Domine Quo Vadis: Appropriation, Veneration and Fabrication, Traces of the Divine
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Introduction

> "There is no link to the past more powerful than a physical relic,
> but also no link harder to prove."[1]

In his book *The Survival of Roman Antiquities in the Middle Ages*, Michael Greenhalgh discusses the receptions of the overwhelming abundance of the remains of Antiquity, amid which the people of the Middle Ages "often lived cheek by jowl."[2] Particularly in Rome, among the boundless ruins of the Roman Empire, willingly or not, the past must have almost literally permeated every 'nook and cranny' of daily life. As Richard Krautheimer has described in his seminal study on the medieval biography of Rome, the centuries following the Constantinian conversion to Christianity saw a gradual movement towards an amalgamation of Christianity and the classical tradition.[3] By the ninth century, this assembling of past and present, of pagan and Christian, the city's two prevailing cultures, resulted in a city checkered with historical patchworks.

Today, the carefully organized and neatly kept Parco di Via Appia in Rome still teems with instances of such patchworks.[4] They are compositions of chronological density, palimpsestic buildings and artefacts which have been relabeled and reused, renegotiated and appropriated, but which still bear traces of their distant origins. The focus of this thesis is a case study that at first glance might appear to be an inconspicuous seventeenth-century church, but after closer deliberation unfolds as a site of such chronological density, a place in which the historical layering through the process of appropriation has continued to the present day.

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[1] Christopher S. Wood, *Forgery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 35.

[2] Michael Greenhalgh, *The Survival of Roman Antiquities in the Middle Ages*, London: Duckworth Books, 1989, p. 183.

[3] Richard Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City, 312-1308*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980, especially chapter 2, "The Christianization of Rome and the Romanization of Christianity", pp. 33-58.

[4] It must be noted that, to a considerable extent, the present-day Parco di Via Appia is a nineteenth-century ensemble, excavated and restored by, amongst others, Luigi Canina in the late 1840's.

Domine, quo vadis?

The Chiesa del Domine Quo Vadis (fig. 1), built in 1637, is situated on the Via Appia, about a kilometer from the Porta Sebastiano. The church is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and is also referred to as *Santa Maria delle Piante,* or in a literal translation *Saint Mary of the Foot Soles*. While the name has sometimes been translated as Our Lady of Weeping, an interpretation that would have been correct if the name had been *Santa Maria dei Pianti*, its dedication becomes clear when considering the parable attached to the site on which the church stands.

According to Roman Catholic tradition, the apostle Peter met Christ on this location when he was escaping persecution in Rome. Startled, he asked Christ where he was going, "Domine quo vadis?", upon which Christ answered: "I am going to Rome, to be crucified again." Having heard this, Peter, repenting his cowardly flight, followed Christ back to Rome and was crucified himself. In the ninth century a small church was erected on this spot, which was demolished in the seventeenth century to make way for the present-day church.

The relic of the miraculous impression of Christ's feet in a slab of white marble, which is kept in the Domine Quo Vadis, is believed to bear witness to this meeting (fig. 2). The existing church stands on the site of an ancient temple to the Roman god Redicilus, the 'God of the Return' and one of the *lares*, the guardian deities in ancient Roman religion. The footsteps' literal pedigree is hence best searched in their Roman heritage: it is almost certainly an *ex-voto* for a safe return, similar to other votive gifts enforcing safe journeys found in abundance around the Mediterranean.[5] Although the relic is framed as the miraculous impression of Christ's feet, the footprints in the Domine Quo Vadis are in fact not the original, but a copy of the held-for-original footprints that are kept in the Church of San Sebastiano Fuori le Mura, a kilometer further up the Via Appia (fig. 3).

The research problem that governs this thesis, and that will be introduced presently, is of a methodological nature. The formulation of a solution to this problem will lead us past questions of a historical and theological nature raised by the appropriation of a pagan ex-voto for Christian purposes and by the reproduction of the ex-voto-turned-relic. Such questions are wide-ranging and cannot be answered by investigating one single case study. Nevertheless, their consideration is crucial to this thesis. They pertain, but are not limited, to

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[5] Margherita Guarducci, "Le impronte del 'Quo vadis' e monumenti affini, figurati ed epigrafici", in: *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia Romana d'Archeologia*, vol. 19, 1942, pp. 305–44.

the following: was the reproduction of sacred objects common practice in Late Medieval and Early Modern Rome? If so, how was this practice deliberated and under what circumstances were these objects copied? Can such a *re-production* be seen as a *production* of the sacred and if so, what does this mean for the religious value of the relic, the credibility of the site of veneration, and, perhaps most importantly, for the authority of the Catholic Church in Rome, that stands or falls with Saint Peter's presence in Rome, a premise that is carefully preserved in the so-called 'Petrine Primacy'?

Research Problem

Defining the object of research

Before investigating these and related further questions, however, we are faced with a methodological difficulty: how can we determine the object of research? A relatively straightforward matter, one would think. However, when I was first confronted with it, a solution proved to be less promptly forthcoming than expected. For what *is* the element that we can single out as having the most significance in this case study? Do we take the church as a point of departure, and if so, which one – the Early Medieval, the Early Modern, or maybe even the antique temple for the god Redicilus? The same difficulty arises when we consider the relic as a starting point: which object will be our focal point? The copy, which is presented as the original; or the original which is in fact an ex-voto? Or might the parable of Saint Peter's meeting with Christ be the cultural object of most significance – a myth that has materialized in so many different physicalities?

Naturally, the marble footsteps can be seen as a telling example of the typical early Christian response to the overwhelming abundance of material remains of classical antiquity – the spoliation, or Christian appropriation of 'pagan' heritage, already indicated above.[6] However, as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis and will particularly set forth in the prologue following this introduction, to analyze the case study using an object-centered methodology, that is, to approach this artefact merely from the perspective of its materiality, undermines its heterogeneous character. As David Morgan eloquently states in the introduction to his recent book *The Thing About Religion*: "If we wish to understand something, we need to scrutinise the dense context in which we experience it. Without that,

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[6] See also: Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney, *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, Farnham; Burlington: Ashgate, 2011.

a thing is unspecified, an object without context, an entity afloat on a nondescript sea of possibilities. It might be anything, rather than something that stares back at us."[7] Only when the "encompassing ecology", the biography of the object within its context, is taken into consideration it becomes clear that the footsteps do not derive their significance from their material properties, nor from their appropriated heritage.[8]

I particularly like Morgan's metaphor of the "nondescript sea of possibilities", which to my mind evokes the Ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus' premise that one cannot step into the same river twice. It serves as a fitting motto for a complex case study as ours, as it reminds one of the perpetual changes to which all "things" are subject, adding to and enriching their biographies, while prompting the researcher to keep her gaze fixed on a broad horizon.

The research problem that underlies this thesis draws from this tension of change and continuity, of fragment and entirety. I do not presume to present a model in which an object so multilayered in meanings and condensed in chronologies as ours can be grasped in its totality: 'the whole' can never be defined. By the same token, we must be aware that a focus on a single element inhibits the research in a specific sociohistorical (or otherwise relatively static) context and the researcher in a specific methodological approach.

Moreover, in any historical research, we are invariably impeded by either the scarceness of data available to us (and occasionally by an excess of it), by our various hermeneutical horizons and by an infinite number of other volatilities preventing us from revealing more than a glimpse of the research object's myriad implications. Paradoxically, however, precisely these lacunae in our academic endeavors necessitate a panoramic perspective of the case study.

Departing from the realization that I too can only present a selection of snapshots providing an orchestrated glimpse, and from the paradoxical premise that the 'whole' is a challenging notion that is impossible to pin down; while an overly focus on the 'parts' in such a layered case study gives too limited a perspective, the following research problem will be considered. What elements can we disentangle from the intricate ensemble of Domine Quo

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[7] David Morgan, *The Thing About Religion: An Introduction to the Material Study of Religions*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021, p. 3.
[8] David Morgan coins "encompassing ecology" in his article "The Ecology of Images: Seeing and the Study of Religion", in: *Religion and Society*, 2014, pp. 83-105.

Vadis that have been constitutive in shaping the whole? What factors have been consistent and concrete and can therefore be singled out in endeavoring a comprehensive consideration of this composite and chronologically dense case study?

To be able to order both the snapshots and my argumentation, I have structured my thesis in three parts that each consist of three chapters. For the parts, I have purposefully selected three performative elements that have been constitutive in the ensemble of Domine Quo Vadis: 1) appropriation, 2) veneration and 3) fabrication.

These performative elements are attitudes towards Domine Quo Vadis, ranging from the unintentional to the outright pragmatic, that have contributed to the layered, palimpsestic nature of the case study and have sustained it as an ensemble. I have singled out these three elements, because they have continuously surfaced on the "non-descript sea" as which the longue durée history of Domine Quo Vadis sometimes can appear. Before scrutinizing these performative elements, we must briefly return to the question posed earlier, that of the object of research.

Methodology

For, although we have persisted upon and acknowledged the significance of reading this case study as a total made up of parts, the problem of the object of research cannot be entirely dismissed yet. *Nolens volens*, one does need an object of research for a structured and intelligible expose. Without it, like the object without context, we are "afloat on a nondescript sea of possibilities." Therefore, and for the sake of clarity, I will consider the footsteps, that is, the ancient ex-voto turned relic, as the material manifestation of the narrative, a palimpsest testifying to the process of its continuous appropriation. The footsteps will serve as a synecdoche for the compilation that Domine Quo Vadis has become, as a *pars pro toto*.

There is, however, another methodological reasoning for taking the footsteps as a point of departure. Within the fluctuating ensemble that makes up our case study, it is the one constant and stable component, which has persisted precisely because of its continuing tangibility. We do not have a solid textual basis testifying to the existence of the ancient temple of the pagan god Redicilus; nor have we any visual representation of the ninth-century church that was built on its site; even concrete evidence of its foundation is wanting.

Likewise, we do not have evidence of the meeting between Peter and Christ on the Via Appia. The only link that binds the relational structure of our case study together is the marble footsteps. Therefore, questioning this object can offer insights that, due to the paucity of the historical record, would otherwise be unavailable to us.

Research Methods

The following pages will trawl some elements from the "sea of possibilities", and make the intricate narrative that has been constructed around the parable of Domine Quo Vadis less nondescript. An analysis of the diverse elements that make up the case study inevitably calls for a cross-disciplinary consideration, and will therefore be approached using methodologies from different fields. The argument of this thesis will be developed based on the study of artefacts: the church, the original ex-voto and the present-day relic, as well as visual sources that can shed light on the circumstances in which the relic was copied.

These visual analyses will be combined with an analysis of *in situ* archival material. These sources from municipal and private archives in Rome include property statements and deeds of transfer, early modern guides and pilgrim reports.

As many archives unfortunately have been closed during the various lockdowns during which I conducted my research, I have also gratefully used the large number of digitalized sources that are available on the Internet. These primary materials will be supported by an analysis of secondary theoretical and historical sources.

Structure – A Palimpsestic Model

For the structure of this thesis, I have drawn from the composite nature of my case study. The Domine Quo Vadis not only derives its layered character from its various elements; it has also become layered over time – developing into the form I have designated earlier in this introduction as an object of chronological density. A fascinating aspect of the footsteps is that they have remained virtually *in situ* over the course of nearly a millennium. The object, therefore, is saturated with its own history, like a palimpsest. Previous meanings shimmer beneath its surface, and instead of replacing one another, the object's significance is made more intricate as it acquires new and absorbs earlier meanings over time. Likewise, I have structured my thesis in three parts, each of which takes cues from the previous chapters – in a palimpsestic model.

Following the chronology of the object's history, the concepts that support my arguments travel through the pages, becoming building blocks that reinforce and develop into the concepts that structure consecutive chapters. As stated earlier, the three parts – "Appropriation", "Veneration" and "Fabrication" – are titled for the performative elements that I believe to be the key points to answering our research problem. As stated earlier, these performative elements are manipulations of and attitudes towards the Domine Quo Vadis that have constituted and sustained the whole.

Appropriation

In the first part, "Appropriation," I will consider the circumstances leading up to the construction of the ninth-century church. How did it come to pass that a Christian church was constructed on a place of pagan worship and a blatantly pagan idol was appropriated as a testimony to Christ's meeting with Peter and, consequently, as a symbol of the foundation of the Roman Catholic Church? Whose politics did it serve? And, why did it take relatively long, until the ninth century, for this to happen?

Webb Keane's notion of 'semiotic ideologies' is helpful here. These are governing practices that underpin everyday life and regulate the ways in which we experience the world around us.[9] Keane departs from Charles Sanders Peirce's premise that "a sign does not function as a sign unless it be understood as a sign."[10] The way a sign, anything communicating a message, is understood is governed by what Keane designates as semiotic ideologies, which themselves arise from contexts which he calls "representational economies."[11] We will trace both the semiotic ideology governing the appropriation and the representational economy that it arose from. Moreover, by using these notions, it will be easier to understand how a blatantly pagan object could have been venerated as the sacred imprint of Christ's feet.

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[9] Webb Keane, "On Semiotic Ideology", in: *Signs and Society*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2018, pp. 64-87.
[10] Quoted in *idem*, p. 64.
[11] Keane 2018, p. 68.

Part II, "Veneration", deals with the difficult question of belief.[12] How are we to understand that people truly believed this somewhat shapeless slab of marble to be the true imprint of Christ's feet? As will be demonstrated in this part, similar objects were present to a considerable extent in Rome. Some of these were explicitly designated as ex-voto's through their inscriptions (see fig. 6 and 8). In this case study, the question looming in the background is that it must surely have struck visitors of the ninth-century church that the relic they venerated in fact was a pagan idol. In what way are we to come to terms with this credulity? How does it happen that one is persuaded to believe such objects to be harbingers of truth?

Paul Veyne's seminal essay *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths?* is exceptionally helpful in coming to grips with this question, while in the process expanding Keane's semiotic ideologies with the somatic experience of the believer.[13] Keane's notion is insightful for understanding the circumstances that govern the interpretation of signs and considering how the reception of objects and artefacts is negotiated. However, it does not aid an understanding of why people believe these objects or artefacts to encompass narratives, to be harbingers of truth and testifiers to certain events or, in our case, the veritable marks left by Christ.

In this part, I will propose a distinction between *implicit* and *explicit* belief to understand these different dimensions of belief. *Implicit* belief is the historical dimension of belief, an unconscious acceptance of the traditions that we hold to be true, and implicitly of the structures that they are governed by. Another dimension of belief is the embodied, and therefore focused, belief that explicit objects encompass the transcendent, that they mediate between the believer and a divine entity. I will call this *explicit* belief. But how do objects become such mediators? To answer this question, I will turn to insights from the field of Material Religion.

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[12] In this thesis, the word 'belief' will not refer to a religious belief in a transcendental entity, but to the credulity that the footsteps in Domine Quo Vadis are the veritable marks left by Christ.

[13] Paul Veyne, Paula Wissing (trans.), *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Fabrication

By the time the new Domine Quo Vadis church was built in the seventeenth century, the original relic was safely stowed away in one of the seven pilgrim churches of Rome, the San Sebastiano Fuori le Mura, situated approximately one kilometer further up the Via Appia. The third and final part, "Fabrication", deals with the reproduction of the relic. I will consider the implications of the reproduction for the status of the relic as a mediator of the divine. How could the copy and the original coexist in such close proximity to each other, without each losing their claim to authenticity? Was it common practice to reproduce religious objects?

Christopher Wood's excellent catenary model, as developed in his *Forgery, Replica, Fiction* will aid an understanding of the practices of reproduction.[14] However, the reproduction of the material object also raises questions about the reproduction of the sacred. For such considerations, I will again turn to some of the methods from the Anthropology of Religion and Material Religion.

State of Research – publications on Domine Quo Vadis

The scholarly attention that Domine Quo Vadis has received underpins the relevance of the research problem that lies at the heart of this thesis. The publications that mention our case study all take separate elements from the Domine Quo Vadis case. However, no study has considered it as a constellation of interactive components, as proposed in this thesis. To my knowledge, even an academic study that takes Domine Quo Vadis as its sole research object is lacking. As a result, some studies regard the slab of marble as a typical example of the Christian appropriation of pagan Roman heritage; while others focus on the footsteps in the Chiesa del Domine Quo Vadis, disregarding its status of copied ex-voto, not to mention the significance of this reproduction on a conceptual level. Publications on footprints in folklore and the *topos* of the *vestigia dei*, the traces of God, inevitably refer to the Quo Vadis imprints, and few publications on Early Medieval Christian Rome, the history of the papacy or apostolic veneration in the Eternal City fail to mention the site as a constitutive part of the instatement of Christianity.[15]

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[14] Wood 2008.
[15] Such as: Krautheimer 1980; John O'Malley, *A History of the Popes: From Peter to the Present*, London: Sheed; Ward, 2011 and Janet Bord, *Footprints in Stone: The Significance of Foot- and Hand-prints and Other Imprints Left by Early Men, Giants, Heroes, Devils, Saints, Animals, Ghosts, Witches, Fairies and Monsters*, Wymeswold: Heart of Albion, 2004.

In a state of research on the Domine Quo Vadis in particular and Early Christian and Medieval sites of apostolic veneration in general, pride of place must be granted to Margharita Guarducci's much-cited 1942 article "Le impronte del 'Quo vadis' e monumenti affini, figurati e epigrafici." [16] Guarducci, a Roman archaeologist who dedicated much of her career to the excavations of the Vatican catacombs and Saint Peter's tomb and consequently has publicized much on the archaeological evidence of Peter in Rome, discusses many contours, imprints and representations of feet and footsteps with and without inscriptions. Inscriptions are also an integral element in Katherine Dunbabin's investigation of footprints and their representations on Graeco-Roman monuments. In her article "*Ipsa deae vestigia*... Footprints Divine and Human on Graeco-Roman Monuments", Dunbabin demonstrates how the meanings of such footsteps vary and are often obscure, except in the cases when they explicitly concern votive gifts.[17]

Two articles that discuss elements from Domine Quo Vadis were published in the period I was conducting my own research and have been valuable to my investigations. In his article about the sixteenth-century building activities of Cardinal Reginald Pole on the site surrounding our case study, Andrea Bacciolo discusses not the church, but the oratory of Domine Quo Vadis in relation to the political situatedness of the post-reformatory English catholic community in Rome.[18]

In a very recent publication, Erik Inglis considers the footsteps in relation to other Apostolic relics of impression, such as Peter and Paul's knee prints in the church of Santa Francesca Romana and the springs at the convent of Tre Fontane that are attributed to Paul's decapitated head.[19] Inglis uses these relics to understand the ways in which Romans, and medieval people in general, attended to their environment. I owe much to his exceptionally well-researched article in terms of supplementing my own archival research with Medieval sources that I was not aware of. As an appendix to his paper, Inglis gives a broad (though not exhaustive) overview of textual accounts of the impression relics that feature in his paper – a useful tool that generally outlines the most relevant sources. In the

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[16] Margharita Guarducci, "Le impronte del Quo Vadis e monumenti affini, figurati ed epigrafici", in: *Rendiconti della pontificia Accademia romana di Archeologia*, vol. XIX, 1942, pp. 305-344.

[17] Katherine Dunbabin, "*Ipsa deae vestigia*... Footprints Divine and Human on Graeco-Roman Monuments", in: *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, vol. 3, 1990, pp. 85-109.

[18] Andrea Bacciolo, "'Belonging of right to our English nation' The Oratory of Domine Quo Vadis, Reginald Pole, and the English Hospice in Rome", in the special issue of the *Journal of the International Association of Research Institutes in the History of Art (RIHA)*, "Constructing Nationhood in Early Modern Rome", 2020.

[19] Erik Inglis, "Inventing Apostolic Impression Relics in Medieval Rome", in: *Speculum*, vol. 96/2, 2021, pp. 309-366.

first part of this thesis, I will bring some nuances to Inglis' valuable study and challenge his historical conclusions.

Many volumes exist on Medieval and Early Modern pilgrimage and the embodied religious experience of believers when confronted with sacred artefacts. However, the scant academic interest that the Domine Quo Vadis has received in the past decades has not resulted in an independent discussion that takes the relic's status as an object of religious veneration as its focal point. With this thesis, I hope to mend this lacuna and demonstrate how the question of belief and the consideration of the embodied experience of believers does not have to be incompatible with the study of material culture. Before commencing on the three Parts and discussing the performative elements, I will challenge some constitutive concepts within the field of material studies and thus advance the academic debate.

Prologue – Assemblage Theory: a reflection on matter-*ing*

As stated in the introduction, my palimpsestic model arose from the incomplete fit of conceptual frameworks that different disciplines seemed to offer. Still, some of the theoretical models that have been developed in the past decades throughout the Humanities were extremely insightful. They helped me to realize the complexity of the Domine Quo Vadis case and hence encouraged me to think deeper.

In this thesis I use the word *ensemble* to refer to the intricate nature of my case study. In readers familiar with the theories posited in the field of New Materialism, this term may invoke the concept of the *assemblage*. And, indeed, on first glance the notion of the assemblage seems to present an alluring framework in which a multivarious and layered case study as ours can be considered. However, as I will demonstrate, the notion does not allow for a consideration of both the material and the religious properties of the case study on equal grounds. It is the notion of the assemblage in particular and the New Materialist rigorous denunciation of an anthropocentric approach to materiality in general that I will challenge explicitly in this prologue. It is important to begin with a reflection on these issues, as I will implicitly challenge them throughout this thesis by considering the three performative elements (appropriation, veneration and fabrication) on equal grounds within the framework of the palimpsestic model.

The notion of the assemblage was coined by Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze in the 1980s and was quickly adapted by the strand of materiality scholars generally designated as "New Materialists."[20] Dissatisfied with the anthropocentric approach to materiality that arose from the Material Turn, thinkers in the field of New Materialism reject traditional hierarchical ontologies, particularly those that posit sharp distinctions between mind and matter. For these scholars, the Material Turn did not deliver a complete turn away from an indebtedness to the Cartesian dualism that postulates the conscious subject's superiority over the inert object. It is argued that the materiality debate is in dire need of an ontological rethinking of the object/subject dichotomy: matter is not passively waiting for us to imbue it with meaning. Rather, "material things possess a remarkable range of capacities that exceed the purview of human sense or knowing, and therefore […] the materiality of material things

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[20] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari; Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (trans.), *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983.

themselves must be carefully considered, not merely interpreted for their implications on human concerns."[21] The ontology of thing and human cannot be sharply delineated within an assemblage, because hierarchical relations do not exist within them – things and humans are intrinsically equivalent. Guattari and Deleuze state in this respect: "There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other... The self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever."[22]

These scholars underline that "we are materializations entangled in other materializations; we happen in our mattering." [23] All matter is intrinsically fluid, "always in the process of becoming."[24] However, this constitutive premise makes a practical application of New Materialism and the assemblage theory problematic. A co-existence on equal grounds is feasible only in a state of entropy – when we allow objects to stop matter*ing.* Sonia Hazard, religious scholar and passionate advocate for a non-anthropocentric approach to materiality, stresses that the New Materialist methodology does not imply to merely "playfully proceed *as if* things have power." Rather, the concept of assemblage allows the "everyday power of things to come into relief."[25]

Yet, if we depart from the premise that things *have* intrinsic power, as New Materialists suggests, if we are prepared to accept that objects *are* fluid entities that are always "in the process of becoming", that objects have biographies (to use an anthropocentric term), must we then not also accept their deaths? If we allow the "everyday power of things to come into relief", must we not also allow them to come undone, to decay? The assemblages in which things and people exist on equal grounds are fundamentally instable structures. Now, it is easy to see how people are "always in the process of becoming" – they develop, their physiques change and eventually they fall into decay and perish. So, of course, do objects. Although the New Materialist discourse stipulates that it is, to say the least, unproductive to regard matter as a stable entity, our attitudes towards matter, what Webb Keane calls our "semiotic ideologies", per definition

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[21] Sonia Hazard, "The Material Turn in the Study of Religion", in: *Religion and Society. Advances in Research*, 2013, no. 4, p. 64.
[22] Deleuze; Guattari 1983, p. 2.
[23] Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein (eds.), *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2017, p. 1.
[24] John Shotter, "Reflections on Sociomateriality and Dialogicality in Organization Studies: From "Inter-" to "Intra-Thinking"... in Performing Practices", in: Paul R. Carlile; Davide Nicolini Ann Langley; Haridimos Tsoukas (eds.), *How Matter Matters: Objects, Artifacts, and Materiality in Organization Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 32-57, p. 33.
[25] Hazard 2013, p. 65.

render matter static.[26] When an object is preserved, when it is treasured and taken care of, it is inhibited in time and by thus by being inactivated, it is prevented from being part of the assemblage in which things and humans are intrinsically equivalent. For, to be able to have such an assemblage on equal grounds, objects should be allowed to decay. Only once an object is left to relinquish, to *unmatter*, it can become part of the New Materialist discourse, and be allowed its "process of becoming", for this process also entails a coming *undone*.

Karen Barad, one of the protagonists in the field of New Materialism, stresses that to foreground materiality, to perceive artefacts not as already-made things, but as things-in-their-making, a "profound conceptual shift is necessary" in our attitudes towards matter.[27]

I fully agree with this. However, until such a paradigmatic shift in the ways we deal with material culture, history and memory comes to pass, the burden of heritage will continue to entangle us in an inextricable anthropocentric relationship with matter.

This insight led me to the realization that, while the *assemblage* in regards of materiality provides a fairly convincing structure for the Domine Quo Vadis, by its constitutive premise, the rigid denunciation of anything suggesting an anthropocentric viewpoint, the New Materialist approach towards material culture per definition disregards the phenomenological aspects which the veneration of religious artefacts entail; not to mention those of the embodied *and* thinking subject who is painstakingly conducting the actual research.[28] Or, as Peter Bräunlein validly asks: from what perspective and for whom do we write articles when we disconnect the subject from the object and there is no longer a distinct "self"?[29]

Thus, the assemblage theory does allow for considering our case study as an intricate network of signifying elements. However, it lacks in terms of the embodied experience of the believers to whom, as we will see shortly, the Domine Quo Vadis is first and foremost an object, space, or even parable that mediates religious veneration.

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[26] See Part I of this thesis.

[27] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2007, p. 139.

[28] See also Peter Bräunlein, Peter Bräunlein, "Thinking Religion Through Things", in: *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, vol. 28 (4/5), 2016, pp. 365-399.

[29] Bräunlein 2016.

Part I – Appropriation

"To take a sign a certain way is to take seriously the world it presupposes."[30]

I.1 – Semiotic ideologies

The first performative element to be discussed, that of appropriation, implies two questions that will drive the following pages: 1) how did it come about that a pagan ex-voto was appropriated as a Christian relic and was subsequently used to legitimize the construction of a church on the site of pagan worship, and 2) why did it take until the ninth century for this to happen?

Before tackling these questions and diving into the chronological patchworks of ninth-century Via Appia, I will highlight the concepts of "semiotic ideology" and "representational economy" as proposed by cultural and linguistic anthropologist Webb Keane (1955-). These concepts will help us get a clearer focus on the dynamics involved in the process of appropriation.

The concept of semiotic ideologies refers to "[…] people's underlying assumptions about what signs are, what functions signs do or do not serve, and what consequences they might or might not produce."[31] In other words: semiotic ideologies govern the ways in which we understand signs – they can be seen as instructions to their interpretation.[32] In Keane's understanding of semiotics, the notion of the sign is not limited to conventional modes of communication, such as spoken and written languages or artistic representations. Rather, it stretches to envelop corporeal phenomena as well: the ways in which we perceive and interpret sounds, smells, touches, muscular movements, and other such bodily sensations are similarly governed by semiotic ideologies as the ways in which we understand something as straightforward as a traffic sign. As we know from the basics of semiotics, not all signs have the same level of iconicity: the signifier does not always resemble the signified, as for example is the case with a portrait, an onomatopoetic word or a sound effect. To indicate an object in which the relation to its sign is arbitrary or indexical – meaning that the signifier

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[30] Webb Keane, "On Semiotic Ideology", in: *Signs and Society*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2018, pp. 64-87, p. 64.
[31] *Idem*, p. 65.
[32] *Idem*, p. 68. On the concept cf. Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

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does not iconically resemble the signified, but rather is culturally determined or connects to its signified through some other relation – Keane uses the terms "sign vehicle", or "semiotic link."[33] These links must be understood as mediators through which a sign becomes present, again governed by semiotic ideologies.[34] We will return to the idea of objects as media in Part II, when we will discuss objects that mediate the divine.

This said, the semiotic ideologies that make the semiotic dimensions of our world interpretable are not always explicitly formulated principles. They may as well be "tacit presuppositions of sign use", lingering in the realm of the normative and the implicit, the structures that we are mostly unaware of, but that govern our daily lives. However, these structures do not develop autonomously or out of thin air, but are themselves rooted in and governed by historical and social contexts, to which Keane refers as "representational economies."[35]

Now, the notion of semiotic ideologies draws our attention to the various ways in which these principles and structures govern how people interpret and use signs, and consequently, form judgments of ethical and political value.[36] Therefore, to be able to understand the ways that people responded to a certain object in a given historical context, it is imperative to consider both the semiotic ideologies that structured such a response, as well as the "representational economy" from which they arose.

In this first part we will thus investigate in what tradition the ninth-century appropriations in Domine Quo Vadis must be seen. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, both the appropriation of the footsteps and the relatively late construction of a church on the site of a pagan sanctuary must not merely be seen in the light of the Early Medieval practice of spoliating useable scraps of Antiquity, but must be considered in the larger tendency of the Catholic Church to constantly legitimize its authority in a changing political and religious landscape. The appropriation of the ex-voto as a relic seems to be a rather late material manifestation of the so-called *Petrine Primacy*, an extensive narrative aimed at establishing and legitimizing the authority of Saint Peter and in consequence the authority of the Catholic Church in Rome. Tracing the semiotic ideology in which this narrative is embedded requires to elaborate somewhat on its historical background.

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[33] See for an insightful introduction to semiotics: Thomas A. Sebeok, *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, Toronto, Buffalo, London: Toronto University Press, 2001, for types of signs see pp. 8-11.
[34] Keane 2018, p. 69.
[35] *Idem*, p. 68.
[36] *Idem*, p. 67.

I.2 – Petrine Primacy and the See of Saint Peter

> "No character of the Bible, we may say, no personage in all history,
> has been so much magnified, misrepresented and misused for doctrinal and hierarchical
> ends as the plain fisherman of Galilee who stands at the head of the apostolic college."[37]

In his treatise *On Baptism*, the second-century Christian apologist and theologian Tertullian (ca. 160-225 AD) relates how, during his ministry in Rome, the apostle Peter christened converts in the Roman Tiber, in the same way that Saint John the Baptist baptized in the River Jordan.[38] Later, in his *Prescription Against Heretics*, Tertullian catches Peter in Rome in the act of ordaining Pope Clement I as his successor to the papacy, even though the young man must have been only twenty-nine at the time of Peter's death.[39] "If you are near to Italy", Tertullian writes, "you have Rome, whence also our authority derives. How happy is that Church, on which Apostles poured out their whole doctrine along with their blood, where Peter endured a passion like that of the Lord."[40]

It is not surprising that Tertullian, an ardent apologist, defending Christianity against pagan objections, gives these remarkably specific reports of Peter's presence in the city of Rome. As Mark Burrows remarks, his texts must not only be seen as a "forensic defense of the legitimacy of Christianity, a legal argument regarding the status of Christians within the Roman Empire", rather, and on a more profound level, Tertullian is defending the origins of Christianity.[41] And indeed, according to Tertullian, Peter's presence in Rome testifies to the foundation of these origins and, by implication, to the establishment of the Catholic Church in the Eternal City. Since the apostle is considered to be the first of the popes, every subsequent claim of the Holy See to its principality within the Roman Catholic Church is based on Peter's works and martyrdom. Although for Tertullian and for many of his contemporaries it was beyond doubt that Peter had worked and died in Rome and had appointed successors to replace him as bishop of the Eternal City, Peter's presence in Rome

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[37] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, vol. I: Apostolic Christianity. A.D. 1-100*, Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing Co, 2004, p. 165.

[38] Alexander Roberts; James Donaldson; Arthur Cleveland Coxe (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. III: Latin Christianity*, New York: Cosimo Books, 2007, p. 671.

[39] *Idem*, p. 258.

[40] Quoted in Stephen K. Ray, *Upon This Rock: St. Peter and the Primacy of Rome in Scripture and the Early Church*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999, p. 78.

[41] Mark S. Burrows, "Christianity in the Roman Forum: Tertullian and the Apologetic Use of History", in: *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 42, no. 3, 1988, pp. 209-235, p. 210.

has, to this day, been a topic of considerable controversy.[42] No conclusive evidence exists, textual or archaeological, that Peter was martyred and died in Rome.

Primus inter pares

The Gospels present Peter as the chosen leader after Christ's death. Most explicitly, his succession is specified in the famous verse from Matthew 16:17-18, in which Jesus equates the fisherman Simon with Peter – the rock on which He will build his church: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."[43]

Another fundamental New Testament passage that endorses Peter's primacy can be found in the Gospel of John, in which Christ charges Peter with pastoring his flock after his death, appointing him three times to "feed" and "tend his sheep."[44] Church historian and theologian Jaroslav Pelikan notes that, whenever the disciples are named in both the Gospels and the Acts of the apostles, Peter's name always comes first.[45] When, for example, again in the Gospel of Matthew (10:2), the apostles are listed, the sequence starts as follows: "The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter [...]." The word "first" in this passage, Pelikan notes, is not an adverb, but an adjective, giving Peter's name more significance and distinguishing him from the others in the sequence.[46] Every New Testament listing of the twelve apostles has Peter placed at the top, while Judas is always listed last, and when the other disciples are referred to as "the eleven" or simply as "the disciples", Peter is mentioned by name, designating him as the "*primus inter pares*", the first among equals.[47] In his book on Peter's primacy, Stephen Ray notes that the names Peter, Simon, or Cephas (Aramaic for 'rock') are mentioned 191 times in the New Testament – a number of references only exceeded by Christ himself.[48] For Early Christians, the commissions in these and other such verses, and the continuous emphasizing of his primacy

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[42] Ray 1999, p. 78.
[43] Matthew 16:17-18, New King James Version, 1987.
[44] John 21:15-17.
[45] Jaroslav J. Pelikan, *Acts*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005, p. 87.
[46] *Ibid*.
[47] James D. G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making, Volume 2: Beginning from Jerusalem*, Grand Rapids; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009, p. 1066.
[48] Ray 1999, p. 23.

amongst the disciples, substantiated Peter's principality in the church by the authority of God.[49]

Although a large body of apocryphal and other documents, among which Tertullian's writings, testify to Peter's presence in Rome, none of these are contemporary to the sixties of the first century, the time of Peter's alleged Roman martyrdom. The earliest texts date from the end of the first, and the latest from the fifth century.[50] Moreover, as Otto Zwierlein states in his book on Peter in Rome, since many of these authors knew little about the city of Rome, they "just draped their inventions with some external topographical information", and thus "[…] have nothing tangible to report about Peter and Paul in Rome."[51] The various New Testament documents provide little historical data on the early years of the Catholic Church and the lives of the apostles after Jesus' death. No detailed documentation has been passed down that discusses Peter's life beyond the New Testament record.[52] In fact, the New Testament does not mention Peter ever traveling to the Eternal City. Religious scholar James Dunn laments in this respect: "If only Peter had had someone like Luke [who documented Paul's mission] to record his doings and adventures, what a tale might have come down to us! […] all in all we find ourselves in a darkened room, with only a few pinprick shafts of light illuminating tiny patches of a large area and wondering how the patches can be linked into a coherent overall picture."[53]

From the New Testament we know that after Christ's death, Peter is co-leading the Christian community in Jerusalem together with Jesus' brother James.[54] In Paul's well-documented accounts of his ministry in Rome, Peter is not mentioned once. Nor is Peter's name stated amongst the long list of friends and acquaintances in Rome that Paul personally greets in Romans 16:1-16.[55] Paul, however, does relate meeting Peter in the Eastern Mediterranean during the Council of Jerusalem around 50 AD, after which the famous

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[49] Jaroslav J. Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, 100-600 A.D*, vol. 1, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, p. 353.
[50] For a comprehensive listing of these texts, see: Ray 1999, pp. 68-96.
[51] Otto Zwierlein, *Petrus in Rom: Die literarischen Zeugnisse. Mit einer kritischen Edition der Martyrien des Petrus und Paulus auf neuer handschriftlicher Grundlage*, Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2009, p. 128. Translation WT.
[52] Ray 1999, p. 63.
[53] Dunn 2009, p. 1058.
[54] F. L. Cross; E. A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 862; Dunn 2009, p. 210; p. 1067.
[55] Dunn 2009, p. 1068.

dispute between the two apostles at Antioch occurs.[56] The weightiest indication of Peter's Roman presence in the New Testament is Peter's letter in 1 Peter, which he sends from "the church in Babylon" (1 Peter 5:13); "Babylon" being a code name for Rome.[57] However, the authorship of this letter is much contested, the consensus being that it was written by two anonymous authors as late as 150 AD.[58] The last two times Peter is mentioned in The New Testament, in Acts 12:17 and 15:7-11, he is, again, in Jerusalem. After that, he seems to vanish from the pages.[59]

The bones of Saint Peter

Peter's burial place is a further point of controversy, even to the present. According to Early Christian tradition, Christians in Rome managed to recover and bury the bodies of the murdered Peter and Paul.[60] The most explicit account is provided by Eusebius of Ceasarea (c. 260-340 AD), in a passage that is worth repeating for its detailed description of Peter's (and Paul's) supposed "trophies", or burial monuments:

> It is related that in his [Nero's] time Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and that Peter was likewise crucified, and the title of 'Peter and Paul', which is still given to cemeteries there, confirms the story, no less than does a writer of the church named Caius, who lived when Zephyrinus was bishop of Rome. Caius in a written discussion with Proclus, the leader of the Montanists, speaks as follows of the places where the sacred relics of the apostles in question are deposited: 'But I can point out the trophies of the Apostles, for if you will go to the Vatican or to the Ostian Way you will find the trophies of those who founded this church'. And that they both were martyred at the same time Dionysius, bishop of Corinth, affirms in this passage of his correspondence with the Romans: 'By so great an admonition you bound together the foundations of the Romans and Corinthians by Peter and Paul, for both of them taught together in our Corinth and were our founders, and together also taught in Italy in the same place and were martyred at the same time.[61]

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[56] Paul J. Achtemeier, "An Elusive Unity: Paul, Acts, and the Early Church", in: *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 1, 1986, pp. 1-26, p. 10. Dispute at Antioch: Galatians 2:11-14; Dunn 2009, pp. 470-476. The dispute revolved around Peter's denouncement of the Gentiles, the non-believers, with whom he had earlier shared a table.

[57] Dunn 2009, p. 1072.

[58] Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible: A Reader's Guide and Reference*, Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1980, p. 295.

[59] Dunn 2009, pp. 1058-1059.

[60] Thomas J. Craughwell, *St. Peter's Bones: How the Relics of the First Pope Were Lost and Found… And Then Lost and Found Again*, New York: Image Books, 2013, introduction, xiii.

[61] Quoted in Dunn 2009, p. 1073.

As Eusebius' account states, Peter's body was allegedly buried in a cemetery on the Vatican Hill, close to the arena where he had been martyred. Following excavations of the catacombs beneath the Saint Peter's Basilica in the early nineteen-forties, evidence was found of "a very ancient trench."[62] The narrow opening was situated straight under the monument that Emperor Constantine built on the apostle's alleged burial place, under the present-day high altar. In her reports on the excavations of the Vatican catacombs and her epigraphical examinations of the various inscriptions found there, Margherita Guarducci notes that near the tomb attributed to Saint Peter, the ground was "full of coins", nearly two-thousand pieces, dating from the first to the fifteenth centuries, suggesting that the tomb was a place of pilgrimage from the Earliest post-apostolic days.[63] Two ensuing archaeological campaigns resulted in the excavation of a large number of bones on the site of the second-century shrine, leading Pope Pius XII to state in 1950 that, although the tomb of the "Prince of the Apostles" had "beyond all doubt" been found, it was impossible to prove with certainty that the remains were Saint Peter's.[64]

The bones were put aside and did not receive any attention in the ensuing decade. However, in June 1968, Pope Paul VI officially declared that the relics of Saint Peter "at last" had been identified, following Guarducci's discovery and translation of a fragment of plaster containing a graffito that designated the earlier transferred bones as being Saint Peter's after all.[65] Guarducci's interpreted the inscription as "Petros eni" (Πετρ(ος) ενι), translated "Peter is here", which to her and Paul VI served as final proof that Peter was buried at this location. This interpretation, however, was challenged by several scholars who argued that the epigraphical proof supporting the statement was "very weak."[66]

Particularly Antonio Ferrua, a Jesuit archeologist who had led excavations in the Vatican catacombs in the nineteen-forties, was highly critical of Guarducci's claim. Ferrua proposed that in fact the inscription should be read as "Petr[os] en i[rene]", "Peter in

[62] Margherita Guarducci, *The Tomb of St. Peter: The New Discoveries in the Sacred Grottoes of the Vatican*, Bristol: Hawthorn Books, 1960, p. 92.

[63] Guarducci 1960, p. 88; John Evangelist Walsh, *The Bones of St. Peter: The First Full Account of the Search for the Apostle's Body*, New York: Image Books, 1985, p. 62.

[64] Walsh 1985, p. 74.

[65] Guarducci 1960, p. 133; Walsh 1985, p. 128.

[66] Liberato De Caro; Fernando La Greca; Emilio Matricciani, "The Search of St. Peter's Memory ad catacumbas in the Cemeterial Area ad *Duos Lauros* in Rome", in: *Heritage*, vol. 4, 2021, pp. 479–506, p. 480.

peace", which ignited a polemic between the two scholars.[67] Later, the piece of plaster was unanimously dated to the third century, a fact that Guarducci recognized as well.[68]

While the excavations of the Vatican catacombs were in full swing, on Jerusalem's Mount of Olives an Early Christian ossuary was discovered as well. In 1952, a group of Franciscan archaeologists unearthed the so-called Dominus Flevit tomb, where along with Early Christian symbols an inscription was found bearing what seemed to be Peter's Hebrew name 'Shimeon Bar Yonah' – 'Simon, Son of Jonah,' the name Jesus uses to address Peter before he equates him with the rock in Matthew 16:17.[69] While also this inscription's definite connection to Peter has been contested, the two parallel and contradicting discoveries underline the controversy surrounding the apostle's last place of residency.[70] Whatever geographical and textual unclarities concerning Peter's whereabouts before his death exist in modern scholarly discourse, from the early fourth century onwards building activities commenced on the Saint Peter's Basilica atop of the presumed place of Peter's burial, or, as is the consistent papal interpretation, on Peter, the "rock", himself.[71]

As a result of the clashing narratives discussed above, even in present-day scholarship the opinions on Peter's undertakings in the years before his death diverge widely. They range from statements voicing the undisputed martyrdom of Peter in Rome, declaring that "the tradition can be accepted as true beyond reasonable doubt",[72] to more reserved remarks where the Petrine tradition is perceived as an "ideological, theological, and literary creation

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[67] Antonio Ferrua, "La criptografia mistica ed i graffiti Vaticani", in: *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana*, 1959, vol. 35, pp. 231-247; Margherita Guarducci, "La crittografia mistica e i graffiti vaticani: A proposito di una recensione del P. Antonio Ferrua", in: *Archeologia Classica*, vol. 13, 1961, pp. 183–239; Antonio Ferrua, "Pietro in Vaticano", in: *Civiltà Cattolica Roma*, 1984, vol. 142, pp. 573-581; Margherita Guarducci, "Pietro in Vaticano: commento ad una recensione del p. Antonio Ferrua", in: *Archeologia Classica*, 1984, vol. 36, pp. 266-298; Antonio Ferrua, "La Tomba di San Pietro", in: *Civiltà Cattolica Roma*, 1990, vol. 141, pp. 460–467.

[68] Pasquale Testini, *Archeologia cristiana: nozioni generali dalle origini alla fine del sec. VI*, Bari: Edipuglia, 1980, p. 172; Margherita Guarducci, "Le Reliquie di Pietro sotto la Confessione della Basilica Vaticana: Una Messa a Punto", in: *Coletti Editore*, 1967, pp. 83–160.

[69] First published in: Bellarmino Bagatti; Józef Tadeusz Milik, *Gli scavi del "Dominus flevit" (Monte Oliveto, Gerusalemme), Vol I: La Necropoli del Periodo Romano*, Jerusalem: PP. Francescani, 1958.

[70] Stephen Pfann, "Rereading the 'Shim'On Bar Yonah' Ossuary from Dominus Flevit (DF 11)", in: *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies*, 2016, pp. 65-70.

[71] John O'Malley, *A History of the Popes: From Peter to the Present*, London: Sheed; Ward, 2011, p. 7.

[72] O'Malley 2011, p. 11.

that helped in the development of a broader social memory of Peter's role in the shaping of nascent Christianity in the imperial capital."[73]

Whatever the truth behind the Peter stories may be, the conflicting traditions demanded a constant safeguarding and legitimization of Peter's prevalence in Rome. As a matter of course, this so-called Petrine Primacy was extended to the papacy in the Apostolic Succession, a doctrine that stipulated that, as the Bishop of Rome, the pope's authority to rule over the entire Christian Church has been delegated from Jesus himself through Peter and successive popes.

Petrine apology as a semiotic ideology

In my opinion, the *Domine quo vadis?* parable, in which Peter meets Christ on the Via Appia, must be seen in this apologetic tradition, promoting the authority of Peter and consequently reinforcing the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. This Petrine apology can be regarded as a semiotic ideology, governing not only the interpretation of the marble footsteps as the imprint left by Christ, but also licensing the appropriation of a pagan ex-voto into a Christian context. It is fairly uncomplicated to grasp how the material appropriation worked to visually and materially testify to Peter's meeting with Christ, and we will turn to this appropriation presently.

The parable of Domine Quo Vadis, however, represents a much earlier and intangible element of the Domine Quo Vadis ensemble that has been as constitutive as the material elements. We must consider two ways in which this parable served as a Petrine apology. Firstly – and most straightforwardly – the story legitimized Peter's primacy in Rome by testifying to his martyrdom and death. Secondly, the phrase "Domine quo vadis?" itself was appropriated and reworked into a new context, in an apologetic attempt to restore Peter's reputation.

The story is first alluded to by Origen (185-254) in his commentary on the Gospel of John.[74] For the full narrative, however, we must turn to the Greek version of the Apocryphal Acts of Saint Peter. Although being the earliest of the five Apocryphal Acts of the apostles, this document was composed only at the end of the second or the beginning of the third

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[73] Milton Moreland, "Moving Peter to Rome: Social Memory and Ritualized Space After 70 CE", in: Karl Galinsky (ed.), *Memory in Ancient Rome and Early Christianity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 344-368, p. 354.
[74] See for an account of the early allusions to the parable: Christine M. Thomas, *The Acts of Peter, Gospel Literature, and the Ancient Novel: Rewriting the Past*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 37-39.

century. What remains of Peter's Apocryphal Acts can be summed up in two parts that both take place in Rome: the struggle between Saint Peter and Simon Magus, leading up to his arrest, and the *Martyrium*, the Martyrdom of the Apostle, in which the *Quo vadis?* scene is related.[75] The following English translation is derived from the Latin version of Peter's Apocryphal Acts, the *Codex Vercellensis*, in which the phrase "Domine quo vadis?" is recorded:

> When he went out of the gate he saw the Lord come into Rome. And when he saw him he said, 'Lord, where are you going?' And the Lord said to him, 'I go to Rome to be crucified.' And Peter said to him, 'Lord, are you being crucified again?' And he said, 'Yes, Peter, again I shall be crucified.' And Peter came to himself; and he saw the Lord ascending to heaven. Then he returned to Rome, rejoicing and praising the Lord because he had said, 'I am being crucified.' This was to happen to Peter.[76]

In his article on the intertextuality of the *Quo vadis?* episode, Marek Starowieyski demonstrates how the parable was reasonably well known in Christian Antiquity, as it was read in Greek and Latin, but was also translated in Ethiopian and Armenian and persistently occurs throughout every known version of the apocryphal texts.[77]

In order to grasp the intricate appropriation of this parable in support of Saint Peter's primacy, we must also take another side of the story into account. The parable not only served as an apology for the primacy of Peter in Rome; it also worked to restore Peter's reputation, which had been dented as a result of another episode containing the phrase "Lord, where are you going?"[78] In John 13:36, Peter asks Jesus: "Lord, where are You going?" to which Jesus replied, "Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterward."[79] When Peter insists, Jesus tells him that before the cock crows, Peter will have betrayed him three times, which indeed happens further in the Gospel of John, following Jesus' arrest.

Thus, when the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles were chronicled in the late second century, Christ's admonition of Peter following Him "afterward" was dusted off. In line with

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[75] Marek Starowieyski, "L'Épisode Quo Vadis? (Acta Petri, Martyrium, 6)", in: *Humanitas*, vol. 50, 1998, pp. 257-262, pp. 257-258.

[76] J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005, p. 424.

[77] Starowieyski 1998, p. 259.

[78] I am grateful to prof. dr. Lautaro Lanzillotta for bringing this to my attention.

[79] New King James Version.

the apologetic practices concerning the Peter stories, the fragment "Domine quo vadis?", hitherto linked to Peter's betrayal of Christ, was ingeniously reworked and appropriated into the new and positive narrative that takes place on the Via Appia.

Consequently, when in the ninth century on the supposed location of the miraculous meeting on the Via Appia a slab of marble was found carrying footprints, the semiotic ideology of the Petrine Primacy was thoroughly instated, and the slab was used as one of many tools in the process of firmly situating Peter in Rome. But why did this appropriation not happen earlier? Why did it take relatively long, until the ninth century, before the footsteps were linked to the Domine Quo Vadis narrative and the church was built in its commemoration?

I.3 Profile of a City – sketching a representational economy

In the previous chapter, we have identified the Petrine apologetic tradition as a chief semiotic ideology mandating the appropriation of a pagan ex-voto. The presence of Peter in Rome was fundamental for the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and the apostle's martyrdom and death in the Eternal City was generally accepted among the writings and beliefs of the Early Christians. After the Constantinian conversion in the fourth century a new Rome, both Christian and classical, gradually took the place of Ancient Rome, led by the pope as Peter's successor and as the spiritual leader of the West. Pope Leo the Great, who held the Papal See between 440-461, famously stated that "Rome has become the Head of the World through the Holy See of Saint Peter."[80] In this respect, Richard Krautheimer repeatedly stresses in his influential book *Profile of a City* that by the fifth century Peter and Rome had become synonymous and that this equation sustained throughout the following centuries.[81]

The first millennium of Christianity presents a tumultuous and complex narrative. Consequently, the following attempt at a historical sketch in a brief chapter is doomed to at best scratch the surface of its history. To remain afloat on the "sea of possibilities" that the historical analysis of such a period provides, I will focus on four interrelated circumstances that on the one hand necessitated Peter's undisputable presence in Rome and the equation

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[80] Richard Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City, 312-1308*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 46.
[81] *Idem*, *passim* chapter 1-3.

of the Papal See with the city, but that on the other were also constitutive for the seemingly late construction of the church and the appropriation of the footsteps as a relic.

In the following, I will discuss 1) the Early Medieval Western attitudes towards pictorial representations of the divine and towards the image in general, 2) Rome's subjection to the Byzantine Empire, and 3) the eighth-century approval of the use of relics for religious veneration that resulted from the Second Council of Nicaea. I will conclude with 4) the management of crowds and clerical resources that the large influx of pilgrims compelled in the ninth century. Thus, by forming an image of what Webb Keane calls a "representational economy" (the context which sustained the semiotic ideology of the Petrine apology) an explanation will be formulated for the seemingly late material manifestation of the Domine Quo Vadis narrative.

Determining a terminus post quem – early sources on the footsteps and the church

First, however, in order to determine whether indeed the footsteps were appropriated when the church was built in the ninth century, we need to analyze the early sources in which the church and the footsteps are mentioned. In his recent article on apostolic impression relics, Erik Inglis suggests that the footsteps were identified as a Christian relic somewhere between the twelfth and the thirteenth century. However, as he states himself, there is no conclusive evidence that upholds this claim.[82] In the following I will argue for an earlier appropriation.

Although the construction of the church is generally traced to the ninth century, the earliest explicit references to a structure on this site date from the eleventh century.[83] In a testimony from 1014, an allusion to a construction of some sort is made in a story about the sickly abbot of the monastery of Santi Bonifacio e Alessio on the Aventine. To aid his recovery from an illness, the abbot had been promised a pheasant by a friend, which he was to collect on the Via Appia, on the place "ubi Dominus apparuit", where the Lord appeared.[84] Although in this source no explicit mention is made of a church on that location, we can infer that the site must have been marked in some way to be able to serve as a landmark to which

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[82] Inglis 2021, p. 347.
[83] See: Guarducci 1942, pp. 305–344; Lucrezia Spera, *Il paesaggio suburbano di Roma dall'antichità al medioevo: il comprensorio tra le vie Latina e Ardeatina dalle Mura Aureliane al III miglio*, Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1999, p. 164.
[84] Quoted in: Spera 1999, p. 371.

directions could be given. The first explicit mention of a church is made in a bull from 1074 by Pope Gregory VII, which mentions goods donated to the care of the monks of the monastery of San Paolo Fuori le Mura. Among these assets the church of "Santa Maria quae cognominatur [which is named] Domine Quo Vadis" is mentioned.[85]

An important source that lists the earliest references to the footsteps is *I sacri trofei romani* (1644). In this guidebook of sacred sites dedicated to Saint Peter and Christ, Roman archaeologist and scholar Francesco Maria Torrigio (1580-1649) gives a detailed overview of early sources concerning the Quo Vadis footsteps, as a part of the "testimonies" to the presence of Saint Peter in Rome that are "being raised perpetually."[86]

The two earliest records of the footsteps mentioned by Torrigio are Francesco Petrarca's letters and a decretal document of Pope Innocent III. The text Torrigio alludes to is the decree *Per Venerabilem* (1202), in which Innocent advocates papal power by connecting the Papal See with the Apostolic Succession. Although Innocent uses the site of Domine Quo Vadis to argue that God had wanted to bind Peter to Rome, he does not explicitly mention the footsteps.[87] Petrarca's (1304-1374) letters seem to give the first explicit mention of the footsteps. In a letter from the 21st of December 1336 to his friend cardinal Giacomo Colonna, the poet "enumerates the praises of Rome" and relates his anticipation to see the "venerable image of the Savior of people and in the hard stone the footsteps that shall eternally be worshipped by nations."[88] And in a letter from the early 1350s to Philippe de Vitry, Petrarca repeats the sentiment that fortunate is the traveler who shall "gaze at the spot where Christ appeared to the fugitive Peter and see on the hard stone his footsteps which all nations will worship eternally."[89]

Although a reference to the footsteps is not made in later translations of Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, Inglis notes that a very early version of the text, dating to 1282, mentions the church "Saint Mary of the Footsteps" (Santa Maria ad Passus), a name that must refer to the prints.[90]

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[85] *Ibid*.

[86] Francesco Maria Torrigio, *I sacri trofei romani del trionfante prencipe degli apostoli san Pietro gloriosissimo*, Rome: Francesco Moneta, 1644, pp. 61-66. Translation from Italian and Latin WT.

[87] This is an exegesis proposed by Anna Sammassimo, "L'affermazione del Collegio Cardinalizio Tra l'XI ed il XIII Secolo", in: *Vergentis*, vol. 3, 2016, pp. 79-100, p. 91.

[88] Petrarca would travel to Rome in the following year. Francesco Petrarca; Aldo S. Bernardo (trans.), *Rerum familiarium libri I-VIII*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1975, Fam. II, 9, p. 104.

[89] Francesco Petrarca; Aldo S. Bernardo (trans.), *Letters on Familiar Matters: Rerum familiarium libri IX-XVI*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, IX, 13, pp. 41-42. Also mentioned in: Inglis 2021, p. 346.

[90] Inglis 2021, p. 346.

Thus, Inglis rightly states that we cannot determine with certainty whether the footsteps were present in the church when it was constructed in the ninth century: we have no records testifying to such an early presence. However, by examining the available historical sources, we have at least established a *terminus post quem* – earlier datings are doomed to remain in the realm of speculation until new evidence presents itself. Nevertheless, at the end of this chapter, I hope to have convincingly argued, differently from Inglis, why it is probable that the identification of the ex-voto as a relic was contemporary to the erection of the ninth-century church.

Byzantine interventions – the apprehension of the image

As I have briefly mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Rome in Late Antiquity was checkered with the remains of the city's Imperial past. Early Christians "lived and moved and had their being" in the spaces of the Roman Empire.[91] From the fourth century onwards, Krautheimer states, "the physical collapse of the city built Christian Rome."[92] Although the Christian culture of the Early Middle Ages was encased by this ancient world of images, it strongly opposed pagan practices of image veneration. This is an important factor to consider when questioning the seemingly late construction of the church and appropriation of the footsteps as material endorsements of the Petrine Primacy. Only by the late eighth and early ninth century this reluctance gave way to an embodied acceptance of the image in religious veneration.

The apprehension towards the image has its origins in the Second Commandment's prohibition of the creation and veneration of graven images: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image — any likeness *of anything* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them."[93]

Subsequently, image and sculpture are generally believed to have been almost absent in western Christian devotional practice throughout the Early Middle Ages. In

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[91] Laura Salah Nasrallah, *Christian Responses to Roman Art and Architecture: The Second-Century Church Amid the Spaces of Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 2.

[92] Krautheimer 1980, p. 66.

[93] Exodus 20:4-5, New International Version, italic in original. 'Graven images' are carved idols or representations of a god used as objects of worship. For a comprehensive overview on the Second Commandment and the image question, see: Birgit Meyer, "Idolatry beyond the Second Commandment: Conflicting Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen", in: Birgit Meyer and Terje Stordalen (eds.), *Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Contested Desires*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, pp. 77–96.

scholarship, Early Medieval Christianity is therefore often regarded as having been virtually aniconic.[94]

In addition, an essential political factor must be taken into account when discussing the Early Medieval Roman's attitude towards the image, one that strongly stimulated the careful preservation of the Petrine Primacy: Rome's subjection to the Byzantine empire – a situation that necessitated a continuous legitimization of Rome's primacy within the Christian world.[95] Early Byzantine artistic practices, depicting an intangible divine world, were rejected as outrageous acts of idolatry by the 'unpolluted' Roman Christians, for whom the veneration of images "stood in diametrical opposition to the blind faith in an invisible God that was the foundation of the new religion."[96] Tertullian, the third century apologist we have encountered earlier, not only stated that "a disciple of Greece could not be a disciple of heaven", he also extended the definition of idolatry far beyond pictorial art.[97] Tertullian's treatise *On Idolatry* not only rejects images, it also argues against all other manifestations of material abundance – all things potentially distracting from the veneration of an invisible and transcendent God.[98]

How, then, are we to understand the spoliation and appropriation of large amounts of antique elements in Rome's material landscape that can be traced back to the Early Middle Ages? Such appropriation suggests a pragmatic abandonment of the apprehension towards the image in favor of what seems to be a recycling of the usable scraps of Antiquity. For, as Maria Fabricius Hansen observes in her book on Early Christian appropriation, the reuse of building materials was not necessarily the easiest or cheapest solution: the materials had to be searched for, gathered, transported, and reworked to fit their new context.[99]

In the East, pagan temples had been reused for Christian purposes since the fourth century; while in the West this had been common practice since the sixth century.[100]

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[94] Nasrallah 2011, p. 219.
[95] Krautheimer 1980, p. 60.
[96] Beate Fricke, "Fallen Idols and Risen Saints: Western Attitudes Towards the Worship of Images and the 'Cultura Veterum Deorum'", in: Anne McClanan, Jeffrey Johnson (eds.), *Negating the Image: Case Studies in Iconoclasm*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, pp. 67-95, pp. 67-95, p. 77; Krautheimer 1980, p. 72.
[97] Cited in: Andrew J. Ekonomou, *Byzantine Rome and the Greek Popes: Eastern Influences on Rome and the Papacy from Gregory the Great to Zacharias, A.D. 590-752*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007, p. 2.
[98] Robin M. Jensen, *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005, p. 9.
[99] Maria Fabricius Hansen, *The Eloquence of Appropriation: Prolegomena to an Understanding of Spolia in Early Christian Rome*, Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2013, p. 17.
[100] Krautheimer 1980, p. 72.

Although in 459, the city of Rome legalized the spoliation of antique elements from ruinous buildings "beyond repair" under the *Codex Theodosianus* – a measure that, of course, allowed for the loosest of interpretations – it took one hundred and fifty years for the first pagan temple to be Christianized.[101] The Pantheon, formerly dedicated to all pagan gods, became the church of Santa Maria Rotunda, dedicated to the Virgin Mary and all Martyrs, only in 609, and it took another three hundred years before other temples were appropriated for Christian purposes.

Krautheimer professes his puzzlement over this Roman reluctance to reuse perfectly decent structures in a time when the city suffered famine and disease, flooding by the erratic Tiber, Longobard invasions and plundering, while continuously being subjected to the Byzantine Empire. "Was it only in Rome", he asks, "that the belief in evil spirits haunting temple sites lingered on with such strength, and if so, why?"[102] Remarkably, the eighth-century break with Byzantium, which culminated in the Great Schism of 1054, when the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches each went their separate ways, was brought about by the image question. Rome, as ever opposing Byzantine practices, now resisted the iconoclasm that was decreed by Emperor Leo III in 726, causing many iconophiles to seek asylum in Rome.[103]

However, in the years leading up to the emperor's abolition of images, Constantinople was not so much known for its icons as for its relics. More relics were collected in the Byzantine capital by the early eighth century than in any other city.[104] A crucial and pivotal moment in the Iconoclastic Controversy was the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, which attempted to resolve the issue of the veneration of images. In the resolutions of this council, far more importance was attributed to saints and their relics than to icons and images.[105] The legislation on the use of relics and artefacts for religious veneration incited an influx of such objects to the West and worked to further normalize their veneration. In reaction to the rigorous Byzantine position, Western attitudes towards venerated religious objects (such as the cross or relics) and the equation of images with the sacrament in the eucharist were re-examined.

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[101] David Karmon, *The Ruin of the Eternal City: Antiquity and Preservation in Renaissance Rome*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 33; Krautheimer 1980, p. 66.
[102] Krautheimer 1980, p. 72.
[103] *Idem*, pp. 106-107.
[104] John Haldon and Leslie Brubaker, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680–850: a History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 38.
[105] *Ibid*.

Before the Second Council of Nicaea, the veneration of relics was predominantly an Eastern custom. While in Byzantium the bodies of saints were dissected and the fragments distributed as relics, such practices were regarded as sacrilegious in the West until the ninth century. The Byzantine belief that even the unsightliest relic of a saint's body possessed the same power as the saint himself was frowned upon. In Rome, it was only the sacred site, such as the tomb of the saint, that was deemed to possess powers.[106] However, by the ninth century, when the church on the Via Appia was built and the footsteps were appropriated as a relic, the crucial differences between East and West had been abandoned.[107]

The ninth century: pillaging and pilgrimage

To complete the construction of our representational economy, we need to consider a pragmatic and economic circumstance that resulted from both the resolutions of the Iconoclastic Controversy and Rome's successful equation with Saint Peter. By the eighth century, pilgrimage had grown in popularity, and the flood of pilgrims that in a relatively short period overwhelmed the city necessitated the management of both crowds and ecclesiastical assets.[108]

When Rome had managed to break the hold of Byzantium by the eighth century, it was vital to reinforce the city's authority on the religious and political stage. As of old, this was achieved by the effective strategy of presenting the pope as the successor of Saint Peter and the ruler of his lands.[109] The successful equation of Rome and the Catholic Church with the figure of Saint Peter resulted in the desire amongst believers to visit his city and see and touch the places where he was martyred and buried.

The area surrounding the Domine Quo Vadis and the San Sebastiano Fuori le Mura was the earliest cult center of the Apostles on the Appian Way, dating to the third century.[110] The site was among the first places on the ardent pilgrim's checklist *en route* to Rome. By the mid-eighth century, however, pillaging, destruction and general neglect had obligated the Church to take a measure that was formerly frowned upon in Rome and was only practiced by popes of Eastern descent. The relics outside of the city were transferred,

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[106] Fricke 2005, p. 67.
[107] *Ibid*.
[108] Diana Webb, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West*, London; New York: Tauris & Co Ltd, 1999, p. 13.
[109] Krautheimer 1980, p. 107.
[110] Gioacchino Mancini, *Le Chiese di Roma Illustrate, N. 21: San Sebastiano Fuori le Mura*, Rome: Libreria Fratelli Treves dell'Anonima Libraria Italiana, 1958, pp. 5-7.

sometimes by cartloads, to safety within the city walls.[111] Krautheimer relates how, in 761, Pope Stephen II brought "from the devastated cemeteries innumerable bodies of saints."[112] The ecclesiastical efforts following the Iconoclast Controversy restored Rome for the welfare, safety and spiritual benefits of pilgrims and residents. However, as a result of the mass *translatio* of relics *intra muros*, by the ninth century, the sanctuaries outside the walls were in need of relics to supply the newly renovated churches; relics pertaining to the apostles were especially sought after.[113]

An intriguing story in this respect is that of Aurea Petronilla, a Roman lady whose body was hailed as the daughter of Saint Peter. In 757, Pope Paul I ordered the translation of the body of Saint Petronilla from the Catacomb of Domitilla on the Via Ardeatina, outside the city walls to the Old Saint Peter's Basilica.[114] The *Legenda Aurea* relates that on her marble sarcophagus an inscription was written "by Saint Peter's own hand, which read: *Aureae Petronillae dilectissimae filiae* (to golden Petronilla, my most beloved daughter)."[115] Today, her relics still lie in the 'new' Saint Peter's, on a prominent location in the basilica, under the Altar of Saint Petronilla.

In the ninth century, the ever-lingering necessity of connecting the city of Rome and the papacy with the figure of Saint Peter was incited by the political consequences of the Iconoclast Controversy. Rome had to establish its authority vis-à-vis Byzantium. In addition, pilgrimage had by then become an important revenue model for the Roman Catholic Church, while the relics on the oldest sites of veneration outside the city walls had been transported to the already wealthy sanctuaries *intra muros*.

The appropriation of a pagan ex-voto on one of the main pilgrim roads to the Eternal City, testifying to Saint Peter's presence in Rome and his succession of Christ, must be seen within the circumstances sketched in this representational economy. Thus, this ninth-century appropriation, which at the beginning of this expose seemed to be a rather late material manifestation of the Petrine Primacy, happened at exactly the right moment.

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[111] Caroline Goodson, "Archaeology and the Cult of Saints in the Early Middle Ages: Accessing the Sacred", in: *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome. Moyen âge*, vol. 126-1, 2014, p. 3.
[112] Krautheimer 1980, p. 113.
[113] *Ibid*.
[114] Craughwell 2013, p. 18.
[115] Jacobus de Voragine; William Granger Ryan (trans.), *The Golden Legend, Readings on the Saints*, Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012, p. 181; Craughwell 2013, p. 18.

Conclusion

Peter's martyrdom and death in Rome cannot decisively be acknowledged or denied; to this day there is no consensus or conclusive evidence even of his presence in the Eternal City. What can be concluded is that it was precisely this uncertainty that necessitated a constant legitimization of his primacy and a connection to his personage through the Papal See. Mediation was necessary to firmly situate Peter in Rome. Within the carefully orchestrated narrative of the Petrine Primacy, all conceivable means were appropriated and used in an apologetic attempt to reinstate and reinforce his authority.

We have seen how the Petrine apology worked as a semiotic ideology, governing the process of appropriation in the Domine Quo Vadis ensemble. Within the representational economy that has been sketched above, every element from the intricate ensemble of our case study works as what Webb Keane refers to as a "semiotic link", mediating the presence of Saint Peter in Rome. The earliest of these semiotic links is the parable of Domine Quo Vadis, which was appropriated and reworked into a new and positive narrative, restoring Peter's dented reputation. We have established a *terminus post quem*: we do not have sources testifying to the presence of the footsteps in the church of Domine Quo Vadis before the thirteenth century. However, by sketching the representational economy, I have demonstrated why I think it is probable that the semiotic link of the footsteps was appropriated in the ninth century, contemporary to the construction of the church.

Part II – Veneration

In the second part of this thesis, I will consider the performative element of veneration, in particular the underlying question of belief. At face value it might seem that visitors of the ninth-century church would have seen that the relic they venerated in fact was (or at least used to be) a pagan idol. In what way are we to come to terms with people's credulity of the footsteps being the veritable imprints of Christ's feet? In the second and third chapters, I will tackle this 'question of belief' by looking at the dynamics involved in representing, and, by inference, making present, the divine.

First, however, it is useful to establish whether the prevalence of votive footprints in Early Medieval Rome, similar to the ones in Domine Quo Vadis, was indeed such that we can state that people were able to recognize them as having a pagan provenance.

II.1 Tracing Roman footprints

Archaeologist Katherine Dunbabin has extensively examined votive representations of feet and footprints from Graeco-Roman contexts.[116] Although, as she states, the exact meanings of many of these footprints are obscure, they all have in common that "they allude to the presence of the person concerned, human or divine."[117] Guarducci notes that believers in Antiquity may well have positioned their own feet in or over the sacred footprints in order to establish a direct encounter with the symbolized divinity.[118]

Guarducci has paved the way for the study of votive footprints in the nineteen-forties, and the extensive scholarly attention which the subject has received since indicates the prevalence of such artefacts in Graeco-Roman Antiquity.[119] In her contribution to Jaś Elsner and Ian Rutherford's volume on Graeco-Roman pilgrimage, Sarolta Takács, for example, analyzes depictions of feet with inscriptions dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Isis, who was also venerated in Rome: the introduction of the cult of Isis as a *sacrum publicum*, attracting pilgrimage, occurred around 40 AD.[120] From her article it becomes clear that

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[116] Dunbabin 1990, pp. 85-109.
[117] *Idem*, p. 86. This is also argued in Bernhard Kötting, "Fussspuren als Zeichen Göttlicher Anwesenheit", in: *Boreas*, vol. 6, 1983, pp. 197–201.
[118] Guarducci 1942, p. 323.
[119] Relevant references are stated in the footnotes to this paragraph. See also the *status quaestionis* in the introduction of this thesis.
[120] Sarolta Takács, "Divine and Human Feet: Records of Pilgrims Honouring Isis", in: Jaś Elsner; Ian Rutherford (eds.), *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods*, Oxford: Oxford University

divine footprints can be found all across the ancient Mediterranean, and although the greatest part of these footsteps seems to be gifted to Isis, they are not solely an Egyptian phenomenon, nor always dedicated to Isis.[121] In Rome, too, there are numerous footsteps with and without inscriptions, some of which are discussed by these authors. Let us consider a few.

The seventeenth-century antiquarian Raffaele Fabretti describes a number of footprint inscriptions in his book on antique epigraphy.[122] Among these is a slab of marble found on the Via Nomentana in Rome, showing two incised pairs of feet with a votive inscription by the Roman freedwoman Licinia Philete (see fig. 4 for a reprint from 1702).[123]

Another much-cited example is found in Ostia, the ancient port of Rome which was in use until the eighth century. The so-called *planta pedis* footprint (fig. 5) points towards the high altar of a *mithraeum* in Ostia. It is a telling example of the custom of placing 'threshold footprints' at the doorsteps of sanctuaries, which, as Guarducci has pointed out, was a widespread practice throughout the Mediterranean.[124]

The Capitoline Museums house several votive footprints, one of which will be discussed later in this chapter. The museum also displays a large white slab of marble (fig. 6) with two pairs of footsteps from the third century. This slab, found in the Via della Consolazione during excavations on the Roman Forum in the twentieth century is dedicated to Dea Caelestis, the Romanized form of the Carthaginian moon goddess Tanit.

There are numerous examples of similar objects with a Roman provenance, scattered throughout Italian and international collections. Like the samples mentioned above, they show that the remnants testifying to the pagan practice of votive offerings were by no means an oddity in Rome's Early Medieval landscape. Graeco-Roman votive footsteps, with or without dedicatory inscriptions, were objects that people might have relatively easily encountered between the scraps of Antiquity which, as we have seen in Part I, were constantly negotiated.

Press, 2006, pp. 353-369. See for the Isis cult in Rome: Miguel John Versluys, "*Isis Capitoijna* and the Egyptian Cults in Late Republican Rome", in: *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World*, vol. 151, 2015, pp. 421–448.

[121] Takács 2006, p. 360; Dunbabin 1990, p. 85.

[122] Raphaelis Fabbreti, *Urbinatis Inscriptionum Antiquarum Quae In Aedibus Paternis Asservantur Explicatio Et Additamentum*, Rome: Dominici Antonii Herculis, 1699.

[123] *Idem*, p. 472.

[124] Guarducci 1942, pp. 310-311; Dunbabin 1990, p. 93; Takács 2006, p. 360; Ladislav Vidman, *Isis und Sarapis bei den Griechen und Römern. Epigraphische Studie zur Verbreitung und zu den Trägern des Ägyptischen Kultes*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1970, pp. 145-146.

Let us for a moment return to the Domine Quo Vadis footsteps, that is, to the original that is displayed in a side chapel of the San Sebastiano (fig. 3 and 7). The first thing that stands out is the heavy and somewhat clumsily fabricated wooden frame, which sharply delineates the footsteps and leaves the rest of the marble slab invisible. The casing and the letters seem to be relatively recent, and on several occasions, I have attempted to gain access to the archives of the San Sebastiano to research its origins. Unfortunately (as of yet) my efforts have been to no avail; I have not been granted access to any documents testifying to the uncovered slab nor the casing. Yet, one cannot refrain from wondering what is hidden from our view by such a crude reliquary.

Considering the large number of votive footsteps with dedications to Isis that have been found in Rome, a question presents itself. Does the meticulous covering of the marble slab imply an inscription similar to those on other votive offerings? The dedication of the ex-voto is believed to be not to Isis, but to the god Redicilus. In spite of the dire lack of documental evidence, somehow this accepted dedication managed to bridge the timespan from Antiquity to the present. Can we thus infer that the presumed inscription under the wooden covering contains an explicit dedication to this deity, upholding the narrative of its pagan provenance?

Before turning to the complicated matter of making present the divine and its connections to belief, I will consider one more Roman votive footprint stone, perhaps the most telling example in relation to our case study (fig. 8). It is currently kept in the Capitoline Museums, but until the seventeenth century these footprints were displayed close to the high altar of the Church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli on the Roman Capitoline Hill. The round marble disk with incised footsteps carries an inscription from the Imperial period dedicated to Isis Frugifera (Isis the fruit bringer).[125] The rest of the inscription on the outer border has been lost. Before it was dismantled in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, it was believed to hold the footprints of Saint Michael the Archangel, which he allegedly imprinted on the stone when appearing on the Castel Sant'Angelo during the Roman plague of 590.[126] During renovations in the Aracoeli in the late sixteenth century, the stone was moved, but

[125] Takács 2006, p. 365.
[126] The story of Michael and the Castel Sant'Angelo is also related in the *Legenda Aurea*: De Voragine 2012, pp. 144-145. The object is also discussed by Inglis 2021, pp. 345-346.

then received a new honorific installation 1604.[127] There are indications that Greek inscriptions were placed on the outer border, but these seem to have been mostly erased to increase the object's suitability for a Christian appropriation.

In her article on these footsteps, Johanna Heideman discusses how the inscriptions in the center of the stone proved less easy to overrule and consequently became problematic. She quotes Onorato da Lucca (1594-1678), a friar who lived in a convent near the Aracoeli. In an unpublished document, the friar relates how "some antiquarians" had observed that the inscription in the middle of the stone contained a Greek dedication to the goddess Isis.[128] Because of its obviously pagan provenance, in the later seventeenth century the stone was removed from its display in the church.

However, not all antiquarians agreed with this rigorous removal of the treasured relic. Following the news of the impeding removal, church historian, antiquarian and clergyman Fioravante Martinelli (1599-1667) submitted a formal petition to Pope Alexander VII in which he pleaded to reconsider the dismantlement of the relic.[129] In his statement, Martinelli invoked three other examples of impression relics that supported his claim to the authenticity of Archangel Michael's imprints. One of these were the Domine Quo Vadis footsteps:

> And finally, we see that in the Santa Maria in Palmis on the Via Appia, also known as "delle Pedate", where Christ our Lord disappeared from Saint Peter's sight, a stone was placed as a testimony to this event with two carved feet *in renovatione* of other similar stones, one of which is preserved among the relics at San Sebastiano. And at this stone, at which I have sometimes seen a burning lamp, the people kneel in prayer, venerating it with kisses and touching it with rosaries and medals.[130]

Martinelli, however, did not succeed in convincing the pope to reinstall the ex-voto and it was removed from the church in the late seventeenth century.

Was this merely pragmatism on the part of Martinelli? Did he really put aside the newly emerging objectivity of antiquarianism and historiography in favor of the religious and

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[127] Johanna Heideman, "Orme romane e il perduto reliquiario delle «pedate» dell'Arcangelo Michele", in: *Bollettino dei musei comunali di Roma*, Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1990, pp. 17-26.
[128] *Idem*, pp. 17-18.
[129] *Idem*, p. 18.
[130] *Idem*, p. 152. Translation WT.

devotional connotations that the object entailed? These enticing questions remind of another instance in which the Quo Vadis footsteps are evoked as pertaining to "the truth".

Let us love not sects but the truth!

In determining the *terminus post quem* for the appropriation of the footsteps in Part I, we have briefly considered Francesco Petrarca's letters to his friend cardinal Giacomo Colonna. As we have seen, already in the seventeenth century, Francesco Maria Torrigio quoted the two letters that I mentioned as the earliest explicit reference to the footsteps, and they have been cited as such in the scholarship on Domine Quo Vadis ever since.

There is, however, another mention of Domine Quo Vadis in Petrarca's letters that seems to have so far been overlooked in scholarship. In his letter to Giovanni Colonna, Giacomo's relative and fellow cardinal, Petrarca recalls the many things that they have seen on their walks together through the outskirts and the city of Rome.[131] On these walks, the two discussed matters of philosophy and morality, such as the distinction between the liberal and the mechanical arts and the scientific obligation to "love not sects but the truth." In his letter, Petrarca professes his vehement objection to things that are presented as the truth, but that are in fact "opposed to our true and blessed faith." Following this aphorism, he expounds on the things that the friends encountered on their outings that had excited their "tongue and mind." Among these sites and sights, which we can infer to be instances of "the truth" that the poet had just advocated, Petrarca mentions the place where "Christ appeared to his Vicar."

Although the footsteps are not explicitly specified, we can assume that they are implied in the poet's reference to the site of Domine Quo Vadis, as he does mention them in other letters.[132] Petrarca's characterization of the footsteps as belonging to the category of "the truth" is particularly intriguing for the issue that is at the heart of this part of my thesis: the complicated question of belief.

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[131] Petrarca 1975, Fam. VI, 2, pp. 290-295.
[132] See Part I of this thesis.

II.2 From semiotic ideologies to modalities of belief

We have seen how semiotic ideologies govern the ways in which signs are understood, and these insights have been useful in understanding why and when the footsteps were appropriated. However, Keane's notion does not allow for an understanding of why people believe these signs to be harbingers of truth, to testify to certain events and to encompass narratives, or as Birgit Meyer puts it, how one is persuaded of "the truthfulness of fiction."[133] In short: how could people have believed this blatantly pagan ex-voto to be the veritable imprint of Christ's feet?

Although asking such a question may come across as anachronistic and perhaps even as naïve (for how can we presume to understand the mind of an Early Medieval believer) and may well be impossible to answer, it is fundamental to the task I have undertaken. For, it is the belief in this object as a carrier of the divine, the veneration of these ancient footsteps as the veritable imprint of Christ's feet, that has caused the object to endure, and the site and parable of Domine Quo Vadis to have been (re)appropriated and (re)negotiated to this very day. Moreover, this object, apart from being all the other things it represents – an appropriated ex-voto, a political tool used to legitimize authorities, the spider in the web of a complex ensemble, and so on – it is also, and perhaps most of all, an object of religious veneration. Thus, I do not want to shy away from the question of belief, difficult as it may be, but to try to understand the object for its religious status as well.

Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths?

Archaeologist and historian Paul Veyne too asks the seemingly impossible question of belief from an even further, though perhaps better documented, past.[134] The main question in his book *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths?* develops along the same line as our question whether the Early Medieval pilgrims visiting the small sanctuary on the Via Appia really believed the marble slab to encompass the imprint of Christ's feet. Although his argumentation revolves around examples from Antiquity, the negotiation of truth in that historical period is not very different from the Medieval perspective.

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[133] Birgit Meyer (ed.), *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 5.
[134] Paul Veyne, Paula Wissing (trans.), *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

These believers, as Veyne states, seem to have had an "apparently lax attitude toward scientific rigor that we find shocking or surprising", an attitude that we perhaps saw traces of in Martinelli's attempt to save the impression relic of Michael the Archangel.[135] Surely, people must have known better, one wonders, so how was this credulity possible? The argument developed in Veyne's book revolves around the premise that truth and belief are plural concepts that are structured by "modalities of belief."[136] Veyne was a friend and admirer of Foucault, and his modalities much resemble the Foucauldian concept of power structures that underlie the discourses shaping our realities.[137] Although on first consideration the notions seem to overlap, modalities of belief, however, are not semiotic ideologies: they do not exclusively govern the interpretation of signs. Rather, they shape and sustain the world that we hold to be true. Veyne calls this culture.[138]

A crucial point Veyne stresses in his book is that, before we can start considering belief, we have to acknowledge that first and foremost belief is made up of truths that are constructed: "They were not forgers, nor were they acting in bad faith. They were simply following what was, at the time, the normal way of arriving at the truth."[139] To believe was to obey, Veyne argues, and in the politics of religion, ideological content did not play a role whatsoever.[140] Theologian Jane Heath remarks in this respect that, even long before Christianity had developed a strong visual culture, for Early Christians, "to see was to believe."[141] The sense of sight, Heath continues, was substantiated by parables such as that of the Doubting Thomas, and, of course, of the miracle of Christ's resurrection.[142] The credibility of and belief in a truth is supported by texts, myths and oral history – and, I would add, by objects and artefacts – in a process that Veyne calls the "purification of myth by reason."[143]

Before the age of Enlightenment, Veyne argues, truth could mean many things and could even encompass (what to us seems to be) fiction: facts existed.[144] And, since they

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[135] *Idem*, p. 11.
[136] *Idem*, *passim*.
[137] Veyne wrote an intellectual biography of Foucault: Paul Veyne, *Foucault: Sa Pensée, Sa Personne*, Paris: Albin Michel, 2008.
[138] Veyne 1988, preface, xii.
[139] *Idem*, preface: xi.
[140] *Idem*, p. 32.
[141] Jane Heath, "Sight and Christianity: Early Christian Attitudes to Seeing", in: Michael Squire (ed.), *Sight and the Ancient Senses*, London; New York: Routledge, 2015, pp. 220-236, p. 221.
[142] *Ibid*.
[143] Veyne 1988, p. 1.
[144] *Idem*, p. 13-14.

existed and were by no means controversial, the historian had neither to interpret nor to challenge them.[145] This is the light in which we must consider Martinelli's petition. The religious and devotional status of Saint Michael's relic was just as much an unwavering fact, and moreover "purified by reason", as were the visual inconsistencies presented by the object's materiality. The difference between reality and fiction, as Veyne states, is not objective and does not pertain to the thing itself; it resides in us. The object is not unbelievable in itself, we do not even see its distance from 'the' reality, as truths are always analogical.[146] Only once the truths do not line up, as in Martinelli's case, a clash occurs, shaking the very world we hold to be true: our culture. It might explain why the original footsteps were so rigorously framed, their pagan provenance crudely constrained by a wooden barrier, in an attempt to realign contradicting truths. Moreover, it might also explain why a 'Christian' copy of the relic was made in the seventeenth century.

Implicit and explicit belief

The acknowledgement of Veyne's Foucauldian argument that the world we hold to be true is always constructed and sustained by power structures (modalities of belief) is an essential key to understanding the dynamics of belief. However, I would argue that one can distinguish (at least) two dimensions to belief, which I will call *implicit* and *explicit* belief.

Veyne speaks of "truth" rather than of belief. His notion of belief can be seen as an unconscious, *implicit*, acceptance of the paradigmatic *status quo*: "it resides in us."[147] The notion of *implicit* belief indeed helps us understand why even Petrarca accepted the footsteps as the veritable imprint of Christ's feet, in spite of the many similar objects scattered around the city that were allowed to expose their pagan heritage.

It does not, however, fully explain why "people kneel in prayer, venerating it [the footsteps] with kisses and touch it with rosaries and medals", as elicited by Martinelli's petition.[148] This dimension of belief is a spiritual or religious belief. This is, however, not the same as a belief in religion, which is constructed and therefore *implicit*. Religious belief is the focused, *explicit* belief that objects encompass the transcendent, that they mediate between the believer and a divine entity. This religious belief, we can state, is the embodied

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[145] *Idem*, p. 13.
[146] *Idem*, p. 21.
[147] *Ibid*.
[148] Martinelli, see footnote 15.

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experience of the credulity that Veyne talks about, the implicit belief in that what tradition holds to be true, shaped and governed by Keane's semiotic ideologies. But how do objects become such mediators? To understand this, let us turn to the field of Material Religion.

II.3 From modalities of belief to aesthetic formations

The somatic experience – Material Religion

The distinction between explicit and implicit belief that I propose, lies at the heart of the study of religious material culture. The idea that belief is implicit and disembodied has, in the past decades, been overturned by scholars of religious material culture. This development has led to the introduction of a new field of studies within Material Culture – the study of Material Religion. Religion, as the argument in this field goes, can never be immaterial.[149] Even the most profound anti-materialistic religions need matter to be "rendered tangible and become present in the world."[150] From the paper on which the Gospels are printed to the bodies that are used in acts of religious worship, religion cannot escape matter – "essence needs stuff."[151]

In her introduction to *Aesthetic Formations*, anthropologist and scholar of Material Religion Birgit Meyer introduces the concept of the "sensational form." This notion is reminiscent of Keane's semiotic ideologies in the sense that it too describes an overarching and normative set of assumptions about the ways people deal with objects, and which subsequently "involve religious practitioners in particular practices of worship."[152] Instead of governing the reception or interpretation of signs, sensational forms sustain the ways believers *experience* religion or the divine, while also controlling the manners in which the divine is materialized. In other words: it mandates the kind of objects that are believed to mediate between believer and the divine. These mediators, in our case the footsteps, are not isolated objects, but are produced within what Meyer calls "aesthetic formations", constellations of

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[149] E. g. Birgit Meyer, Dick Houtman (eds.), *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2012, p. 7; Matthew Engelke, "Material Religion", in: R. Orsi (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 209.
[150] Meyer; Houtman 2012, p. 7.
[151] Matthew Engelke, "Material Religion", in: R. Orsi (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 209-229, p. 212.
[152] Birgit Meyer, *Aesthetic Formations, Media, Religion, and the Senses*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

"bodies, senses, media, things, practices, attitudes, and ideas."[153] These aesthetic formations can be understood as Veyne's purifying processes that validate myths.

Anthropologist Matthew Engelke understands the objects that are the focus of explicit belief as a "middle ground", mediators between the believer and the divine.[154] Bruno Latour goes a step further and states that "mediators" not only act as "intermediaries" or passive containers of divine presence, but also shape the content which they transmit; they produce belief.[155]

"Essence needs stuff." Religious belief needs semiotic links, the mediators that make it possible to experience the divine, that make it present in the world. The veneration of the footsteps in the Domine Quo Vadis ensemble and the credulity of the believers is thus not only governed by semiotic ideologies and modalities of belief, but must moreover be regarded as a "sensational form", involving religious practitioners in the practices of worship. Thus, the footsteps can be seen as a telling demonstration of the process in which implicit belief supports explicit belief, a process of "purification of myth by reason."

Conclusion

While in Part I, I highlighted the semiotic ideology at work in the appropriation of the ex-voto, this second Part revolved around the question: what made veneration of the footsteps as the *true* imprints of Christ's feet possible in the first place? I proposed to approach this question by acknowledging that veneration and belief not only entail a semiotic ideology and a broader representational economy, but also what I have called an *explicit* belief. People, we may surmise, were drawn to the 'materiality' of the footprints, which functioned as a "sensational form", a mediator between the believers and the divine. In this light, people were inclined to view the footsteps as true, neglecting or overlooking its pagan provenance. Of course, it remains difficult for us to grasp how such attitudes worked in reality, but the approaches of Veyne and Meyer help us understand the setting in which the footsteps received their sacred status and became an object of Christian worship.

In Part III I will investigate the 'authenticity question' from yet another angle, by looking at the seventeenth-century replica of the footsteps that replaced the original.

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[153] *Idem*, pp. 6-11, and Sonia Hazard, "The Material Turn in the Study of Religion", in: *Religion and Society. Advances in Research*, 2013, no 4, pp. 58-78, p. 69.
[154] Engelke 2012, p. 227.
[155] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 39-40.

Part III – Fabrication

III.1 Christ's many traces

In the previous chapters, we have seen that materiality is the stuff through which the religious becomes manifest and gets defined. The divine is explicitly believed to be both present and represented in objects of religious veneration. We have seen how this presence is negotiated in the process of mediation. In the last part of this thesis, we will turn over the performative element of fabrication and consider how the process of mediation is challenged by the reproduction of the mediator.

Today, in the Chiesa del Domine Quo Vadis, the marble slab with incised footsteps is a copy of the original that has been kept in one of the seven pilgrim churches of Rome, the San Sebastiano Fuori le Mura. We do not know when or why the relic was moved to the San Sebastiano. Unfortunately, due to the many closed archives and libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic, I have not been able to search for documents that might report on or testify to its translation. However, a fifteenth-century account states that by that time the church, as it was built in the ninth century, was in ruins. Flavio Biondo's *De Roma Instaurata* from 1450 mentions that the roof had collapsed.[156]

The circumstances surrounding the translation present a fascinating field of further inquiry. For now, however, it is my hypothesis that a combination of the dilapidated state of the Medieval church and the increasing popularity of pilgrimage was a motive to transfer the footsteps to the San Sebastiano in the fifteenth century. On this ancient and principal site of apostolic veneration, the relic could be kept safe, easily approachable by pilgrims, while being close to the place of origin.

Furthermore, if we depart from the assumption outlined in Part II, that the original ex-voto carries a dedicatory inscription hidden under the wooden frame, we should also consider the possibility that the reproduction was motivated by this inconveniencing testimony to the object's pagan provenance. Although we do not know why or when the relic was translated, we do know that it was reproduced in the year 1616. This is specified in the inscription on the outer border of the reproduction (fig. 2), along with a memorandum to the visitor stating that he is looking at a copy and that the real stone is in the San Sebastiano. A nineteenth-

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[156] Flavio Biondo, *Roma Instaurata*, Rome: ca. 1450, fol. 42, xcv.

century informatory plaque on the wall above the door of the present-day Chiesa del Domine Quo Vadis notifies the traveler of the same (fig. 9).

When entering the present-day church, the visitor is presented with an ensemble in which the footsteps are displayed in a way that frames them as the prints left by Christ's feet. The stone is positioned in the middle of a road that simulates the Via Appia (fig. 10). It is juxtaposed with other objects referring to the parable, such as the frescoes on both walls depicting respectively Peter and Christ. An iron frame encases the relic to prevent it from being stolen, while still allowing the footsteps to be touched through the bars. By such a presentation, the footsteps invite an embodied response from the visitor, similar to what Guarducci discussed in relation to believers in Antiquity, who positioned their own feet over the sacred footprints in order to establish a direct encounter with the symbolized divinity.

And indeed, the polished and glazy appearance of the incised stone's surface testifies to a longstanding tradition of touching and embodied veneration. A few years ago, I was visiting the church when a touring car stopped on the Via Appia and a large group of Polish nuns thronged around the marble footprints in reverence and contemplation, touching and venerating the stone in quite a similar manner to that which Martinelli described in his petition to Pope Alexander VII for the reinstatement of the impression relic of Saint Michael.

This modern veneration made me wonder about the remarkable situation that has developed in this case study and has been sustained since the seventeenth century. For, the original footsteps were not lost or kept in some distant location. On the contrary: they were and still are situated in a reliquary cabinet in a prominent side chapel of an important and easily accessible church only a kilometer down the same road (fig. 7). In his guidebook on Roman apostolic sites, Francesco Torrigio implies that the original footsteps had not been rigorously locked away after they had been reproduced. He writes that the original stone was regularly taken out of its display in the San Sebastiano and that he himself has moreover seen them "on several occasions", one of which being the visit of the Grand Duke of Florence in 1626.[157] How could the reproduction and the original coexist in such close proximity without each losing their (claim to) authenticity?

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[157] Torrigio 1644, p. 63.

III.2 The magic of substitutability

For a possible explanation we have to complement the concepts of "sensational forms" and "mediation" that helped us deal with the issue of belief in Part II. In his book *Forgery, Replica, Fiction*, Christopher Wood has developed a hypothesis which accounts for the credulity that arises from situations in which original and replica coexist. Wood argues that, in contrast to the modern, or post-Renaissance, beholder who assigns the artefact no other origin than the moment of its making, the reception of historical artefacts in pre-Renaissance Europe was governed by their mutual substitutability. Within their categories, such as a common referent or a shared purpose, "one object was as good as another."[158]

Images, buildings and artefacts were understood as links to an originary reference point, in our case Peter's meeting with Christ, rather than as products of a particular historical performance. Before the Renaissance instatement of the artwork, Wood argues, the interpretation of things was guided by an object's membership within a chain of referential artefacts, stretching back in time to a distant origin. However, the object was not regarded as having an absolute place within that chain.[159]

Wood's catenary model is useful to consider situations that occur in sequence, and that develop, as a matter of course, in the process of reception – a process in which one link legitimizes and enforces the next. As Wood states: "the substitution of paradigm is basically the belief that the chain is as good as its strongest link."[160] This point is interesting to consider in relation to the remark I made earlier in this chapter about the inconveniencing dedicatory inscriptions on the original ex-voto, testifying to its pagan origins. In the catenary model, these make for a weak link in the referential chain, necessitating a stronger reproduction. As Wood argues, an artefact within the chain could be substituted by another without weakening its reference, and even though one might possess knowledge about the circumstances of the object's fabrication or heritage, such as the presumed dedicatory inscription on the original footsteps, this was not allowed to interfere with its referential linkage or with the premise of substitutability.[161]

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[158] Wood 2008, p. 15.
[159] *Ibid*.
[160] *Ibid*.
[161] *Idem*, p. 40.

"Substitution", Wood states, "is a kind of magic, in that one object takes the place of another and denies difference, creating an effect of identity."[162]

III.3 The reproduction of the sacred

However insightful Wood's model may be for understanding the interchangeability of objects, it does not fully allow for a consideration of the transmission of divine presence from one mediator to another, from original to replica, that is implicit in the veneration of the copy of the footsteps. For, the reproduction of a venerated object raises the problem of the re-production of the transcendent, and consequently probes the question "can the sacred be produced?" Has the divine that formerly resided in the footsteps been fragmented by the act of reproduction or has it been rendered absent from the original? If so, does this suggest that (divine) mediators are arbitrary – and how are we to understand this?

In her influential book on representation, Hannah Pitkin formulates the problem as follows: how can something be present and not be present, or be present in something else – and thus recognized as being present by being absent?[163] The Romans used the word *repraesentare* to signify the "literal bringing into presence of something previously absent, or the embodiment of an abstraction in an object."[164] Pitkin therefore uses this ancient etymology to single out the "correct" working definition of representation: "*re-presentation*, a making present again."[165] Representation, therefore, means the "making present in *some sense* of something which is nevertheless *not present* literally or in fact."[166] In this light, the re-production of the relic indeed would entail a production, a *re-presentation* of the sacred, but does the divine allow itself to be that easily transferred?

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[162] *Ibid*.

[163] Hannah F. Pitkin, *On the Concept of Representation*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1972, p. 9. Also quoted in Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence, Beyond Scripture in an African Church*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2007, p. 28.

[164] Pitkin 1972, p. 3.

[165] *Idem*, p. 8.

[166] *Idem*, p. 9.

Matthew Engelke builds his anthropology of Christianity on the above-discussed tension between presence and absence, or what he calls "the problem of presence": "the paradoxical understanding of God's simultaneous presence and absence."[167] Elsewhere, Engelke asks a question that is even more valuable for our purposes. In his discussion of Hindu renovation rituals, in which divine agency is transmitted from one temple to another, he examines how we are to understand that an omnipresent deity can be taken out of one thing and transferred to another, "much less be made more present through reinstallation."[168] His description shows that such transfer takes place in a very 'material' and elaborate way:

> Renovation rituals are called "water-pot bathing rituals" because they culminate by pouring water "charged" with divine power over a temple's tower and images. To carry out renovation, the priests had to empty the towers and images of divine power; transfer the power of the towers into small pictures, then transfer the power of the images into water pots, which contained not only water but special ingredients, such as the smoke from burning ghee and certain leaves (…).[169]

While one might say that for the ritual itself these specific media (in this case, water, pictures, water pots, smoke and leaves) do matter, they lose their significance when it comes to the notion that the divine power *can* be transferred to these different media. Such transference of presence from one medium to another and, more broadly speaking, the apparent carelessness with which religious artefacts are reproduced and exchanged implies an arbitrariness of the given medium. In 1935, Walter Benjamin famously argued that the mechanical reproduction of an art work devalues its aura, its uniqueness.[170] A replica in Benjamin's view is a pitiable substitution for the original.

However, when it comes to religious veneration, the disregard for the medium is striking. It implies some kind of conflation of the sign and the divine entity it (re)presents, or,

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[167] Engelke 2007, p. 12.
[168] Matthew Engelke, "Material Religion", in: Robert A. Orsi, *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 209-229, p. 226.
[169] *Idem*, p. 225. Engelke draws from C.J. Fuller, "The Renovation Ritual in a South Indian Temple: the 1995 *kumbhābhiṣeka* in the Mīnākṣī Temple, Madurai", in: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 67/1, 2004, pp. 40–63.
[170] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, London: Penguin Books, 2008.

as art historian Caroline van Eck states, an "incapacity to distinguish between the image and what it represents."[171] In this conflation of signifier and signified, the medium becomes arbitrary; it seems to paradoxically disappear from the perception of the beholder.

This idea has been set forth in the inaugural lecture of anthropologist Patrick Eisenlohr, in which he discusses the propensity of media to disappear in the act of mediation. For the origins of this rather puzzling and paradoxical insight on the nature of mediation, Eisenlohr invokes Aristotle's discussion of transparent media, *media diaphana*. These transparent media make perception possible by filling up the space between perceived object and perceiving subject.[172] The medium in this process disappears in the act of perception: one does not take into account the air that is between the perceiving subject and the object of perception, "air itself only ever becomes an object of perception and attention if it does not work in the normally expected way."[173]

Conclusion

This 'paradox of disappearance' can help us understand the arbitrariness of the medium that seems to occur in the process of religious mediation. As Eisenlohr's theory elucidates, in this process, the distinction between the image and what it represents indeed seems to disappear or is rendered invisible to the believer. Taking into account Wood's 'magic' of substitutability, we can thus state that the materiality of the medium in the process of religious mediation becomes arbitrary. Subsequently, the veritable imprint of Christ's feet can be reproduced without apparent consequences for its status as mediator of the divine.

In a way, this could be regarded as an extension of what I have called "explicit belief" in Part II of this thesis. If a pagan ex-voto can be made into a Christian relic and believed to be 'real', a copy can be made of this relic and believed to be 'real', through the "purification of reason" governed by Veyne's notion of "modalities of belief" or Meyer's concept of "aesthetic formations."[174]

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[171] Caroline van Eck, *Art, Agency and Living Presence: From the Animated Image to the Excessive Object*, Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2015, p. 135.
[172] Patrick Eisenlohr, "What is a medium? The Anthropology of Media and the Question of Ethnic and Religious Pluralism", inaugural speech, Utrecht University, 2009, p. 8.
[173] *Ibid*.
[174] See chapter II.2 of this thesis.

Conclusion

The discussions in this thesis have covered some ground of the intricate case study of Domine Quo Vadis – no doubt too hastily and with too little consideration for both the sociohistorical details of Christianity in the timespans discussed and to the sensibilities of embodied religious experience. Such is the paradox that is at the heart of my research problem: we must try to keep a panoramic perspective on the parts, while constantly acknowledging that we can never grasp the whole. Nevertheless, departing from this paradox, I have demonstrated that an attempt to unravel a case study that presents itself as an object of chronological density is futile. In order to come to a solid understanding, we cannot isolate a single component from the tangled network of signifying elements that have interlaced over the course of roughly a millennium.

From a historical perspective, this research has trawled some "elements from the sea of possibilities" and has offered new insights on the case study of Domine Quo Vadis. Let us shortly summarize what we have learned and synthesize the conclusions we have drawn following each part of this thesis.

The first performative element that we considered within the palimpsestic model entailed the dynamics of appropriation. The explicit focus on signs offered by Webb Keane's notions of "semiotic ideologies", "representational economies" and "semiotic links" has proved to serve as accurate heuristic tools. By using these concepts, the appropriations in the Domine Quo Vadis case can be read as a consequence of the prevailing regulating conditions. They helped us to see how the seemingly late construction of the church and the appropriation of the ex-voto in the ninth century were in fact events occurring at precisely the right time.

Furthermore, these notions have substantiated my hypothesis that the appropriation of the pagan ex-voto as a Christian relic was contemporary to the construction of the ninth-century church. Although still to be supported by documentary evidence, the dating of the appropriation has challenged existing theories on the Early Christian church and thus advanced the academic debate on Domine Quo Vadis.

I have shown in the second part, dealing with the performative element of veneration, how we do not have to shy away from the seemingly naïve and anachronistic question of belief, but can and must regard it as another constitutive element within the ensemble of Domine Quo Vadis. We have discussed the abundance of similar votive footsteps in and around Rome and concluded that people must have been able to recognize the relic as having pagan origins. We have looked at models in which this credulity could be explained. To conceptualize this, I have set forth two dimensions to belief: the *implicit*, internalized and unconscious belief shaping the worlds that we hold to be true and the *explicit* belief that is focused on objects as mediators of the divine.

In the last part, which dealt with the performative element of fabrication, we have problematized the question of belief even further by discussing the seemingly odd attitudes towards the copy of the footsteps. How is it possible, we asked, that this copy, which is so clearly designated as a reproduction and which exists in such close proximity to the 'real' relic, is still able to claim to mediate the divine? Wood's catenary model and his "magic of substitutability" has pushed us towards the realization that, indeed, the divine seems to be relatively easily transmitted. We have considered the problem of presence through examples offered by Engelke's anthropology of religion and Eisenlohr's paradox of disappearance. These theories have demonstrated that the medium through which the transcendent is made present to the believers, can be arbitrary. Moreover, when the signifier and signified become sufficiently conflated, this arbitrariness can even lead to the paradoxical situation in which the medium disappears from the perception of the beholder, a condition that seems to have presented itself in the Domine Quo Vadis footsteps.

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to consider the historical and material elements of the Domine Quo Vadis ensemble while also acknowledging its status as a mediator of the divine. My chronologically dense and multi-layered case study necessitated the use of a palimpsestic model, which has allowed for a wide-ranging consideration by its deployment of concepts and theories from various fields in the Humanities. By using such a framework, I hope to have advanced the realization that a deliberation of the embodied experience of believers does not have to clash with the study of the material properties of objects. As I have shown, in arriving at a comprehensive understanding of this multi-layered case study, the rigid distinction between the material and the intangible is unproductive and must be

abandoned. In the prologue, I have substantiated the methodological problem that underlies this thesis by challenging some constitutive concepts within the field of material studies, and thus have positioned it within and advanced the academic debate. I have demonstrated how a consideration of the case study of Domine Quo Vadis as an *ensemble* and the palimpsestic model I have used are able to challenge the notion of the *assemblage* and the New Materialist denunciation of an anthropocentric approach to material culture.

The theoretical conceptions I have drawn on in this thesis offer tools to approach the dynamics at play in the 'grey zone' between matter and spirit, between the material and the divine or transcendent. As we have seen, in order to come to an understanding of the research problem of this thesis, the consideration of the whole without loss of attention for the parts and *vice versa,* we must allow the religious aspects of the case study to come into focus. Moreover, we must allow the religious significances that our case study has held throughout its history to stand on equal grounds with the case study's material properties.

Illustrations

Fig. 1. Chiesa del Domine Quo Vadis on the Via Appia
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Fig. 2. Copied footsteps in the Chiesa del Domine Quo Vadis
Photo by author

Fig. 3. Original footsteps in the Chiesa di San Sebastiano Fuori le Mura
Photo by author

Fig. 4. A page from the reprint of Raffaele Fabbreti's *Urbinatis Inscriptionum Antiquarum Quae In Aedibus Paternis Asservantur Explicatio Et Additamentum* (Rome, 1702), describing the Licinia Philete slab found on the Via Nomentana in Rome
Source: https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/fabretti1702/0482, accessed on 17 July 2021

Fig. 5. Mosaic footprint marking the entrance of the so-called *planta pedis* Mithraeum in Ostia
Photo by author

Fig. 6. Votive footsteps dedicated to the goddess Caelestis, Musei Capitolini,
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Fig. 7. Display of the original footsteps in a side chapel of the San Sebastiano
Photo by author

Fig. 8. Marble disc with footprints formerly attributed to Michael the Archangel. Musei Capitolini. Source: https://www.angolohermes.com/simboli/Rocce/rocceplastiche.html, accessed on 24 May 2021

QUESTA CHIESA É INTITOLATA SANTA MARIA DELLE PIANTE E COMUNEMENTE DOMINE QUO VADIS DALLE PIANTE É NOMINATA PER L'APPARIZIONE DI NOSTRO SIGNORE FATTA IN ESSA A S. PIETRO, QUANDO QUESTO GLORIOSO APOSTOLO PERSUASO, ANZI VIOLENTATO DALLI CRISTIANI AD USCIRE DI PRIGIONE, E PARTIRSI DA ROMA, S'INCAMINÒ PER QUESTA VIA APPIA, E GIUNTO A QUESTO LUOGO, S'INCONTRÒ CON NOSTRO SIGNORE, CHE S'INCAMINAVA VERSO ROMA, ALLA CUI PRESENZA MARAVIGLIATO GLI DISSE DOMINE QUO VADIS, ED EGLI RISPOSE VENIO ROMAM ITERUM CRUCIFIGI, INTESE DI SUBITO IL MISTERO SAN PIETRO, E SI RICORDÒ, CHE A LUI ANCORA AVEVA PREDETTO UNA TALE MORTE, QUANDO GLI DIEDE IL GOVERNO DELLA SUA CHIESA, PERÒ VOLTANDO IL PASSO, RITORNÒ A ROMA, ED IL SIGNORE SPARÌ, E NELLO SPARIRE LASSÒ IMPRESSE LE SUE PIANTE IN UN SELCE DEL PAVIMENTO DELLA STRADA, E DA QUI VÍ PRESE QUESTA CHIESA, IL SOPRANOME DELLE PIANTE, E DALLE PAROLE DI S. PIETRO, HA IL NOME DI DOMINE QUO VADIS. IN MEZZO DI QUESTA STA COLLOCATA LA FORMA ESPRESSIVA DELLE PIANTE DI NOSTRO SIGNORE CAVATA DA QUEL SELCE DOVE DA LUI FURONO IMPRESSE, CHE AL PRESENTE SI CONSERVA NELLA CHIESA DI S. SEBASTIANO

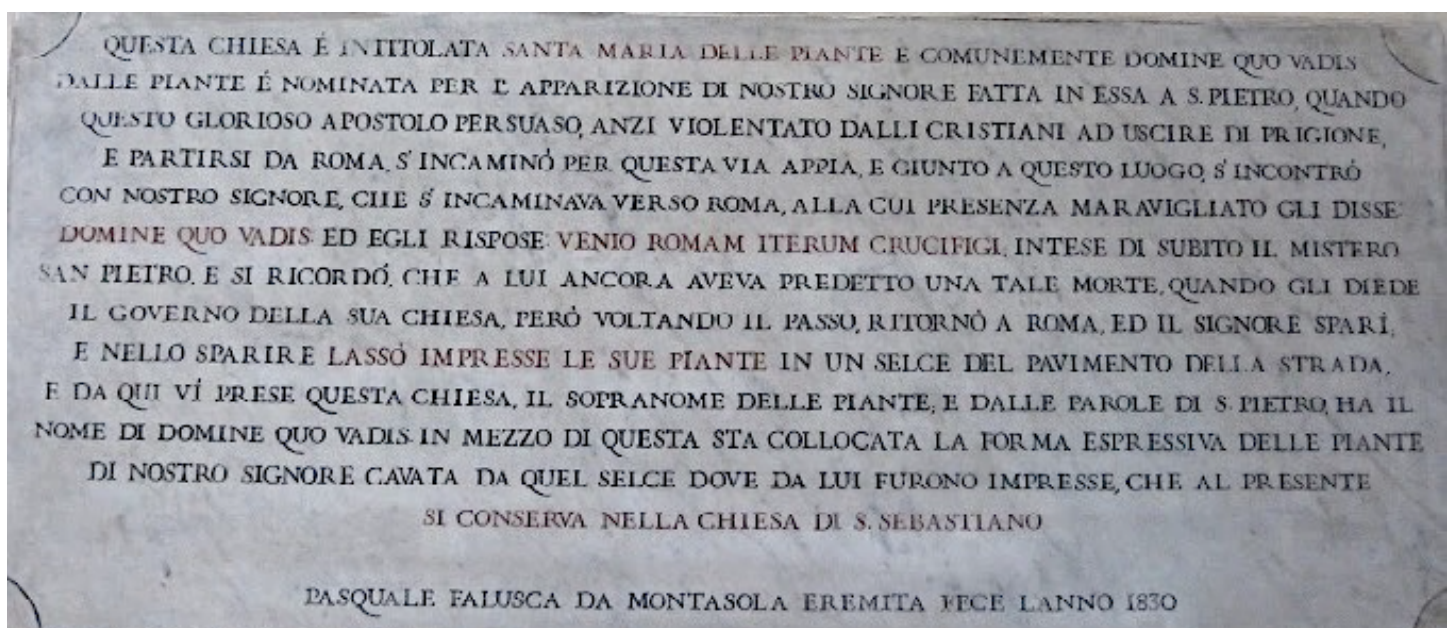PASQUALE FALUSCA DA MONTASOLA EREMITA FECE L'ANNO 1830

Fig. 9. Nineteenth-century informatory plaque in the Domine Quo Vadis, among other things notifying the visitor that the footsteps are a reproduction.

Fig. 10. Impression of the interior and placement of the relic
Photo by author

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