

Courting Christianity for Political Gain?

Religious Politics and the Villa of Maxentius on the Via Appia

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Preface

When I returned to Kalamazoo College in the Spring of 2003 after spending six months studying in Rome, I hardly expected that I would be returning to that city I fell in love with after only a matter of months. The Maxentius project, before I left for study abroad, had been little more to me than a collection of possibilities and optimistic what-ifs. This project, truly the most rewarding experience of my time at Kalamazoo College, was an undertaking that I was lucky enough to witness from its inception in late 2001 to the launch of site work in the summer of 2003. Kalamazoo College likes to tout experiential education as one of its basic principles, and the Maxentius project exemplifies just how important it can be. Through my participation, I was able to learn valuable information about the field of archaeology that is unteachable in any classroom.

I can think of no better introduction to the field of archaeology than the one I was given last summer, when I participated in the opening season of a new collaborative archaeological project between Kalamazoo College and the University of Colorado, Boulder. This project is a revisitation of the Villa of Maxentius, a site that was partially excavated for a brief period of time in the 1960s, and subsequently abandoned due to bureaucratic and financial issues. As a consequence, much of the site remains almost completely untouched, providing an opportunity for significant new excavation to take place.

Although no new excavation took place in the first season, it was nevertheless full of hard work and discovery. Through working at the Villa of Maxentius, The primary task of the project in this initial stage was to begin a survey of the topography of the site, creating a virtual model of it into which data can later be added and spatially referenced. This use of GIS systems is a recent development in the field, made possible by the recent

progress of technological advancement. I was given an introduction to this system while on site, and helped survey the land, which eventually yielded a virtual model of the *aula palatina*, the large apsidal room where the majority of our project took place.

Most of the time on site, however, was dedicated to clearing the old trenches left from the Ioppolo and Sartorio excavations of the late 1960s. The 1960s excavation produced a system of wall-chasing trenches in an attempt to discern the architectural layout of the villa. These trenches helped define where the walls of the structure stand, but we had to re-expose them in order to incorporate the spatial data into our GIS database. The backfilled trenches, although less than forty years old, gave me a tremendous insight into the behavior of the terrain, which is alive and constantly changing. It was amazing to see how much of the landscape the earth had retaken in a matter of only a few decades. Not only have the trenches filled in with new layers of dirt, the entire site has been overgrown by a forest of weeds, only a few of which had been removed by the time our team arrived at the site. In the backfill from the earlier excavation, we uncovered many physical remains. Dish fragments, teacups, bottles, and other remnants of mid twentieth century Italian civilization dotted the backfill. If the last forty years have accumulated such a wealth of objects, it will be exciting to eventually see what sorts of finds are uncovered from the sixteen hundred years of stratified soil that still covers most of Maxentius' villa.

I had never thought that digging in the dirt could be such a satisfying experience, especially not in Italy during the worst heat wave in European history. On-site work would commence at 8:00 am, and continue until the sun reached its highest point in the sky, rendering further manual labor impossible. The team would then return to San Tarcisio monestary, shower, collapse for an afternoon siesta, eat dinner at a restaurant across from the site, fall asleep and repeat the routine the next day. It was a greuling

process, but well worth it.

Maxentius' villa is located on Rome's Via Appia Antica, a short distance outside the city wall. It sits in an area of Rome where one might not necessarily expect to find a monumental palatial complex. The area was primarily used for funerary purposes in Maxentius' time, and several times during my month on the project, I was able to tour the many Christian catacombs that dot the landscape around the Via Appia. It seems odd that Maxentius would place his villa in a primarily funerary, and primarily Christian sector of the city. I was struck by this odd juxtaposition of Christian funerary structures and a pagan imperial residence, and strove to investigate the matter further. The result is what follows, my investigation of why Maxentius' villa complex is situated where it is.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of the individuals with whom I worked this summer. Diane Conlin, Noel Lenski, Geoff Compton, Gianni Ponti, Terry Brock, Rachel Kahn, Crystal Fritz, and Holly Scriptor, I thank you all for making this experience not only possible, but extraordinary.

I would also like to extend my thanks to Joseph Brockington and Margaret Wiedenhoeft, and everyone else at the Kalamazoo College Center for International Programs for supporting this project. The Maxentius project is truly a testament to the benefits that a small liberal arts school like Kalamazoo has to offer to its students. I would also like to thank the Beeler Foundation, who awarded me a grant which covered the financial aspect of my participation in this endeavor. Without the generosity of Isabel Beeler, I would not have been able to participate in this project.

Most of all, I would like to thank Anne Haeckl, for putting up with me through the entire grueling research process. Not only has she masterminded this project, she has been an inspiration to me throughout my entire researching and writing process, never allowing me to accept anything as “good enough.” She has urged me on every step of the way, and has taught me that research of this type is never truly finished. As I have drawn from, and in some cases, disagreed with, the research of others in this matter, I hope for my own work to continue an ongoing dialogue on the subject.

Introduction

In July of 2003, a new archaeological project was begun at the Villa of Maxentius, one component of a monumental, imperial building complex along the Via Appia Antica on the outskirts of Rome. This project is a collaborative effort between Kalamazoo College, the University of Colorado, Boulder, and the Sovraintendenza ai Beni Culturali del Comune di Roma. As one of the largest American excavations currently operating in Rome, The Kalamazoo College/CU-Boulder excavations offer a unique opportunity to investigate a little-understood monument from one of the most dramatic times in Roman history, the period immediately preceding the collapse of the Tetrarchy and the rise of Christendom. Maxentius, a self-declared emperor who ruled Rome from 306 to 312 CE, was a pivotal figure in this transformation. Immediately before he defeated Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine is said to have experienced a vision which converted him to Christianity, making him Rome's first Christian emperor. The religious sympathies of Maxentius remain a topic of debate, on which the excavations of his Appian villa may shed new light.

Constructed outside the Aurelian Wall which surrounds the city, Maxentius' extramural complex draws a marked contrast with the rest of his building program, which focused on Rome's city center. Maxentius' motivation for the construction of an enormous new imperial seat in a suburban setting remains one of the great unanswered questions about this period of history. Therefore, one of the primary objectives of the new project is to explore the political, dynastic, and religious implications of this unexplained site choice.

The circumstances of Maxentius' reign were charged with the pagan/Christian tensions that shaped the contemporary political and religious landscape. In order to

legitimize his usurpation of power in Rome, Maxentius had to appeal to all sectors of the city's community, including the Christians, which forced him to address this touchy issue. I intend to argue that the villa complex on the Via Appia played a previously unrecognized role in Maxentius' attempted reconciliation of Rome's pagans and Christians, a religious conflict that he attempted to use to his own political advantage. The Via Appia at the turn of the fourth century CE was a region rife with monuments from Rome's glorious pagan past, but was also experiencing an increasing influx of Christian development. I hope to demonstrate that this dual religious association is precisely what prompted Maxentius to choose the area for a new suburban imperial seat.

Historical Background: The Tetrarchy and the Career of Maxentius

To fully understand the story told by the Maxentian complex along the Appia, one must understand the world in which Maxentius lived.¹ Maxentius rose to power in a time after the Roman Empire had been through nearly a century of upheaval, with emperors changing like seasons, and various secessions of territories such as the Gallic Empire. Only two decades before Maxentius took power was the instability finally calmed by Diocletian on November 20, 284 CE, when he reunified Rome's former territories. Diocletian recognized that the structure of Rome's government and military was inherently unstable. In order to discourage attempted coups, he sought to introduce a new power structure, with a clearly defined method of succession and shared power. Thus, in 286 the Roman Tetrarchy, a system of government designed to share power between four imperial colleagues, was born. The Tetrarchy was an effort to split the administration of the empire into two spheres of influence, the Greek-speaking East and the Latin West, which nevertheless would remain a single unified political entity. Each half of the empire was ruled supremely by an *Augustus*, who in turn appointed a *Caesar*. The *Caesares* acted as both deputy emperors and, more importantly, officially designated heirs of their *Augusti*. In this way, the Tetrarchic system strove to streamline power transitions, ensuring that the new structure of government would be maintained perpetually.

However, in attempting to provide a stable system of government that would limit squabbles over succession, the Tetrarchy only inflamed the situation, providing four high-ranking positions of power that were just as coveted as the single throne had been in the past. Diocletian, the *Augustus* of the East, and his counterpart, Maximian of the West,

¹ John Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital, Rome in the Fourth Century*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press 2000) 43-69.

had named as their respective *Caesares* Galerius and Constantius. These two duly took over as *Augusti* after the abdication of their superiors in 305. Although the first Tetrarchic power transition went smoothly, it was not without its underlying problems. Hereditary claims had no official place in the Tetrarchic system of succession, but this did not nullify their effects. Two of the Tetrarchs, Maximian Herculus and Constantius, had biological sons, Maxentius and Constantine, respectively, who were not content to let others govern territories which had formerly belonged to their fathers. This situation was a political powder keg, as there was an inherent potential for conflict between blood heirs and appointed *Caesares*. By changing to a four-branch ruling structure, Diocletian helped his regime gain staying power, but at the same time embroiled multiple families in the highest echelons of the government. In the succession of 305, Constantius inherited the western territory formerly controlled by Maximian, and appointed Severus, an unrelated man, as his *Caesar*. In the East, Galerius took over the position of *Augustus* and appointed his nephew, Maximin Daia, as his *Caesar*. These decisions alienated the sons of both Constantius and Maximian. Constantine and Maxentius were completely left out of the empire's administration, even though their fathers had been involved in the Tetrarchy since its inception.

Both Constantine and Maxentius soon acted on what they viewed as their dynastic rights to rule. Within a year, Constantius' death in 306 provided both with the opportunity to grab a seat of power to which each believed he had a legitimate claim. Constantine, who was declared *Augustus* in Britain by his father's army, was put into immediate opposition with Maxentius, who took initiative of his own and seized power in Rome. Lactantius (26: 1-3) tells us of the circumstances of Maxentius' rise to power:

“The reason for this rising was as follows: when he [Galerius] decided to devour the world by instituting censuses, his madness went so far that he was not willing for even the people of Rome to be immune from this

oppression; census-officials were already being appointed who would be sent to Rome to register the population. At about the same time he had abolished the camp of the praetorian guard. The few soldiers who had been left in the camp at Rome seized their opportunity. They killed some of the magistrates and then, with the support of the people, whose discontent had already been aroused, they invested Maxentius with the purple.”²

Maxentius, feeling left out of the Tetrarchy, was able to establish a strong bond with the citizens of Rome, who were also frustrated with their loss of imperial privileges. Rome, during the reign of the Tetrarchs, had been treated as just one of several Tetrarchic capital cities, its position and heritage no longer of special status in a world of frontier warfare and decentralized power. A city that had so long been the center of the civilized world did not take kindly to losing its dominant civic position in an empire it had once controlled. Maxentius capitalized on this feeling of disenfranchisement, and was able to establish himself as the Rome-friendly emperor, intertwining his own image with that of the city to make himself its champion.

Maxentius’ power play, however, seemed only to help him locally in Rome. While he retained control of a significant amount of territory in Italy and North Africa, he was never officially recognized by the college of Tetrarchs. In contrast to his rival Constantine, whose succession was subsequently ratified, Maxentius never officially became a Tetrarch. Although both Constantine and Maxentius began their reigns as usurpers who attained their positions through dynastic claim to their fathers’ former commands, the former was officially accepted after the fact, whereas the latter was not. This lack of recognition plagued Maxentius throughout his six-year reign from 306 to 312, when he was finally defeated and killed by Constantine and his forces during the battle of the Milvian Bridge on October 28, 312.

Everything that we are told about Maxentius’ reign, and indeed about most of the

² Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*. Ed. & Trans. J. L. Creed (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1984) 41

Tetrarchic period, comes to us through biased sources who are both pro-Constantine and pro-Christian. Every contemporary literary source that speaks about Maxentius was written during or after the reign of Constantine, and thus had an agenda that cannot be described as purely objective. Having occupied territory which had formerly belonged to Constantine's father, Constantius, having opposed Constantine's conquest of the West, and having finally fallen to Constantine in battle, Maxentius was cast in a negative light by those who wished to show Constantine as a hero. In order to paint Constantine as the glorious conquering hero, it was necessary to demonize his enemies, the first of whom was Maxentius.

The three most noteworthy sources from this period are the Latin Panegyrists, Eusebius and Lactantius, all of whom were Christians writing in the aftermath of the Great Persecution of Christians that had been carried out by the Tetrarchs.³ Although the persecutions were no longer in effect, these authors had a vested interest in recalling them, as all differences between the new Christian emperor Constantine and the former pagan leadership that initiated and authorized the persecutions needed to be emphasized in order to show Constantine's greatness by contrast. No positive qualities were ascribed to any of the pagan Tetrarchs, for the authors' main concern was not the recording of history, but the use of it to paint a certain propagandistic political picture. Specifically, their works strove to show Constantine as a heroic figure, all of whose enemies were evil. These authors maintained a consistent theme: Constantine was Christianity's champion, and his pagan rivals were enemies of God. This pagan/Christian dichotomy was used to justify Constantine's conquests and triumphs over each of his rivals. Since Constantine was in power at the time Eusebius, Lactantius, and the Panegyrists were writing, he was portrayed as a hero, a divinely anointed victor over his predecessors. Christian sources were primarily interested in legitimizing Constantine's sole rule, while condemning the

³ Curran (supra n. 1) 63-64.

Tetrarchic form of government as evil because of its association with the persecutors.

Romanitas and Paganism in Maxentius' Intra-Pomerial Building Program

We can, however, through critical analysis of literary and archaeological evidence, extrapolate a more nuanced view of Maxentius' character and disposition, and his response to the major political issues of his reign. As an unrecognized usurper, Maxentius was faced with two important challenges: the defense of his territory and the legitimacy of his rule. In order to address these problems, he was forced to appeal to his primary constituency, the citizenry of Rome. Such a strategy necessarily required some sort of imperial mediation to heal the rift between Rome's pagan and Christian communities. Despite the Tetrarchic persecutions, Rome's Christians had increased in number, becoming a sizeable portion of the population which Maxentius could not afford to ignore.⁴

Because Maxentius drew his support from the local population in Rome, a major part of his propaganda campaign was dedicated to gestures in their honor. In a recently divided empire, where the centers of power were increasingly decentralized, there must have been much resentment on the part of the citizens of what was formerly the sole capital of the Roman world. Maxentius appeared to sympathize with the disgruntled citizenry, emphasizing in his public works the grandeur of traditional Rome. For this reason, many of his public works reflect the concept of *romanitas*, a love of all things Roman, with an emphasis on the time-honored traditions of the city.

All of Maxentius' building projects convey a strong message of *romanitas*. This concept can be seen in the structures Maxentius chose to erect in the city proper, particularly in the area of the Roman Forum. Here Maxentius used traditional Roman techniques and symbols. In his construction of the Basilica Nova, Maxentius followed in the footsteps of his predecessors, adding his own signature to the Forum area. The

⁴ Curran (supra n. 1) 35-42.

Basilica Nova stood on the site of the Horrea Piperataria, Domitian's spice warehouses, replacing that utilitarian structure with a splendid new civic space. His basilica would stand tall amidst the public buildings that former Roman emperors had erected for use by the populace. This basilica was a gesture by Maxentius that demonstrated his dedication to the Roman citizenry. It was a monumental complex that was ambitiously constructed, built for beauty and majesty, incorporating architectural elements formerly only used in bath complexes.⁵

Maxentius' reconstruction of Hadrian's Temple of Venus and Roma helped him convey his love for the city of Rome by bringing its two chief goddesses to prominence in one monumental temple. The Temple of Venus and Roma stood between the Basilica Nova and the Arch of Titus, on a terrace that overlooked the Flavian Amphitheater to the southeast, thus linking the Flavian monuments to the Roman Forum. Roma, the personification of the city, was of chief importance in Maxentius' propaganda campaign, as his attention to her embodied the concept of *romanitas* that permeated the rest of his public works. Venus was an important figure to emphasize as well, as she was the mother of Aeneas, the Trojan prince whose adventures led to Rome's founding. The reconstruction of the Temple of Venus and Roma showed Maxentius' emphasis on Rome's past, refurbishing a work by one of Rome's great emperors, Hadrian.⁶ Together, these two adjacent monuments, the Basilica Nova and the Temple of Venus and Roma, transformed the southeast end of the Forum, and the north side of the Via Sacra, into a Maxentian preserve.

⁵ Amanda Claridge, *Oxford Archaeological guides, Rome*. (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc. 1998) 115-116.

⁶ Matts Cullhed, *Conservator Urbis Suae: Studies in the politics and propaganda of the emperor Maxentius*. (Stockholm: Svenska Institutet i Rom, 1994) 52.

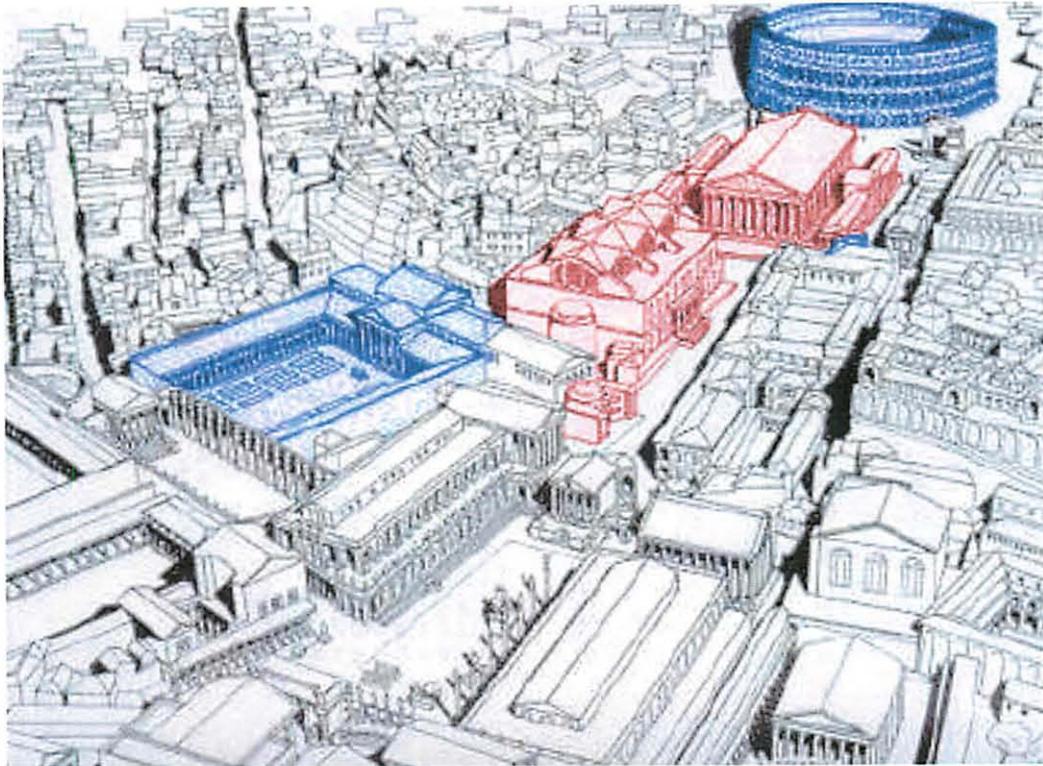


Figure 1: The Roman Forum. Maxentian buildings in red, Flavian buildings in blue.

Maxentius' construction of the so-called "Temple of Divus Romulus" was also a significant modification of the space of the Forum Romanum. The impressively domed building is thought to commemorate Maxentius' untimely dead son, Romulus, who drowned in the Tiber when he was only a boy. Romulus was named after the legendary founder of Rome, again showing Maxentius' passion for ancient traditions. Romulus' temple linked Vespasian's *Templum Pacis*, or Temple of Peace, to the Via Sacra and, in turn, the rest of the Forum area. It not only held dynastic implications for Maxentius by emphasizing his family, it also showed his commitment to the city. By physically linking the original Forum Romanum to Vespasian's imperial forum, Maxentius was expanding the Forum's space to include Vespasian's addition. Through this innovative use of passage architecture, Maxentius was able to insert himself into the political landscape of Rome, at the intersection of Republican and imperial Rome, both of whose traditions he strove to revive.⁷

⁷ Cullhed (supra n. 6) 55.

These three buildings, while all displaying *romanitas*, also carried an intriguing and previously unrecognized association with the Flavian dynasty. The Basilica Nova replaced a previous Flavian structure, and the Temple of Venus and Roma and the Temple of Divus Romulus both linked the Roman Forum to spaces defined by Flavian construction, the Colosseum and Vespasian's *Templum Pacis*, respectively. In fact, the three structures lie on an axis which points directly toward the Colosseum on one side and opens onto the *Templum Pacis* on the other. Perhaps Maxentius was drawing a comparison between himself and the Flavian emperors, particularly Vespasian, who, like Maxentius, came into power during a time of contested power. Vespasian came to the throne in 69 CE, after a brief outbreak of civil war known as the Year of Four Emperors. Power in Maxentius' day was just as divided, with four emperors ruling again in the Tetrarchy. By comparing his own position with that of Vespasian, Maxentius may have sought to justify his quest to end Tetrarchic rivalry and restore sole rule to the Roman Empire. It is also important to note the method of succession during the Flavian Dynasty. The Flavian emperors comprised Vespasian and his two sons, Titus and Domitian, both of whom succeeded on the basis of their familial ties. Since Maxentius' strongest claim to legitimacy was that he was the son of the former Augustus, he may have been using the Flavians as his imperial model, establishing a dynasty for his family, with his son Romulus as heir.

Like other emperors before him, Maxentius embarked upon a campaign to show his contribution to the city by erecting impressive public pagan and secular structures for the Roman people. However, unlike emperors such as Augustus (27 BCE-14 CE), Vespasian (69-79CE), Domitian (81-96 CE), and Trajan (98-117 CE), all of whom built their own fora as separate structures, Maxentius returned to the space of Rome's earliest Republican Forum, putting his stamp on the city and enhancing his image as the Rome-

centric emperor. As we will see, Maxentius' Appian buildings, like those in the Forum, sought to capitalize on the same message of *romanitas*, only with the addition of new Christian associations as well.

The strong emphasis on Rome and its traditions conveyed throughout the building campaign of Maxentius also appeared in his coinage. The majority of Maxentian coins displayed *romanitas* as his principal message.⁸



Fig. 2: Maxentian coin depicting Maxentius on the obverse, Roma on the reverse. c. 308-310.

Many of Maxentius' coins depicted him on one side, and patriotic Roman images on the other. In one case, (Fig. 2.) Maxentius was shown on the obverse of the coin, while on the reverse the goddess Roma appeared in a hexastyle temple holding a globe and scepter. The recurring image of the goddess Roma on Maxentian coinage served to emphasize the importance of the city itself to Maxentius' reign. This image of Roma in the temple also appeared on many Maxentian coins of the period, perhaps making a direct reference to the Temple of Venus and Roma that Maxentius restored in the Forum area.

Maxentius' coins also conveyed his *romanitas* through the use of titles. On many

⁸ Cullhed (supra n. 6) 63.

coins Maxentius was referred to not as *Augustus* or *Caesar*, but as *Princeps*, a title created by Rome's first emperor, Augustus, but less commonly used by the time the Tetrarchy was established.

There are two interpretations of this choice of loaded vocabulary. One is that the title was meant to emphasize Maxentius' aspirations to sole rulership of the empire, such as Augustus had enjoyed when he coined the term *princeps*. Augustus' reign had been marked by the promulgation of many of the same Roman traditions that Maxentius strove to emphasize in his own image. Another interpretation is that the title of *princeps* may also have been intended to imply that Maxentius' position was something akin to a Tetrarch, but not identical. When Augustus originated the term, he also invented the concept of *primus inter pares*, or "first among equals," a title meant to be respectful to the status of other Romans, but also to proclaim Augustus' supreme *auctoritas*. By evoking the image of Augustus, Maxentius may have been saying that as *princeps*, his position was both external and superior to, but also complementary to the Tetrarchy, a special position that would turn it into a five-man "pentarchy"⁹ with Maxentius as *primus inter pares*.

Perhaps the most effective way that Maxentius used his coinage to show his aspirations to join the Tetrarchy was through numismatic linkage to his father. While his father had been an important figure in shaping the new government, he was no longer in command, and Maxentius was forced to appeal to others in order to secure himself a position in the college of Tetrarchs. In order to acknowledge his fellow rulers, Maxentius issued coinage which depicted them as well as their titles, indicating that his territory was not an entirely separate entity from those of the Tetrarchy.¹⁰ It was important for Tetrarchs to gain favor in each other's eyes, as Maxentius apparently attempted to do via

⁹ Cullhed (*supra* n. 6) 33-34.

¹⁰ Cullhed (*supra* n. 6) 36

the inclusion of their portraits, names and titles on his official coinage. Maxentius' numismatic homage to Constantius may have been a deliberate bow of appeasement to his son, Constantine, who had also been declared Augustus by his troops, and whom Maxentius obviously perceived as a rival. Matts Cullhed has suggested that the absence of Galerius' portrait on Maxentian coinage, as well as the absence of that of Severus, must have been deliberate snubs to the other rulers, and shows that there were still obstacles to Maxentius' acceptance into the ruling body. Only after his death did Galerius appear on Maxentius' coins, where he could enhance Maxentian propaganda without benefiting from it.¹¹ There is a possible anti-Tetrarchic discrepancy, however, that Cullhed also highlighted, in Maxentius' use of the title *princeps*, instead of Caesar or Augustus. This title, Cullhed suggested, was an attempt by Maxentius to establish himself as a new addition rather than take the place of anyone in the Tetrarchy. This analysis is intriguing, but overlooks the fact that much of the territory over which Maxentius claimed dominion was the formal territory of Severus, whom Maxentius excluded from coin depiction. This exclusion can also be seen as an attempt to eliminate Severus, replacing him with Maxentius as the new ruler of Severus' turf.

¹¹ Byron J. Nakamura, "When did Diocletian Die?" *Classical Philology* 98 (2003): 283-289.

Romanitas, Paganism, and Maxentius' Complex on the Via Appia

Arguably, Maxentius' greatest architectural work was the monumental imperial complex located outside the Porta San Sebastiano in the Aurelian Wall, between the second and third milestones of the Via Appia. The complex was originally attributed to Maxentius by Antonio Nibby, a nineteenth-century archaeologist who found what he believed to be a statue base in the circus which bore a dedication to Romulus, Maxentius' son who died while his father was in power.¹² The Villa of Maxentius was a monumental complex that dwarfed the splendor of its neighboring architectural masterpiece, the first-century CE tomb of Caecilia Metella.

The complex consisted of three components: a palace, a mausoleum, and a circus. The palace unit, which rose behind the other two structures on a hillside terrace, was a Maxentian construction, on a site previously occupied by earlier villas dating from the late Republic to the Antonine period.¹³ It was an enormous palace, whose layout still remains incompletely defined, due to the fact that no long-term archaeological excavation project has, as yet, operated at this part of the site. The circus, which lay to the east of the villa, set back from the road, was an entirely new Maxentian construction. It lay in a natural valley and was connected to the villa by a long *cryptoporticus*, which linked the palace and the *pulvinar*, the emperor's private box at the circus. The mausoleum was a large round structure surrounded on all four sides by a portico, which would have shielded it from the view of those on the road, while still maintaining a dominating presence.

Where Maxentius' Via Appia complex differed drastically from his other monumental building projects, however, was in its location. Of all of Maxentius' works,

¹² Alfred Frazer, "The Iconography of the Emperor Maxentius' Buildings in Via Appia." *The Art Bulletin* 48 (1968) 385.

¹³ Guiseppina Pisani Sartorio, *La Villa di Massenzio Sulla Via Appia*. (Rome: Istituto di Studi Romani. 1976) 113-130.

the villa complex stood out as a suburban project, rather than an urban one. The Appian buildings were literally outliers, not in form or function, but simply in their location, so far from the center of the city with which Maxentius sought to identify himself. Furthermore, there appears to have been no rational need for the construction of an imperial residence at this location at all.

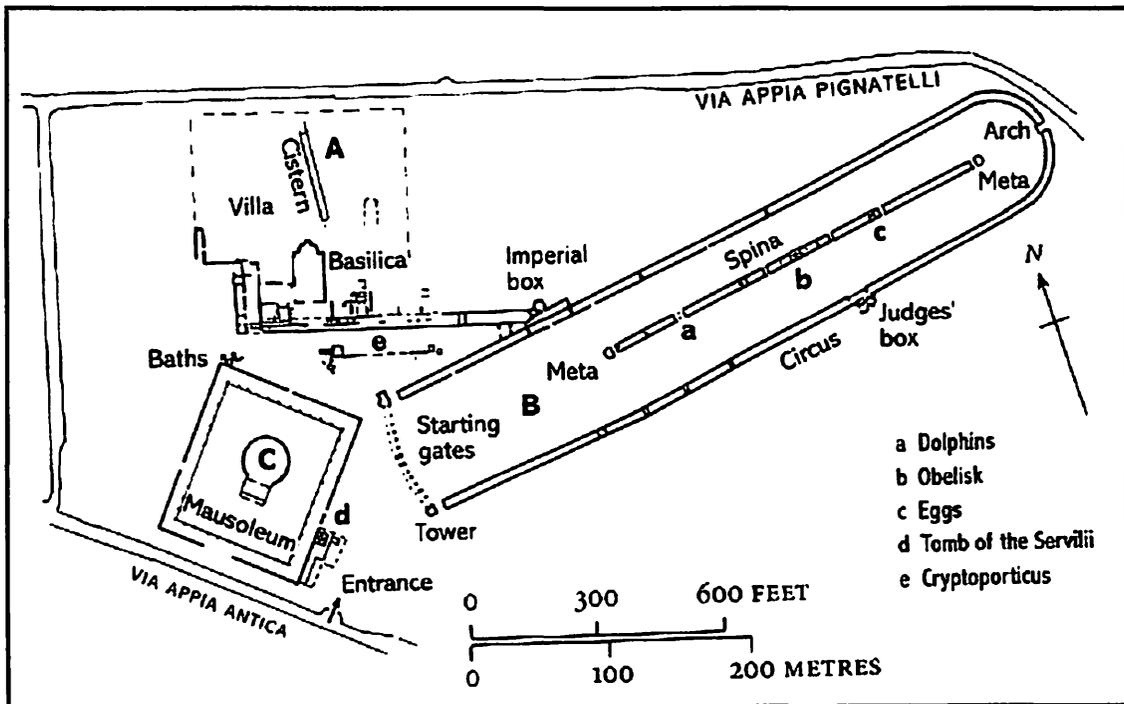


Fig. 3: The Villa of Maxentius

The Appian palace closely mirrored the design and purpose of the Domus Augustana, Rome's official imperial residence on the Palatine Hill. The Palatine also combined a palace with a full-sized circus, the Circus Maximus. Had Maxentius needed or wanted a circus connected to his palace, he could surely have used the Palatine complex as Rome's previous emperors had, and erected only the mausoleum on the Appia.

Maxentius' neglect of the Domus Augustana is particularly puzzling, considering the great lengths to which he went to model his own image on glorious traditions of Rome's past. To supplant the traditional residence of the emperor could be seen as a departure from the rest of Maxentius' propaganda campaign. Even if the Palatine palace

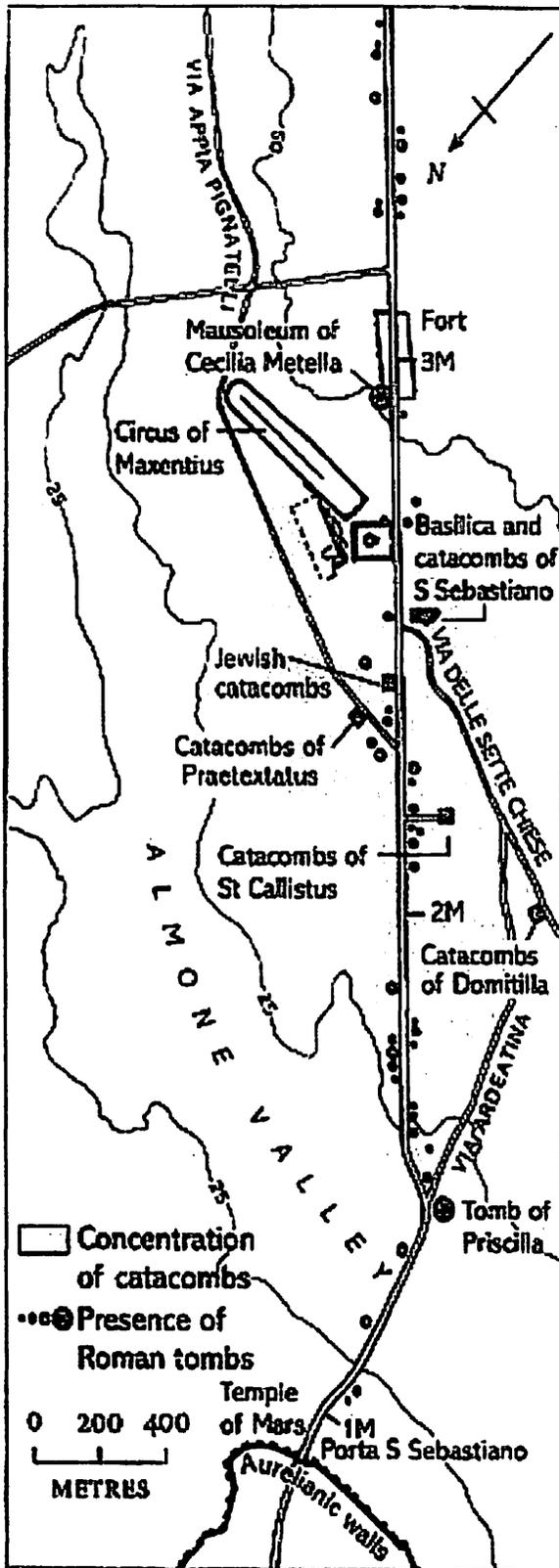


Figure 4: The Via Appia

had not been entirely suitable for his tastes, Maxentius could have stayed on the Via Labicana, where he took up residence in a villa immediately after his rise to power. So why build an entirely new complex? Maxentius' motives for building the Appia group were obviously not merely those of a man wanting a place to live. The construction of the complex must have been initiated for more serious purposes.

Maxentius' Appian complex upheld all the qualities that Maxentius cultivated in the rest of his building program. Like the temples and basilica in the city proper, this suburban villa conveyed many of the strong political messages, such as *romanitas*, references to pagan cults associated with Roman history and Roman emperors, and dynastic succession, that Maxentius tried to bring to the foreground in his other public works. The dynastic mausoleum may have provided Maxentius with a powerful incentive to place the complex

where he did. Because Roman tradition prohibited burial within the sacred *pomerium*, such a monumental funerary structure would immediately disqualify any location inside the city from consideration. Ever since the fourth century BCE, however, the Via Appia had served as Rome's most impressive street of tombs, lined with impressive funerary structures erected by Republican and imperial aristocrats.¹⁴ For centuries, wealthy Romans had set up their tombs along the road for all to see as they entered or exited the city. Maxentius' emphasis on *romanitas* may have been a factor in his attraction to the Via Appia. By placing his mausoleum among their tombs, Maxentius could take his place among the great Romans of old.

The Mausoleum of Romulus stood alongside the Augustan tomb of Caecilia Metella, emphasizing the fact that Maxentius was dedicated to the revival of early imperial Roman culture. Furthermore, Maxentius' own site had been used for funerary purposes in the late second century CE, when it belonged to Herodes Atticus, who converted the territory into a funerary park in honor of his dead wife, Annia Regilla. Maxentius' mausoleum therefore linked his reign to aristocratic funerary traditions of the Augustan and Antonine past, and helped to identify him as their re-initiator, while emphasizing a desire to return to a period of Roman splendor. In this way, Maxentius made an attempt to connect himself with earlier Roman *summi viri*, echoing their constructions of suburban mausolea and showing himself as a follower of the *mos maiorum*, the path of the elders. The magnitude of Maxentius' new complex appropriated Herodes Atticus' funerary site, already the largest in the area, establishing Maxentius as the *princeps* and *primus inter pares* of Rome's most significant mortuary landscape.

It is also worthwhile to compare the location of Maxentius' complex with the

¹⁴ Lucrezia Spera, "The Christianization of Space along the Via Appia: Changing Landscape in the Suburbs of Rome," *American Journal of Archaeology* 107 (2003) 24. ✓

funerary constructions of earlier Roman emperors. Funerary practice by Roman emperors had been varied throughout the life of the empire,¹⁵ but the tendency was to construct imperial tombs within sight of the *pomerium*. Augustus (27 BCE-14 CE), with dynastic aspirations, built a mausoleum in the northern Campus Martius, close to Rome's *pomerium*. Because he viewed himself as *dominus et deus*, important enough to defy one of Rome's great traditions, Domitian (81-96 CE) had the audacity to plan to be buried within the *pomerium*, in the *Templum Gentis Flaviae* constructed on his birthplace on the Quirinal Hill. Trajan's (98-117 CE) remains were placed in the base of his Column, which stood only a few inches outside the *pomerium*, flirting with a trespass, but accepted as appropriate for Rome's *optimus princeps*. Hadrian (117-34 CE) followed Augustus' example by respecting for the city's traditional boundary. Although Hadrian's mausoleum was placed farther from the city center than that of Augustus, and stood on the far side of the Tiber, it was nevertheless still visible from metropolitan Rome and linked to the city by the Pons Aelius. Like emperors before him, Maxentius was willing to set up a mausoleum for his family in the vicinity of Rome, which showed his dedication to the rightful imperial seat. However, his own dynastic mausoleum was placed much farther outside the *pomerium* than the tombs of earlier emperors, and shielded from the view of city residents by the Aurelian Wall, ostentatiously underscoring Maxentius' respect for ancient Roman burial traditions.

In addition to this emphasis on Roman funerary tradition, Maxentius' villa complex could have been beneficial to his political standing in several ways. Whatever he may have done during his reign, Maxentius remained a usurper, who seized power rather than being given it. This fact must have detracted from his image, making him seem less legitimate in the context of the new Tetrarchic government. Any self-styled ruler would

¹⁵ Penelope J. E. Davies, *Death and the Emperor Roman Imperial Funerary Monuments from Augustus to Marcus Aurelius*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000)

have tried to look more Tetrarchic in order to maintain his legitimacy. This desire may partially explain why the Via Appia complex needed to be built. While Maxentius styled himself as the Rome-centered emperor, calling on the city's time-honored, traditional values, his image nevertheless needed to keep pace politically with those of the Tetrarchs. Also, if Maxentius did harbor aspirations to join the Tetrarchy, he needed to appear ready to do so. Diocletian's retirement palace at Split included a mausoleum on the palace grounds, mimicing the organization of the Palatine, while adding a new architectural element.¹⁶ Mausolea also appeared in the Tetrarchic palaces at Milan, Thessalonica, and Zamzigrad.¹⁷ Maxentius may have felt he needed to demonstrate that he could create in Rome a fashionable and multi-purpose imperial complex equal to those of the Tetrarchy, while at the same time staying true to the ancient spatial rules of the rightful capital. Since traditional Roman law forbade the construction of tombs within the *pomerium*, Maxentius was forced to look to the city's outskirts for his imperial combination of Tetrarchic palatial and funerary structures.

His imitation of Tetrarchic palaces was not the only way Maxentius may have indicated his desire to enter the ruling body. Another way the Appian complex could have furthered such an agenda was by fostering connections between Maxentius and his father Maximian. Maximian had been chosen by Diocletian himself to be the Augustus of the West. Maximian, as part of his imperial propaganda, had conflated his image with that of Hercules, becoming Maximianus Herculus, in order to align himself with Diocletianus Jovius, who had conflated his image with Jupiter. This new aspect of manipulating the imperial cult helped to exalt the rulers themselves to the level of pagan gods, while also emphasizing the deities that most clearly defined the ideology of their reigns.

¹⁶ Frazer (supra n. 11) 388.

¹⁷ Frazer (supra n. 11)

Maxentius, in order to connect himself with his father, continued the ruler cult of Hercules that his father had initiated, associating his own image with that of the same pagan god. By patronizing Hercules, Maxentius was able to claim heredity indirectly, showing off his blood relation to Maximian while simultaneously claiming the divine favor his father had supposedly enjoyed while he was Augustus. Once again, coinage provides evidence that Maxentius attempted the tactic of Hercules-identification. On several coins Maxentius can be seen bearing the traditional iconography of Hercules (Fig. 4.), from the Nemean Lion headdress to his traditional club.¹⁸ The similarity between himself and his father would be difficult to miss, as Maximian had chosen to depict himself in the same way on his official coinage. Maxentius can be seen in this gold coin with Hercules' lion headdress, and is depicted on the reverse side with the goddess Roma, who also held an important position in his imperial propaganda. Maxentius is called here *Conservator Urbis Suae*, or “conservator of his city,” a title he cultivated during his Rome-centered reign. Coins like this one demonstrate Maxentius' commitment to the Tetrarchic methods of rule, while also bringing his *romanitas* to the forefront.



Fig. 5: Gold Maxentian coin. Obverse: Maxentius as Hercules, Reverse: Maxentius with Roma

The perpetuation of the cult of Hercules, while an important aspect of Maxentian coinage, also may have played a role in the plan of Maxentius' villa. Alfred Frazer suggested that Maxentius designed the layout of the Appian complex to draw a direct connection to the Domus Augustana on the Palatine Hill, and through it, to Hercules and

¹⁸ Frazer (supra n. 11) 392.

his father Maximian.¹⁹ Frazer claimed that the three-part structure of the Appian group was not simply an allusion to the palace and circus units of the Palatine complex, but a direct comparison, meant to allude to a third component in the city proper. In Frazer's view, the third element of the Palatine group which Maxentius attempted replicate on the Via Appia was the Ara Maxima, Rome's most ancient shrine to Hercules. If we are to see the Appia group as a direct evocation of the Palatine group, then the location of the third component, the Mausoleum of Romulus, would most closely correspond to the site of the Ara Maxima in its relation to the other two structures. As the Circus Maximus pointed its starting gates toward the Forum Boarium, which contained the Ara Maxima, so did the Circus of Maxentius point its gates toward the Mausoleum of Romulus.

This comparison may have been intended to bring about two effects, the first being to highlight Hercules as the god who endorsed Maxentius' power, the second to elevate the importance of the Ara Maxima in the city proper. The arrangement emphasized Hercules' presence in the Appia group, and formed a direct parallel to the Palatine arrangement. Visitors to the Appia complex would form a mental link between the Romulus' mausoleum in its suburban setting and the Ara Maxima of Hercules in the city proper. This would draw an important connection between Hercules and the mausoleum on the Appia, further intertwining Maxentius with the deity. Frazer also noted Nibby's discovery of a Hercules head on the *spina* of the circus, providing convincing evidence that Hercules did have a presence in Maxentius' Appian building program.

¹⁹ Frazer (*supra* n. 11)

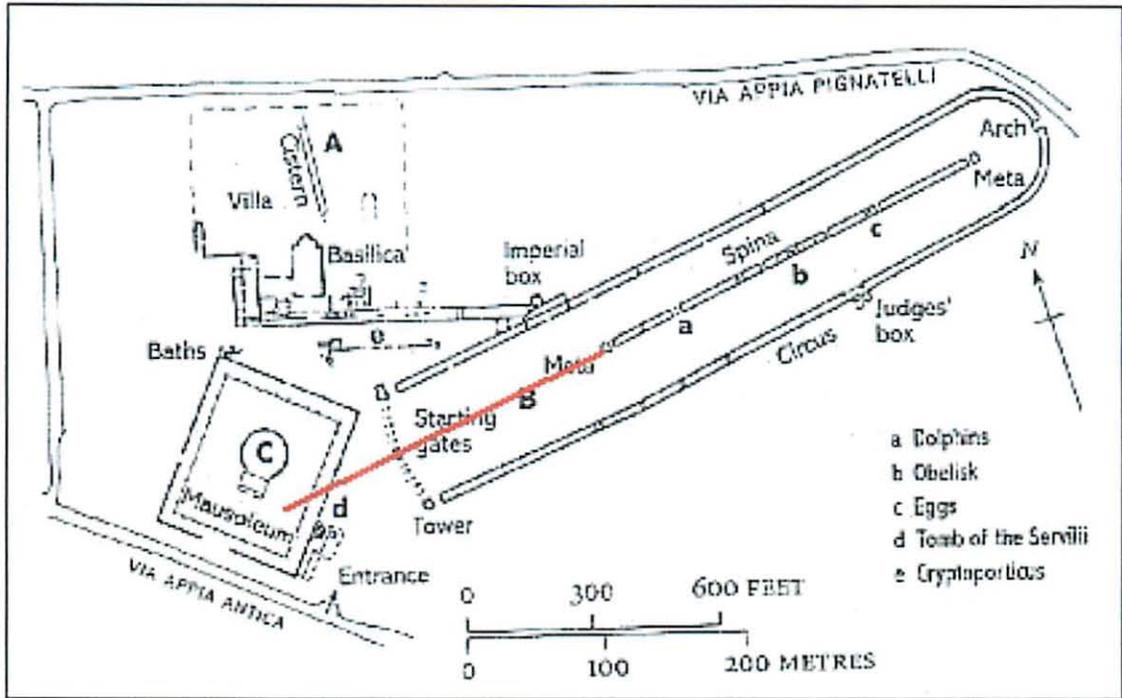


Fig. 6: The Circus of Maxentius and its axial emphasis on the Mausoleum of Romulus

Frazer's argument is particularly convincing in the context of Maxentius' familial situation. Through the plan of his Appia complex, Maxentius would have been able to highlight his connection with Hercules, and to emphasize architecturally his most compelling claim to legitimacy, his lineage. Since Maxentius' principal claim to the purple was his status as his father's "heir," he was obviously not averse to the concept of dynastic succession. If the mausoleum, which appears to be dynastic in intent, had indeed been set up in a way that was meant to emphasize Hercules, it must have contained Herculean imagery, and perhaps was intended to be used in the establishment of a "Herculean" dynasty, with Maximian as the founder and Maxentius and Romulus as its successors.

Christianity, Maxentius, and the Complex on the Via Appia

As discussed above, the complex that Maxentius built on the Via Appia carried significant political associations, especially concerning Maxentius' use of *romanitas* to connect with the glorious traditions of Rome's pagan past. However, the Appian buildings also appear to look to Rome's future, with associations to Christianity that I believe have not been given sufficient weight by previous research. On one level, the Maxentian complex on the Via Appia could have functioned as an imperial architectural reconciliation of Rome's pagan and Christian communities, an achievement usually attributed to Constantine. It is here that Maxentius has recently been seen by some scholars as Constantine's predecessor, breaking away from the Tetrarchic stance on Christianity to bring about a peaceful coexistence between Rome's pagan political structure and the new religion.²⁰ To date, however, no one has investigated Maxentius' Appian complex as part of a conciliatory policy toward Christianity.

Maxentius' policy towards Christianity must be examined in the context of what had been happening throughout the empire under the rule of the Tetrarchy. Christianity, although it had gained significant ground in society throughout the previous century, remained an illegal belief. Christians had been sporadically persecuted throughout the third century CE. In an era of such political instability, the maintenance of power by those who had recently acquired it was of paramount concern. Therefore, rulers were inclined to become hostile toward any trend that bucked traditional order or threatened to change the status quo. Christianity became an easy target for anyone needing to silence subversion. Due to the public and formal nature of traditional Roman religious practice,

²⁰ Daniel De Decker, "Mémoires et Documents, La Politique Religieuse de Maxence," Byzantion 38 (1968) 472-562.

Christians were inevitably seen as openly defiant toward the society to which they belonged.

Throughout the life of the Roman Empire, emperors used formal religion to maintain solidarity throughout the territory Rome controlled. Beginning with Augustus, the concept of granting the ruler a formal position in religious practice was introduced, and sacrifice in his honor soon became a patriotic ritual. The imperial cult and the *adoratio* were not only seen as religious institutions, but also as important political structures used to promote the expression of obedience towards the emperor and the government. Because Christianity had its own set of beliefs that prohibited sacrifice to pagan deities, Christians did not participate in these displays of nationalism. This created a conflict of interest in an empire that used these rituals for political reasons. Christian refusal to participate in official state religion, while religious in intent, carried political consequences, causing Christians to be painted as subversives and traitors. Although persecution had taken place for this very reason throughout Christianity's early history, the worst actions of all came during the Tetrarchy. Having gained control over the empire after a century of chaos and civil war, Diocletian had compelling reasons for attempting to eliminate any signs of opposition to his reign. Lactantius described the events leading up to the Great Persecution and identified them as stemming from this act of refusal from practice in the state religion. He recounted the initiation of the Great Persecution as follows (15: 3-7):

“People of every age and either sex were seized for burning, and, since their number was so great, they were taken not individually but in groups and then encircled by flames. Members of the household had millstones tied to their necks and were drowned in the sea. The persecution fell with equal violence on the rest of the population, as the judges, sent out around all the temples, compelled everyone to perform a sacrifice. The prisons were full, unheard-of kinds of torture were devised; ... Letters had also gone to Maximian and Constantius telling them to do the same; no account had

been taken of their opinion on these important issues. The old man Maximian readily obeyed throughout Italy; he was not a man of great clemency. Constantius, to avoid appearing to disagree with the instructions of his seniors, allowed the churches - that is, the walls, which could be restored - to be destroyed, but the true temple of God, which is inside men, he kept unharmed."²¹

The brutality that Lactantius described was probably practiced by all the Tetrarchs. The end note about Constantius' clemency may have been revisionist history, reflecting Lactantius' desire to clear the family of Constantine from charges of persecution.²²

Into this ferment of violent anti-Christianity came Maxentius, the son of a persecutor, who seized power in Rome in 306. Maxentius' actions toward the Christians in Rome, however, were not in line with those of the rest of the Tetrarchy. In this area, he departed from official Tetrarchic policy and embarked upon his own, one of toleration. This stance not only distanced Maxentius from the Tetrarchs, but it also allowed him to show his desire to turn over a new leaf in leadership, one which would gain him favor among the increasingly important Christian community of Rome.

Lactantius, while he treated Maxentius as a villain in his *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, made no attempt to categorize him as a persecutor. This restraint stood in marked contrast to Lactantius' treatment of the Tetrarchs, all of whose actions against the Christians he documented in graphic detail. Because Lactantius was not inclined to attribute any positive qualities to Maxentius, he chose to leave out details of his religious policy. Eusebius, on the other hand, although he was a partisan of Constantine as well, stated (VIII: 14) that "Maxentius, who assumed autocratic power in Rome, began by making a pretense of our faith in order to gratify and flatter the citizens. He commanded his subjects to cease persecuting the Christians, putting on the guise of religion and trying to appear considerate and much gentler than his predecessors."²³ Although he was critical

²¹ Lactantius (supra n. 2) 23.

²² Frazer (supra n. 11) 390.

²³ Eusebius, *The History of the Church*. Trans. G. A. Williamson (London: Penguin Books 1965) 274)

of Maxentius as a ruler, Eusebius, a pro-Constantinian propagandist, was forced to acknowledge the fact that Maxentius ended the persecutions. In fact, the reign of Maxentius, in spite of the emphasis he placed on traditional Roman values and *romanitas*, seems to have been the first period in the history of the Roman Empire that saw a move toward reconciliation between Christianity and the Roman state, an event traditionally associated with the reign of Constantine. Daniel De Decker described Maxentius as follows:

“L’‘usurpateur’ qui régna sur Rome du 28 octobre 306 au 28 octobre 312, et dont la réputation n’est pas des plus flatteuses, aurait eu, selon nous, le mérite d’avoir été ‘le prodrome’ de Constantin, d’avoir été le véritable initiateur de sa politique et un agent très actif de la reconnaissance du christianisme par l’État romain.”²⁴

“The ‘usurper’ who reigned over Rome from October 28 306 to October 28 312, and whose reputation is not one of the most flattering, would have had, according to me, the distinction of having been ‘the prologue’ of Constantine, of having been the veritable initiator of his policy and an active agent of the recognition of Christianity by the Roman state.”

A cessation of hostility toward Christianity on Maxentius’ part carried certain political implications for him, both positive and negative. First, his new policy marked a direct departure from the policies of both his predecessors, and the contemporary Tetrarchs. Maxentius’ new religious policy of toleration provocatively challenged the persecuting Tetrarchs, who may have seen it as a rallying cry against him. As discussed above, Maxentius initially strove to gain recognition within the Tetrarchic system. He was the son of the former Augustus of the West, and his marriage to Galerius’ daughter was a gesture of good will and partnership between the two mens’ families.²⁵

However, the cordial relations between Galerius and Maxentius certainly ended at some point, as the disappearance of Galerius’ name from Maxentian coinage in 312

²⁴ De Decker (supra n. 19) 473. The translation is my own.

²² De Decker (supra n. 19) IV.

indicates.²⁶ Indeed, a marked shift in Maxentius' governance occurred when he simultaneously fell out of favor with the Tetrarchs and began more actively to assert his independence. Now Maxentius removed the other Tetrarchs from his coinage and revived the title of *princeps*, calling attention to his singular, Rome-centered reign. A row over the parties' difference with respect to religious policy could have been the cause of both Maxentius' alienation and their wrath. Maxentius seems to have been the most favorable political figure to date towards the Christians, whereas Galerius was probably the most ruthlessly hostile. As recorded by Lactantius (XXI: 7-11), Galerius' practices towards Christians were such as to strike fear into any Christian heart:

“For people of no rank, the penalty was burning. Maximian [Galerius] had first permitted this form of execution against the Christians, issuing instructions that, after being tortured, the condemned should be burnt by slow fires. When they had been bound fast, a gentle flame would first of all be applied to their feet, long enough for the skin on their soles to be contracted and torn from their bones. Next, torches which were first lit and then put out were applied to each limb in turn, so that no area of the body was left unaffected. During all this, their faces would be splashed with cold water and their mouths moistened in case their throats got parched with dryness and they breathed their last too quickly. Death would finally supervene when, over the greater part of the day, their skin had been burnt off them, and the force of the fire had penetrated to their most vital parts. Then a pyre was made and the already burnt bodies were burnt again; their bones were collected, ground to powder, and tossed into the rivers and the sea.”²⁷

This gruesome description of Galerius' persecutions is striking, especially when compared to Lactantius' silence about Maxentius' treatment of the Christians. De Decker drew a provocative conclusion from Lactantius' and Eusebius' accounts of Maxentius, making a bold claim about his religious policy:

“*Le De Mortibus Persecutorum*, on l'a constaté, s'accorde avec Eusèbe sur ce fait capital: Maxence fut chrétien. Seulement, comme Eusèbe encore, *De Mortibus* s'ingénie à travestir un fait qui devait concilier la sympathie

²⁶ Nakamura (supra n. 11) 288.

²⁷ Lactantius (supra n. 2) 35.

de ses lecteurs à l'usurpateur. Le refus de l'*adoratio* ayant fait scandale en son temps, il n'était pas possible de le nier."²⁸

"*De Mortibus Persecutorum*, I have proven, agrees with Eusebius on this one principal fact. Maxentius was Christian. Alone, like Eusebius, the *De Mortibus* contrives to disguise a fact that should have won the sympathy of its readers towards the usurper. The refusal of the *adoratio* having been a scandal in his time, it was not possible to refuse it."

De Decker made the assertion that Maxentius was Christian based solely on the literary evidence provided to us by Lactantius and Eusebius, two unreliable sources about the man. Furthermore, De Decker relied on an *argumentum ex silentio*, as he inferred this claim more from what the authors fail to say about Maxentius than what was actually written. He also neglected the numismatic evidence that linked Maxentius to the goddess Roma, and conflated his image with that of Hercules. He also ignored the Herculean imagery of Maxentius' reign, including the sculptural head that linked his circus with the deity. Eusebius stated (VIII: 14) that Maxentius "pretended our faith,"²⁹ which implies that any attempt Maxentius made to appear Christian was insincere. This claim by Eusebius, however, is interesting, as it sheds light on one prevailing aspect of Maxentius' reign: he exploited his relationship with the Christian community for his own political purposes.

As early as the first century CE, Christians had begun to dig out catacombs in the area around the Via Appia.³⁰ This shift in the funerary character of the suburban space along the Appia from pagan to Christian burials seems to have been coupled with the dissociation of pagan and Christian cemeteries.³¹ These developments continued through the late third and early fourth centuries, when Christian activity began to dominate the region. This explosion of Christian development seems odd when considered in light of

²⁸ De Decker (supra n. 19) 499. The translation is my own.

²⁹ Eusebius (supra n. 22) 274.

³⁰ Fabrizio Mancinelli, *The Catacombs of Rome and the Origins of Christianity*, (Florence: Scala 1981) 17.

³¹ Spera (supra n. 14) 24.

the Tetrarchic Great Persecution. However, it also indicates that the Christians of Rome had begun to constitute a community whose presence and significance were on the rise. A localization of concentrated Christian burial activity on the Via Appia provided Christians with an opportunity for more independence in their rites and practices. This practice of excavating underground necropoleis accessible by tunnels in order to conserve space would be developed fully in the many catacombs in the area that were devoted to Christian burial.

The Via Appia region, having begun to decline in importance for wealthy Roman pagan burial, began to experience a large influx of Christian-oriented development in the late second and early third centuries CE. By c. 210 CE, there is evidence for the involvement of the Church in Christian burials along the Appia, particularly at the site of the Catacombs of St. Callistus, where Callistus was placed in charge of “the cemetery” there by Zephyrinus, the Bishop of Rome at the time.³² Christian cemeteries expanded in the Appian area throughout the Tetrarchic period, including one discovered between the Appia and the Via Ardeatina and another near the Via Pignatelli. Both of these subterranean complexes were crowded communal sepulchers, with many bodies crammed into closely-packed *loculi*.³³

By Maxentius’ time, there was already an extensive Christian catacomb directly across the street from the site of his villa. This catacomb, now known as the catacomb of San Sebastiano, probably originated in the early first century, and had grown to an impressive size by the turn of the fourth.³⁴ In the second half of the third century the site acquired an association with the saints Peter and Paul, and a *trichia* was erected in their honor. Lucrezia Spera has noted, “It is interesting to note that the complex of the

³² J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs, Rediscovered monuments of early Christianity*, (London: Thames and Hudson LTD 1978) 11.

³³ Spera (supra n. 14) 26.

³⁴ Mancinelli (supra n. 28) 17.

emperor Maxentius, which included a villa the mausoleum of Romulus, and a circus, was also undertaken during the same period as much Christian construction.”³⁵ She brings up this spatial coincidence, but draws no conclusions from it about Maxentius’ policy toward Christianity.

The Christianization of space along the Via Appia also included the dedication of sites to Christian martyrs, whose numbers had increased during the time of the Great Persecution. One notable example of sites focused on martyrs is the area around the modern day Basilica of Saint Sebastian. The site was originally linked to Christian martyrdom by its association with Saints Peter and Paul, to whom a shrine was constructed on the site during the late third century.³⁶ Subsequently, the site was also linked with Saint Sebastian, an important Christian martyr who held office in Rome during the Great Persecution of Diocletian. Sebastian entered the army and was eventually elevated by Diocletian to the politically and militarily powerful office of Praetorian Prefect, the commander of the Praetorian Guards, the emperor’s private military force in Rome. Sebastian was an example of a prominent Christian in the Roman army, and, more importantly, a member of the emperor’s elite guard, garrisoned in Rome, which formed the backbone of Maxentius’ army.

Sebastian, upon refusing to sacrifice to Diocletian, was martyred in Rome. He was executed and thrown into the *Cloaca Maxima*, the great drain through the Forum, which washed him into the Tiber, almost the same fate that befell Maxentius only a few years later at Constantine’s hands.³⁷ John Helgeland dated Sebastian’s death to one of two periods, either c. 286-287 or after February 303. Either way, Sebastian’s martyrdom fell into the period immediately before Maxentius’ usurpation, which succeeded only

³⁵ Spera (supra n. 14) 30-31.

³⁶ Spera (supra n. 14) 26.

³⁷ John Helgeland, “Christians and the Roman Army from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine.” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, 23 (1979) 724-830.

because Rome's garrisons supported it. If the second date is accurate, Sebastian's martyrdom immediately preceded Maxentius' elevation by the Praetorian Guard and *Equites Singulares* of Rome. The precise date of the construction of Sebastian's Basilica on the Via Appia directly across from Maxentius' complex is unclear, although many date it to the early the fourth century. It is possible that its construction may even have begun while Maxentius was in power.³⁸

We can assume that Maxentius, when he usurped the throne, was an ambitious, power-hungry man, so it seems hard to believe that he would introduce such a revolutionary policy of toleration toward Christians merely as an act of altruism. A decision this significant must have been advantageous to him somehow. Perhaps the Christian community in the city of Rome had grown so large at this point that it constituted a sizeable, and perhaps influential portion of the population. As an emperor who made a business of styling himself after the city he would call home, Maxentius had to make a concerted effort to appeal to all the major parts of its population. With the Christian presence on the Via Appia area growing ever more significant, Maxentius was afforded a unique opportunity to show off his policy of toleration towards the fledgeling community. The goal of currying favor with the Christian segment of the populace may have been an important factor in the site selection for Maxentius' Appian complex.

An architectural presence on the Via Appia not only afforded Maxentius the opportunity to convey his *romanitas*, incorporate plans for a dynasty, and echo other Tetrarchic capitals, but it also gave him a way to concretely and visibly demonstrate his religious policy of toleration. By positioning his villa complex where he did, Maxentius was able to demonstrate that his policy worked, and that he bore the Christian community no hostile intentions. As Maxentius' Appian complex was not only funerary, but residential as well, Maxentius was now living in the Christians' midst. By

³⁸ Mancinelli (supra n. 28) 18.

living peacefully in the middle of what was turning into a Christian neighborhood, Maxentius set an example of his benevolence, a trait that may have attracted many Romans. In this way, Maxentius was able to legitimize his power not only through pagan imagery and associations to the Tetrarchy and dynastic claims, but also on the basis of being a tolerant and just ruler toward adherents of the Christian religion.

Maxentius' military situation may have contributed to his conciliatory policy toward Christians. Maxentius especially depended upon the strength of two private military units, the Praetorian Guard, to which Sebastian belonged, and the *equites singulares*, an elite mobile cavalry force garrisoned in the Lateran. These units were those responsible for Maxentius' initial elevation to the purple, and as a consequence the *equites singulares* were later disbanded by Constantine, who replaced their headquarters with the church of St. John in Lateran in an attempt to wipe all trace of Maxentius from the city.³⁹ If Christians constituted a large enough portion of the citizenry, they could have been enlisted in the army in large numbers. In this case, their toleration would be crucial in maintaining strong military backing, and may even have been the final factor that led to the desertion of Severus' troops when they reached Rome. Not only had they formerly been loyal to Maxentius' father, if a significant enough portion of them had been Christian, they would gladly have fought for Maxentius rather than a persecutor. Throughout the time leading up to the great Tetrarchic persecutions, military service had been an acceptable profession for Christians; only when the persecution was actively enforced did their faith become a problem. Helgeland states:

“We have seen, however, that many Christians for a long time had been able to find a way to exist inside the army structure without encountering trouble; the majority of Christian military martyrs met their deaths in the Great Persecution, where the pressure did not arise from the army religion at all, but from the imperial sacrifice edict extended to the military as well as to the civilian population. It would seem, therefore,

³⁹ Curran (supra n. 1) 76.

that had not the persecution arisen, these soldiers would have completed their military careers and retired into oblivion leaving no trace, undoubtedly the case with many Christian soldiers.”⁴⁰

With significant numbers of Christians involved in military service, it would be wise for their commander to appeal to them and show sympathy for their plight, as his strength depended on their loyalty.

Taking these facts into consideration, can it be mere coincidence that Maxentius’ villa complex was located directly across the street from the burial place and Christian martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, the martyred Christian Praetorian Prefect? From the time of Sebastian’s death in c. 286-287 or 303, the site acquired an association with him, particularly in the catacombs, where his tomb was located. Sebastian’s tomb was later moved into the basilica, but it is unclear when

he became the dominant figure associated with the structure. At the time of Maxentius’ accession, Sebastian’s tomb was apparently located on the Appian site, or under it, even if the site’s associations to Peter and Paul still dominated.⁴¹ By drawing a connection to Sebastian, Peter, and Paul at the same time, Maxentius could show solidarity with the Christians in honoring a martyr of such high status and significance. He also could have been using Sebastian to identify himself with the Praetorian Guard, an institution that was crucial to Maxentius’ usurpation and continued hold on power. Maxentius’ tribute to Sebastian would have been well appreciated by his Praetorian Guards, who would have remembered Sebastian’s martyrdom.

There is a strong physical connection between the Christian Catacombs of Saint Sebastian and Maxentius’ Appian villa that transcends mere proximity. If we revisit Frazer’s idea that the orientation of the Circus of Maxentius had a meaningful pagan

⁴⁰ Helgeland (*supra* n. 37) 816-817.

⁴¹ Antonio Ferrua, *The Basilica and the Catacomb of Saint Sebastian* (Vatican City: Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archaeology 1983) 22-24.

message, we can see that this monument also exploited Christian associations. Frazer read the axial orientation of the Circus of Maxentius toward the Mausoleum of Romulus as a dynastic reference to the pagan cult of Hercules. However, the mausoleum was not the only structure that stood along sight lines of the Circus of Maxentius. Important Christian sites lay on the axis of its towering *pulvinar* as well. From his imperial box in the Circus, Maxentius had a commanding view of the Catacombs of San Sebastiano, further behind it lay the Catacombs of Domitilla. This important Christian funerary site also boasted Flavian connections. Flavia Domitilla was a wealthy Roman matron who lived in the first century CE, on whose property a large cluster of Christian catacombs was constructed. She was a prominent member of the Flavian family, related through her uncle to the Flavian emperors. Domitilla was eventually exiled by Domitian on

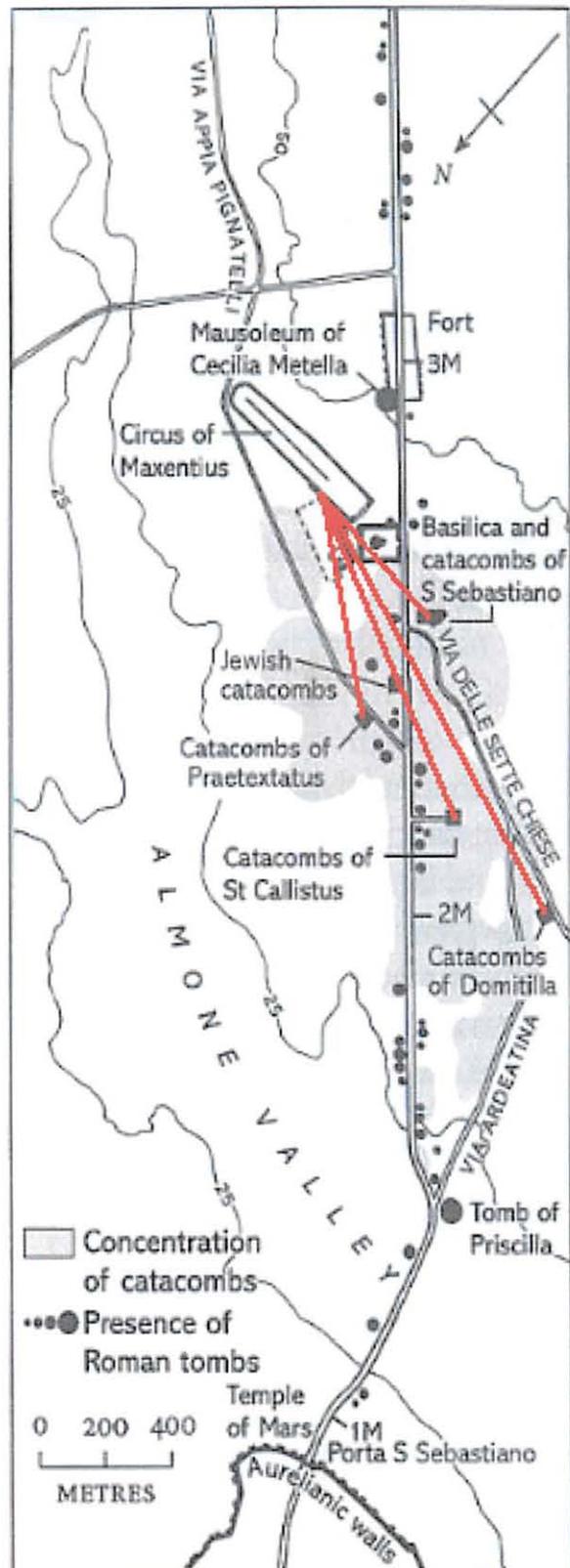


Figure 7: Sight lines from Maxentius' *pulvinar* to various Christian catacombs

account of her Christian faith.⁴² By creating a spatial relationship to Domitilla on the Via Appia, Maxentius was able to replicate the Flavian connections that he had established in the Roman Forum, while expanding them to include a new Christianized dimension.

The axis that connects the Circus of Maxentius and the Mausoleum of Romulus with specific Christian monuments, the Basilica of Saint Sebastian and the Catacombs of Domitilla, is not immediately visible at ground level. However, from an elevation, the sight-lines are clear. The tower of the *pulvinar* of Maxentius' circus rose high above the ground, and most of it still stands to this day. From this point, not only were all of the axial components visible, but Maxentius would have been given a view of several other important Christian sites as well. He would have seen the Catacombs of Saint Sebastian, Domitilla, Praetextatus, and Saint Callistus. More importantly, the *pulvinar* tower, which was used to enshrine the emperor during public appearances, would have put him on display, visible from these Christian locations. In this way, Maxentius was able to establish a permanent visual presence on the Appia, in a zone of burgeoning Christian development.

By situating his villa in close proximity to Saint Sebastian's burial place, Maxentius not only showed his toleration of Christianity, which in itself was an important display, but more significantly, he chose to associate his imperial complex with a specific Christian martyr with ties to the Roman military. Sebastian had been the Praetorian Prefect, in charge of the unit that aided Maxentius in his capture of the throne. Through his spatial emphasis on Sebastian's tomb, Maxentius most likely carried favor with the many Christians serving in the Roman army, whose support he needed to maintain his *imperium*. It is ironic that Maxentius, after architecturally acknowledging Christians in the military in such a grandiose way, was overthrown during a battle in which Constantine's soldiers bore the Christian cross on their shields.

⁴² Mancinelli (supra n. 28) 25.

As through his building program in the Forum Romanum, Maxentius unified the space around his suburban architectural complex on the Via Appia into a coherent whole. I suggest that Maxentius's Appian project was designed to convey a propagandistic message, just as important as, but more revolutionary than, his public works inside the *pomerium*. In the city proper, his buildings showed off his *romanitas*, linking the traditions of ancient Rome with his own reign. On the Via Appia, these traditions were emphasized as well, but with additional far-sighted attention toward bridging the gap between Rome's pagan past and its multicultural Christian future.

The strong political and religious implications of the placement of the Villa of Maxentius cannot be overlooked, as they exemplified the core of Maxentius' policies on Christianity: the new religion could exist peacefully alongside traditional Roman society, and did not need to be feared. By architecturally embodying this message, Maxentius was able to exploit the location of his Appian complex to his advantage. It's placement physically reflected Maxentius' dynastic propaganda, uniting a revival of *romanitas* with a new policy of religious reconciliation. By exploiting the pagan and Christian associations of the Via Appia, Maxentius was able to appeal to both sides in the pagan/Christian conflict, and to gain the support of each, effectively pacifying internal resistance to his reign.

This policy worked for Maxentius until Constantine adopted Christianity for his own purposes. The irony of Maxentius' replacement by another emperor with a conciliatory policy towards Christianity continued throughout his successor's reign, as Constantine simultaneously promoted Christianity and strove to eliminate the memory of the man who had begun the reconciliation. One of the goals of the Kalamazoo/Boulder archaeological project is to investigate the possibility that Constantine plundered Maxentius' villa for Spolia reused in the construction of the Basilica of Saint Sebastian. If

true, Constantine's actions can be seen as the ultimate irony, destroying the first imperial building to honor Saint Sebastian in order to commemorate him on a grander scale.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Maxentius had very clear motives for his toleration of Christianity. Christians had become a sizeable portion of the Roman population by Maxentius' time, and their involvement in the military made them an especially important constituency for anyone seeking to define his power on the will of the *populus Romanus*. With high-ranking Christians in the military, especially those in elite units such as Maxentius' own Praetorian Guard and the Equites Singulares, it did Maxentius well to earn their loyalty. Therefore, in order to style himself as the ultimate Rome-centered *princeps*, Maxentius had to have a propaganda campaign which appealed not only to the vast majority of traditional pagan Romans, but also to the burgeoning Christian population within the city. As I have demonstrated, the links between Maxentius' Appian villa and the surrounding area, replete with Christian construction, cannot be denied.

Through the architecture of his villa, Maxentius was able to establish a site plan with heavy religious overtones. The construction mirrors that of the *Domus Augustana* on the Palatine hill, adding a new Herculian association to the three-part complex, while simultaneously addressing the Christian religion as well. This helped Maxentius draw attention to his family, and thus to his only real claim to legitimacy in the Tetrarchic system.

This is, however, not the only way he used his architectural plan to his advantage. The axial emphasis on the Mausoleum of Romulus penetrates much deeper into the surrounding landscape, highlighting important Christian sites as well. Maxentius used the axial relationship to the Catacombs of Domitilla in order to highlight his desired links to the Flavian Dynasty, as he did with his public architecture in the Roman forum. By

replicating this connection, along with placing his dynastic mausoleum well outside the *pomerium*, Maxentius was able to show his commitment to the revival of sole, dynastic imperial rule for the Roman empire, based on the dynasty his father Maximian had already put in place.

The commanding view that Maxentius had of the predominantly Christianized area from his *pulvinar* gave him a constant visual presence on the Via Appia, one which ostensibly demonstrated his ability to peacefully coexist with adherents to the Christian faith. This presence allowed him to prove that his policies of toleration worked, and that Christians no longer needed to live in fear in the aftermath of the Great Persecution.

The villa's position also carried a strong message of support for the Praetorian Guard. Its relationship with the Catacombs of Saint Sebastian honor the Christian martyr who had commanded the elite military force on which Maxentius' power depended. By emphasizing Sebastian's resting place, Maxentius was able to show solidarity with Christians in the Roman army, who otherwise might not have supported him.

In light of all the spatial connections that Maxentius' villa seemed to draw to important Christian sites, it can no longer be seen as a coincidence that his Appian complex happens to be situated in such a hotbed of early Christian construction. Given the unorthodox placement of the complex, it seems hardly feasible that it was constructed on that site simply out of convenience. Furthermore, the availability of other, pre-existing large-scale residences suggests that the site itself was the single most important factor in Maxentius' decision to build his villa. This being the case, there are few other appealing aspects of the Appian Way other than its strong connection to Christian development.

This investigation is by no means the final word on the subject. The ongoing archaeological fieldwork of the Kalamazoo/Boulder Excavations will continue to

investigate the spatial relationships discussed above, expanding its spatially referenced database and uncovering new questions in the process.

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