CHAPTER ONE

PAULINUS OF NOLA, COURTYARDS, AND CANTHARI:
A SECOND LOOK*

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Some of the fullest descriptions of ancient churches and their decoration by a contemporary were written by Paulinus of Nola. These descriptions gain in significance because Paulinus was also the patron sponsoring some of these projects. Furthermore, parts of these constructions still survive. Interpreting the writings of Paulinus remains nonetheless difficult. A version of this essay was first published in 2000. Several important studies appeared around that time and thereafter, and much archaeological and museological research has taken place since. All of this makes it desirable for us to revisit the theme here.

LITERARY SOURCES

Paulinus’s Descriptions of Church Courtyards in Rome and Cimitile

Some of the most elaborate and detailed descriptions of Early Christian churches by a Latin writer are given by the nobleman Pontius Meropius Paulinus, commonly known as Paulinus of Nola, after the city where he became bishop in the latter part of his life. He was born in Bordeaux around

* The first version of this paper was published as “Paulinus of Nola, Courtyards and Canthari,” HTR 93 (2000): 173–219. Another marble vase, viewed on a return trip to Cimitile, and recently published studies on the site have led to an extensive revision of the final sections of this paper. We would again like to dedicate the article to the memory of Richard Krautheimer. Thanks go to Dennis Trout for checking our translation of Paulinus’s passages, and to Carlo Ebanista, Dieter Korol, and Tomas Lehmann for communicating and sending their latest publications on Cimitile. At the Historical Archaeological Workshop at Harvard organized by Kathleen Coleman and Christopher Jones, many important observations were made, now reflected in our text and footnotes. Jasper Gaunt has provided advice on Greek vase shapes.

353, into a wealthy family that had extensive properties in Aquitania, Gallia Narbonensis, Latium, and Campania. He received an education appropriate to his noble stature and became the prize student of Ausonius, also a native of Bordeaux, who was the tutor of the (future) emperor Gratian and a celebrated poet at court.

Before 379, at a young age, Paulinus began a public career and became a consul, then some years later governor of Campania. There he was introduced to the cult of Saint Felix, a confessor who probably lived at the time of the Diocletianic persecutions. The miracles of Saint Felix had become legendary in the region, and his burial place in Cimitile, the cemetery area of ancient Nola, had become a pilgrimage site long before Paulinus arrived. During his governorship Paulinus improved some of the infrastructure of the area, rebuilding a road to the church of Felix and erecting a hospice beside it.

After returning to his native Aquitania and the tumultuous times that followed the violent death of Gratian in 383, Paulinus found his way to Spain, where he married. He was baptized in 389 and then returned to Campania in 395. Together with his pious wife Therasia, he started an ascetic community at Saint Felix’s tomb in Cimitile, during a time when many patrician men and women were renouncing the world and worldly goods. He became bishop of Nola around 409 and died in 431.

Paulinus was well-connected throughout the Early Christian world; he was respected by theologians of such stature as Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Rufinus; and he corresponded regularly with like-minded noblemen from Gaul, such as Sulpicius Severus. Distinguished guests, including Melania the Elder and Nicetas of Remesiana, visited him at the tomb of the holy Felix. Paulinus himself paid regular visits to Rome, particularly on the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul. His description of Old Saint Peter’s in Rome, begun by Constantine, is probably the earliest surviving written account of that building. Although the focus of his letter was not primarily the architecture but consolation for an old friend after the death of his wife, his incidental description of the church is of great importance. The letter to

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2 Paulinus was presumably a consil suffectus, that is, a consul who did not start his office at the beginning but during the course of the term. Such consuls, who were appointed in the case of the death, illness, or resignation of a consul, were not recorded in the fasti.

3 The major edition of Paulinus’s works is Wilhelm von Hartel, Sancti Pontii Meropii Paulini Nolani Opera (2 vols.; CSEL 29–30; Vienna: Tempsky, 1894). An accurate analysis of Paulinus’s church descriptions was provided by Rudolf C. Goldschmidt, Paulinus’ Churches at Nola (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1940).