, and a range of objects encompassing media such as metalwork, textiles and manuscripts – will all be treated as documentary evidence for the exploration of that history, a process for which I prefer the term ‘history *in art*’, as opposed to ‘history *of art*’.<sup>1</sup>

This approach was used in my previous study, *Rome in the Eighth Century: A History in Art* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), and the present book is intended very much as both a companion and sequel to that volume, picking up precisely where the first one left off. It will also adopt much the same general structure, organized primarily on a chronological matrix that itself follows the various incumbents of the ‘throne of St Peter’, in other words the bishops of Rome, the popes, who provided the principal patronage of material culture through much of the century in question. And of course this is the same organizational principle employed in our primary written source for the period, the series of sequential papal biographies known as the *Liber pontificalis* (*LP*).<sup>2</sup> Its purpose, as Rosamond McKitterick has argued, was not simply to place the bishops of Rome at the heart of the Christian project, but to construct a notion of ‘Romanness’ in which the popes were seen as having inherited the mantle of the emperors.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion of this terminology see Osborne 2020: xiv–xv.

<sup>2</sup> English translations of *LP* for the eighth- and ninth-century *vitae* by Raymond Davis (1995 and 2007). The history, function and value of this text are examined by McKitterick 2020a. See also the conference volume edited by Herbers and Simperl 2020.

<sup>3</sup> McKitterick 2018.

For well over a century since the publication of Duchesne's edition in the late 1800s, these *vitae*, believed to have been compiled more or less contemporaneously with the reign of the pontiff in question, have served as the foundation for most studies of the ninth-century papacy, as well as for their patronage of material culture.<sup>4</sup> As we shall see, the focus on buildings and gifts of textiles and metalwork is extensive, and in some instances is more or less the only topic addressed. Other written sources for early medieval Rome are exceptionally scarce; for example, there are almost no original property documents or legal records until the tenth century (only a few copies are preserved in much later cartularies), although there is some surviving papal correspondence, and information about Rome is occasionally included in chronicles written elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Also of exceptional value is the series of 'stage directions' for the performance of the liturgy known as the *Ordines Romani* (OR), and in particular the complete description of a station mass set out in *Ordo Romanus* I (c. 700).<sup>6</sup>

The division into centuries is not simply a random accident, however convenient it may appear. The eighth century marked the political break between Rome and Constantinople, the creation of a politically-independent Roman 'republic' ruled by the pope, in other words the papal state, and the forging of a new alliance with the Frankish monarchy, culminating in its final dramatic act, the coronation of Charlemagne as the new 'Roman emperor' on 25 December 800. It was a transformation that in many respects paved the way for the next millennium of the city's history. The story of the ninth century is very different. It begins on that high note, but the wealth and energy so dramatically evident in its early decades would not be sustained, and at the end of the century the city experienced one of the most economically and politically challenged moments in the entirety of its history, not only of the Middle Ages.

Some of the *vitae* of the ninth-century popes include valuable accounts of papal engagement in the secular and religious politics of their time, while others ignore such matters entirely and focus instead on building achievements, as well as the substantial donations of luxury furnishings, vestments and liturgical implements to the city's churches (Fig. 1.1). This written evidence is invaluable, but so too are the buildings and objects themselves. We can learn as much, if not indeed more,

<sup>4</sup> Bauer 2004: 27–38. <sup>5</sup> Summarized in West-Harling 2020: 10–16.

<sup>6</sup> See also Baldovin 1987: 130–4; and Romano 2014: 15–16. For the particular Frankish interest in these texts, which has served to preserve them, see Westwell 2019.



Fig. 1.1 Map of ninth-century Rome, indicating churches mentioned in the text © Lacey Wallace.

about Rome in the age of Pope Paschal I (817–24) from Santa Prassede and the other churches he built and decorated, and in which his name and image appear, as we do from the words of his *Liber pontificalis* biography. But historians of politics have rarely thought about the evidence of material culture, as recently observed and lamented by

Francesca Dell'Acqua,<sup>7</sup> while until the last quarter of the twentieth century historians of art had tended to ignore the political, social and religious contexts in and for which the objects of their study were created.

As explained in the preface to my previous volume, the approach taken by the historian *in art* is not entirely novel in the twenty-first century, and the pioneering study which heralded this new direction for scholarship was Richard Krautheimer's award-winning 1980 monograph *Rome: Profile of a City, 312–1308*. Krautheimer was first and foremost an architectural historian, and thus his focus was squarely on buildings, with the unfortunate consequence that he rarely considered evidence in media such as wall-painting or manuscripts; and of course his study was written well before the substantial advances in medieval archaeology undertaken across the city in more recent decades. Furthermore, it surveyed a period stretching across an entire millennium, and thus could devote only a single chapter to what he called the 'Carolingian Age'.<sup>8</sup> The same comment also applies to the excellent recent volume by Hendrik Dey, a conscious and hugely successful attempt to 'update' Krautheimer's *magnum opus* but still ranging over a period of a thousand years.<sup>9</sup> The present study will be much more focused chronologically, but at the same time considerably more wide-ranging in terms of the materials and media assessed.

Ninth-century Rome has exercised my imagination for almost half a century, since the day in November 1974 when I first visited the excavated 'lower church' of San Clemente, the Early Christian basilica which lies beneath the standing church of the early twelfth century, and discovered the well-preserved image of Pope Leo IV (847–55) (Fig. 1.2); and some five years later this same mural also played a significant role in both my doctoral thesis and my first published article.<sup>10</sup> In the context of the visual culture of medieval Rome, the ninth century is exceptionally rich in terms of surviving material for study, in fact probably the richest era of the early Middle Ages in that regard; and from that perspective it should perhaps be an easy moment about which to write a comprehensive overview, given the wealth of information available. But it is not easy; and this is due in large part to a markedly uneven distribution of material available for consideration.

<sup>7</sup> Dell'Acqua 2020: 6. The primary exception has been Paolo Delogu, whose most recent book (Delogu 2022) incorporates significant evidence of both architecture and archaeology, although covering a much broader chronology.

<sup>8</sup> Krautheimer 1980: 109–42. <sup>9</sup> Dey 2021. <sup>10</sup> Osborne 1979 and Osborne 1984: 24–106.



Fig. 1.2 San Clemente: mural portrait of Pope Leo IV (847–55)

For the eighth century we have not only a complete set of papal biographies, in addition to correspondence with the Frankish kings and various other written materials, but also a more or less continuous sequence of surviving monuments, the foremost being the church of Santa Maria Antiqua in the Roman Forum, which was a recipient of high-level artistic patronage that can be documented in at least four pontificates that are known, those of John VII (705–7), Zacharias (741–52), Paul I (757–67) and Hadrian I (772–95). The portraits of all four of those popes are included in the mural decorations. For the ninth century, in comparison, with the sole exception of the church of San Clemente there is no single monument with secure surviving physical evidence of more than one moment of activity. And while there is a surfeit of information for material culture produced in the first five decades of the century, this is balanced by an almost complete absence of such evidence from the last five decades. The contrast is truly quite extraordinary.

The early ninth century witnessed a massive increase of commerce and prosperity across the Carolingian and Mediterranean worlds, resulting in an enormous expansion of physical building that in western Europe was manifested in, among other things, the construction of large new monasteries.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Hodges 2020: 69.

In this era of abundance, the city of Rome was no outlier. The popes at the beginning of the ninth century quite evidently commanded unprecedented surplus wealth as well as access to both materials (new and recycled) and specialized labour, and they made good use of these resources to create lasting testimonials to the power and authority not only of the Roman Church they represented but also of themselves as individuals. They left behind a legacy of some truly spectacular buildings, many lavishly decorated with mosaics reflecting their interests and concerns, of which the most complete and best preserved is undoubtedly the church of Santa Prassede, one of a number of substantial architectural projects initiated by Pope Paschal I. By contrast, however, the less fortunate pontiffs who reigned at the end of the century appear to have been all but penniless, bereft of resources and struggling to find the means to undertake even the most basic of necessary repairs. This would lead eventually to a shift in patronage, as the ability to undertake the production of material culture gradually moved away from the direct control of the papacy to others, primarily the resident nobility and social elite, most of whom also occupied important positions within the administration of both the city and its Church. Indeed, the ninth century really is a ‘tale of two cities’, one wealthy, the second impoverished, and a second theme of this book will be an attempt to identify and explain that disparity.

Not only is this development mirrored quite precisely in the accounts of papal activities preserved in the *Liber pontificalis*, which are all but silent on building activities after the pontificate of Leo IV,<sup>12</sup> but it is also reflected in the essence of that source itself. We possess comparatively fulsome biographies of the popes through to Nicholas I (858–67), but then only a partial *vita* of Hadrian II (867–72), and no entries at all for his successors through to the end of the century, apart from a small fragment of the life of Stephen V (885–91), which covers only the very beginning of his pontificate. Furthermore, while the eighth-century lives are known from a number of surviving manuscripts, those from the ninth century have only a small handful of witnesses.<sup>13</sup> Why this was the case still remains less than fully understood.

I shall take the view that when the evidence derived from multiple sources (including written documents, standing remains and archaeology) all point in much the same direction, this represents not simply some

<sup>12</sup> As observed by Hendrik Dey (2021: 140), ‘there was less to talk about because less was in fact being done’, a view which is amply supported by various strands of evidence.

<sup>13</sup> For a full listing of the medieval manuscripts containing some part of the text, see *LP*: clxiv–ccvi; and Davis 2007: xvi–xxi.

random accident of survival, but rather a very real downturn in the city's fortunes. By the late 800s it was no longer 'business as usual' for those who governed Rome and its Church, and the conditions which conspired to bring about this dramatic decline will also be explored, the principal factor being a collapse of the city's economy resulting from the complete physical insecurity of its surrounding hinterland, arguably the source of much of its previous wealth.

Finally, this book also has a third theme, again paralleling one introduced in the previous volume. For the eighth century I attempted to demonstrate that the dramatic political shift which removed Rome from the orbit of the emperors resident in Constantinople and brought the city into that of the transalpine Frankish monarchy was not paralleled by any fundamental change in underlying cultural attitudes or cultural products. In the present volume I contend that this observation largely also holds true for the ninth century, a moment of substantial contact and reinvigorated communication with eastern Christianity and the city of Constantinople, never fully interrupted but particularly prevalent in the years following the end of the second period of iconoclasm, and the so-called 'Triumph of Orthodoxy', in 843.<sup>14</sup>

It is perhaps worth noting here that the city was saved from a 'Saracen' attack in 880 not by the Frankish army, but by the imperial fleet of Emperor Basil I, despatched to protect the Tiber at explicit papal request; and we can perhaps speculate that at least some of the factional divisions which dominated the complicated internal politics of the Roman Church stemmed from a desire in some quarters to return the city to the empire which continued to bear its name. Or so at least some in the period in question seem quite clearly to have believed, as incongruous as that might seem to us today with our advantage of multiple centuries of hindsight. Tom Brown has envisaged a lingering undercurrent of nostalgic attachment to Byzantium in the city's political life, and he is undoubtedly correct in attributing this to the mindset of the city's secular aristocracy, many of whose families had emigrated from the eastern Mediterranean to Rome in the seventh century as soldiers, bureaucrats or ecclesiastics.<sup>15</sup>

As we shall see, this is more than matched in the evidence supplied by material culture. The murals in the church of Santa Maria *de Secundicerio*,

<sup>14</sup> Ballardini 2007: 194, gets it exactly right when she speaks of 'un'ecumene mediterranea ancora mobile e dialogante'. For the general use of the term 'Byzantine' to signify the world of eastern Christianity even beyond the confines of territory ruled from Constantinople, see Holmes 2021: 178–9.

<sup>15</sup> Brown 1988: 39–42.

for example, datable to c. 875, have little in common with any contemporaneous ‘Carolingian’ production, and instead fall squarely into a larger context that is usually thought of as ‘Byzantine’ art. Indeed, throughout this study I shall attempt to avoid casting Rome politically and artistically as part of the Carolingian Empire, which in legal terms it was not, and instead view it as an independent entity. This is not a book about ‘Carolingian Rome’. Rome was never ‘Carolingian’ in terms of its material culture, although of course the Franks played a prominent role in its ninth-century political life. The city stood at the crossroads of an east–west axis spanning the Christian Mediterranean, and a north–south axis crossing the Alps to Francia and Britain, and at times it borrowed from both. But at its base was a foundation of visual tradition stretching back to at least the fourth century CE, an inherited legacy of which the popes clearly saw themselves as jealous guardians and promoters.

Earlier attempts to document the material culture of ninth-century Rome are very few in number, mostly consisting of short chapters within larger chronological surveys of the entire Middle Ages: for example, the chapter on ninth-century mosaics in Walter Oakeshott’s classic *The Mosaics of Rome*, or the contributions on papal patronage in that century by Mario D’Onofrio, Ivan Foletti and Valentine Giesser in the comprehensive recent survey of that specific topic *La committenza artistica dei papi a Roma nel Medioevo*.<sup>16</sup> Previous studies have also been for the most part medium-specific, for example Erik Thunø’s synchronic approach to the apse mosaics in Roman churches,<sup>17</sup> or the architectural surveys by Richard Krautheimer and Hendrik Dey, previously cited. Some have also been made redundant by more recent research. On the subject of wall-painting, for example, it is now a third of a century since the bold attempt by Maria Andaloro to update the first volume of Guglielmo Matthiae’s *Pittura Romana del Medioevo*,<sup>18</sup> and that original text, first published in 1965, had focused almost exclusively on the concept of artistic style, with little attention paid to the political and economic contexts which governed production.<sup>19</sup>

Richard Krautheimer’s *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae* (CBCR), published in five volumes by the Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana between 1937 and 1977, organized its material by

<sup>16</sup> Oakeshott 1967: 195–242; D’Onofrio 2016; and Foletti and Giesser 2016. <sup>17</sup> Thunø 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Matthiae and Andaloro 1987.

<sup>19</sup> Somewhat curiously, perhaps, the larger political, economic and religious contexts had been explored perspicaciously and insightfully by Matthiae in a much earlier study; see Matthiae 1954.



monument, presented for the most part in an alphabetical sequence (with the exception of the final volume, which dealt with the city's three major fourth-century basilicas: San Giovanni in Laterano, San Paolo fuori le mura and Saint Peter's), and the same geographic principle governs the *Corpus della scultura altomedievale*, a project since 1959 of the Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo in Spoleto, still incomplete but now approaching some thirty published volumes, including seven for the city of Rome alone. Such *corpora* have incomparable value as a foundation for future scholarship, but their primary aim is to document and catalogue work at individual sites, rather than to weave a tapestry in which historical, art historical and archaeological threads are drawn together to create a coherent narrative. Much the same can also be said of the *Corpus* and *Atlante* volumes of the comprehensive project entitled *La Pittura Medievale a Roma*, edited by Maria Andaloro and Serena Romano,<sup>20</sup> although we still await the projected *Corpus* volumes which will deal with the early Middle Ages, including the ninth century. A much more rounded picture is offered by Caroline Goodson's 2010 monograph, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*,<sup>21</sup> and in many ways the present book is an attempt to set her achievement within the larger context of what would follow in the decades immediately afterwards.

The year 900 marks a nadir for the material culture of medieval Rome, whether in terms of surviving buildings and objects or of knowledge about them derived from other sources; and there can be no doubt that this reflects a substantial quantitative decline in production. But this transition between the two centuries is also another 'Janus moment', since the early tenth century witnessed a new, albeit gradual revival of the city's prosperity when the political and economic situation stabilized under the leadership of the aristocratic House of Theophylact, in particular in the generation of Theophylact's grandson, Prince Alberic. That third act in the fortunes of the early medieval city, during a period all too frequently dismissed as its 'Dark Ages', will be the subject of a projected final volume in this series.

<sup>20</sup> Andaloro and Romano 2006-. <sup>21</sup> Goodson 2010.