

MOUNT SORACTE

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Consulting my Italian encyclopedia, P-S, on some subject by now forgotten, the word *Soratte* caught my eye. Curious, I paused to read the short item because this solitary mountain, sitting humped upon a vast empty plain like some prehistoric mammoth strayed and stranded in the wrong time period, dominates the horizon of a small village where we once lived, not far from Rome. The lonesome silhouette of Monte Soratte was as familiar to us as the plaintive face, thrust at dawn through our bedroom window, of Sor'Alberto's donkey. Loose again!

I read: "Mountainous mass ... on the right of the Tiber ... rises only 691 m. but because of its isolated position in an open plain ... a characteristic element of the landscape, visible also from Rome. There were two famous monasteries, Sant'Andrea del Soratte, San Silvestro del Soratte, protected by the Carolingians.... On its summit had been an ancient temple to Apollo Soranus...."

I would have had no intention of retaining this information had I not run across, that very same day while riffling through the contents of the box labeled "Picture Possibilities", a reproduction that had been lying in wait ever since I used to give lectures on the Basilica of St. Peter's, fifteen, twenty years ago (Fig. 1).

It takes two sticks to make a fire; a sudden spark shot through the dry timber of memory searing a path between Roma and Soratte.

In one of those ironies of history, Pope Sylvester I and his priests fled to Mount Soracte to escape the persecutions of the Roman haruspices. The mountain once sacred to Apollo sheltered in safety the priests of the true religion.

Long before, when the cultured and powerful cities of Etruria flourished from the Arno to the Tiber, the Wolf-suckled Twins descended the Alban Hills and chose a site commanding the river, there to build themselves a city. Remus, somehow, got killed. To make certain his city would prosper, Romulus called upon the famous expertise of the Etruscan haruspices to direct him "by sacred usages and written rules in all the ceremonies to be observed, as in a religious rite".* Under the guidance of Etruscan priests, very likely from the territory of the Veii, the walls of Rome were traced on April 21, an anniversary celebrated to this day.

*PLUTARCH: *Lives*, "Romulus".

Taught by the Etruscans, Romulus, a very religious man, became skilled in divination. He even learned the power of the *lituus*, the crooked rod used by Etruscan augurs to describe the quarters of the heavens as they observed the flights of birds, and he treasured his own instrument as long as he lived.

As the Romans assimilated the feasts and customs of their neighbors, they established their own official college of haruspices based on the "Etruscan discipline", a written code that governed every public and private act - a position of enormous political influence. The code specified diverse priestly categories: those who specialized in the reading of omens, or foretelling the future, performing many wonders, or interpreting the will of the gods in signs and portents such as a flood, an earthquake, lightning strikes, or plagues.... Honored and privileged, the haruspices were regulated by law, just as any other governmental agency. In 319 and 321, Constantine the Great issued laws to curb certain prevalent abuses, but it was only the Church that prohibited Christians from consulting practitioners of the magic arts. It must not be supposed that the rite of baptism washed away the pagan beliefs of centuries.



Roman augur with *lituus*

The struggle between paganism and Christianity kindled dangerously during the IVth century, and the Church's condemnation of soothsayers, augurs, diviners, magicians, amulets, phylacteries, potions and all the occult practices and paraphernalia, laid the groundwork for the inflammatory hostility of the haruspices, driving Sylvester, Bishop of Rome, and his priests into the caves of Mount Soracte. An echo of those unsteady times can be heard in the Church's reading for St. Sylvester's feast day, December 31, from St. Paul's Second Letter to Timothy: "Preach the word, insist in good times and inconvenient times ... for the time will come when men will no longer accept the true doctrine, but follow their own desires ... they will turn from the truth to go back to the fables." Four hundred years could not erase the abiding tradition of Saint Sylvester's asylum on Soracte, for in 746 Charlemagne retired to the mount for a period of penance, and built there a monastery, San Silvestro del Soratte, that Pope Paul I, in 767, joined to the church of San Silvestro in Capite in the very heart of Rome. The other monastery, Sant'Andrea, is mentioned for the first time in a letter dated 762, from Pepin to Paul I.

A monk of Sant'Andrea — Benedetto — devoted 28 years, from 972 to 1000 — to the composition of a history of Rome. The *Chronicon di Benedetto di Sant'Andrea* begins in the time of Julian the Apostate (r. 361-363) and ends with Benedetto's lament over the rule of the foreigner, Otto I (r. 962-973).

The *Chronicon* is valuable for the traditions and legends current in the Xth century; it remains a precious fount of Rome's early history for it is based on written sources in the archives of the monastery. Benedetto also mentions the Veronica image of Rome.

Johannes papa ... fecit oratorium sanctae Dei Genitricis opere pulcherrimo intra ecclesiam Beati Petri Apostoli, ubi dicitur Veronica.

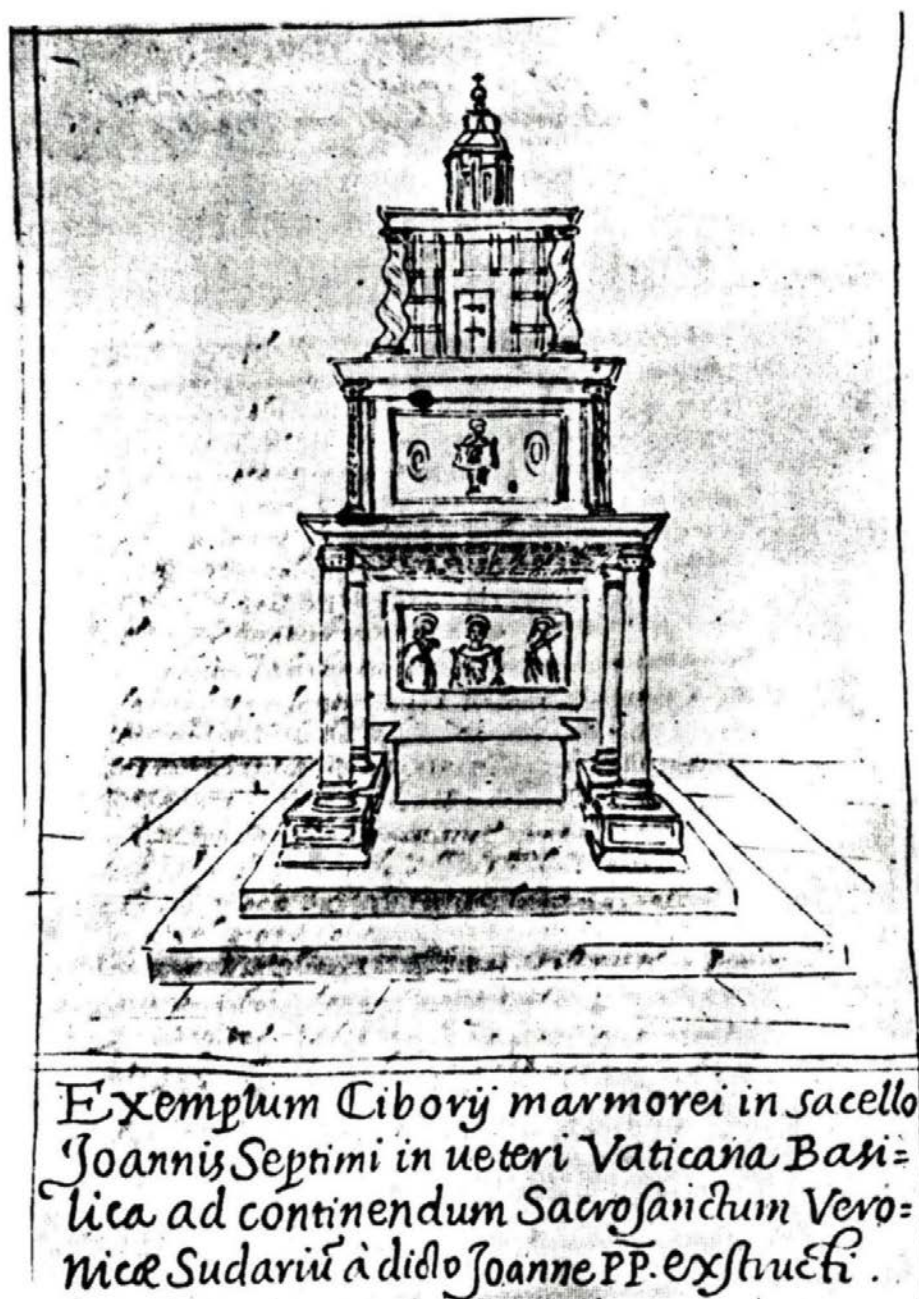


Fig. 1: The marble shrine that held the *sudarium* of Veronica, in a sketch by J. Grimaldi in 1620. Both cassettes depict a figure displaying the veil. The legend reads: Sketch of the marble ciborium in the shrine of John VII in the Old Vatican Basilica, containing the Most Holy Sudarium of Veronica, constructed by the said John, P.P.

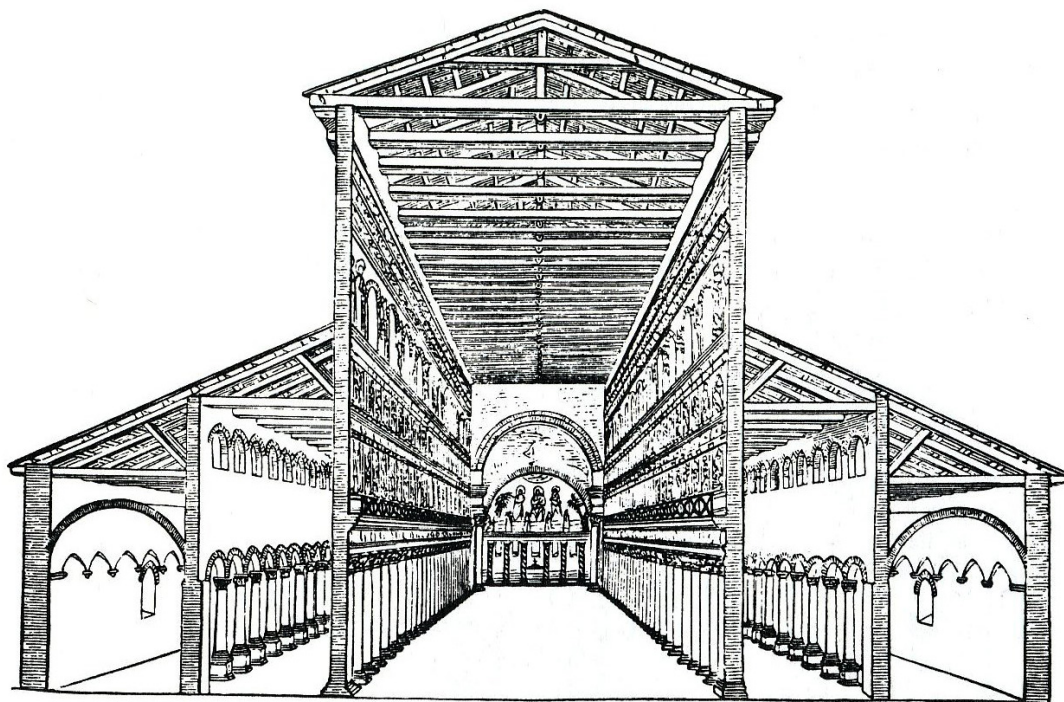


Fig. 2: The interior of Old Saint Peter's before reconstruction began. The mosaics running the length of the walls of the nave are indicated, as well as the triumphal arch and apsidal decoration.

(Pope John ... made the oratory of the Holy Mother of God, very beautiful work in the church of Blessed Peter the Apostle, where there is the so-called Veronica.)

A beautiful work the oratory must have been, to judge from descriptions and mosaic fragments preserved in the Vatican and elsewhere. The wall above the oratory was encrusted with a huge mosaic of the Virgin, beside whom John himself was portrayed (Fig. 2 & Fig. 3).

John VII was born in Calabria of Greek parents. Son of a distinguished Greek whose career in Byzantine civil service culminated in the governorship of the imperial palaces on the Palatine, property of the Byzantine emperors, John was educated in Constantinople, brought up in oriental luxury. Understandably, on his accession to the papal throne in 705, he began to adorn the city, calling on artists from Constantinople. The churches shone with gleaming mosaics and exquisitely beautiful paintings. Rome had never seen such splendor. After a reign of only two years, John VII died and was buried before the altar of the Sudarium of Veronica, which he had built and endowed.

Considering John VII's close and continuous ties with Constantinople, it seems certain that the Veronica image for which he erected the shrine in Old St. Peter's was brought to him from Byzantium. But there were already in Rome other such images. In the year 597, Pope Gregory the Great equipped St. Augustine with one to

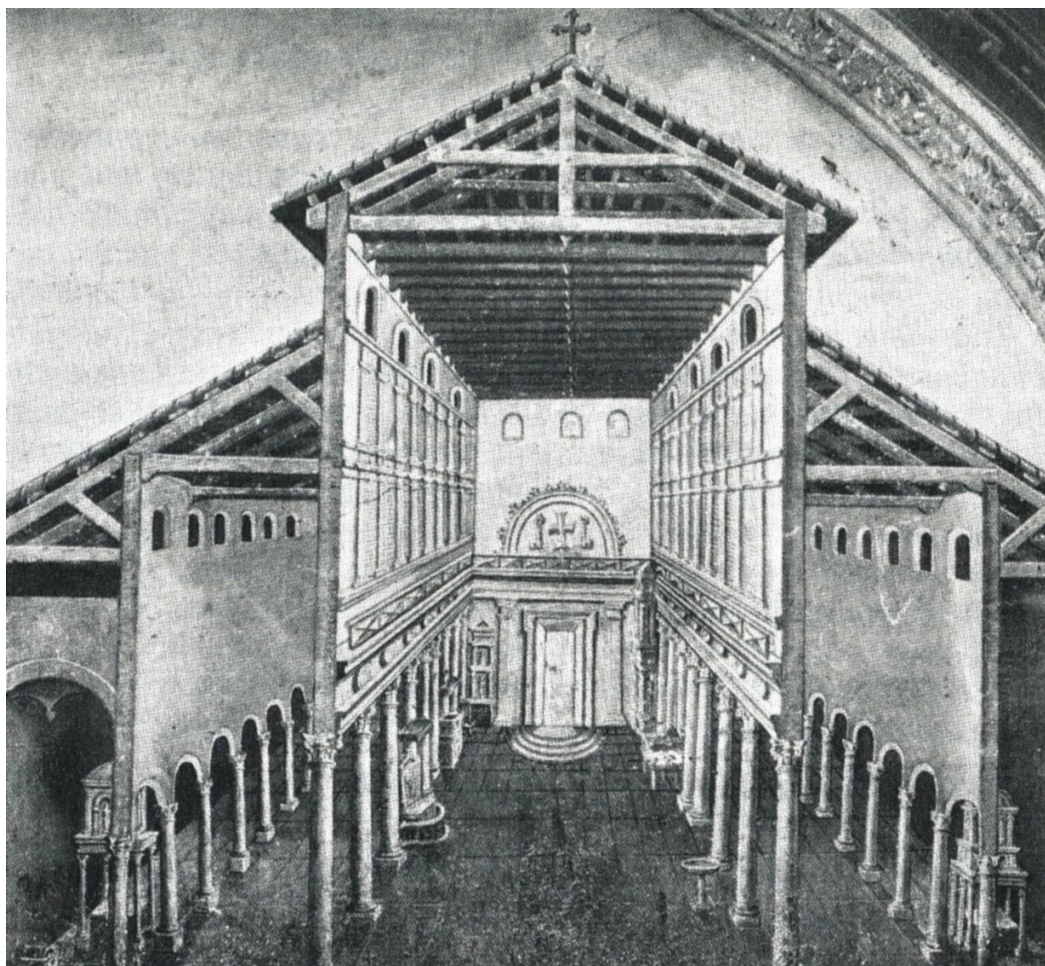


Fig. 3: The interior of Old St. Peter's in a fresco executed by Domenico Tasselli in the XVIth century. In 1538 a wall was erected at the end of the nave so that Mass could be celebrated while the new construction was going on. The Veronica shrine, in the Blessed Virgin oratory, is shown in its place against the wall in the right aisle. Reproduction from *Storia dell'Arte Italiana*.

carry to the pagans of Britain: "... a silver cross as their standard and the likeness of our Lord and Saviour painted on a board".* In the VIth century, Rome had welcomed several communities of Greek monks fleeing the Arab conquest of Palestine. One of the treasures they brought was a *Vera Immagine*, a True Image, according to the marble inscription on the wall of the church of San Silvestro in Capite:

SACROSANCTA IESV XPI IMAGO / ANTE TEMPUS PASSIONIS / AB IPSO
MIRABILITER IMPRESSA / ET ABGARO REGI TRANSMISSA / A GRAECIS
PROFUGIS PRO S. FIDE TVENDA / ROMAM ASPORTATA / IN HAC S.
SILVESTRI ECCLESIA / PIA OMNIUM VENERATIONE PERCOLITER

(Most holy image of Jesus Christ miraculously impressed before the time of his Passion and transmitted to King Abgar, brought to Rome by Greek

*BEDE: *History of the English Church*.

refugees for the preservation of the Holy Faith, in this church of St. Silvester for the greater honor and pious adoration of all.)

The inscription refers to an image no longer there; it was removed to the Vatican for safekeeping during the Risorgimento, and was replaced by a copy, almost inconspicuous in the keystone of the apsidal arch, shadowed high above the nave of Rome's ancient basilica of San Silvestro in Capite.

And so we come, by various paths, full circle. *Soratte* was the *madeleine* that evoked this remembrance of things past. A past of nearly three millenia brought close to us on the numinous trace of ordinary, apparently unrelated acts, by chance recorded and preserved, emerging at long intervals from a history in which we too are a part.

PRINCIPAL WORKS CONSULTED:

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Various Italian books on Veio; a *Notizie Storiche* of the village in which we lived; personal notes.



From a kiln of John VII, a brick stamp bearing his name.