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Dale Kinney

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Abstract
The debate over whether the early church basilica was "imperial" is bound up with many other questions, including the origins of the building type, and whether building types have fixed or only contingent associations. Krautheimer, for example, maintained that the imperial quality of the early Christian basilica was genetically transmitted, as the church basilica was a descendant of the public basilica which it formally resembles, and which itself was in the imperial domain. Deichmann, by contrast, held that no architectural form has inherent meaning, rather buildings are constituted as Christian or imperial through use or posterior interpretation. Recent advances in semiotic theory offer a way around this impasse, by suggesting that the "basilica" is a discursive rather than a formal category, determined neither purely by form nor purely by use, but by a cultural and linguistic understanding; and that the properties of architectural spaces contribute to this understanding by thematizing culturally meaningful categories. Contrasting the Lateran basilica to two earlier public basilicas, the Basilica Aemilia and the Basilica Ulpia, demonstrates a fundamental lack of resemblance without denying a possible genetic connection. Semiotic analysis of the Lateran's interior suggests that it thematized many qualities that were also imperial but not exclusively so, including opulence, visibility, and power. It also thematized privacy – not an imperial attribute – and did not refer to the imperial themes *par excellence*, victory and military prowess.

“The imperial audience halls of the Flavian Palatium and at Trier were entered from one end and had an apse at the other; this version of the basilica, with its focal concentration, was the direct antecedent of the early Christian churches of Rome and Ravenna: the altar replaced the imperial seat." 1 These sentences from *A Handbook of Roman Art* serve as one of many possible reminders that the church basilica is literally a textbook example of the theme of the symposium, "Imperial Art as Christian Art." The textbooks transmit an opinion forged in more specialized publications, like those of our honoree Hans Peter L’Orange. In *Art Forms and Civic Life in the Late Roman Empire* – published in English translation in 1965 and still widely read in North America – L’Orange described the form of the Christian basilica as the product of two inseparable developments: a transfer of architectural layouts and furnishings from the imperial palace to the church, and an involuntary transformation in all the arts created by “a movement away from lifelike nature to abstract types, from plastic articulation to conceptual generalization, from the corporeal to the symbolic.” The salient traits of palace architecture included symmetry, axiality, focalization, and particular forms and objects loaded with imperial associations, especially the “glorification gable” and the ciborium. All of these features appeared in the first Christian

basilicas, in addition to others that resulted from a universal change in the idiom of architectural expression in late antiquity: "one renounces the whole corporeal building – the columns, friezes, architectural ornament... in order to immerse oneself in incorporeal space, in the insubstantial, intangible interior filled with light and shadow. From the clear, plastic definition of form one turns toward the realm of the abstract: a turning which, better than anything else, characterizes the whole attitude toward life in Late Antiquity" (Figs. 1, 2). 1

Thomas Mathews’ recent exposé of what he calls the "Emperor Mystique" forces a re-examination of the textbook commonplace, as well as the tradition of distinguished scholarship it encapsulates. Suddenly defamiliarized, L’Orange’s well known account seems to rest on two foundations, spatial analysis derived from the work of von Kaschnitz-Weinberg and ultimately from Riegl, and a history of symbols based on studies by Ejnar Dyggve and Andreas Alföldi. Mathews spotlights Alföldi as one of the seminal purveyors of the Emperor Mystique, but he does not explicitly consider the influence of this scholarly tradition on the history of architecture. 3 In this paper I will try to bridge that gap, reviewing some

of the principal contributions to the discussion of the basilica since Alföldi, and reflecting on the potential of certain strains in the "new" art history to recuperate some of the insights to be found there.

Alföldi’s two colossal articles on imperial rituals and symbols – 118 and 171 pages in successive issues of the *Roemische Mitteilungen* – undoubtedly are more often cited than read today.⁴ In citation they tend to be flattened into documentation for specific ceremonies and insignia, but all of this documentation – superb as it is – was deployed originally in the service of an argument, some aspects of which now seem dated while others are surprisingly fresh. Alföldi was fascinated by the symbols of imperial authority not for their own sake, but as the means by which autocratic power was inculcated and perpetuated. Lacking juridical validity, the office of the emperor had to be sustained by charisma, and charisma was effected by the arrogation of attributes of divinity. These symbols were coercive; they had an affective appeal that bound the princeps to his nominal equals, and later, the dominus to his subjects. The point of tracing the "Insignia and Costume" of late antique emperors to the second or even the first century was to demonstrate that theocratic absolutism was latent in the position of Augustus from the start. The movement from princeps to dominus was inevitable, and it began long before Diocletian – where Mommsen placed it – and Constantine.

Alföldi had little to say about architecture. In a few pages dedicated to the palace, he indicated that the latter was sacralized by ornamental details and furnishings associated with the worship of gods: the ciborium over the throne, the

⁴ Alföldi 1934, 1935.
temple pediment or *fastigium*, niches.\(^5\) In the final paragraph of his second article he sketched the afterlife of this development: "Everywhere around 200 C.E. we see a convergence of the images of divinity with the empire. Christ is called *imperator* by Tertullian, the oriental gods of the same period appear in the armor of the Roman emperors, and church art of the fourth century follows the rules of the imperial court in costume and etiquette, color symbolism and signs of rank. Constantine inaugurates the assimilation of the great basilicas to the furnishing of the throne room. The insignia of the emperor and his dignitaries pass over to the popes and bishops."\(^6\)

The influence of Áľfoši's articles was immense and immediate. In the history of architecture, their most important afterlife was in the work of Richard Krautheimer, who was, incidentally, the *Doktorvater* of Thomas Mathews and also my own. Like nearly all of the scholars whose work will be cited in this paper, Krautheimer did not isolate the question of the relation of imperial and Christian qualities in church architecture in his publications. His views on the matter were expressed in discussions of other topics, especially the origins of the Christian basil-

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5. Áľfoši 1935, 127-134.  
6. Áľfoši 1935, 158.
ica. Excerpting these statements threatens to distort both his views and his method, but within the limits of a brief paper there is no other way to proceed.

Krautheimer was not much given to analyzing the affective aspects of architecture. Like most scholars working in North America he ignored Viennese Strukturforschung, which means that, unlike L'Orange, he did not seek meaning in essential properties of space or three-dimensional form. His approach was more strictly historical, deriving meaning from the demonstration of causal relationships or the resonance of form with historical circumstance. It was in this mode that he made use of Alföldi. In his first independent treatment of the question of the early Christian basilica, published in 1939, Krautheimer cited the articles of 1934-1935 in support of the claim that by late antiquity “the audience hall of the imperial palace [was conceived] as a sacred place, a temple, the idol of which was the Emperor’s person” (Figs. 3, 4). He proposed that this “conception” of the audience hall “carried over into the Church” but only as an “influence” on the church basilica, which was modelled on what he called “secular” basilicas and therefore fundamentally a hall of meeting. Nearly thirty years later, in his widely read article on “The Constantinian Basilica”, Krautheimer offered a much more detailed and subtle account of this development. This article frames a position somewhat closer to L'Orange’s, even though the method remains different. The Constantinian church basilica was necessarily imperial, because “under the impact of the emperor cult, the borderlines between religious

and secular, civic, judiciary, and throne basilicas had been obliterated; and any basilica was, or carried the connotations of, a sanctuary of the god on earth.”

Moreover, the church basilica was a public building, and “all monumental public architecture, [including] basilicas whatever their specific function, were viewed increasingly as the responsibility as well as the property of the emperor.” By the 1990s Krautheimer had modified the characterization of Constantinian church basilicas as “public”, to argue instead that they were at least fictively private, erected largely or in part with funds from the privy purse. But he continued to emphasize their imperial connotations, even more so than in 1967.

L’Orange, Alföldi, and Krautheimer seem to offer three different models for defining the imperial element in the early Christian basilica. According to L’Orange, imperial qualities are essential ones, embodied in axial, symmetrical, hierarchical form and observable through structural analysis. According to Alföldi, buildings were constituted as imperial by the presence of mobile symbols, which can be decoded on the basis of iconographic research. According to Krautheimer, basilicas were imperial by association, as church basilicas fell into a category of building identified with the sponsorship and worship of the emperor. These models are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. The question of how a basilica or any building encodes meaning is inexhaustible. Like many fundamental questions it is easily overlooked. Implicit in all claims about the “imperial” – or Christian! – nature of the early Christian basilica, it is rarely addressed explicitly. It is a semiotic question, and thinking about semiotics, or certain semiotic propositions, is a useful means of generating answers.

In Learning from Las Vegas, a book that was very influential on subsequent architectural practice in North America, the architects Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi and Steven Izenour proposed that buildings are of two types: “ducks” and “decorated sheds”. Ducks are buildings in which “the architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form” (Fig. 5). By contrast, in decorated sheds “systems of space and structure are directly at the service of the program, and ornament is applied independently of them” (Fig. 6). The duck was named for a poultry store on Long Island, New York, but the architect-authors also cited Chartres cathedral as a duck. The tomb of Caius Cestius is a duck; and I would submit that Bishop Ambrose of Milan built ducks. The controlling purpose of his Basilica Apostolorum (Fig. 7) was to represent the cross, and although it may have been an influential building, it was not a great architectural idea. Its volumes are bluntly abutted, and its program – if the program was to house commemorative liturgies and burials – could have been more efficiently and ele-

12. Venturi et al. 1977, 87; cf. Izenour 1985, 65: “A duck is a building whose function, structure and material are secondary to its representational quality or sculptural form.”
13. Venturi et al. 1977, 87; Izenour 1985, 65: “The decorated shed exaggerates or distorts one element, usually the front facade, while the rest of the building remains conventional in appearance.
gantly accommodated by a different design. In contrast, it is tempting to classify the so-called “standard” type of church basilica – the nave with apse and two aisles – as a decorated shed. Although it may look like a shed, however, many interpreters have treated the basilica as a duck, that is, as an architectural form determined by symbolic reference to another form rather than by program.

Most duck-theories of the early Christian basilica have a genetic component: they assert that the basilica is a significant form because it looks like an earlier significant form which is its ancestor. So, for example, Ernst Langlotz claimed that the earliest church basilicas were deliberately modeled on apsed throne
halls like that in Trier (Figs. 2, 3), and that this formal relationship constituted a symbolic connection.\textsuperscript{16} John Ward Perkins likewise argued that the imperial hall was the deliberately chosen archetype of the church basilica, though he did not press as strongly for a consequent referential relationship between palace hall and church.\textsuperscript{17} Krautheimer's account was more complex, allowing for a wider range of formal sources for the church basilica and an element of inevitability in their selection. He used the biological metaphors genus and species to describe the relationship of the church basilica to all other basilicas, and also to convey the idea that formal relationships could have been just hereditary rather than intentional. Nevertheless, as indicated earlier, Krautheimer also assumed that the church basilica had imperial connotations, because of the imperialization of all earlier examples of the genus, or type. That is, insofar as the church basilica was a basilica, it was by definition an imperial building, regardless of variations in the forms of individual examples.

The duck-theory assumes that the basilica was an idea, rather like Plato's bed, of which each basilican building was a recognizable instantiation (Fig. 8).\textsuperscript{18} The existence of such an abstraction seems obvious because of the well-known passage by Vitruvius, which describes precisely an ideal basilica.\textsuperscript{19} In terms of the linguistic semiotics of Saussure, the ideal basilica would be a sig-

\textsuperscript{16} Langlotz & Deichmann 1950, 1249.  
\textsuperscript{17} Ward Perkins 1954, 87.  
\textsuperscript{18} Plato, \textit{Resp.} X.  
\textsuperscript{19} Vitruvius, \textit{De arch.} V, 1, 4-10.
nified, and each building a signifier of it. On this model, early Christian basilicas were meaningful because of their constitutive role in the sign “basilica”. This is how Greek temples worked, and French Gothic cathedrals; hence Chartres cathedral is claimed by the Venturis as a duck. The shed-theory, by contrast, denies the existence of the sign, usually on empirical grounds. Shed-

21. More precisely, Chartres is a duck and also a decorated shed; Venturi et al. 1977, 87.
Theorists tend to argue that the remains of dozens or hundreds of particular buildings are too dissimilar to have been perceived by contemporary Romans as signifiers of any one concept or ideal.

Noël Duval took this position in his “state of the question” of the origin of the Christian basilica in 1962. He concluded that attempts to trace the early church basilica to a particular type or subgroup of Roman basilicas were useless, because the range of variations among basilicas prevented any fixed formal-functional relationships. “The architecture of antiquity constitutes... a vast koiné in which plans and procedures were exchanged from one sector to another without it being possible to speak... of imitation;” in other words, resemblances in form are just that, not indices of meaningful emulations.  

Another proponent of the shed-theory was F.W. Deichmann. In an important methodological paper delivered in 1951 but not fully published until 1982, Deichmann insisted that to understand the early Christian basilica it is necessary to distinguish form, meaning and use; in his view these were three independent variables, and to know one is not necessarily to know the others. Form was neutral; so while Deichmann believed that the early Christian basilica derived from the Roman forum basilica, he claimed that this genetic relationship said nothing about the meaning of basilican churches. “Meaning” was a quality applied to, or invested in buildings by their users or observers, as in ekphrasis such as Eusebius’ sermon on the basilica at Tyre, which reads the structure as a reproduction of the Old Testament Temple. According to Deichmann, the ability of observers to see a church building in this symbolic way was neither necessitated nor determined by the building’s form. Form and symbolism were completely independent. The third factor, “use” – in the case of churches, Christian liturgy – similarly was not a shaping factor; liturgy was adapted to any given architectural design.

In an article published in the Deichmann Festschrift of 1986, Jürgen Christern offered a subtler statement of the same position in a consideration of the longitudinal apsed basilica at Tipasa (late second/early third century), which looks strikingly like the standard early church basilica (Fig. 9). Pondering the implications of this resemblance, Christern concluded that whether or not the basilica at Tipasa was a caesareum, a house of the imperial cult, the formal similarity between it and later churches says nothing about the origin or intention of the churches. Like Duval, Christern maintained that architectural forms had no inherent qualities – and consequently no fixed connotations – in late Roman practice; instead, buildings were composed of elements that were infinitely transferrable. No form was exclusive to the emperor, or to the sacred; even the temple facade was no longer reserved. Since neither “imperial” nor “Christian” was a sufficiently stable quality in the architecture of late antiquity to act as a signified, the “Christian basilica” is only a retrospective category; it does not describe a late antique architectural type. Hence Christern’s programmatic use of the term “church basilica” rather than “Christian basilica”, on the grounds

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that "church" plainly designates a function, whereas "Christian" implies a quality inherent in the form.26

On the question of the connotations of the early Christian basilica, duck-theorists and shed-theorists have reached an impasse. Referring the debate to semiotic theory may offer a way around it. In the terms of a "semiotics of architecture" recently articulated by Gerard Lukken, "basilica" should be thought of as a discursive category rather than a fixed "type" of architectural design.27 In Lukken's terms, buildings "figure" basilicas – or temples, mausolea, baths, etc. Individual structures ("architectural utterances") refer, or are referred by viewers or users to the category "basilica" by a discursive practice with linguistic and social as well as architectural components. Lukken distinguishes figures and themes, or figurativization and thematization, as two forms of semantic capacity with different "trajectories". Themes include qualitative categories such as privacy/openness, rusticity/regality, tradition/modernity. Whereas a building might be a "basilica" through figurativization, it would have been "imperial" through thematization.

"Figurative and thematic trajectories can... be determined... by the way people act to occupy the space..., or by the way light, sound, smells, or decor are dis-

tributed. Space, after all, is a syncretic object.” Semiotics invites us to reopen the analysis of space conducted by L’Orange, and to make it more inclusive. In order to explore the utility of semiotic analysis for understanding how, or whether early Christian basilicas were imperial, I will devote the remainder of this paper to a single example, the Lateran cathedral in Rome.

As first erected, the Lateran church stood in a zone of sprawling mansions extending from the Claudianum to the Sessorian Palace, on a high promontory outside the pomerium, screened from the city by a branch of the Aqua Claudia. With an external height of 90 feet the basilica was probably much taller than the surrounding domus; its effect may have been something like that of the Basilica in Trier in a reconstruction drawing (Fig. 10). Unlike the Trier Basilica, however, the Lateran was on a hill, and this and its size would have made it visible from some parts of the city despite its peripheral location. By the third century the houses immediately around it had become imperial property, and the area was heavily militarized. There would have been less public traffic here than in parts of Rome closer to the river.

Krautheimer, following Alföldi, interpreted the Lateran’s peripheral siting as a tactful or prudent strategy of avoidance of more central areas dominated by the pagan aristocracy. In his recent overview of Constantinian churches in Rome, Hugo Brandenburg preferred to stress the site’s imperial ownership, claiming that the imperial presence was strong enough for this zone to rival the Palatine.

29. 2000 Jahre 1984, 23, Fig. 1 (detail).
Brandenburg’s description gives the location a positive valence, marked by the presence – real or vicarious – of the emperor rather than by the absence of pagans. Pagans were not absent in any case. A few minutes’ walk along the aqueduct brought one to the Basilica Hilariana, a building which would survive into the fifth century as the seat of the dendrophoroi of the cult of Cybele. The Basilica Hilariana was a substantial building, at least 35 m. long; but the Lateran was almost three times longer.

Fig. 13 – Forum Romanum, Basilica Aemilia, facade (after Bauer 1988, 204-205).

The exterior of the Lateran was very plain (Figs. 11, 12). Although probably the brick-faced walls were covered with scored stucco imitating stone, nothing relieved their long, flat expanses except the many large windows, whose shallow set-backs revealed that the walls were very thin. The facade was remarkably inarticulate, offering only more windows and three doors. The gable was pediment-like in shape, but it was almost involuntary, the product of the configuration within. There is no record of any external inscriptions such as Roman viewers were accustomed to see on the facades of public buildings; nothing informed the passer-by what this building was for, and nothing signalled that he or she should go inside.

In all of these respects the Lateran was utterly unlike Rome’s public basilicas. These buildings differed among themselves in age and design, but all looked on a public space which they adorned with their ornament. The Basilica Aemilia, recently restored after the fire in the Forum in 283, was fronted by a porticus of dimensions comparable to the Lateran’s: 100 feet tall by almost 300 feet long, though only about 20 feet wide. Its two-tiered theater-type facade decorously masked ground-floor shops and the stairwells by means of which one ascended to the gallery of the basilica behind (Figs. 13, 14).33 The Basilica Ulpia, probably the public basilica most frequently compared to the Lateran by modern scholars, was even more different from it in access and effect. Its facade formed the fourth side of a peristyle which, like the rest of the Forum, participated in an enormous permanent celebration of Trajan’s military prowess (Fig. 15).34 The ground-level colonnade supported an attic with a triumphant display of defeated Dacians, surmounted by the chariots of the victor. In James Packer’s recent reconstruction, the portico behind the columns opens directly into the Basilica through another colonnade, which would have made the space of the Basilica continuous with the open court outside it. Whether or not this was so, entry was emphatically signalled by three projecting porches with columns of brilliant giallo antico.35

The Lateran church had none of the external signs of a Roman public building. To early-fourth-century citizens it must have appeared like an audience hall or the Curia, a space to be entered by invitation only. Its exclusivity might have

34. Packer 1997, frontispiece.
been especially evident at night. The large windows of late antique halls are often described in terms of daylight – that is, of admitting light – but they also would have let light out. The purportedly Constantinian donation lists specify large numbers and many kinds of lamps and endowments to keep them burning; Krautheimer imagined “lamps burning day and night” inside the building.\textsuperscript{36} Whether the lamps burned every night or only on certain nights of the year, the effect of the illumination glowing through the large windows must have been doubly powerful to a spectator standing in the dark (Fig. 16).\textsuperscript{37} On the one hand, light shining from a large hall at night looks festive; so the Lateran’s glimmering windows would have signalled to outsiders the joyousness of the gathering within. On the other hand, by drawing attention to these nocturnal rituals the windowed basilica refuted one of the standard disparagements of mystery religions, that their practice of meeting at night signified something dark and furtive about the religion itself.\textsuperscript{38} The Lateran positively advertised the fact that Christians had nighttime liturgies, in a brilliantly lighted space whose glowing windows established darkness as the realm of the non-initiates outside.

Those who entered the building found themselves inside a columned hall. \textit{Aula} is the term used for St. Peter’s basilica in its dedicatory inscriptions, and contemporaries might have used the same word for the Lateran.\textsuperscript{39} This hall was as large and tall as a Forum basilica but differently articulated, with blind

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Duchesne 1981, 172-174; Krautheimer 1993b, 535; De Blaauw 1994, 127.
\item \textsuperscript{37} The principal night liturgy was at Easter: De Blaauw 1994, 147-155.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Livy \textit{Ab urbe condita} XXXIX, 8, 4: “nec is qui aperta religionem ... sed occultarum et nocturnorum antistes sacrorum,” etc.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Krautheimer 1989.
\end{itemize}
walls above the columns of the middle space and relatively low porticoes on either side (Figs. 12, 17). The columns dividing these spaces were oddly proportioned. With shafts over 30 feet high, the main columns were slightly taller than those inside the Basilica Ulpia, but the shafts between the aisles were less than half as tall, and had to be raised on pedestals to support an arcade. The aisle shafts were of green Thessalian marble – verde antico – while the main colonnade was of red granite, perhaps mixed with grey. All of these shafts were reused. Scholars have tended to treat the mixed colors of these spolia as characteristically late antique, but coloristic variation was already a feature of first-century basilicas. The Basilica Aemilia had interior columns of dark africano and greenish cipollino, while the Basilica Ulpia mixed grey granite (“granito del foro”) shafts on the ground floor with cipollino in the galleries, over a pavement colored with giallo antico, pavonazzetto, and africano. The red granite and verde antico in the Lateran may have emulated red and green porphyry – the two most expensive stones in Diocletian’s edict on prices – but they would not have deceived many Romans. Although they would not necessarily have taken them for granted, fourth-century visitors to the Lateran may have been less impressed by the colors and materials of the colonnades than by their reuse. Habitués of the court and the imperial estates probably knew where they came from.

The most striking feature of the Lateran’s interior must have been the silver and gold *fastigium* at the west end of the nave. In the reconstruction by Sible De Blaauw, the *fastigium* spanned the space between the main colonnades to segregate the apse and the westernmost bays of the nave, which were reserved for the *presbyterium* (Fig. 12). Its gilded bronze columns were only about a foot shorter than the granite shafts of the colonnades, so they would have formed part of a continuous screen around the nave, like three sides of a peristyle. The villa of Diocletian at Split inevitably comes to mind (Fig. 18). At the same time, its metal sheathing would have distinguished the *fastigium* from the stone colonnades and made it an object of separate attention. The *fastigium* framed a notional view of the main altar and of anyone enthroned behind it in the apse; but in practice this view was unavailable except to those who were permitted inside the *solea*. The oblique view required of everyone else would have tended to dissociate the *fastigium* from the view behind it, making it an optical end in itself. Its role as a visual target confirmed its principal function as a freestanding symbol.

As a spectatorial space the Lateran cathedral was more like an audience hall than a public basilica. Forum basilicas provided diverse viewing experiences and multiple platforms for seeing. The facade was a site from which spectators tra-

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ditionally looked out over the open square (Figs. 13, 15). With the introduction of galleries into the Basilicae Aemilia and Julia they could also look inward, as described in a letter of Pliny the Younger: “the very galleries [were] lined with men and women, hanging over in their eagerness to hear (which was difficult) and see (which was easy).” The view was democratically reciprocal: those who were looking could be seen and vice versa (Figs. 14, 17). Viewers could be simultaneously consumers and sources of display. The axially focused, vertically undivided audience hall, by contrast, allowed viewing from only one level and imposed a single focus (Fig. 3). All eyes were directed toward the dominus enthroned in the apse, but unless the floor of the apse was sufficiently raised, like a stage, relatively few would have been able to see him. In the Lateran, because of the fastigium, the presence in the apse was more implied than visible (Fig. 12). Their gaze unsatisfied, spectators in the nave might turn to the solea. The solea made the nave a parade space, but here again, without some means of elevation (this time of the spectators) only those standing within two or three rows of the parapet would have been able to see the spectacle. The frustration of spectatorship is a conspicuous aspect of a design which, in Lukken’s terms, seems to thematize visibility. Frustration compounds desire, in this case enhancing the prestige of viewing by privileging those who were able to do it.

The power of the gaze is a trope of postmodern critical theory. The critical construct of the gaze depends on psychoanalytic assumptions that are not demonstrably relevant to late antiquity; but the results of its application to film and other contemporary imagery have made everyone aware that seeing and being seen do not constitute a neutral transaction. Seeing confers power, upon the holder of the gaze in contemporary theory but upon its object, apparently, in late antique practice. In the famous account by Ammianus Marcellinus of the entry of Constantius II to Rome, the emperor initially offers himself as spectacle to the people. “Everyone’s eyes were riveted upon him...,” but he “kept the gaze of his eyes straight ahead, and turned his face neither to right nor to left...” Constantius is doubly empowered by the inability of the people to look away from him and by his own refusal to reciprocate their gaze. Ironically, however, the emperor is undone by the sight of Rome’s splendors; when he allows himself to look upon the Forum “he stood amazed... [and] was dazzled by the array of marvelous sights.” The spectacle of the City outshines his own, reducing him to an impotent voyeur. This anecdote illuminates the semiotics of vision in the Lateran basilica. The opulent materials and colors “dazzled”, disarming spectators by making them “amazed”; this was true of the Forum basilicas as well, however. The distinction of the axially focused parade space is that it directs the

49. Ammianus Marcellinus, XVI, 10, 4-16, trans. Rolfe.
dazzled gaze to a single object, the *dominus* revealed in the apse or hidden behind the *fastigium*.

According to Lukken, the themes of a building are related to its "intentionality or angle of approach." In its size, brilliant materials, and light, the Lateran thematized splendor, and in doing so it was just like the traditional basilicas on the fora. Unlike those basilicas, however, it did not thematize civic contributions: the decor of the surrounding public spaces, for example; nor did it thematize military valor and victory, which were imperial prerogatives in the third and fourth centuries. In these respects the Lateran was more like a private building than a public one. It thematized vision and (in)visibility, and privileged certain sites of display (*solea* and *fastigium*) and the relatively few viewers who were permitted to stand near those sites. Splendor, exclusivity, visibility symbolized power, and power was the Lateran’s leading theme.

The power thematized in Rome’s cathedral does not seem to have been coded as specifically imperial, and on this point Alföldi’s comments on the Lateran may have been mistaken. But I believe that he was right to stress the affective role of symbols and their coercive effect, just as L’Orange was right to recognize that symbols are not only detachable objects placed within space, but also properties of space itself. Through their symbolizing, buildings like the Lateran confirmed that Christ was *dominus*, Lord or *Kúpios*, as he had been constituted *ab initio* in the Gospels.

Dale Kinney  
Department of History of Art  
Bryn Mawr College  
101 North Merion Avenue  
Bryn Mawr, PA 19010  
U.S.A.

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