Anchoring Innovations in Rome from the 4th-6th Century: 
The Case of the Basilica of St. Peter

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Introduction
The Late Antique fora of Rome were, as centres of both the city itself and of the Roman Empire, important for shaping Roman identity. However, during the Late Empire, churches appeared as alternatives to earlier public places in Rome. They became the new civic and political focal points, and dedications, self-representation and the like could now be performed there. This was also the case for the Basilica of St. Peter, which took over political and ideological functions, occasionally even becoming a part of the imperial adventus and triumphal representation, seemingly rivalling the fora. Additionally, imperial decrees were announced here and the aristocracy increasingly used the church for their self-representation. Based on archaeological, epigraphic and literary evidence this case study will examine the basilica, focusing on the transition of political and social functions from the fora of Rome to the church, using the Forum Romanum and the Forum Traiani as examples. These transfers were made possible by intentional and unintentional manipulation of Roman collective memory through the process of anchoring. The basilica will be examined as a place of collective memory and Roman identity: a place for continuing the traditions previously upheld in the fora, but also a place of innovations.

Transferring traditional functions from the fora to the Basilica of St. Peter
Sible de Blaauw has written extensively on the Christian liturgy celebrated in the Basilica of St. Peter from the 4th to the 6th century, documenting the different ceremonies and their influence on the shape of the basilica. There is thus no doubt that Christian liturgy was celebrated in the basilica, though the sources on the 4th century are scarce. However, the basilica had other functions besides the purely religious: comparing the different aspects of the fora and the basilica, there was a surprising number of social and political functions in the basilica, especially compared to the overtly Christian functions:

• Meetings between bishop and emperor (after 4th century)
• Meetings between Senate and Clergy (after 4th century)

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1 I would like to thank prof. dr. Olivier Hekster for his thoughtful comments on my paper. A first version of this paper was presented at the PhD Master Class Anchoring Sanctity held in Amsterdam, 1 June 2017.
3 Cooper, Leyser, and Hillner, “Dark Age Rome: Towards an Interactive Topography,” 322; Liverani, “Saint Peter’s and the City of Rome between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages,” 33.
4 For this study, I take into account the surrounding area of both the basilica and the Forum Romanum to avoid detaching them from their context. The Forum Traiani, being a much more confined space is considered separately.
5 De Blaauw, Cultus et Decor. Liturgia e Architettura nella Roma Tardoantica e Medievale: Basilica Salvatoris, Sanctae Mariae, Sancti Petri.
6 De Blaauw, 498.
7 De Blaauw, 453–56.
The lack of evidence of Christian use (Evidence from the 5th and 6th century is much more numerous than evidence dating to the 4th century. One exception is a nun taking the veil in 354)
- Ceremonies/rituals (not specifically Christian – e.g. the adventus)
- Publishing of poems/art/music
- Publication of decrees and laws (after 4th century).8

Research indicated a transfer of several of the actions that you would expect to be performed in the fora to the basilica. In fact, the fora and the basilica shared 14 core activities in Late Antiquity:
1. Schools
2. Judicial audiences/Law courts
3. Trade
4. Burials (Forum Romanum, not Forum Traiani)
5. Funerary purposes (Forum Romanum, not Forum Traiani)
6. Meetings of the Senate
7. Euergetism/Self-representation
8. Imperial use/Making the emperor visible
9. Rituals and ceremonies (e.g. adventus)
10. Sanctuary
11. Publications of decrees/laws/edicts/imperial letters/etc.
12. Grave of a mythical founder (Romulus/Peter/Trajan)
13. Place of memory/(museum)
14. Poetry readings (Forum Traiani, not Forum Romanum).9

The number of activities the locations had in common seem to have outnumbered the differences. Among these differences are, for instance, the absence from a jail in the basilica (it is highly unlikely that there was one) against the presence of a jail in the vicinity of the Forum Romanum. We have no evidence suggesting that the praefectus urbi would hold meetings in the basilica either, though it is likely he was present at the area of the two fora. Similarly, in the fora, it is highly unlikely that core Christian activities such as baptism, Christian pilgrimage, and oaths to the bishop took place during at least most of the period considered here. We do, however, have evidence of Christians trying to mythically linking

8 The activities have been detected in a thorough examination of the literary, epigraphical and/or archaeological sources, an examination, which is still in process. Some of the actions are visible in several of the sources and some are only visible in one of them. Furthermore, the actions can be divided into 1: actions, that certainly took place in the basilica, covered by several sources, 2: actions, that are likely to have occurred at the location (This is actions were the evidence is collected from similar locations outside of Rome or from uncertain sources, e.g. literary sources that are known to be not credible or archaeological sources that are ambiguous) 3: actions, which is mentioned in the scholarly literature, but without the primary sources to back up. For a more extensive discussion about the results and underlying data, see Videbech, C., “The Forum of St. Peter? A Comparative Study of the Basilica of St. Peter and the Forum Romanum and Forum Traiani” (forthcoming). A selected sample of literature highlighting some of these actions taking place in churches, especially the Basilica of St. Peter, are: Brandenburg, Ancient Churches of Rome, 98; Coates-Stephens, “Byzantine Building Patronage in Post-Reconquest Rome,” 155; Deliyannis, “Urban Life and Culture,” 248; Forsyth Jr., “The Transept of Old St. Peter’s at Rome,” 66; Humphries, “Liturgy and Laity in Late-Antique Rome: Problems, Sources, and Social Dynamics,” 179 & 184; Krautheimer, St. Peter’s and Medieval Rome, 17–18; Liverani, “Saint Peter’s and the City of Rome between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages,” 28–30; Sessa, “The Roman Church and Its Bishops,” 431 & 437; Schumacher, “Das Baptisterium von Alt-St. Peter und seine Probleme: Mit einem Beitrag von Thomas Barth,” 223–24.
9 See note 8.
themselves with the area of the Forum Romanum by accounts of Peter and Paul praying and fighting against Simon Magus here and Bishop Silvester allegedly fighting a dragon, which lived under the Temple of Vesta. Christians are therefore, at least mythically, attested in and around Forum Romanum, but repeated Christian rituals do not occur here before churches were introduced to the area (likely in the late 6th century). Furthermore, burials are also rare in the fora, with only a few near Forum Romanum and none (except Trajan) in the Forum Traiani. We do, however, have one incident of a funerary procession in the honour of a bishop taking place here at the beginning of the 5th century. The list of actions that might have taken place in both the basilica and the fora, although I cannot prove it at present, are as follows: It is quite likely that the basilica, like a forum, functioned as a meeting place for people and that both speeches and non-Christian administration could take place there, given the other functions of the church. Furthermore, it is possible that meetings between the senate and the clergy/bishop could take place in the fora, just as these spaces would be suited for the distribution of alms and charity because of their open spaces. Additionally, it is quite likely that calendars would be on display in the fora, though I have not yet encountered any evidence for this practice either.

Collective memory and the concept of anchoring
As suggested above, several key functions of a forum were present in and around the basilica. Consequently, a church in Late Antiquity seems to have had an important political and civic role. Since the fora and the Basilica of St. Peter were very different spaces, e.g. in terms of layout and accessibility, it might seem strange that it was possible to move these traditional actions, heavy with historical meaning, from the fora to the basilica. In my view, the basilica worked as a place of collective memory and this made the transfer possible. Although the theory of collective memory is not unproblematic to use in a Roman context, since it was developed for the modern period, it does highlight some aspects which are useful and thought provoking when studying Roman society. The theory suggests that just as memory can be tied to an individual, it can also be tied to a group of persons. As time passes by, both group and memory will evolve in an interdependent, social process. Scholars such as Pierre Nora and Jan and Aleida Assmann further developed the theory by elaborating the idea, that group memory could be stored in, among other things, rituals, texts, monuments, and social spaces. These memory vessels would, when encountered by people, remind them of the past, hereby revitalizing and strengthening the memory.

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10 Kalas, Restoration of the Roman Forum in Late Antiquity, 125, 161 & 163.
11 Kalas, 20.
12 Bauer, Stadt, Platz und Denkmal in der Spätantike, 111.
13 See note 8.
17 Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 129; Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory,” 111; Assmann, Cultural Memory and Early Civilization, 37–38, 42–44, 74 & 119–20; Assmann,
The stored memory would evolve over time, while, both intentionally and unintentionally, new memories were added, irrelevant memories were removed, and often, if not always, it would be highly heterogeneous in nature. That the memory was kept alive was ensured by the active effort of the group in the shape of traditions and rituals activating the memory vessels.

In connection with the theory of collective memory, the concept of anchoring is a helpful tool too with a great potential to improve and clarify the approach of memory studies. It is a concept, that helps illuminate some of the fuzziness that memory studies suffer from and a more sufficient way to put words on some of these processes. It is therefore highly relevant for analyzing the transfer of activities from the fora to the basilica and I think it can take us a step further than the theory of collective memory can by itself. Below, I hope to demonstrate this through my work on the Basilica of St. Peter.

Anchoring is a tool for investigating how people cope with “newness” and change and a label for the different ways in which people connect new innovations to the traditional and familiar, making people feel that they understand and recognize innovation. Thus an anchor is, as Ineke Sluiter writes, “the concrete phenomena or concept that are perceived or experienced as the stable basis for innovation.” Consequently, anchoring shares a lot of common ground with memory studies. However, it is important to remember that neither the process of anchoring, nor the intentional or unintentional use of memory, had the purpose of explaining the past, but to serve the concerns of the present. The parts of the past that could


be used, where chosen and preserved, while the parts, that did not fit the present concern were discarded.²⁵

In the Roman Empire change and innovation was not appreciated. On the contrary, continuity and tradition were highly valued.²⁶ Still, innovation did occur and therefore had to be implemented in a way that was generally acceptable. Anchoring explains this process, which allowed Roman citizens to experience continuity of traditions in a period, which really introduced much change.²⁷ It made the Late Antique Roman feel an unbroken sense of self and identity, group cohesion, and cultural belonging by linking novelties with what was perceived familiar. Thus, the feeling of an unbroken "Roman-ness" persisted. This was a process, which had been used with great success also before Late Antiquity.²⁸ Anchoring and the use of collective memory in this process could be expressed in many different media, such as for example etymology,²⁹ but also in the way that the Romans, shaped their immediate surroundings. By manipulating the monuments of their cities, intentionally or unintentionally incorporating the past in new buildings and repairs, it was ensured that the city, though changing, was perceived familiar and safe.³⁰ This connection between memory and monuments are traceable in several antique literary sources, such as Cicero, Pliny, and Augustine.³¹

**Anchoring in the Basilica of St. Peter – Euergetism**

As the public functions of the churches in the Empire grew, so did the tendency to use them for euergetism, the action of doing a good deed for one’s city, highlighting oneself in the process. This tendency in a Christian context is visible both in the archaeological and the literary sources: Christians used gifts and the building of churches to improve their relationship with God, but also to make sure that they were remembered in posterity.³²

I have tried to trace acts of euergetism in literary, epigraphic, and archaeological sources from the Basilica of St. Peter and the Forum Romanum.³³ In my study, I excluded graves, tombs, and mausoleums of the basilica since they seem to be a different group from the other dedications, where death is not involved. However, if we added them to the dedications, they would further underline the results. I have also not included acts of charity, such as alms and funerary dinners. This is not because I find them


²⁶ McCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity*, 268.


²⁸ Hekster, “Anchoring Religious Change.”


³³ See note 7. Unfortunately, I have not yet had the time to make a similar study of the euergetism in the Forum Traiani, which will consequently not figure in this part of the study.
insignificant as good opportunities to communicate memory, but because they usually do not have a monument to commemorate them.

Even without the grave- and charity-related dedications, the Basilica of St. Peter was the focus of the *euergetism* of the elite. A growing number of aristocrats, bishops, and rulers became patrons of the church by donating mosaics, fixtures, decorating, remodeling, and repairing the basilica, even adding completely new buildings. As on the Forum Romanum, rulers were responsible for many of the dedications in the basilica. However, unlike the forum, a strong presence of the bishops is detectable, eventually making them responsible for most of the dedications.  

Though not all sources are equally reliable and dateable, the tendencies of the practice of *euergetism* in the basilica in this period can be proven: In the 4th and 5th century the Forum Romanum was the preferred place for dedications of the two. However, during the 4th to the 6th century, the dedications in the forum were waning, while they were rising in the basilica, resulting in the number of dedications in the basilica area being larger than in the forum in the 6th century. This might have been due to the fact that the churches were the new city centres. It may also be a sign that the anchoring process had indeed been successful.

Furthermore, the process of anchoring probably became self-perpetuating rather quickly, when each dedication would further normalize the *euergetism*, consequently attracting more dedicators. Another contributing factor might also have been that the space of the Forum Romanum was already crowded with older dedications, leaving limited space for anything new.

**Anchoring in the Basilica of St. Peter – *Spolia***

Architecture was also used as a way of anchoring the basilica in the past:  

*Spolia*, being the reuse of older building parts in new contexts, is a phenomenon we see all over the world throughout history, but with the Constantinian basilicas the practice became far more systematic.  

Exactly to what extent is debated, but most scholars agree that *spolia* were used as an important building component in the Basilica of St. Peter.  

Though unconfirmed, some sources even claim that the basilica was made exclusively from *spolia*.  

When first entering the atrium, the Late-Roman visitor would immediately have spotted the *pigna*, which was part of the fountain in the middle of the forecourt. Made in the 1st century, but not mentioned in the sources before the 8th, it is possible that the *pigna* could have been in

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35 For a more extensive discussion about the results and underlying data, see Videbech, C., “The Spoils of Eternity - *Spolia* as Collective Memory in the Basilica of St. Peter during the 4th century AD (forthcoming in the proceedings for the session “Tonight will be a memory too – Memory and Landscape”, Kiel International Open Workshop 2017, 20-24th March 2017).  
37 Both visible and non-visible *spolia* was used in the basilica. However, the non-visible will not be treated further in this context since it would not have been relevant in a memory-context. Rather it demonstrates how *spolia* in different context can have different meanings, as has often been discussed by scholars. I discuss this more thorough in my aforementioned article on *spolia*. Blaauw, *Cultus et Decor. Liturgia E Architectura Nella Roma Tardoantica E Medievale: Basilica Salvatoris, Sanctae Mariae, Sancti Petri*, 460 & 475–76; Brandenburg, “Die Verwendung von Spolien und Originalen Werkstücken in der Spätantiken Architektur,” 19; Machado, “Roman Aristocrats and the Christianization of Rome,” 513.  
the atrium as early as the reign of Constantine, but it is far from proven. Continuing into the nave of the basilica, the visitor would discover that the columns here, considered as *spolia* by most scholars, were different from each other in both colour, size, and material, most likely marking them out as *spolia*.

At the high altar and presbytery, he would have seen the six twisted columns, probably dated between the 2nd or 3rd century AD, that Constantine collected from Greece.  

There have been various suggestions of how to interpret both *spolia* in general, and the extensive use of *spolia* in the basilica in particular. Generally, the reused material is interpreted as either a practical solution, an expression of a new aesthetic or ideology, or a combination of these options. More than once has the use of *spolia* been connected with a general decline in the later Roman Empire. However, I would like to put forth the interpretation that *spolia* visible to the visitor of the basilica were consciously used as architectural references to the past. As such it gave the Roman viewer a feeling of connection with the past and of being a part of a greater whole. It was a visualization of a shared Roman identity, based on a glorious past and gave the basilica an air of *auctoritas* thus legitimizing the transfer of the traditional activities to this new type of space. It anchored them.

This interpretation of *spolia* has been suggested by scholars before, but only rarely discussed in depth. The main argument against such an interpretation is that the Roman viewer of Late Antiquity might not have been able to recognize *spolia* as such and identify from where they came. Can we expect he/she, not necessarily well educated, to have the necessary knowledge of styles, architecture, and origin of the reused materials to understand the link to the past? We know almost certainly that we cannot, considering that even well-educated Roman historians were sometimes mistaken about monuments. However, even if this necessary knowledge cannot be taken for granted, I would argue that *spolia* could still work

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43 Alcherme, “Spolia in Roman Cities of the Late Empire,” 170; Papalexandrou, “Memory Tattered and Torn: Spolia in the Heartland of Byzantine Hellenism,” 56.
as a powerful anchor: The Roman viewer would, well-educated or not, when entering the basilica notice that the columns of the nave were very different from each other in both colour, size, and material, likely marking them out as *spolia*. It was not necessary to be able to identify different architectural styles or to date the individual parts of the basilica precisely to realize this. Nor did the viewer had to know exactly where the *spolia* came from. He/she only had to recognize it as looking old. The viewer would have the existent old buildings in the fora as points of reference. If we accept this argument, the heterogeneous appearance, encountered by the Late Roman in the basilica, could have been interpreted as a visualization of the greatness of the Roman Empire and a clear connection to the past, a strong visual anchor indeed.

**Cui bono**
The basilica did not suddenly end up like a space of collective memory. It was a more or less conscious development, begun by the emperor who built the basilica and continued by the people, who had something to gain from this. The beneficiaries of this process seem to have been many: For the benefactors, it generated status and ensured that their memory would live on through the dedications and improved their relationship to God. As time went by their contribution went from being containers of their personal memory to being containers of Roman collective memory. Christianity as a religion also benefitted from the continuation of these traditions. As a relatively new religion, it still had to prove its worth. To be able to demonstrate old traditions and a mythic past was therefore very important. The anchoring process was legitimizing Christianity as a religion and a part of the old idea of *Roma Aeterna*. By changing the appearance of the basilica, the memory of the church was shaped collectively. The aristocracy, rulers, and clergy were investing their memory in the basilica, consequently legitimizing Christianity as a religion. By using architectural forms, which were easily recognisable and provided the feeling of historical pride in the viewer, and by revitalizing old traditions in the new surroundings, it was clearly illustrated how Christianity was not a break with the Roman past, but a natural continuation. The same process had been going on for hundreds of years in the Forum Romanum and Forum Traiani. Now the money and the commitment were used on *Roma Cristiana* instead, consequently causing a reduction of stress in a time of transition. This was a process that would need continual care through the centuries to come, an argument that would go on, as Late Antiquity gradually transformed, at least in the eyes of modern scholars, into the Middle Ages. The city of Rome, her old monuments, and her churches was an important part of this argument of anchoring, visualizing continuity with her architecture, *spolia*, and grand, old traditions.

**Conclusion**
I would argue that the transfers of the traditional Roman practices in the Basilica of St. Peter were made possible by using classical public architecture for the church, incorporating *spolia* and encouraging the continuation of *euergetism* in a Christian context. The innovations of the church were anchored firmly in Roman tradition and collective memory. This gave an impression of continuity, reducing stress in a time of transition and was a way to cope with the novelty of Christianity among the cultural and political elite. However, even though this process was probably begun consciously, once it had been set in motion, it developed its own

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life and soon became self-perpetuating. By manipulating Roman collective memory and cleverly anchoring the basilica, the bishops, rulers, and Christian aristocracy were moving the political centre of the city from the fora to the churches and rewriting the story of Roma Aeterna as Roma Christiana.51

The moving of these actions to the basilica was therefore not a break with the past, but on the contrary a continuation of the Roman collective memory and traditions. Or, at least, that was how it was presented to the Late Antique viewer through the process of anchoring.

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