'Treasures of the Temple' and Claims to Authority in Twelfth-century Rome

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By the twelfth century, Christians and Jews alike believed that certain of the treasures removed by the Emperor Titus from the Temple of Herod in Jerusalem following its destruction in A.D. 70 were housed in Rome as relics under the protection of the Church. The Roman appropriation of Jewish liturgical treasures from the Temple and their removal to Rome paralleled the continuing diaspora or dispersion of the Jewish people. Despite this widespread scattering of Jewish communities throughout Christendom, Jews continued to observe their traditional customs and to preserve the final memory of the Temple in Jerusalem together with its treasures. The papacy’s manipulation of commonly held perceptions about the Temple Treasures and the Church’s simultaneous identification with the heritage of the ancient Jews during the twelfth century in Rome, a perception that the Church encouraged and perhaps exploited as a political tool, are both themes well suited to discussions of power and authority. This era of an accelerated identification with biblical Judaism may also be seen to parallel the protection extended to the Jews by the popes in the document Sicut Judeis.1

The destruction of the Temple heralded not only the elimination of the last Jewish structure erected on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem but also signalled the definitive end of a Temple-centred ritual within Judaism. The epic events involving the Temple Treasures followed a four-year-long war against Judea,

which had revolted against provincial rule. Roman legionaries commanded by Titus finally broke into the inner wall of the Temple in Jerusalem and set fire to the Holy of Holies. Josephus, a former Jewish general and eyewitness, recorded how Roman soldiers removed the Temple Treasures before the structure was destroyed, set aside numerous prisoners to be used as slaves or in spectacles, and selected the tallest and most handsome of the youth, and reserved them for the Triumph. When Titus and his father, the Emperor Vespasian, returned to Rome, Temple Treasures and captured Jews alike were paraded together the length of the Via Sacra. As Josephus wrote, 'conspicuous above all stood out those [spoils] captured in the Temple at Jerusalem. These consisted of a golden table, many talents in weight, and a lamp stand, likewise made of gold [...]. After these, and last of all the spoils, was carried a copy of the Jewish Law.' The Treasures were then placed on display in Vespasian’s Temple of Peace, which fronted onto the Via Sacra on the Forum, while memorial arches and coins alike were fashioned to commemorate the victory. To this day, the Arch of Titus (c. A.D. 81), situated at the southern end of the Forum where the road leads up to the Palatine, preserves the memory of Jewish tragedy and Roman Triumph in its sculpted friezes depicting the paraded Temple Treasures.

Nearly five centuries after Titus’s triumph, Procopius, advisor to Belisarius, Justinian’s general, mentioned the fate and location of the Temple Treasures in his History of the Wars. As he chronicled the removal of the Temple Treasures from North Africa to Constantinople, Procopius noted that the Treasures had been stolen from Rome during the Vandal sack of the city in 455, and were taken to Carthage at that time. The Byzantine army subsequently seized the Treasures in Carthage in 534 and brought them to Constantinople. Shortly thereafter, related Procopius, the Treasures were returned to Jerusalem.

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2 In The Jewish War, written in A.D. 75, Josephus chronicled his eyewitness view of the events of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Although he composed this work primarily for a Roman readership, his account’s detail and completeness makes it an invaluable tool for historians.


6 Procopius, History of the Wars, IV, ix, 5–10. Unfortunately Procopius does not offer any more specific information in regard to exactly where the Treasures may have been sent.
Although textual references to their whereabouts in the West cease after the sixth century, a popular belief prevailing in Rome during the twelfth century was that certain of the Temple Treasures had remained in the city, and that they were stored for safe keeping in San Giovanni in Laterano, the basilica built by Constantine. The perception that the Lateran was protecting these holy relics of the Jews existed not only among Christians, but also among Jews. The *Itinerary* of Benjamin of Tudela, a Jew from Navarre, further attests to this belief.\(^7\) The *Itinerary* chronicled Benjamin’s travels to several destinations in the Mediterranean world, including Rome. While in Rome, he visited the Lateran, possibly taken there by his local Jewish guides, and reported seeing two bronze columns which he believed had originally been located in the Temple of Solomon.\(^8\) Benjamin also suggests that the Temple Treasures had remained in Rome, reporting that, either lying beneath or close to the Lateran, ‘is the cave where Titus, the son of Vespasian, stored the Temple vessels which he brought from Jerusalem’.\(^9\) Benjamin’s account clearly demonstrates the persistent association between the Temple Treasures and Rome, and the Temple Treasures and the Lateran Basilica in the twelfth century. The perceived presence of such famous Jewish relics at the Lateran held extraordinary significance. Since the time of Constantine the Lateran basilica and palace had served as the *cathedra* of the Bishop of Rome, the centre of papal authority, and seat of papal bureaucracy, the Curia.\(^10\)

Christian perceptions of the Temple Treasures being held in the Lateran in the twelfth century are demonstrated by both literary and material evidence during an era when the papacy embraced the heritage of the Jews as an intrinsic component of

\(^7\) *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, intro. by Michael A. Signer (Malibu: Joseph Simon/Pangloss, 1993). It is impossible to say whether Benjamin deliberately embellished his account or whether his brief description of Rome (pp. 63–64) can be relied upon for an accurate reflection of the Jewish communities he encountered. This writer will nevertheless use Benjamin’s text as an indication of the perceptions and beliefs of the Roman Jews.

\(^8\) Benjamin, *The Itinerary*, p. 64.

\(^9\) Might this have been a subterranean access to some small part of the former *castra equitium singularium* or former barracks of the imperial bodyguard, on the site of which Constantine had erected his Basilica? For the excavations beneath the Lateran see *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae: The Early Christian Basilicas of Rome (IV–IX Cent.)*, ed. by Richard Krautheimer, Spencer Corbett, and Alfred K. Frazer, 5 vols (Città del Vaticano: Pontificia Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana; New York, Institute of Fine Arts, 1977), v. 24–28.

its Christian heritage, and as part of the Church’s claim to possess the fullness of the Old and the New Covenants. These instances involve direct references to the Temple Treasures and include two twelfth-century texts, the redesignation of the private papal chapel of S. Lorenzo as the Sancta Sanctorum, and mosaic evidence from the late-twelfth-century Lateran portico. In addition, the papal adventus ceremony was expanded in the twelfth century to include the display of the Torah to the Pope by representatives of the Roman Jewish community, an action pregnant with meaning in terms of the superseding by Christianity of Judaism, and in terms of the contemporary relationship between the two groups in the twelfth century. These four instances clearly demonstrate the Church’s welcome identification with the pre-Christian heritage of the Jews during the twelfth century.

The literary evidence includes two texts, *De sacra imagine SS Salvatoris in Palatio Lateranensi* and *Descriptio Lateranensis Ecclesiae*, both emanating from the canons of the Lateran during the twelfth century. Both texts mention the

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11 See nn. 15 and 16, below.


Temple Treasures as prominent components of the Lateran's vast relic collection. From the inception of the Lateran Basilica in the fourth century, the church had served as a repository for numerous relics of the apostles and saints, of Christ and the Virgin Mary, of articles from the Holy Land, and of the Acheropita, the image of Christ which was believed to have been divinely made. By the twelfth century, much of this extraordinary collection was housed in the papal chapel and in the basilica itself. These two texts list and describe the relics in the Lateran collection, including the Jewish relics.

The first text, *De sacra imagine*, was composed circa 1145 by the Cistercian monk, Nicolaus Maniacutius. Few details of Nicholas's early life are known save that he had served as a deacon of S. Damasus in Rome before c. 1140, when he entered the Cistercian community of S. Anastasius at Tre Fontane as a novice under Abbot Bernard. Indeed, it was this Abbot Bernard, himself a close associate of Bernard of Clairvaux who, following his election in 1145 as Eugenius III, probably brought Nicolaus with him to the Lateran. Nicolaus's *De sacra imagine* focused attention on the newly named *Sancta Sanctorum*, formerly the private papal chapel of S. Lorenzo in the Lateran Palace, and contains the first known designation of that chapel as the *Sancta Sanctorum* or the Holy of Holies, a term familiar to both Christians and Jews from Old Testament narratives which described the sanctuary housing the Ark of the Covenant. Nicolaus explicitly emphasized the similarities between the Roman *Sancta Sanctorum* and the ancient Holy of Holies in which the Hebrew High Priest was the only celebrant allowed to enter the space, accompanied by few attendants, a situation paralleled by the Pope's nearly solitary celebration of Mass in his private chapel.

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Historians perhaps know Nicolaus best as a corrector of Latin translations of the Old Testament texts, primarily the Psalter. His work, however, joined a growing practice among Christian Hebraists across the Continent and England during the twelfth century, who not only communicated with Jewish scholars but who also, and to varying degrees, actually learned Hebrew. At this point, questions arise as to why Nicolaus produced the *De sacra imagine*. What lay behind the impetus to focus on biblical Judaism, and what precisely was the nature of his role at the Lateran? Did he perhaps produce the text as a guide for pilgrims to Rome in the manner of other twelfth-century guides such as the *Mirabilia urbis Romae*? According to Gerhard Wolf, it was Nicolaus himself who initiated the use of *Sancta Sanctorum* for the former chapel of S. Lorenzo.

The decision to rename the popes’ private chapel, however, must surely have originated with a higher ecclesiastical authority than Nicolaus, even perhaps emanating from the papal administration itself. Nicolaus’s emphasis placed on the Hebrew heritage within Christian theology may thus have been the result of a papal directive and might well have originated in the Cistercian milieu which Eugenius and he shared. On the other hand, it was possibly also related to the growing interest among Christian Hebraists not merely to learn Hebrew to facilitate their corrections of Latin Old Testament translations but also to gain


23 Two of the twelfth-century travel guides to Rome were known as the *Mirabilia urbis Romae*, although they were composed by different authors, and for different audiences. See *La più antica redazione dei ‘Mirabilia’*, in *Codice toponografico della città di Roma* (see n. 16, above), III, 1–65; English version in *The Marvels of Rome — Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, ed. by Francis Morgan Nichols, 2nd edn (New York: Italica, 1986), and *Magistri Gregorii: De Mirabilibus Urbis Romae*, in *Codice toponografico*, III, 137–167; English version in *Master Gregorius: The Marvels of Rome*, trans. by John Osborne, Medieval Sources in Translation, 31 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1987).

24 Wolf, ‘“Lactare filia Sion”’, p. 423.
direct access to Jewish scholars, a living source of Hebrew scholarship, for translations and interpretations. The question remains, however, as to what or who motivated this significant alteration to the official name of the chapel which henceforth identified it as not only an architectural element from Jewish sacred architecture, but also as a symbol of the most intimate contact between the forerunners of Christianity and their God?

A second text, the Descriptio Lateranensis Ecclesiae, also claimed that the Church possessed the Temple Treasures. The Descriptio was first composed c. 1073–1118 by an unknown canon at the Lateran primarily in order to direct pilgrims to the Lateran Basilica and to inform them of the relics held within, including the Temple Treasures. A second redaction dates from the pontificate of Anastasius IV (1153–54). The text was further revised and a prologue added later in the twelfth century by John the Deacon, another canon of the Lateran. John was directed to revise the Descriptio extensively by Pope Alexander III (1159–81) and to focus even more attention on the Temple Treasures supposedly kept at the Lateran. Valentini and Zucchetti proposed that the main purpose of John’s revision was to bolster the Lateran’s position as mater et caput of all churches in its ongoing dispute with St Peter’s for supremacy in Rome. While

26 Valentini and Zucchetti, ‘Descriptio Lateranensis Ecclesiae’, pp. 319–20. The twelfth-century Roman renovatio generated a widespread interest in the remains of classical antiquity, then in evidence throughout the city, coinciding with an increased pilgrimage movement to holy sites. Several miracula texts were written during that century to guide pilgrims to both sacred and profane mementos of the past. For further reading on this pilgrimage phenomenon to Rome, see Debra J. Birch, Pilgrimage to Rome in the Middle Ages (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998) and Diana Webb, Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West (London: Tauris, 1999).

this interpretation appears reasonable in light of the vigorous and ongoing dispute between the Lateran and the Vatican in the High Middle Ages, it is probably only one of many explanations for John's revision of the *Descriptio*. Political challenges to papal power and authority might well have been the driving force behind the reissue of a text asserting papal and institutional supremacy. Throughout much of his pontificate, Alexander III struggled against the power of Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa, of various antipopes, and of the Roman Commune, and frequently fled Rome when conditions became unsafe.\(^3^1\)

*De sacra imagine* and *Descriptio Lateranensis Ecclesiae* — these two Lateran texts produced with papal authority — placed direct emphasis on the heritage of the biblical Jews which the Christian Church claimed to possess, theologically and physically, in the form of the Temple Treasures. This textual evidence, taken together with the *Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, demonstrates the pervasive belief among the Roman ecclesiastical and Jewish communities alike that the Lateran did indeed house the Temple Treasures in the twelfth century. Benjamin of Tudela's *Itinerary* illuminates the era of Alexander III's pontificate not only in terms of Jewish beliefs, but also in terms of Jewish-Christian relations on the highest ecclesiastical level. Benjamin mentions that a certain Rabbi Jecheil served as 'an official of the Pope' and 'has the entry of the Pope's palace; for he is the steward of his house and all that he has'.\(^3^2\) If such was indeed the case, the presence


\(^{32}\) *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, p. 63. Again, it is unclear how far Benjamin may have embellished the importance of the Roman Jewish community by including in his story, Jecheil, the highly connected and prominent Roman Jew, or indeed whether this is a factual account. In the absence of other corroborative evidence, Benjamin's statement must be used with caution.
of a Jewish steward in the Pope’s own residence demonstrated the extraordinary nature of papal-Jewish relations the late twelfth century — a Jew holding a position of honour and power in the papal household while the Church openly acknowledged the connection with its Jewish heritage. At the same time, Jews in Europe were increasingly restricted in occupations, and the continuing call to crusade fed interethnic violence, while rumours of Jewish sacrifices of Christian children were also beginning to circulate.33

The Church further sought to emphasize its ancestry in Hebrew antiquity through the construction of narrative mosaics on the portico of the Lateran’s western entrance, probably in the late 1180s when the Peace between the Roman Commune and the papacy was formalized, ostensibly ending the forty-five year struggle for control of the city.34 Ingo Herklots has recently proposed that the portico mosaics were created after the Curia returned to Rome in 1188.35 Construction of the Lateran portico followed the tradition of entrance porches added to Roman churches during the twelfth-century renovatio.36 Mosaic scenes decorated the portico architrave, referring to the founding of the Lateran by Constantine and Pope Sylvester, to legends from their Vitae, and to the hagiography of SS John the Baptist and John the Evangelist (who were also associated with the basilica).37 Significantly, the frieze began with two scenes


34 Clausen, Gli eredi di Constantino, p. 161.


referring to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. The first two scenes depicted the Roman fleet sailing to Jerusalem, and the city of Jerusalem under siege. By commissioning these mosaics for such a prominent location facing the Lateran Field and being continuously on view to a large number of citizens and clergy, the Church was proclaiming its historic connection with the destruction of Jerusalem. Here was a statement and reaffirmation of its possession of biblical Judaic heritage, at the same time reinforcing the public perception that the relics of the Temple were held in the Lateran. The porch served as the site of particular liturgies, including the showing of a new pope to the Roman people and perhaps also some portion of the papal adventus ceremony.

Susan Twyman has recently recalled the use of the imperial adventus ceremony by the popes as a means of asserting papal rule, whether by a newly elected pope or by an exiled pope returning to Rome. Although the extant evidence suggests that papal adventus had been celebrated in Rome since at least the eighth century, twelfth-century adventus gained a new meaning, when political events in the city resulted in chaos and instability. In that century, papal adventus appears in the historical record when the Roman people welcomed the pope to Rome as a component of the imitatio imperii, and essentially as 'a vehicle for political propaganda'. The papacy's deliberate adoption of imperial ceremony included the routing of ceremonial papal adventus processions among the ancient triumphal monuments on the Forum, on part of the way from St Peter's to the Lateran. The processing of the papal entourage beside the relief sculptures of the Temple Treasures on the Arch of Titus also implied that Christianity was claiming to have superseded Judaism, and that papal power extended beyond even the might of the former Roman Empire and its frontiers. Many questions remain about the specific use of the Lateran portico during the adventus ceremony, and whether the procession served to call attention to the mosaic narratives on the portico as a further emphasis of papal authority.

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40 Herklotz, Gli eredi, pp. 172–75.

41 Twyman, Papal Ceremonial at Rome, p. 15.

Twelfth-century adventus continued to include the Jews of Rome along with many other groups of citizens; however, their participation took a new form in the exhibition of the Torah to the Pope as he processed through the city. The record of Jewish ceremonial involvement in papal adventus processions does not include the display of the Torah to the pope until c. 1145 for Pope Eugenius III, and again c. 1165, for Alexander III. The Jews’ exhibition of their holy texts solemnized their loyalty to the pope, while for Christians, it focused attention on the Church’s claim to possess the fullness of the Covenant, as originally established between Abraham and Yahweh, Moses and Yahweh, and later between Jesus and his followers. This claim occurred at much the same time as the twelfth-century papal document Sicut Judeis extended papal protection to Jews, while the Church continued to exert control over them.

Since the inception of Christianity, the relationship between the Jews and the Christian Church had evolved from a familial association within Judaism to a point of theological opposition by opposing doctrinal camps. By the time of the First Crusade in 1096, that opposition became manifest in forced baptisms, restrictions on the daily lives of Jews, and massacres of several Jewish communities. In the early twelfth century, this urgent need of the Jews for protection and Jewish pleas for security finally resulted in papal action, the issuing of the papal letter, Sicut Judeis, by Pope Calixtus II (1119–24). Christians were

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44 '[I]bi advererant Iudei, ex more legem suam deferentes in brachiiis': *Le Liber Pontificalis*, II, 413.

45 The Third Lateran Council, presided over by Alexander III in 1179, directly addressed the interaction of Christians with Jews and Muslims, for instance, forbidding Christians to work as servants or nursemaids for Jewish and Muslim employers. Many restrictions laid down by Lateran III had been stated in earlier decrees; however, their reiteration in 1179 indicates a perception that certain interactions might involve danger for Christians; see *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. and trans. by Norman P. Tanner, 2 vols (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1970), 1, 223.30–224.12.

46 For an excellent discussion of the surrounding problems, see Grayzel, 'The Papal Bull Sicut Judeis', pp. 250–55, in which he points out that no actual copy of Calixtus’s Bull has survived. He considers as 'more cogent', i.e., possible, that the Bull was asked for and given to the Jews of Rome. More recent discussions of the development of Sicut Judeis may be found in Kenneth R. Stow, 'The Church and the Jews', in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, ed. by David Abulafia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 204–19; Kenneth R. Stow, *The Jews in
commanded neither to harm nor to kill Jews, nor to confiscate their property, nor to treat them in any manner different from local custom. Jewish cemeteries were also to remain undisturbed. At least five papal successors to Calixtus II reissued Sicut Judeis during the twelfth century, including Eugenius III and Alexander III.47

The two Lateran texts, the renaming of the Sancta Sanctorum, and the mosaics on the Lateran portico, all indicate a quickening identification of the Church with biblical Judaism, at a time when the Jews were officially protected by the papacy. Recall Rabbi Jechiel, who served in a position of authority in the household of Alexander III in the 1160s: a mere fifty years later, as a result of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, Jews were officially and definitively barred from holding public office by conciliar decree.48

While a multitude of questions remain, the evidence reveals a deliberate public identification of the Church with its Jewish heritage during the twelfth century. Whether this attitude toward the legacy of the ancient Hebrews influenced any papal protection of the Jews through Sicut Judeis, the evidence clearly indicates that the papacy endorsed a programme which focused on the Christian supersession of Judaism as a distinct statement of power and authority. Considering the forces within the Church which actively opposed the power of the popes, and external opposition to them from the Roman Commune, Roman nobility and Germano-Roman emperor, it is reasonable to conclude that papal actions were conducted, not merely to follow ceremonial and papal precedent, but to produce unmistakable statements about the sacred nature and power of the Vicarii Petri in the twelfth century.


48 Tanner, Decrees, 1, 265–67.