

The Arx and the Aracoeli: Preserving the Archaic — Presenting the Feminine?

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This is the story of a site: the highest summit of the Capitoline Hill in Rome, called the Arx, or Citadel. The roots of architectural history are found in the intersection of man and nature when man builds. Most of the time, we don't think about what happened between the first human habitation and the buildings eventually built. Studying this site has revealed the first settlements and the works of architecture connected across time, and inspires an understanding for what this place means, not because of the buildings it has held, but because of the three thousand years of stories which the site embodies.

Rome has been shaped by many very directed architectural projects: the imperial fora, palaces and public squares, the axes of Sixtus V, the new fittings for Roman Capitale and Roma Fascista. Rome's hold on our imagination, however, is much more than these projects. It is the total record of the city's layers which holds us, not a single physical place but a composite of topography and building through the centuries. This has resulted in a dense and chaotic amalgam of images which crowded together become our idea of the city. This confusing and anti-rational layering, although it is intuitive and largely unconscious, is held as a precious attribute of Rome by the city itself. It is at least partly responsible for the development and sustenance of an urban culture which, although it waxes and wanes, has so long endured.

The Arx, or citadel, of the Capitoline Hill, was the site of the Romans' Temple of Juno Moneta, and is occupied now by the church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli. Although this plain medieval basilica is less noticeable than Michelangelo's Campidoglio or the Monument to Victor Emmanuel, it is important because it preserves the higher summit of the hill as well as the archaic nature of this part of the Capitoline. Since the Capitoline is the civic heart of Rome, the lineage of the architecture of this place is important to Rome's history and identity. I believe the citadel's archaic nature has been purposely preserved from earliest history, and its preservation and protection are as important to the city as grand and eloquent architecture. I propose further that this protected and plain summit represents an archaic "civic feminine spirit", the intuitive protected treasury of Rome's earliest collective memory. I will show that the architecture of the citadel's two most prominent buildings, the Juno temple and the church of the Aracoeli, embody this necessarily anti-rational recognition of both the archaic and the feminine. This character is not only important in the understanding of the earliest city, but vital to its continuing identity.

In exploring these concepts, I have used literary sources extensively. Archaeology of most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has dismissed the literary history of Rome as charming but unreliable stories. Recent historical scholarship, however, has taken a different, less positivistic approach. I quote from Alexandre Grandazzi's *Introduction to The Foundation of Rome: Myth and History*, in which he categorizes the various historical and archaeo-

logical responses to the discovery of an eighth century B.C.E. wall on the Palatine which apparently corroborates the story of Romulus's founding of the city:

It now happens that in Rome, at the Palatine (that is, on the site of the legendary foundation of the city), archaeologists have discovered vestiges, some dating to the eighth century B.C.E., which may give scholars from the two disciplines the opportunity to confront one another and even perhaps to converge their research. Such a possibility has far-reaching consequences. A disconcerting breach is opening in the wall, patiently erected by scholarship for nearly two centuries, between the implausible and the probable, between myth and reality, between what lies in the province of reason and knowledge and what can be abandoned to the dream world.'

THE ARX IN ARCHAIC ROME

Histories of Rome's beginnings such as Livy's always describe the Capitoline Hill's two summits, the Arx and the Capitolium. These two heights are separated by a swale called the Asylum, called also *Inter Duos Lucos* (between two groves), describing groves of trees on each summit. Several early stories illustrate its character.

Romulus, legendary founder (April 21, 753 B.C.E.) and first king of Rome, recognized the need to populate his new city, struggling to compete among the many tribes and settlements of the area. He called the swale between the two summits of the Capitoline the Asylum, and advertised that the city would accept as absolved from crime or guilt any fugitives who sought to build a new life. In this way the city attracted a populace which had many pasts but was committed to a common future.'

Plutarch, in his *Life of Romulus*, describes Romulus's meeting with Tatiuz, the Sabine king, who "dwelt where now is the Moneta"³. Prior to Trajan and his forum of the second century C.E., the Capitoline was connected by a low ridge with the Esquiline. This area in earliest Roman times was inhabited by the Sabines, best remembered as the aggrieved tribe whose women were stolen by the Romans who needed wives. The house of the Sabine king Titus Tatiuz had been on the Arx. This is a testament to the closeness and resulting competitive origins of the Romans with the Sabines and other tribes in their founding era. The Romans and the Sabines eventually made a peace, and the Sabines, like other neighboring tribes, were absorbed by the Romans. This absorption is recorded in the lineage of the early kings: Numa Pompilius, a Sabine, was the second king of Rome.

After the death of Romulus, Rome was uncertain of its next king and its future. As founder, the kingship of Romulus was secure; Numa Pompilius, a Sabine, insisted that his kingship be recognized as divinely destined in order to reassure doubters. Livy records the story of the priest and Numa ascending the Capitoline to the Arx,

where, looking out over the city, the priest asked Jupiter to give a sign that Numa was by divine as well as human destiny the king. Although Livy doesn't describe the auspices given by the priest, they were forthcoming, and the Arx became the official augural station, or *Auguraculum*. Hence Numa Pompilius was inaugurated second king of Rome on the Arx, and the place is connected with divine ratification of civic destiny.¹

In the struggle between the Romans and the Albans, the Arx gains importance not only to internal civic affairs, but to the securing of agreements with foreign powers. According to Livy again, the third king of Rome, Servius Tullius, sent a messenger to arrange the battle between the Horatii and the Curiatii, two sets of triplet brothers who represented the Romans and the Albans respectively. This messenger took as his royal authority the *fetials*, sprigs of a sacred plant from the Arx. The *fetials* thus become an important tradition of Rome's ensuing military history. All Roman military diplomats carried as their identifying sign a sprig cut with a flint knife from the sides of the Arx. This civic sign was the guarantee of Rome's word in a treaty. The Arx then was the site of Rome's civic trustworthiness, both unto itself as well as to its allies and enemies.²

JUNO AND THE ARX

Juno was a Roman goddess whose origins are Etruscan and Latin and who takes on the characteristics of the Greek Hera. Her role as patron goddess is important to the archaic cities who vied with Rome. Both Lanuvium, a Latin city, and Veii, an Etruscan city, held Juno as their patron goddess, and in both cities her temple occupied the highest citadel. The Romans, when they finally defeated their great competitor Veii, actually took the city by tunneling under the precinct of Juno and appearing in the city within the sanctuary itself. After defeat, the sacred statue of Juno of Veii was installed in a temple on the Aventine Hill in Rome. Romans similarly adopted Juno Sospita, the Sustainer, of Lanuvium, and established temples to her within Rome. There were many other aspects of Juno as protector of childbirth and women as well as civic protectress.⁶

Many historians think that on Rome's Arx a precinct sacred to Juno predates the founding of the Temple of Juno Moneta of 344 B.C.E. Dionysius of Halicarnassus cites the protection of the citadel by Juno's sacred geese during the Gallic invasion of Rome in 390 B.C.E. The Gauls followed a Roman boy who was bringing a message to the citadel, held fast against the Gauls, from Veii, where most of the Romans had fled. As the Gauls arrived at the inner precinct of the summit, their presence was betrayed by the squawking of Juno's geese, and the Romans inside the citadel were able to fend off the attack. This may be the root of *moneta*, from *monere*, to warn.⁷ This story is sometimes told with *Tarpeia*, a Roman or Sabine girl, as the traitor who coveted the enemy's bracelets and let them inside the citadel. She was punished by being hurled from the precipice, the *Tarpeian rock*, or in some stories crushed by the Gauls' shields (what they wore on their arms, their "bracelets").

The acclaimed here of the Gallic attack on the citadel was Marcus Manlius, a consul whose house was on the Capitoline. One of the first to be awakened, he bravely held the fort until other Roman defenders could be aroused. Ironically, Manlius was later killed as a traitor for political intrigue, his house burnt, and a law passed that no patrician could again dwell on the Capitoline. The irony of this hero and his ignominious end has fascinated many historians and historiographers.⁸ The site of his house was the chosen site for the temple of Juno Moneta, which the dictator Lucius Furius Camillus dedicated as thanks for his victory over the Aurunci.

Thus the archaic story of the citadel is the story of the struggle for supremacy of the young city Rome, which includes stories of struggle, disgrace and betrayal as well as of glory. Juno is the patron goddess of the citadel, and as such plays a role in the archaic history of the place.

THE TEMPLE OF JUNO MONETA

The most celebrated temple on the Capitoline was on the other summit called the *Capitolium*: the Temple of Iuppiter Optimus Maximus, which held three shrines—a central shrine of Jupiter, flanked by Juno and Minerva. This large temple had columns on the front and both sides and sat on a plinth. It was dedicated in 509 B.C.E., at the end of the era of the kings, when the last king, Tarquinius Superbus or Tarquin the Proud, and Etruscan, was driven out and the Republic was established. Thus the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus was identified with the sacred Roman Republic and is preserved throughout Rome's long history. It was the site to which Roman triumphs led, where emperors made sacrifice — the most public and important civic temple in Rome. It is clearly understood architecturally, its foundations are evident, and its plan and history are well documented.

The Temple of Juno Moneta is a great puzzle. It is mysterious indeed that such a celebrated place would have held a temple so little mentioned in history.⁹ Although the story of the temple's dedication in 344 B.C.E. is well recorded, its form and even its exact location remain uncertain. It was almost certainly a very small temple, probably a simple frontal Etrusco-Roman temple on a staired plinth, as shown by most classical plans. One well known relief from Ostia shows a simple temple with no peripteral columns, only two columns in antis, flanked by cella walls. The relief shows Juno's geese, their wings raised and outstretched in alarm. It is the only known representation of the Temple of Juno Moneta; and some identify it as the earlier Juno shrine. Plans disagree as to its size and orientation. One must wonder: why would the temple be so forgotten?

To define the architectural character of the Temple of Juno Moneta, I propose a link between the Greek treasuries such as that of the Athenians at the sanctuary at Delphi: buildings which are not peripteral but rather have solid, protected cella walls.

The idea of treasury, which classicist Page duBois proposes for the temples of Athena Nike and the Erechtheion on the Athenian acropolis, are defined by her as a feminine concept. DuBois describes its closed and protecting nature as feminine; like woman the "treasure" is within, guarded and closed, as opposed to the more external, exhibited maleness. The role of the feminine in the culture of the Greek city is that of guarding and holding safe the collective memory of the city, the archaic legends which preserve the spirit of the city and ensure its connection with its origins.¹⁰ Intentionally a treasury is a less exhibitionist building. That important role is taken by the more noticed, celebrated, larger temple.

The links with the preservation of the city's treasure, its fiscal as well as its historical wealth, fit easily the notion of the Temple of Juno Moneta. *Moneta*, thought to be derived from *monere*, to warn, is also the Latin for money, as Rome's first mint was located near here. Like the Erechtheion, the Temple of Juno Moneta commemorates the citadel's archaic past: its origins as the house of a king (Erectheus, Tatus) and its early shrine to the protectress of the city (Athena, Juno) which is more closed and less acclaimed than the larger temple with which it shares a site (the Parthenon, the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus).¹¹

So the Arx's shrine(s) to Juno are architecturally rather undefined, and the architectural character of the building was not monumental in the commonest sense of that word. The place is a treasury of Rome's origins, and this role implies a simple, rather mute building which is by necessity mysteriously vague rather than celebrated and known.

S. MARIA IN ARACOELI AND THE MIRABILIA URBIS ROMAE

The end, like the beginning, of the shrine to Juno on the Arx is lost to history. Similarly, no record exists of the earliest Christian church

in this place, although probably a Christian church was founded in the early centuries following the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century.

The early church was called S. Maria in Capitolio. The name Aracoeli comes from a tale which is recorded in the twelfth century guidebook to Rome published by a cleric, called the *Marvels of Rome*, *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*. This early tourist guide celebrated and identified the sites of classical Rome in terms of Christianity. The curious amalgam of the ancient and Christian which defined Rome throughout the Middle Ages yields some fascinating legends."¹

The Aracoeli legend recounts that Augustus, the first Emperor of Rome in all but name, was troubled by those who called him King. This reluctance is recorded in classical texts as true, but the reasons are obviously much more political than ethical. Augustus asked the Tiburtine Sibyl for guidance concerning his kingship. After she fasted, the sibyl caused a vision to appear to Augustus while he slept: a woman in heaven, holding a male child acclaimed to be the greatest king in the world. Augustus then built an altar on that spot, an altar to heaven, or Ara Coeli. The curious combination of classical and obviously Christian propaganda is typical of the *Mirabilia*.

From somewhere in the vast quarry of classical Rome, an antique column now in the basilica of Santa Maria is inscribed *A Cubiculo Augustorum*. This inscription refers to the imperial chamberlain, one of the emperor's closest attendants; but it was translated in the twelfth century as "from the bedchamber of Augustus" and was thus linked with his dream and the vision of the Aracoeli."²

There are several reasons why the Arx is an appropriate setting for the church of the Aracoeli. Most obvious is the link with Santa Maria, the Christian queen of heaven, with Juno, and this relationship has been explored in depth by historians who seek the sources of Mariology.¹⁴ The Augustus story is like the story of Numa Pompilius: the commemoration of an origin which draws authenticity from the place. Augustus was in fact the ruler of the world when Christ was born, so it would have been chronologically possible for him to build an altar to Christ. Connecting Christ to Augustus is a way of connecting the power and authority of ancient Rome to Christian Rome. The church captured and claimed the power evident in the Capitoline during an era when struggles for power in the Church were commonplace.¹⁵

Why then is the church not architecturally distinguished? It is a plain masonry hall without any composed facade, traced with embellishments and mysterious appendages which have come and gone over the years. Its original relationship to the Capitoline has been lost by the much later additions of Michelangelo's Campidoglio, and the Victor Emmanuel Monument. We know very little of its original form, which way it fronted, how it was sited, and explorations into these mysteries are fascinating but rather inconclusive.¹⁶

The Aracoeli's most distinguishing feature is its long steep steps, which were moved here in 1349 to commemorate the passing of a plague. The architectural significance of this stair is its insistence that the Arx is a high, steep, forbidding hill to climb. To struggle up these steps is to remember that climbing the Capitoline hill is physically daunting. Michelangelo's ramped approach to the Campidoglio allows a much more gracious, graceful ascent; the hill has been domesticated for the city. Not so the Aracoeli steps, which preserve the natural topography. They are archaic, primitive: the built, urban equivalent of the steep natural slope.

THE FEMININE ASPECT OF THE CHURCH OF THE ARACOELI

Architecturally, we can describe the church as a plain masonry screen, holding within the layered complexity of its treasures - if we carry duBois's treasury metaphor forward in time. Besides being dedicated to Mary, the church has always been sacred to women,

children and fertility. An old Roman religious custom is seldom seen today: woman ascend the steep stairs on their knees, praying for a husband or a child. Since the seventeenth century the church has housed the Bambino Santo, an olive wood statue of the baby Christ child wearing rich clothes and a crown, to whom children write and women and couples pray for children. Each Christmas the presepio, the nativity scene, is installed in its special chapel which is closed for the rest of the year, and the Bambino Santo is placed in the crib at the midnight mass.

The city of Rome turns out for the midnight mass at Christmas. The Bambino was stolen from its crib in early 1994, and after a futile search, a newly carved and dressed copy debuted at Christmas 1995. Romans were outraged at the theft of the Bambino Santo, but because of the sense of inclusive and collected memory, the nature of the site and the church are unaffected. The complex, perhaps pagan, mystery of the virgin birth is still celebrated here. It is a church loved by gypsies, a group sidelined and scorned by their primitive and antimodern way of life, who come here in crowds for midnight mass to give money to the Bambino Santo.

These anecdotal characteristics can be seen by some as no measure of the commemorative architectural character of the buildings on the Capitoline. I propose, however, that it is just this kind of silent, guarded architecture which suits its role as the treasury of archaic memories, tragic and glorious, unordered and unclear. It is fitting that in the late nineteenth century the new nation of Italy recorded its pride in the Altar of the Fatherland, the Victor Emmanuel Monument, and sited it here at the Capitoline. The nation built this monument over the objections of Rome's city council, who felt the erasure destroyed parts of their city they needed to hold. S. Maria in Aracoeli is sandwiched between the splendor of Michelangelo's Renaissance masterpiece of urban architecture, and the awkward enormity of the eclectic altar. Yet the Arx is still marked by this plain building, site of the early, striving city. Its archaic architectural character holds the treasure of Rome's archaic past and its feminine spirit: those intuitive, legendary, disorderly notions of what is important to preserve. In this way it has endured to remind us of Rome's beginnings, its rustic natural setting and the early struggling town. It recalls the Capitoline as old King Evander showed it to Aeneas and his son:

He led to our Tarpeian site and Capitol,
All golden now, in those days tangled, wild
With underbrush-but awesome even then.
A strangeness there filled country hearts with dread
And made them shiver at the wood and the Rock.
"Some god," he said, "it is not sure what god,
Lives in this grove, this hilltop thick with leaves."¹⁷

NOTES

- ¹ Alexandre Crandazzi, *The Foundation of Rome: Myth and History* (Ithaca, 1997), p. 3.
- ² Livy, *Book I*, 8. Livy with an English Translation (Cambridge, Mass. 1919-59).
- ³ Plutarch, "Life of Romulus" 20, *Plutarch's Lives* (London, 1914-26).
- ⁴ Livy, *Book I*, 18. op.cit.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, *Book I*, 24; and *Book XXX*, 43.
- ⁶ See Emily Shields, "Juno, A Study in Early Roman Religion" in *Smith College Classical Studies*, No. 7 (Northampton, Mass., 1926).
- ⁷ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *The Roman Antiquities of Dionysius of Halicarnassus* (Cambridge, Mass., 1937-50), Box 8, 7.
- ⁸ Livy, op. cit., *Book VI*, 20. See also T. P. Wiseman, "Topography and Rhetoric: the Trial of Manlius" in *Roman Studies Literary and Historical* (Liverpool, 1987).
- ⁹ Lawrence Richardson, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient*

Rome (Baltimore & London 1992), p. 260.

¹⁰ Page du Bois, *Sowing the Body* (Chicago, 1988), p. 108 ff.

¹¹ Robin Rhodes, *Architecture and Meaning on the Athenian Acropolis* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 131.

¹² R. Valentini and G. Zucchetti, eds. *Codice topografico della Città di Roma* (Rome, 1946), vol. III.

¹³ Dale Kinney, "Making Mute Stones Speak," in *Architectural Studies in Memory of Richard Krautheimer* (Mainz, 1996), pp. 85-86.

¹⁴ See Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess* (Leiden, 1993).

¹⁵ See Mary Stroll, *Symbols as Power* (Leiden, 1991).

¹⁶ See Ronald Malmstrom, "The Twelfth Century Church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli and the Capitoline Obelisk" in *Romanisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 1976 v. 16, pp. 1-16.

¹⁷ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, translated by Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1990), p. 241.

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