

# EARLY MEDIEVAL ROME AND THE CHRISTIAN WEST

*Essays in Honour of Donald A. Bullough*

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## THE RELIQUARY ALTAR OF S. MARIA DEL PRIORATO IN ROME

Adriano Peroni and Stefano Riccioni<sup>1</sup>

### *The Altar's Decoration*

In 1765, Giuseppe Piranesi undertook the architectural and decorative modification of S. Maria del Priorato (also known as S. Maria in Aventino). As part of this work, he preserved some important fragments of the previous church. These fragments included a rare early medieval altar, richly decorated with friezes and inscriptions.<sup>2</sup> This altar was repositioned in the third chapel on the left, on a raised fake marble plinth in conformity with the rest of the new interior. It thus demonstrated the intention of displaying the historical and antiquarian value of the altar itself in harmony with the re-use of ancient sarcophagi and funerary monuments from various epochs distributed in the other chapels. Two early medieval partition screens, which had apparently been reused at a later date for ornamental purposes to complement a funerary monument, must have belonged to the same decorative scheme as the altar; this arrangement can no longer be reconstructed.<sup>3</sup>

It is striking that the criteria used in the display of the altar anticipate those of modern museums, at least up until the time of Carlo Scarpa and to an extent even today. These criteria allowed the display of different objects in an architecturally coherent setting, although this often involved sacrificing the object's visibility and evidence of its function. The altar is indeed "exhibited" in the chapel in a central

<sup>1</sup> The section on the altar's decoration is by Adriano Peroni, the section on the inscription by Stefano Riccioni. The paper was translated by G.V.B. West.

<sup>2</sup> Of the previous bibliography I shall limit myself to citing *Corpus della scultura altomedievale*, 12 vols (Spoleto, 1959-present), VII: *La diocesi di Roma*, 4: *La prima regione ecclesiastica*, ed. M. Trinci Cecchelli, pp. 80-3 and plates XIV-XVI. On Piranesi's role in the work: R. Pressouyre, "La Poétique ornamentale chez Piranesi", *Piranèse et les français in Aventino* (Paris, 1978), pp. 423-42; D. Gallavotti Cavallero and R.U. Montini, *S. Maria in Aventino* (Rome, 1984), pp. 103-6 for our altar.

<sup>3</sup> Trinci Cecchelli, *Corpus della cultura altomedievale*, VII.4, pp. 84-87, plates XVII-XVIII.

position where we would expect to see it in use again as an altar: its elevation however makes it inaccessible for its original purpose, although it is positioned right at the centre of a perfectly appropriate space (fig. 21). This arrangement was intended for display purposes only. This is confirmed by a Latin inscription on a plaque on the plinth, stating that the relics, formerly preserved in the block that forms a raised base for the altar (*sterobates*) and found in a silver casket hidden in the floor, were transferred to the new high altar for the veneration of the faithful.<sup>4</sup> Inspired by the spirit of the Enlightenment, it seems the intention was thus to underline the distinction between cult and history.

Unsurprisingly, examination of the altar in all its particulars is impeded by so learned an arrangement. Small as it is (only about a metre high, 78 cm deep and with a maximum width of 83 cm), it has been positioned just a few centimetres from the wall, thus completely filling the narrow space in such a way as to hide the rear face. The altar's elevation on a plinth prevents any view of the flat "table top" upper surface. This surface proves to be interesting because it has a crudely worked, circular, funnel-shaped cavity (currently partly filled by debris) which is about 45 cm in diameter, with a narrow step on the lip and within the latter a vertical groove (fig. 22). This is certainly the fitting for a lid or covering, perhaps provided with an opening or lifting mechanism, for the original deposition of the relics.<sup>5</sup> Viewed from above the almost square dimensions of the altar top are clear (83.4 cm along the front by 78 cm deep), while the stucco levelling brought about by infilling of the sides leaves the outline of the altar uncertain where it faces the wall. There are similar uncertainties in the base which is likewise apparently inseparably connected with the moulding of the plinth. Eventually one realizes that the rectangular block which formed the original altar is really resting on a cornice which protrudes a few centimetres, with a concave moulding, an astragal and a listel, which replicate the pattern around the base of the altar with its simple moulding and listel. A

<sup>4</sup> SANCTORVM RELIQVIAE IN HOC STEREOBATA IAM REPOSITAE NVPER IN ARGENTEA THECA SVB PAVIMENTO REPERTAE FIDELIVM CVLTVS SVB ARAM TRANSLATAE SVNT.

<sup>5</sup> As Dr. Giovanni Martellucci suggested to me, rather than being an indication of a hinge or fastening, the vertical groove on the supporting lip of the relic cavity's fastening could be a simple guide coupling for a design or inscription contained in the circular fastening, fixed so as to be easily legible.

reconstruction (fig. 23) gives an idea of the real proportions and character of the altar, even if one remains curious to know what is hidden on the side which faces the wall.

There are a series of designs on the three visible sides. On the left there is incised a simple Latin cross, the terminals of which are weakly elaborated. The front and right-hand sides are far more elaborate.

The front is covered by a *bas relief* of a schematic architectural perspective view comprising a pediment supported by pilaster strips which are grooved with raised mouldings in the lower portion (fig. 24). These forms frame a door, which is clearly the focus of the scene. Two peacocks appear in profile on the sloping sides of the pediment, on a line with the cross which stands on the pediment's summit. In the pediment's internal tympanum a roundel containing a lamb with a cross is flanked by two doves, again in profile. The door is framed on three sides by a leaf-spiral; the doors themselves are separated into four panels by linear decorated cross-bands. The two panels on the right-hand shutter are occupied by large flowers, whereas on the left-hand shutter there is a head with a nimbus, accompanied by an abbreviated letter S, which confirms that this is a saint's head; in the lower left-hand panel is a stylized animal's head, set horizontally. The area which makes up the pediment is entirely occupied by an inscription which is essential for any interpretation of the whole composition, and is discussed in detail below.

At this point certain aspects of the altar front's iconographical programme should be clarified. Above all, there is the architectural theme of the door (a theme often present on late antique sarcophagi and in the iconography of the Holy Sepulchre transmitted to us on carved ivories). The architectural frame gives this theme solemnity, with its classicizing apparatus of pilaster strips and pediment and the insistence with which the leaves and their stems are described. Ideally this door would give access to the relics, as both the inscription and the effigy of the saint's head would suggest, but instead it is burdened with the eucharistic symbolism of the altar and its related meanings which lead to salvation and eternal life (the lamb, peacocks and doves). Less evident, at first sight, is the nature of the plant shoot, which has two types of leaf but only two terminals. These can be interpreted as, at the top on the left, a bunch of grapes and, at the bottom at the right, a chalice, and hence this represents a vine scroll symbolic of the eucharist. The animal head on the left-hand shutter of the door may simply represent a door-handle (handles were

commonly attached to lion-head mountings) but most likely had an apotropaic significance, in accordance with classical tradition. Thus the classicizing style of the doors would seem to give added significance to a simple typological formula. One is given the impression that the decorative programme is as doctrinally dense as its sculptural technique is simple, and that the selection of figural motifs has been undertaken with the utmost care to make this programme comprehensible. However, the inscription is essentially required to explain fully which relics are contained in the altar.

On the right hand side we find a cross, the form of which is similar to that incised on the opposite face, but this time with borders carved in relief and with its arms filled in with an elegant floral spiral which begins from a central roundel where the hand of God appears offering a blessing flanked by simple stylizations of the sun and moon (fig. 25). Winged symbols of the evangelists are positioned between the arms of the cross; clockwise they are Luke, John, Matthew and Mark. They rest on their respective gospel books, but the saint's name is written only on John's book, while on Matthew's there is only an abbreviated S for *Sanctus*. As on the front of the altar a depth of meaning is clearly conveyed, albeit with recourse to the most elemental level of representation, as with the two cosmic symbols which accompany the hand of God. Some characteristic symbols appear in these figures, particularly that of the animals' lobed hind-leg, which in the symbols of Luke and Mark is enriched with small star-shaped incisions, a typical form of decoration derived from oriental textiles and which enjoyed great success even beyond the early middle ages. From the doctrinal perspective ideally the content of this composition would be more appropriate for the front of the altar. However the very choice of the door motif with its reference to the relics emphasizes that in this case it was the intention to stress the relics themselves, a common practice in many early medieval reliquaries, whereas the rarity of surviving altars permits fewer comparisons. The asymmetry of the figures (always bearing in mind that the fourth face is now concealed) could be explained by reference to the position of the altar in its original liturgical space, of which however nothing is known.

By contrast with studies of the altar undertaken thus far (that in the *Corpus della scultura altomedievale* volume edited by Margherita Trinci Cecchelli is especially significant) it is precisely this functional anatomy which needs to be better assessed. This emerges just from the descrip-

tion and dimensions of the altar which for the first time define it clearly. Typologically it belongs to the *altarstipes* group defined by Joseph Braun, and it stands out for the richness of its figural decoration.<sup>6</sup> Comparison with the altars of medieval Roman *magistri doctissimi*, which have been studied by Peter Cornelius Claussen, merely underlines this peculiarity and, if anything, dissuades us from accepting the proposed datings, some as late as the twelfth century.<sup>7</sup>

An assessment of the altar's date based exclusively on formal structural elements runs up against the problem of the long duration of its decorative formulae, which were repeated throughout the early medieval centuries. The rich crop of comparisons collected in the *Corpus della scultura altomedievale*, especially for Rome, makes Trinci Cecchelli's attribution of the altar to the tenth century plausible, albeit in the wake of other authoritative scholars. Amongst the many studies carried out on the altar, that of Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro on the pieces in the Museo del Medio Evo in Rome is a good summary and starting-point; she prefers to link the altar to the early phases of the monastery of S. Maria in Aventino (936–37).<sup>8</sup>

However, beyond the purely epigraphical aspects of the inscription examined below, there remains the question of its content. The statement that the head of St Savinus, martyr and bishop of Spoleto, was included amongst the altar's relics allowed Carlo Pietrangeli to establish a historical relationship with the foundation of the Cluniac monastery in Rome, which was near the ancient church of S. Maria in Aventino and was a stopping-off point for important figures such as the great abbots of Cluny: Odo, Maiolus and Odilo.<sup>9</sup> It is known that in c.939, Alberic II, *princeps et senator Romanorum*, had given his

<sup>6</sup> J. Braun, *Der christliche Altar in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, 2 vols (Munich, 1924), I, p. 142: there is a long typological list here. For a useful comparison, see fig. 11 in A. Weis, *Die langobardische Königsbasilika von Brescia: Wandlungen von Kult und Kunst nach der Rombelagerung von 756* (Sigmaringen, 1977).

<sup>7</sup> P.C. Claussen, *Magistri Doctissimi Romani: die römischen Marmorkünstler des Mittelalters*, *Corpus cosmatorum* I (Wiesbaden, 1987); see under "Altar" in the index; on the role of typology, both as a requirement and as an object of research, see the references on pp. 2–3.

<sup>8</sup> *Corpus della scultura altomedievale VII: La diocesi di Roma*, 6: *Il museo dell'alto medio evo*, ed. A. Melucco Vaccaro and L. Paroli, p. 59 (comparison with a *pluteus* in the Museum of similar date, cf. n. 72, p. 160).

<sup>9</sup> C. Pietrangeli, "Memorie spoletine a Roma", *Spoletium* 15 (1968), pp. 11–24, esp. pp. 11–12. On the cult of St Savinus in Spoleto and related dioceses, see the posthumous paper by S. Ceccaroni, "Il culto dei santi nella dedicazione delle chiese della diocesi di Spoleto (età tardo-romana ed altomedievale)", *Spoletium* 38 (1993/1997), pp. 3–14.



house (inherited via his mother Marozia from his grandmother Theodora, wife of the *vestiarius* Theophylact) for the construction of the monastery. Remembering that Marozia married Alberic I of Spoleto, we may hypothesize that the precious relic of the Spoletan martyr reached the church along with the house. The altar would then be one trace of an arrangement from the church's reconstruction or redecoration which also originally included the early medieval partition screens, now re-used in the church. The epigraphical arguments proposed for a narrowing of the date-range to the last decades of the tenth century reopen a possibility, hitherto considered only fleetingly, which is that some aspects of the altar front, in particular the classicizing door-frame, were deliberately intended to recall antiquity. In Rome, especially later during the era of reform, this style assumed a political significance.<sup>10</sup>

In my opinion this idea must be treated cautiously until it is possible to demonstrate a clearer relationship with one of the protagonists in this matter. The role of the Cluniac order remains of primary importance, however. The way remains open for further proofs and a more precise analysis.

The veneration of the relics has always triggered lively curiosity and would probably feature in such further analysis. To some this has seemed sufficient grounds for an earlier dating, and indeed for the transfer of such a dating to other objects and buildings.<sup>11</sup> However the cult of relics underwent secular developments which makes this

<sup>10</sup> H. Toubert, *Un Art dirigé: réforme grégorienne et iconographie* (Paris, 1990). On art in Rome and the reform movement, with particular reference to the Cluniacs and our altar: C. Bertelli, "Traccia allo studio delle fondazioni medievali dell'arte italiana", *Storia dell'arte italiana*, ed. F. Zeri, 12 vols in 14 (Turin, 1979-84), II, pt 1, pp. 171f.; F. Gandolfo, "La pittura romana tra XI e XII secolo e l'antico", *Roma centro ideale della cultura dell'antico nei secoli XV e XVI* (Milan, 1989), pp. 29-32. But see the balanced and convincing comments by J. Poeschke, "Der römische Kirchenbau des 12. Jahrhunderts und das Datum der Fresken von Castel S. Elia", *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 23 (1988), pp. 1-28, esp. p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Weis, *Die langobardische Königsbasilika*, pp. 16-17 and fig. 12. It is curious that Weis, basing himself on an entirely fictional description of the altar ("die sog. Langobardischer Altar", deduced from texts which have now been superseded, such as Haupt), in fact uses Silvagni's illustration—on which see Stefano Ricconi's comments below—who actually attributes a twelfth-century date to the altar. *Vice versa* Weis's table (his fig. 11) reproduces an illustration and a section of the *altarpieces* of St Cirilla in S. Maria in Cosmedin which it is useful to compare to our altar for typological purposes. It is clear that this typology underwent a development which cannot be concentrated in the eighth century, much less merely related to the Lombards.

approach unfeasible unless supported by historical evidence. In our case the only comfort is the link to Spoleto, albeit only as a plausible conjecture. The studies which have most seriously considered the effects of the liturgy on architectural arrangements and their internal furnishings, have taught us precisely to consider that the notion of such internal dispositions can be enlightening. However unfortunately in our case this evidence is missing.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Altar's Inscription*

On the front of the altar of S. Maria del Priorato, the side which very probably faced the nave, there is an inscription within the tympanum of a structure made up of two columns and a door whose shutters are ajar (fig. 24). In terms of design, the tympanum functions as a real frame for the lettering, 37.5 cm high and 64.5 cm long, and is in a highly-visible position, given that it occupies about one-third of the entire surface of the altar. The height of the space for lettering varies slightly on the three sides of the tympanum; in the horizontal zone it is between 5.7 and 6 cm, on the left hand side 6.2 cm; on the right 5.7 cm.

The text reads: horizontal side: +HIC RECONDITUM ES.T. CAPUT S(ancti) SAVINI [upper line]/SPOLITINI. EP(iscop)I. ET MART(iri). ET COSTA S(ancti) CESAR(ii) [lower line]; outside the frame: M(artiri); left-hand side: +ET SANGUINEM S(an)C(t)I SEBA [upper line]/STIANI MAR(tiri) ET REL [lower line]; right-hand side: IQUIE S(an)C(t)I ABUNDI MAR(tiri) [lower line]/+ET RRLIQUE S(an)C(t)I QUADRAG(inta) [upper line].<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> C. Heitz, "Eucharistie, synaxe et espace liturgique", *Segni e riti nella chiesa altomedievale*, Settimane 33 (1987), pp. 609–38, pt. 2, and see especially the discussion which follows the paper.

<sup>13</sup> Other transcriptions have been carried out before: see P. Sinthern, "Memorie di Roma Medievale", *La Civiltà Cattolica* 60 (1909), 4, p. 60: +HIC RECONDITUM EST CAPVT S SAVINI/SPOLITINI EPI ET MAR ET COSTA S CESAR M (in the horizontal section), +ET SANGVINEM SCI SEBA/STIANI ABVNDI MAR (in the sloping left section), IQVIESCI ABVNDI MAR (in the upper line of the right sloping section) +ET RELIQVIE SCI QVADRAG (in the lower line); E. Diehl, *Inscriptiones latinae christianae veteres*, 3 vols and supplement (Berlin, 1925–31 and Dublin, 1970), I, no. 2101, pp. 412–13: **a** + hic reconditum est caput s. Savini/Spolitini epi et mar. et costa s. Cesar. m. **b** + et sanguinem sci Seba/stiani mar. et rel- **c** iquie sci Abundi mar. + **d** r(e)liquie sci Quadrag.; M. Armellini and C. Cecchelli, *Le chiese di Roma dal secolo IV al secolo XIX*, 2 vols (Rome, 1942), II,



There are other inscriptions on the sides of the altar: on the front an S with an abbreviation mark; on the right, inserted in the book clutched by the eagle, the symbol of St John the Evangelist, IOAHS with abbreviation mark; and again on the right, in the book held by St Matthew, an S with an abbreviation mark.

The letter-forms in the altar's tympanum are capitals of unsteady execution with certain uncial elements, such as the rounded E (which however alternates with a squared E) and a G with an internal curl; M executed with its two internal elements slightly arched and sometimes lengthened to the base of the writing-line; N with its diagonal central stroke higher above that line; a double-bowed B whose lower bow is often larger than the upper one; Q as a circle with a stroke horizontal to the line; A executed both with and without an oblique central stroke; S often with an irregular bend and a narrower lower one. Furthermore it displays certain graphic features: NI with the I included in the body of the N and an AR nexus (fig. 26).

The disposition of the inscription in a two-line system has not always succeeded well and the modulus of the letters varies from a height of 1.5 cm to 2.4 cm in the horizontal zone;<sup>14</sup> from 1.7 cm to 2.2 cm on the left-hand side;<sup>15</sup> and from 1.1 cm to 2.3 cm on the right.<sup>16</sup> Spacing is often uncertain and not regular, alternating blank spaces with an excessively cramped execution of the letters.<sup>17</sup> The layout shows a serious error since the letter M does not fall

p. 721: +HIC RECONDITUM EST CAPUT S SAVINI SPOLITINI EPISC. ET MART. EX COSTA S. CAESAREI M. ET SANGUINEM S. SEBASTIANI M. ET RELIQUIE SCI ABUNDI MAR ET RELIQUIE SCI QUADRAG(INTA M.); C. Pietrangeli, "Memorie spoletine," p. 11: +HIC RECONDITUM EST CAPUT S(ancti) SAVINI SPOLITINI. EP(iscopu)m I. ET MART(yris) ET COSTA S(ancti) CESAR(ii) M(artyris) + ET SANGUINEM S(an)C(t)I SEBA/STIANI MAR(tyris) ET RELIQUI(a)E S(an)C(t)I ABUNDI MAR(tyris) +ET RRELIQUI(a)E S(an)C(t)I QUADRAG(inta martyrum); Trinci Cecchelli, *Corpus della scultura altomedievale*, VII.4, pp. 80-1: +ET SANGUINEM SANCTI SEBASTIANI MAR ET RELIQUIE SCI ABUNDI MAR + ET RRLIQUIE SCI QUADRAG + HIC RECONDITUM ES.T. CAPUT S SAVINI SPOLITINLEPI.ET MAR ET COSTAS CESAR M.

The transcription I have proposed is ordered differently from the other editions because I have preferred to follow the order in which the text reads. I have however indicated line references in brackets, so that one can visualize the progression of the text's disposition on the three sides of the tympanum.

<sup>14</sup> Upper line: from 1.5 cm to 2 cm; lower line: from 1.8 cm to 2.4 cm.

<sup>15</sup> Upper line: from 1.7 cm to 2 cm; lower line: from 2 cm to 2.2 cm.

<sup>16</sup> Upper line: from 1.1 cm to 1.6 cm; lower line: from 1.7 cm to 2.3 cm.

<sup>17</sup> This uncertainty is particularly notable in the first line of the horizontal base of the tympanum in which the distance between the letters, or between the groups of letters, varies from 1.4 cm to 1.5 cm to then drop to less than 1 cm.

inside the margins of the frame and has been executed on the right-hand jamb of the altar.

The progression of the text, which unfolds from left to right, is not always coherent. In the right-hand part of the tympanum the text continues directly from the lower line of the left-hand section without picking up again from the upper line, as it should according to traditional writing rules. As a result, on the two sloping sides it is necessary to read the entire lower line continuously and then to go up to the first line on the right-hand section. The text also presents other uncertainties and errors: RRELIQUIE and RELIQUIE for RELIQUIAE, SCI QUADRAG(inta) for SCOR QUADRAG(inta),<sup>18</sup> the point inserted between the ES and T of EST.

As far as the dating of the inscription is concerned,<sup>19</sup> Ernst Diehl proposed the eighth to ninth centuries<sup>20</sup> but both Pietro Sinthern<sup>21</sup> and Angelo Silvagni,<sup>22</sup> at different times, have hypothesized a later date: between the end of the eleventh and the mid-twelfth century. While Silvagni has left no discussion on the reasons for his dating, Sinthern attempted a first analysis of the inscription suggesting a comparison with the twelfth-century epitaph of Pope Boniface IV.

<sup>18</sup> Sinthern, "Memorie", p. 65, maintains that the inscription refers to [the male] St Quadagesimus and so does not consider the possibility of an error. However, the hypothesis that it is St Quadagesimus who is mentioned in this inscription seems unlikely since he was inserted into the Roman martyrology by Baronius who read Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* (III, 7) and attributed to him the resurrection of a dead person. However, according to Gregory's text it was not Quadagesimus who performed the miracle but a monk who lived on Mount Argentario and who was visiting Quadagesimus, whose only merit was to have described the event to the pope. Indeed Quadagesimus never had any cult in his name in the church. *Bibliotheca sanctorum* (Rome, 1968), 2nd edn., 14 vols (Rome, 1990-92), X, col. 1266 and further references cited there.

<sup>19</sup> I refer only to the hypotheses formulated about the inscription by those scholars who have lingered over the subject and expressed observations of an epigraphic nature. Indeed the other studies of our altar present arguments which do not specifically take account of the inscription but only offer a transcription of it; for these works the dating refers only to an examination of the style of the sculpted images. Nevertheless, mention should be made of Trinci Cecchelli's work which dates the altar to the tenth century but does not exclude the possibility that the inscription was executed in a later period (cf. Trinci Cecchelli, *Corpus della scultura altomedievale*, VII.4, pp. 80-3.)

<sup>20</sup> E. Diehl, *Inscriptiones latinae*, Tabulae ad usum scholarum 4 (Bonn, 1912), plate 38a, p. XXVII. The author inserts the epigraph, albeit doubtfully, amongst those of the twelfth century.

<sup>21</sup> Sinthern, "Memorie", pp. 59-71.

<sup>22</sup> A. Silvagni, *Monumenta epigraphica christiana saecula XIII antiquiora quae in Italiae finibus adhuc exstant*, 4 vols in 7 (Vatican City, 1943), I: *Roma*, plate XL, no. 7.

However this comparison is unconvincing because the elements Sinthern mentioned do not permit so late a dating. They were already present in Roman epigraphy a century earlier. (He lists: "G with its lower half considerably folded back, the AR ligature, B with an expanded lower bowl, the exchange of the rounded E for a squared E, and finally the characteristic V=U".)<sup>23</sup> Finally Nicolette Gray has suggested an earlier date in the mid-ninth century.<sup>24</sup> She also made some observations which, however, do not seem convincing; indeed she proposed a difficult comparison with the inscriptions on the ninth-century Neapolitan marble calendar.<sup>25</sup> The oblique abbreviation mark in the calendar is the only element in common with the inscription in S. Maria del Priorato which is in all other respects dissimilar to the Neapolitan example. In the calendar the rounded E has been executed with two curves and the letters show very marked forking of the terminals. Furthermore, considering the positioning of the abbreviated S in our inscription (positioned frontally, on the door's left shutter, between a human head and the jamb),<sup>26</sup> the abbreviation sign seems to have been executed with two divided strokes due to the limits of space and not because of any particular graphical usage. Moreover, the lettering on the right hand side of the altar (another S with an abbreviation mark accompanying the figure of St Matthew, this time with a horizontal stroke)<sup>27</sup> and above all the *didascalia* IOAHS of St John<sup>28</sup> (with an S lying on its side and executed with long thin strokes), do not seem to be different from that of the tympanum. Indeed, on the contrary, it shows the same uncertainty of execution

<sup>23</sup> Sinthern, "Memorie", p. 65.

<sup>24</sup> N. Gray, "The Palaeography of Latin Inscriptions in the Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Centuries", *PBSR* 16 (1948), pp. 118-19, n. 108, plate XVIII, 3. She supports this dating by recourse to G.B. Giovenale (*La Basilica di S. Maria in Cosmedin* [Rome, 1927], pp. 291-3) who dates to the ninth century the door jamb of S. Maria in Cosmedin with the inscription by John of Venice. The characteristics of this inscription are quite different from those in the inscription on the altar of S. Maria del Priorato. In S. Maria in Cosmedin the modulus is reduced, the incision is fine and the N is reversed, while the E is always squared. These are all characteristics absent in the S. Maria del Priorato inscription.

<sup>25</sup> Silvagni, *Monumenta Epigraphica*, IV, pt. 1: *Neapolis*, plates I-IV.

<sup>26</sup> The letter is 4 cm high, bigger than the others. This increase in the size of the modulus may be due to its position and to the fact that it accompanies a human head, to which it refers.

<sup>27</sup> The letter is 2.9 cm high.

<sup>28</sup> The letters vary in height from 1.2 cm to 1.9 cm, like those of the tympanum inscription. In this *didascalia* there is an A with a split central stroke. This element alone, which does not figure in the inscription on the front of the altar, neither

and the same difficulty of remaining within the margins of the frame and suggests a similar dating for all the lettering on the altar.

Gray herself had some difficulty justifying the dating she proposed and her comparisons and arguments are not convincing. The comparison with the inscription running along a sculptured relief in the atrium of the cathedral of Civita Castellana, which she attributes with some uncertainty to the start of the eighth century,<sup>29</sup> does not seem relevant. Aside from the fact that the inscription is hard to read, the tubular O, G with a lower element separate from its main bow and D with a bowed outer curve linking the two arms joined at a right angle, do not constitute a relevant reference point and, on the contrary, justify a later dating for our inscription.<sup>30</sup>

The possibility that the inscription was executed in the ninth century, or even earlier, does not seem to me to have any reasonable foundation. If we examine the inscription from the time of Leo III (795–816)<sup>31</sup> on the arch of the *ciborium* of the altar from the church at Porto (now in the Lateran museum), or likewise the fragmentary inscription from the *ciborium* in the Lateran basilica's cloister from the time of Leo IV (847–55),<sup>32</sup> which we might hypothesize to be contemporary with our altar, and if we also consider the iconographical and stylistic context, it immediately becomes apparent that these inscriptions are too crude for comparison with ours; they do not have the triangular incision and have profoundly different characteristics.<sup>33</sup> We must also exclude a dating near to the time of Paschal I (817–24) when inscriptions were strongly influenced by the Carolingian Renaissance.<sup>34</sup> One must likewise exclude the possibility that

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allows us to hypothesize the hand of another sculptor nor an execution at a different time. The execution of an A of this type is indeed quite widespread in epigraphy both during the Roman era and throughout the middle ages.

<sup>29</sup> Gray, "Palaeography", pp. 82, 84, n. 54.

<sup>30</sup> Recourse to the so-called "popular school" as an explanation for the depth of the incision does not seem relevant since in our case the inscription has been executed with a triangular incision, which confers on the letters a chiaroscuro of almost classical balance, in no way similar to the examples proposed by Gray.

<sup>31</sup> Silvagni, *Monumenta epigraphica*, I: *Roma*, plate XV, n. 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, plate XV, n. 7.

<sup>33</sup> The graphic characteristics of these inscriptions are typical of the ninth century.

<sup>34</sup> See the inscriptions preserved at S. Prassede on the architrave of the chapel of St Zeno (Silvagni, *Monumenta epigraphica*, I: *Roma*, plate XV, n. 2) and the list of relics on the second pilaster of the apse (cf. P. Supino Martini and A. Petrucci, "Materiali e ipotesi per una storia della cultura scritta nella Roma del IX secolo", *Scrittura e Civiltà* 2 [1978], pp. 45–101, p. 83.)

the inscription was executed in an earlier era since the lettering of the fourth to eighth centuries is entirely different.<sup>35</sup>

The graphic characteristics observed above are those of a later period which we can fix between the second half of the tenth century and the end of the eleventh century. In my opinion a significant example is the inscription in SS. Cosma e Damiano dated 984.<sup>36</sup> The inscription in question, although displaying considerable differences due to the fact that the text unfolds across a slab and not inside a decorative context, shows a close similarity to our inscription, even to the point that we might hypothesize that they both belonged to the same "family". The S with irregular curves, with the lower one often of smaller proportions; Q with a horizontal stroke; M with arched diagonals which converge on the writing-line; the alternation of rounded and squared E; frequent use of embraced letters and execution with deep and wide triangular incisions all support this hypothesis.

This was a transitional period in Rome between lettering which was a classicizing imitation, and was present in the epitaphs of the "great" or in the inscriptions in some important Roman churches, and a lettering which tended to reduce its modulus but paid special attention to capital forms, even though maintaining some elements which had by now been present in the tradition for some time, such as the presence of uncial characteristics and the tendency to round the letters. Two inscriptions can be considered in this regard—the inscription which lists the relics in S. Biagio della Pagnotta<sup>37</sup> and that which refers to restoration work and the catalogue of relics in the Lateran basilica,<sup>38</sup> both from the time of Alexander II (c.1072). They both display elements similar to our inscription: the rounded execution of the letters, the M, the G with internal curl. Likewise the catalogue of the relics in S. Nicola in Carcere,<sup>39</sup> from the era

<sup>35</sup> F. Tomassetti, "Notizie intorno ad alcune chiese di Roma: S. Maria in Aventino, S. Stefano del Cacco, S. Gregorio in Martirio, S. Giovanni dei Genovesi", *Bullettino Comunale* (1905), pp. 329–32. The author proposes a sixth-century date but refers mostly to the style of the altar's sculpture and offers no argument about the inscription's lettering.

<sup>36</sup> Silvagni, *Monumenta epigraphica*, I: Roma, plate XVII, n. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Diehl, *Inscriptiones latinae*, p. 43, b; Silvagni, *Monumenta epigraphica*, I: Roma, plate XX, 1.

<sup>38</sup> The inscription is in the cloister of S. Giovanni in Laterano, on the wall on the left of the entrance. Cf. Diehl, *Inscriptiones latinae*, p. 43; Silvagni, *Monumenta epigraphica*, I: Roma, plate XX, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Silvagni, *Monumenta epigraphica*, I: Roma, plate XXI, 6.

of Urban II (1088–99), shows the same G, the rounded letters and the frequent use of embraced letters. During the twelfth century, such characteristics found their fullest expression in the formation of a majuscule romanesque script.

Reading our inscription, if we observe the flow of the script we note that it corresponds only partly to the functional demands of the letters and reveals a use of the written word which we could define as decorative. Indeed the writer clumsily falls into certain grammatical errors and an erroneous format which produces difficulties for the reader.

These observations lead us to another question which this inscription poses. Was the frame in the tympanum of the temple that was sculpted on the altar intended to contain the inscription or was it subsequently adapted for this purpose? The question is important for an understanding of the symbolic significance of the entire piece and for the formulation of a dating hypothesis. Considering the evident difficulty which the writer found in composing his text it might seem that the inscription inserted inside the tympanum was not intended from the moment the altar was first designed. The difficulty of placing letters inside a space which was evidently found to be narrow and constricting produced the incoherent progression of the script in the two sections of the tympanum: the abbreviated M which projects out of the frame, the uncertain spacing with spaces which were either too large or too small (especially in the first line of the horizontal inscription), and the unequal size of the letter modulus. However the dimensions of the tympanum are justified only by thinking of its function as a frame for the lettering. Indeed it is not impossible to hypothesize that, if the inscription had not been planned, the frame would have been smaller or would have accommodated a decorative motif. The solution actually adopted is a *unicum* of great importance; indeed observing other sculpted decorations, we realise that when an architectural form of this type is present, the tympanum is always decorated with geometrical or vegetal forms. The same occurs in manuscripts where the architectural shapes containing the figures of saints always include an inscription in the arch of the architectural form or a leaf-form decoration. Since this does not occur here, it means that the inscription was indeed intended from the very start of the altar and it was not added later as an afterthought. The difficulty of the task, probably entrusted to a stone-cutter within the workshop who was inexpert at lettering, displays



itself in the uncertain execution of some parts of the inscription. We can see this in the *didascalia* which accompany the depictions, which were awkwardly inserted in the available spaces and were not always complete. However the fact remains that the inscription cannot be read in a coherent way except for the section at the base of the tympanum where the relics of St Savinus and St Cesarius are mentioned. This part of the inscription, in a very visible position, is indeed the most legible and reveals the desire to exalt the relics of the two most important saints, whose names are written in a larger modulus than the rest of the inscription. This positioning suggests other reflections.

Contrary to what Sinthern tried to demonstrate,<sup>40</sup> the St Cesarius whose rib is conserved in the altar comes from Terracina not Nazianzus, and is mentioned with Julian on 1 November in the Roman Martyrology.<sup>41</sup> As the *Liber Pontificalis* attests,<sup>42</sup> in Rome the cult of St Cesarius was present on the Palatine from the fifth century and from that time the veneration of the saint spread throughout the city. Considering too how near the Aventine is to the Palatine hill it is more than likely that the relics preserved in the altar are those of St Cesarius of Terracina. The absence of the saint's name from the surviving part of the liturgical calendar in S. Maria del Priorato allowed Sinthern to propose a late date;<sup>43</sup> but this absence is explicable since this text stops at the beginning of the month of July whereas, as mentioned above, St Cesarius' feast day was 1 November. Taking these arguments together, therefore, nothing precludes the possibility that the inscription was executed before 1054, the date of the calendar's compilation.

The history of the relics of St Savinus may suggest another argu-

<sup>40</sup> Sinthern, "Memorie", p. 65.

<sup>41</sup> *AASS Nov*, I, pp. 84–6; *Martyrologium Romanum*, 1 Nov (= *AASS Propylaeum ad Dec.*, I, p. 489); A. Amore, "Cesario e Giuliano", *Bibliotheca sanctorum* III, cols 1154–5.

<sup>42</sup> *LP* I, p. 377, n. 12. In the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* only St Cesarius of Terracina is mentioned on 21 April but this refers, according to Duchesne, to the anniversary of the dedication of an oratory in honour of the martyr built in Rome on the Palatine, whose existence is already attested in the time of Gregory the Great. On this argument see E. Bartoli, "Scoperta dell'oratorio e del Monastero di S. Cesareo sul Palatino", *Bulletino di Archeologia Cristiana* 13 (1907), pp. 191–204.

<sup>43</sup> L. Guérard, "Un Fragment de calendrier romain au moyen âge", *MAH* 13 (1893), pp. 153–75. The calendar is from the end of the eleventh century (Leo IX, d. 1054, is the most recent saint it lists) and was used by Sinthern as a decisive element for the dating of the altar of S. Maria del Priorato since he believed St Cesarius was Cesarius of Nazianzus, born 25 February.

ment for dating the altar, for the skull of the Spoletan saint is the first relic mentioned in the inscription. As mentioned above, its deposition in the altar may be linked with an important property transfer. Around 939 Alberic II gave his family house to the Cluniacs whom he had invited to Rome<sup>44</sup> and this donation may have included the relics of the Spoletan saint which were probably preserved in the house.<sup>45</sup> When the altar was made to contain the relics preserved in the church, it is possible that the monks had the relics of St Savinus in mind as a sign of recognition and of political union with the Roman prince. Furthermore, this argument supports the hypothesis that the conception of the inscription was contemporary with the creation of the altar.

The preoccupation with writing the name of the saint who was most important to the monastery in clear letters, on the most prominent part of the altar, while relegating St Cesarius himself to second place could justify the error of M for MARTIRI outside the frame. The execution of the inscription would thus have to be later than the donation, the result of a precise graphic project. The broad frame in the interior of the tympanum, which as we have seen occupies one-third of the entire decoration of the altar, seems to support this hypothesis which would understand the inscription as designed to exalt the relics contained in the altar in order of their political and religious importance.

There is a final point to be made concerning the symbolism and use of lettering in this altar. Examination of the abbreviated S for SANCTUS on the left shutter of the door reveals that the head alongside it is that of a saint, and it seems possible to me that this indicates the important relics contained in the altar: the CAPUT SANCTI SAVINI SPOLITINI. This could be confirmed by the significance of the two roses placed on the right-hand shutter of the

<sup>44</sup> The *Liber Destructionis monasterii Farfensis* by Hugh, abbot of Farfa (973–1039), informs us that c.939 Alberic II, *princeps et senator Romanorum suam domum propriam, ubi ipse natus est Romae, positam in Aventino monte, concessit ad monasterium construendum, quod usque ad praesens stare videtur in honore sancte [sic] Marie [sic]*. MGH SS XI, p. 536. It is the house Alberic had inherited through his mother Marozia from his grandmother Theodora, wife of Theophylact, and he donated it to abbot Odo of Cluny, provost of all the monasteries in the Rome area, in order to spread the Cluniac reform.

<sup>45</sup> Pietrangeli, "Memorie spoletine", pp. 11–12. The author hypothesizes that Alberic II, son of Alberic of Spoleto, gave the relics of the saint along with his house where they were probably preserved.

door. Indeed the rose was the flower reserved, since early Christian times, for the cult of martyrs and it was often depicted on their *confessiones*, to indicate their future re-awakening among the blossoms of the garden of paradise.<sup>46</sup> This funerary symbolism is clinched by the presence of an animal head (probably a lion)<sup>47</sup> on the left-hand shutter and above all by the door which is itself a funerary symbol, and is often found in both pagan and early Christian sarcophagi.<sup>48</sup> These arguments confirm the hypothesis of the unitary conception of the altar and inscription at the time of the donation of the relics of the Spoletan saint.

When placed in these terms the entire altar can be read as a form of reliquary which takes up the themes and iconography of early Christian funerary monuments. The altar's very form (a single block of marble), puts it amongst the typology of those of chest form and is very close to funerary *cippi* from the Roman period. The cavity for relics in the top gives it the function of an urn of monumental proportions.

On the basis of its letter-forms and function, we may conclude that the text in the frame is contemporary with the production of the altar and that it accords with its overall concept which reveals a "programme of graphic presentation",<sup>49</sup> with a symbolic significance expressed in its own distinctive language. The environment in which this project was conceived is important because it unites the Cluniac order and the new Roman patriciate, both in search of a legitimization often invoked by recourse to antiquity, and because it is a first sign of the cultural reawakening in Rome in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

<sup>46</sup> H. Leclercq, "Fleurs", *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, 15 vols in 30 (Paris, 1907-53), V, pt. 2, cols 1694-99.

<sup>47</sup> The lion often appears in pagan and early Christian sarcophagi (cf. the strigilated sarcophagus in Palazzo Barberini which uses the motif of the half-open door on which are represented four lions, and also the sarcophagus from the church of the Holy Trinity in Miletus, now in the Museo Archeologico in Naples, which however does not bear four lions on the door shutters) as a symbol of resurrection. It often appears on doors with an apotropaic function as the custodian of a sacred place. Because of its solar association the lion is often identified with the *Sol invictus* and in this case is often accompanied by a rosette, the solar symbol. Cf. M.G. Chiappori, "Leone", *Enciclopedia dell'Arte Medievale*, 8 vols (Rome, 1990-97), VII, pp. 634-39.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. the sarcophagus from the church of the Holy Trinity in Miletus which presents the theme of the door between two decorated pilasters in a manner reminiscent of the altar of S. Maria del Priorato.

<sup>49</sup> On the problems relating to the interpretation of "graphic spaces" and its definition, see A. Petrucci, *La Scrittura: ideologia e rappresentazione* (Turin, 1986).



Fig. 21 Early medieval altar in S. Maria del Priorato, as displayed by Piranesi  
(Photo: Adriano Peroni).



Fig. 22 Upper surface of the S. Maria del Priorato altar (Photo: Adriano Peroni).



Fig. 23 Reconstruction of the S. Maria del Priorato altar in its original state (Sketch: Ombretta Dinelli).





Fig. 24 Front of the S. Maria del Priorato altar (Photo: Adriano Peroni).



Fig. 25 Right-hand side of the S. Maria del Priorato altar (Photo: Adriano Peroni).

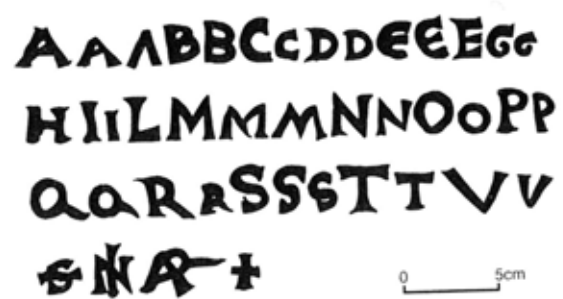


Fig. 26 Letter forms used on the S. Maria del Pri-  
 rato altar (Transcription: Stefano Riccioni, from a  
 cast of the inscriptions).