

■ BY LUCY
GORDAN

"LA SPINA": "THE THORN" FROM ANTIQUITY TO TODAY



Left, aerial view of "La Spina" ("The Thorn") before 1936, and an aerial view of Via della Conciliazione today

Bottom: Early 20th century view of "La Spina" from near the Tiber with St. Peter's dome in the distant background

Opposite page: An oil painting showing a papal procession crossing the Tiber on the Ponte Sant'Angelo. Small photos of Popes Nicholas V (1447-1455), Sixtus IV (1471-1484) and Alexander VI (1492-1503).

Opposite, bottom: Architectural frieze with pagan deities

On until November 20 in Rome's Capitoline Museums is the temporary exhibition, "*La Spina. Dall'Agro Vaticano a Via della Conciliazione*" ("The Thorn: From the Agro Vaticano to the Via della Conciliazione"). It recounts the many major architectural transformations of the *agro vaticano* or territory from the slopes of the Janiculum Hill to what remains of the medieval neighborhoods known as the *borghi*, from ancient times until the Jubilee Year of 1950, when *Via della Conciliazione*, the wide avenue running from the Tiber to St. Peter's Square, was completed. Mussolini had intended to celebrate the Lateran Pacts of 1929 with this grandiose thoroughfare, begun in 1936, by symbolically reconnecting the Vatican to the heart of the Italian capital. To illustrate these transformations over two millennia, on display are archeological finds, fresco fragments, oil paintings, engravings, watercolors, maps, photographs, video installations, and scale models.

As the opening wall panel tells us, "*Spina* (in Italian, *the Thorn*) is the common thread of this story, in the dual meaning of its name derived from the elongated shape of the Renaissance block that has now disappeared, located between the square in front of Castel Sant'Angelo and the one in front of the Basilica, and the 'foreign object' that, as a result of the demolitions, was actually extracted from the connective design of the city." In short, as one of the museum guards explained to

me, the area Mussolini had cleared of its many medieval and Renaissance buildings to build *Via della Conciliazione* was shaped like a thorn, widest at the top closest St. Peter's and gradually narrowing towards the river.

The exhibition is divided into three sections: "Before the Thorn," which concerns the territory in ancient times; "The Thorn," which covers the building of the *borghi* or medieval narrow streets as well as of the several majestic Renaissance palaces; and "Removing St. Peter's Thorn," which concerns Mussolini's ambitious and controversial transformation.

In all fairness to *Il Duce*, his plans were not the first for the construction of a major link between Vatican City and the center of Rome. As *Wikipedia* tells us, "The first design was submitted by Leone Battista Alberti during the reign of Nicholas V (1447-1455), and formed one of the two perennial designs proposed for the area.

Alberti envisioned an 'open' plan, consisting of a single voluminous V-shaped boulevard, widest at St. Peter's Basilica and tapering as it approached the Tiber. The other scheme of designs submitted over the next two centuries by several architects was a 'closed' plan that would consist of two roads arching outwards in an ellipse, with the Tiber and the Square at opposite ends... Neither approach moved beyond sketches and blueprints." Both solutions were considered numerous times, but were ulti-



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mately discarded by the Vatican-approved St. Peter's Building Commission in 1651 for reasons of expense. In 1657, with the construction of Bernini's colonnade, the issue of connecting St. Peter's to the rest of the city came up again, but Bernini's plan for a third colonnaded branch to the Tiber was never realized, both for its expense and for fear that it would restrict the visibility of Michelangelo's dome and spoil the "embracing effect" of the two-armed colonnade.

"Before the Thorn": Because the bend in the Tiber at the *Ager Vaticanus* caused severe flooding (the earliest large flood, mentioned by Livy, dates to 414 B.C.), during the Roman Republic and early Empire the area was considered unhealthy and dangerous. "A provision of the Law of the Twelve Tables," the opening wall panel explains, "allowed one to kill or to sell the insolvent debtor 'beyond the Tiber'... Tacitus tells us that, in the summer of 69 A.D. partisans of the short-term Emperor Vitellius (who was executed by Vespasian) camped in the *infamibus Vaticani locis*, were decimated by a severe plague, and their corpses were floating on the river. Pliny describes the area as infested by snakes, one of which apparently swallowed a child, and Martial compares the Vatican wine to vinegar: *Vaticana bibas, si delectaris aceto* ('If you like vinegar, then drink Vatican wine')."

Obviously not everyone agreed because, after some successful drainage, members of the imperial families started building suburban villas with gardens across the river and on the slopes of the Janiculum. The most famous belonged to Agrippina the Elder, the wife of Germanicus and mother of Caligula (37-41 A.D.), and to Domitia, who was either the aunt of Nero (54-68 A.D.) or, more likely, the mother of Hadrian (117-138 A.D.).

Another wall panel points out: "Nowadays, the place name Vatican is a synonym of Christianity, whereas during the Imperial Age it was strictly related to paganism and Eastern cults. In fact, this area hosted a temple dedicated to the Anatolian mother goddess Cybele. Active until the 4th century, it was called *Vaticanum* or *Phrygianum Vaticanum*. The cult involved the *taurobolium*, a 'blood baptism' performed through the sacrifice of a bull. Altars used for the *taurobolium*, found in great number in the Vatican area (one is displayed here), were carved with dedicatory inscriptions which included the names of the believers who had undergone the purifying ritual." This sanctuary was so important that *Vaticanum* became the conventional name for other such sanctuaries throughout the Empire.



In addition to the suburban villas and temple to Cybele during Imperial times and into the Middle Ages, the *ager vaticanus* housed several nuclei of necropolises including those now under St. Peter's and under the Janiculum. Some had cylinder-shaped monuments similar to the Emperor Hadrian's Mausoleum, which over the centuries has had many roles: part of the Emperor Aurelian's city walls, a medieval citadel and prison, and residence of the Renaissance popes in times of political unrest. The Mausoleum's name changed to "Castel Sant'Angelo" because of a leg-

endary apparition of the angel marking the end of a plague under Gregory the Great (590-604), when the Mausoleum became the first fortified nucleus of the *agro vaticano*.

Besides the fortification of Castel Sant'Angelo, during the early Middle Ages, a proper sacred area developed around St. Peter's Basilica, with monasteries, deaconries, churches, and *scholae* or hostels for the first pilgrims from northern Europe. As the wall panel "Towards the *Rocca del Cielo*" recounts: "*Burgs* was the word Germanic pilgrims used to define this newly built-up area, hence 'Borgo.' To safeguard this area from Saracen raids, Leo IV (847-855) had it encircled with walls between 847 and 852; hence the '*Rocca del cielo*' or '*civitas Leoniana*,' the core of the area's defense system and its link to the city across the river." Nicholas III (1277-1280) expanded these fortifications, but the first pope whose heart was set on "rebuilding the Vatican" was Nicholas V. After the enormous success of his Jubilee in 1450 he made ambitious plans for rebuilding the *Borgo* and St. Peter's as well as embellishing Rome with new monuments worthy of the capital of the Christian world. Before his death in 1455, his entry in *Wikipedia* says, "he got as far as pulling down part of the ancient basilica, made some alterations to the Lateran Palace, and laid up 2,522 cartloads of marble from the dilapidated Colosseum for use in the later construction."

"The Thorn": The two popes who were responsible for "The Thorn" were humanist Sixtus IV (1471-84), who also built the Sistine Chapel and *Ponte Sisto* with the aim of reducing the concentration of pilgrims on the *Ponte Sant'Angelo*, and Spanish-born Alexander VI (1492-1503), best-known for his numerous illegitimate children, but who aimed to finish Nicholas V's projects, and

built the *Via Alessandrina*. According to a wall panel: "This intervention changed the image of the area that had already been transformed under Sixtus IV with the construction of the first cardinals' palaces, Della Rovere, (later named dei *Penitenzieri*) and Armellini (later called *Cesi*). The area became the residential quarter of cardinals, bishops, and officers of the Papal Curia. *Piazza Scossacavalli* took shape. Additional new palaces were built: *Palazzo Giraud* (later *Torlonia*), *Palazzo Caprini* (later dei *Convertendi* and where

Raphael died in 1520) designed by Bramante, and the palace of Jacopo Barolomeo da Brescia, Pope Leo X's (1515-1519) physician, conceived by Raphael."

"Removing St. Peter's Thorn": This final reconstruction of the *Borgo* during the Renaissance, the site of today's *Via della Conciliazione*, its once narrow streets meandering from the Tiber and opening unexpectedly onto Bernini's huge colonnaded piazza, remained much the same for the next nearly 500 years. Today several of these Renaissance palaces still exist even if some were moved and/or reduced in size during the building of *Via della Conciliazione*. (See Mother Martha's *Palazzo Cardinal Cesi: In the Heart of Christendom, Inside the Vatican*, July 2014.) Another is the *Palazzo dei Penitenzieri*, which owes its name to the fact that it was once home to the confessors (*penitenzieri*) of St. Peter's. Originally built by Cardinal Domenico della Rovere in 1480, at his death, the *palazzo* was acquired by Pope Julius II della Rovere's favorite, Cardinal Francesco Alidosi. Suspected of treason, the cardinal was murdered in 1511 by the Pope's nephew, the Duke of Urbino, who took possession of the *palazzo*. Today it's the Hotel Columbus.

Yes, Mussolini built *Via della Conciliazione* for self-aggran-



Benito Mussolini and Pietro Gasparri, Cardinal Secretary of State, signing the Lateran Treaty on February 11, 1929. In the small photo, Pope Pius XI (1922-1939)

dizement, but also for political reasons. During the Italian Unification in the mid-19th century, the Kingdom of Italy confiscated the *Borgo* and the rest of the Papal States outside the Vatican City walls. This led to Pope Pius IX's declaration that he'd become a prisoner in the Vatican. From 1870, for 59 years, the popes refused to leave the Vatican in order to avoid any appearance of accepting the Italian government's authority over their former territories. "Initially," Wikipedia's entry for *Via della Conciliazione* says, "parts of the Italian government welcomed this, expecting the influence of the Papa-

cy to fade to the point that enough political support could be gained to abolish it altogether. However, this failed to come to pass, and eventually a compromise acceptable to both states was reached in the Lateran Treaty of 1929."

Although "The Thorn" contains no artistic masterpieces and the English of its wall panels is sometimes contorted, it's the very first exhibition devoted to the over-2,000-years of urban transformation around and in the Vatican. Sadly, its catalog is only available in Italian from the publisher Gangemi (www.gangemi.com). ○

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