Barberini Political Identity and Utilitarian Architecture in the Rome of Urban VIII

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Seventeenth-century Venetian observers in Rome noted of Pope Urban VIII Barberini (r. 1623–44) that he possessed a "hunger for glory" and a determination to follow any course that "could raise his name in public opinion and make it famous in the future."[2] Urban's family, the Barberini, were one of the most important early-modern papal families and their leadership of Rome is instructive of papal politics at that time. Volumes have been written on Urban and his family, and their heraldic bees swarm over Rome.[3] Urban reigned for twenty-one years and during this extended period, Urban guided the papacy through events as diverse as the Thirty Years' War and the Galileo affair. The Barberini systematically patronized the sciences, theater, music, and poetry, and established one of Rome's greatest libraries.[4] Urban and his three powerful nephews, Cardinal Francesco, Don Taddeo, and Cardinal Antonio, ushered in a period of fantastic artistic patronage, outrageous nepotism, and shocking political excesses.

Under the family's watch, the visual arts in Rome experienced the glittering High Baroque, boasting the masterpieces of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Pietro da Cortona, and Francesco Borromini. While examinations of the high art sponsored by Urban and the Barberini family proliferate, there are relatively few studies of their more mundane architecture. This brief article addresses this lacuna, contributing to our understanding of the role architecture played in the creation of political identity in seventeenth-century Rome.[5] I focus on utilitarian architecture in Rome, including aqueducts, fountains, roads, and industrial works; I mention only in passing Urban's military architecture, such as his improvements to the Castel Sant' Angelo and Rome's circuit of defensive walls along the crest of the Janiculum. This discussion of utilitarian architecture will be bookended by two works displaying inscriptions that contribute to the construction of

Urban's identity as steward of the city: a monument to Urban in the Church of Santa Maria Aracoeli and the *Fountain of the Bees* in Piazza Barberini.

Architecture and Urban's "Vigilant Care"

High on the interior wall behind the façade of Santa Maria Aracoeli is a large commemorative monument to Pope Urban VIII, erected by the Roman Senate in 1634 a few years after a great epidemic swept Rome. The monument, designed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, consists of an inscription set on a long scroll unfurled by two angels beneath a pre-existing window that was colored to depict a trio of golden Barberini bees in a field of blue. The window is circumscribed by an ornate border and capped with the papal triregnum and crossed keys of St. Peter. The inscription lists Urban's numerous benefactions, including ridding the city of epidemic, militarily defending the Papal States, and decorating some of Rome's churches. Near the end, the inscription acclaims Urban's "just, tempered, and truly paternal rule and vigilant care for the benefits of the people."[6] Popes had always promoted themselves as spiritual shepherds of the faithful, an image all the more important following the Council of Trent's assertion that there should be "One flock, one shepherd."[7] The image of the pope as secular benefactor, however, was also commonly promoted, and Urban VIII was particularly active in asserting papal secular authority across the Papal States, Italy, and even Europe.

Santa Maria in Aracoeli was an important church for linking the religious and secular authority claimed by early-modern popes. Founded in the sixth century, the church stands on the Capitoline Hill and was built over the foundations of the ancient Temple of Juno Moneta. The church served the city council of Rome, the successor of the *Senatus Populusque Romanus*.[8] A medieval legend repeated in the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* (ca. 1150) contends that Augustus, having heard that the Senate intended to honor him as a god, consulted the Tiburtine Sibyl about the matter. The Sibyl tells Augustus of a "King of the Ages" who will descend from the skies. As Augustus hears the prophecy, he sees a vision of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus above an altar. Then Augustus hears a voice saying, "This is the Altar of the Son of God," at which

point he decides to raise just such an altar, *ara primogeniti Dei*, near to the Temple of Juno Moneta.[9] Later the altar comes to be referred to as the Altar of Heaven, which is reflected in the name of the church, *aracoeli* (*ara coeli*). This story Christianizes a Roman emperor, an important element of Tridentine papal conceptions of *imperium* that linked Christian religious authority to imperial secular power.[10] In his effort to assert himself as king of Rome, Urban often drew parallels between himself and ancient Roman emperors, particularly Augustus. Augustus' achievements are celebrated in the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, which boasts of building aqueducts and temples, defeating pirates, and expanding the empire. In emulation of Augustus, Urban announced similar accomplishments in various forms, from papal medals to architectural inscriptions.[11] Urban's architectural patronage was rooted in his awareness of the link between political power and architecture. Concern for architecture as an element of good government is one of the more meaningful lessons of Augustus' boast "*Marmoream relinquo, quam latericiam accepti.*"[12]

Urban Construction and Constructing Urban

In addition to promoting his secular authority, Urban also promoted himself as a shepherd watching over his flock.[13] This had always been a central tenet of the Barberini papacy's ideology, and Urban enacted it with great zeal. He completed a number of public projects for the direct and tangible benefit of the Roman people: he established industries, regulated grain supply, erected hospitals and guarded against plague, laid roads and built bridges.[14] Andrea Nicoletti, Urban's biographer, offers a description of his concern for the utilitarian needs of the people of Rome:

> [Urban] desired that everyone should enjoy the prosperity of his pontificate ... he wished that the artisans should make large profits at their trades, but lawfully, and without fraud; to merchants of all sorts he was equally favorable — whence it followed that money circulated so freely during his pontificate, as to make all persons, of whatever profession, content and satisfied. He gave especial orders for the supply of grain, and endured the expense willingly in consideration of the abundance maintained. His greatest enjoyment

> was to know that the husbandman was not deprived of those gains which he considered the risk of life and means incurred by those who toiled on the vast extent of the Campagna, and were exposed to its insalubrious air, to merit; then, when it appeared to him that the sea-coast was principally useful for agriculture, he turned his thoughts in that direction, and frequently talked of draining the Pontine Marshes, to recover those immense districts now under water, and that entirely for the public benefit; but other cares would not permit him to enjoy the completion of so glorious a design. Neither would he permit that the price of grain or other food should be fixed; but to maintain the abundance aforesaid, he would have all free, thus preventing monopoly. Hence, the merchants, filling their granaries, vied with each other in selling cheaply, and the city of Rome became rich.[15]

Indeed, Urban had a long record of caring for the needs of the city of Rome and the Papal States and took an active role in the papal economy. Actions that demonstrated papal care for the poor occupied a central role in the celebration of Jubilee years. On the eve of the 1625 Jubilee, Urban called for an extensive Apostolic Visitation, which lasted from 1624 to 1632, one of the explicit goals of which was relief for the poor and infirm.[16] Urban bolstered the economy with contributions to industry, establishing wool, silk, and ironworks in Spoleto.[17] In Viterbo, Urban built a wax-bleaching facility and expanded the commercial harbor at Cittavecchia. The bread dole was an ever-present concern for the Roman people and therefore for the papal government, and the Barberini repeatedly emphasized grain in their propaganda.[18] At the start of his papacy, Urban began purchasing wheat from Sicily and prohibited the export of grain from the Papal States.[19] Later, Urban reformed management of the Annona (grain supply) and established a granary near the Baths of Diocletian in 1640. Andrea Nicoletti asserts that under Urban, Rome never suffered from shortages of grain.[20]

Urban also looked to the utilitarian infrastructure of Rome and the Papal States. For example, Urban dreamt of resuscitating plans as old as antiquity to drain the Pontine Marshes. Though his dreams of draining these marshes were unrealized, he did complete flood control measures along the Tiber.[21] Elsewhere, Urban completed the circuit of city walls running along the crest of the Janiculum, immuring Trastevere within walls that Giacinto

Gigli described as "truly necessary and most useful to Rome."[22] The Papal States, meanwhile, witnessed a proliferation of roads and bridges under Urban.[23] Back in Rome, in emulation of great street-building popes like Sixtus V, Urban lengthened and straightened the Via Urbana in 1627, an important road linking Santa Maria Maggiore to the Forum area. This short list indicates the scope of Urban's utilitarian projects, and suggests that, political spin aside, Nicoletti is justified in having helped construct the image of Urban as steward of Rome.

The Fountain of the Bees and Urban's Commodious Hydro-Infrastructure

Urban made significant contributions to Rome's hydro-infrastructure, spending considerable sums on aqueducts, fountains, drains, and sewers.[24] Urban undertook a restoration of the Acqua Vergine (one of Rome's aqueducts) between 1623 and 1625, which was followed up with the construction of the *Barcaccia Fountain* (1626–29) in Piazza di Spagna. A decade later, Urban began another intervention on the Acqua Vergine, this one designed to water a new *Trevi Fountain*. Bernini began Urban's unrealized project for the *Trevi Fountain* in 1643. In 1640, Urban initiated a major project on the Acqua Felice under the direction of Bernini. The project provided 300 *oncie* of water to Rome's Capo-le-Case neighborhood centered on the Palazzo Barberini.[25] Of that new water, the fountains in the Piazza Barberini received 80 *oncie*.[26] The *Triton Fountain*, the *Fountain of the Bees*, and the *Chiavica del Tritone* (a new drain connecting the Piazza Barberini's fountains to the Agrippan drain), are all components of Urban's 1640 restoration of the Acqua Felice. The *Triton Fountain's* "gray water" flowed to the *Fountain of the Bees* and from there to the *Chiavica*. The *Triton Fountain*, the crown jewel of Urban's project, was completed in 1643 and sits at the center of the piazza. The *Triton*'s companion, the *Fountain of the Bees* is a *beveratori*, a subsidiary drinking fountain. Standing three meters high, the travertine fountain takes the form of an open scallop shell. The corrugated upper shell is perpendicular to the lower shell, which serves as a pool that collects water emitted by three bees that light upon the hinge of the two shells. The fountains were great benefits

to the Roman people, as they received an abundance of water for both human and animal consumption.[27] Katherine Wentworth Rinne notes that with *beveratori*, such as the *Fountain of the Bees*, "the usefulness of nearly every civic fountain was expanded."[28]

The upper shell of the *Fountain of the Bees* bears a Latin inscription that confirms Rinne's observation. The inscription reads:

VRBANVS VIII PONTIFEX MAXIMVS
FONTI AD PVBLICVM VRBIS ORNAMENTVM
EXSTRVCTO
SINGVLORVM VSIBVS SEORSIM COMMODITATE HAC
CONSVLVIT
ANNO MDCXLIV PONT XXI[29]

Urban VIII Pontifex Maximus, after he built the fountain for the public ornamentation of the city, took care of the needs of each person by means of this separate benefit. In the year 1644, twenty-first year of his pontificate.

The inscription, referring to both fountains in the piazza, explains that Urban, having built the *Triton Fountain* for the public ornament (*ornamentum*) of the city, then took care of Rome's more practical needs by building the *Fountain of the Bees* as a benefit (*commoditate*) for the people.[30] In discussing *mostre* (or terminal display fountains), Peter Aicher notes that, "What makes a fountain a *mostra* is not essentially its size or splendor, but its specific designation as the fountain that is a public memorial to the whole achievement of the aqueduct. Sometimes inscriptions and decoration support this designation and elaborate the achievement with information and allusion to the builder or the benefit of the aqueduct's water."[31] Similarly, the inscription on the *Fountain of the Bees* celebrates Urban's entire achievement in watering the neighborhood centered on the Piazza Barberini.[32]

The *Fountain of the Bees*, unveiled in July 1644 just weeks before Urban's death, was to be the Barberini pope's last public work.[33] The fountain was begun in April 1644, just days after the conclusion of the disastrous War of Castro, a conflict in which several Italian states supported by France and Spain defeated the Barberini-led Papal States.[34] The war left Urban's pontificate in tatters: in Italy, a vassal of the pope had worked with rival powers to defeat the Papal States, while internationally, Urban's

reputation as *padre commune* vanished as it appeared that he had fought an illegitimate war against a Catholic prince. The war cost Rome thousands of lives and nearly bankrupted the papacy.[35] Taxes on the Roman populace increased at several points during the war, and Urban for the first time faced open and vocal opposition. Urban's fine papacy, so painstakingly constructed, was in ruins. Though the war was lost, the Barberini continued to fight the propaganda war. Part of winning the hearts and minds of the Roman people was to quench their thirst with waters from the *Fountain of the Bees*. The fountain is a physical demonstration of Urban's interest in providing for the needs of his people, as the shepherd does for his flock. The fountain thus was part of an effort, in the midst of war and taxes, to return Rome to the sunny antebellum days of Urban's early reign, and restore the image of Urban presented in the celebratory inscription in Santa Maria Aracoeli.

Political Identity and the Politics of Utilitarian Architecture

Urban spent significantly throughout his reign on utilitarian projects: digging drains and sewers, laying roads and bridges, and establishing a granary and foundry. Urban's concern for such things is celebrated in the inscription in Santa Maria Aracoeli, an appropriate venue for such a message as it links the pope to a past great builder of Rome, Augustus. Such endeavors, undertaken at timely moments, were well-established tools of the Barberini political and propaganda machines. The Barberini's utilitarian architecture advanced Urban's political identity as a munificent lord and protective shepherd, a strategy that culminated with the *Fountain of the Bees*.

Notes

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[2] Quoted from Hook 224.

[3] A short selection of important recent works on the Barberini includes Hammond, Harper, Kirwin, Mochi Onori, Rietbergen, and Scott.

[4] See Rietbergen 139–40.

[5] For more on the construction of political identity, see Barker; Colantuon; Delbeke; and Leone.

[6] *Iusta ac temperata vereque paterna dominatione populorum commodis vigil cura prosdexerit*. See Pollak 165; Wittkower 257–58; and Lavin 20.

[7] Council of Trent 1.

[8] The Senate and People of Rome as a political body was proclaimed by popular decree in 1143 after an absence of many centuries, and installed on the Capitoline Hill.

[9] Lanciani 24.

[10] Lavin 20.

[11] Reverses of papal coins and medals under Urban celebrated a variety of achievements, including constructing new buildings, presiding over important ecclesiastical events, expanding the territorial possessions of the Papal States, and even defeating pirates with the recently expanded papal navy.

[12] Augustus boasts that he found Rome a city of mud, but left it a city of marble. Seutonius 28.3. Cf. Cassius Dio, 56.30.6.

[13] Urban furthered this image when he wrote in 1642, “May Moses be my guide who led the people through the Red Sea” (Pastor 29: 411). The image of the pontiff as a new Moses had long been

popular with popes, and is consistent with the Barberini's iconographic program that argued Urban pursued the best interest of his flock.

[14] Pastor 29: 368–373. Flooding was of particular concern, and when the Tiber inundated the city the people of Rome looked to the papacy to lead the way through the catastrophe, and Urban sought to combine "organization, personal generosity, and prayer to safeguard his people" (Harper 1998, 380).

[15] Quoted from Ranke 382.

[16] Groppi 184.

[17] Pastor 29: 371–372.

[18] The resulting "politica di grano," which used the grain supply to evaluate the quality of government, is a clear indicator of papal action and popular content (or discontent). See Palermo 1990; see also Reinhardt 209–220.

[19] Pastor 29: 371.

[20] Quoted from Ranke 382.

[21] Pastor 29: 371–372.

[22] "opera veramente necessaria, utilissima a Roma, et degna di grandissima lode, e di gloria a Papa Urbano." Gigli 374.

[23] Pastor 29: 371–372.

[24] Rinne 217. Rinne notes that "Pietro Narducci, in his monumental study of Rome's ancient, Renaissance, and modern drains, gives pride of place to Urban VIII" (see Narducci).

[25] An *oncia* (plural *oncie*) is a volume of water that passes through a set aperture over a period of time. The aperture for a standard *oncia* in the sixteenth century had a diameter of 2.2 centimeters (one tenth of a *palmo*). Properly installed at a ninety-degree angle

to the wall, a 1-*oncia* pipe delivered about .23 liters per second, or 19,872 liters (5,250 gallons) per day.

[26] D'Onofrio 383 n. 10; Rinne 187 n. 8.4.

[27] Cardilli 81.

[28] Rinne 163. Drawing water from large display fountains such as the *Triton Fountain* was often prohibited. Hence, *beveratori*, as secondary fountains designed to provide drinking water, were much desired.

[29] Thanks to Gregory Bucher, Jeff Hause, Brenda Longfellow, and Dennis Trout. This is in fact the second inscription. The original inscription stated that the fountain was built in the twenty-second year of Urban's pontificate, likely anticipating the anniversary of Urban's election, which would have occurred on 6 August. Urban died on 29 July 1644, just 8 days short of his anniversary. The *Fountain of the Bees* may well have been erected to commemorate the advent of the twenty-second year of Urban's pontificate. For a contemporary account of the inscription, see Gigli 423; see also D'Onofrio 388 and Marder 93.

[30] The monument to Urban in Santa Maria Aracoeli uses similar language, including the word "*commodis*."

[31] Aicher 339.

[32] Katherine Rinne postulates that the *Triton* celebrated Urban's restoration of the Aqua Felice (Rinne 187 n. 8.4).

[33] D'Onofrio at 385 n. 1 cites a contract dated 6 April 1644 for the start of the fountain. Meanwhile, Theodor Ameyden's diary entry of 11 June 1644 comments on the completed fountain (D'Onofrio 387).

[34] DeMaria 191–256 (esp. 191–95); Lutz 310–314; Nussdorfer 205–227.

[35] The War of Castro increased the papal debt from 30 million to 35 million scudi. Between 1635 and 1640, scudi per annum available for current expenditures dropped from 600,000 to 300,000, with 85% of papal income going to interest. See Pastor 29: 380.

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