

MARCELLO TERENCE

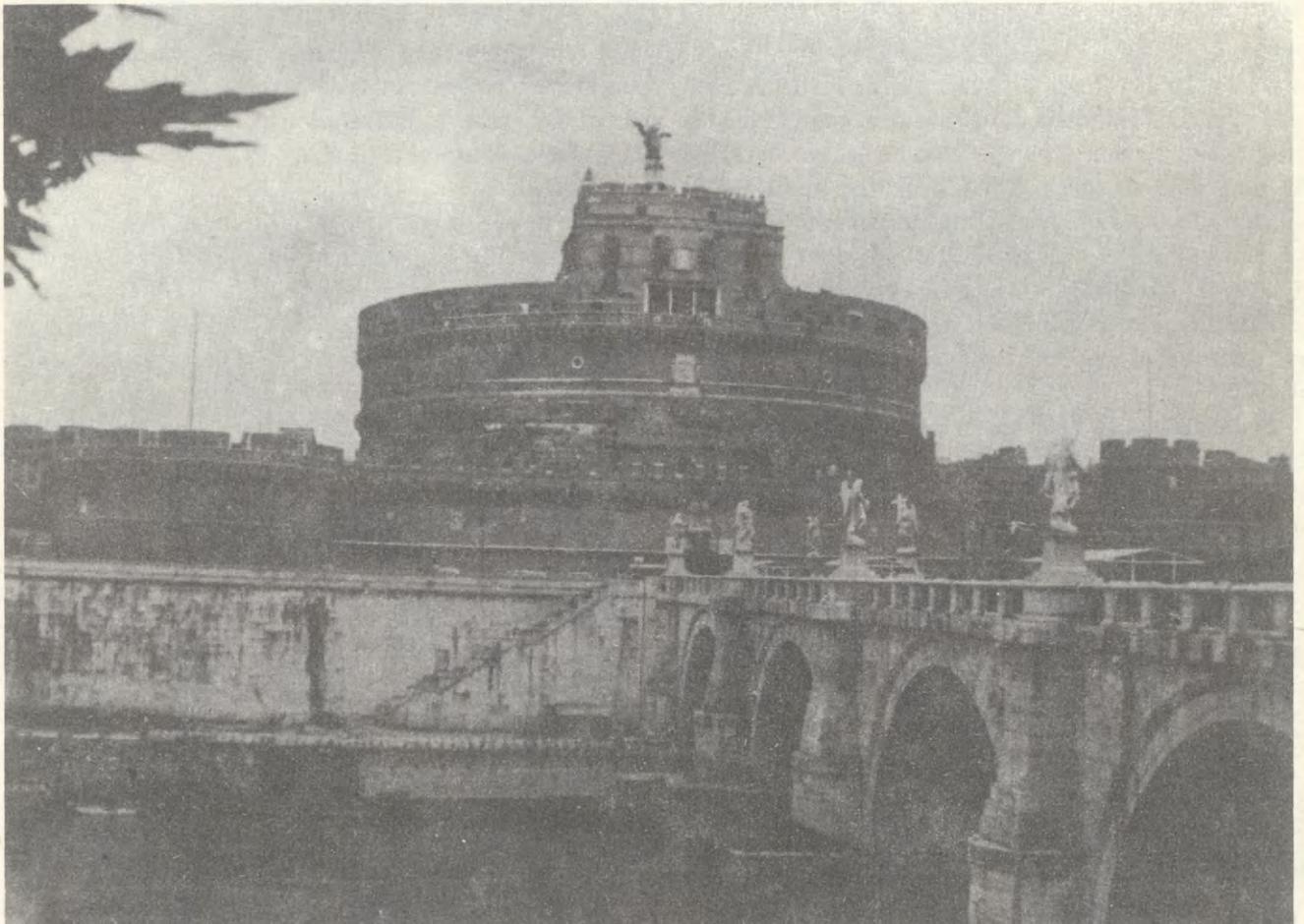
## THE FORTRESS OF CASTEL SANT'ANGELO IN ROME

Castel S. Angelo is the most extraordinary and impregnable fortress of history. No monument in the world has maintained for two thousand years its function, offering to the owner the effective possession of Rome. Montesquieu said: *Castel S. Angelo has made the Popes owners of Rome*. At times, with a garrison of few men, it has been possible to control the navigation of the Tiber river, to block the roads to the north of the Italian peninsula, to control the city and to possess St. Peter's. The history of this monument can be divided into five characteristic periods.

**First period** – in which the mausoleum erected in 139 A.D., was expected to be the tomb of the Emperor Hadrian and his family.

**Second period** – when, after 132 years, the Emperor Aurelian had the tomb transformed into a fortress. This new function persisted from then on.

**Third period** – which corresponds to the barbaric invasions beginning with the Goths of Alaric, Theodoric, Vitige and Totila up to the Franks with Charlemagne, who, with alternate vicissitudes possessed the fortress.



1. The Fortress, Elio Bridge (over the Tiber River), and the "Passetto" (passageway, in red) XVII Century engraving

**Fourth period** – the period of the families. It started during the X century with Theodora and her daughter Marozia who married a Duke of Spoleto after having borne Pope Sergius III a son. The fortress passed then to the Crescenzi family, followed by the Pierleoni, the Frangipane and finally to the Orsini.

**Fifth period** – this period begins with the definitive possession on behalf of the Papal State of the stronghold with Urban V in 1367 and lasted exactly 503 years, i.e. up to 1870, year in which Rome becomes the capital city of the Reign of Italy. These are the two millennia of fightings around, against and on the walls of Castel S. Angelo.

We shall now examine the various periods:

**First period** – On the right bank of the Tiber, between “via Triumphalis and via Aurelia Nova” in one of the most fascinating spots of the city and surrounded by enchanting gardens of various Roman patricians, Publius Elius Hadrian had his mausoleum erected.

It was built, probably, around 132 A.D. and it is said that the works were entrusted to two architects: Demetriano and Apollodoro under the supervision of the Emperor himself, who, however, did not see his work completed. Contemporarily a bridge was built “Pons Aelius”, to make it easier to get to the monument.

The reasons for which the Emperor Hadrian decided to build this mausoleum derive principally from his classic cultural background which he acquired during the long stay in Orient, and from the ambition of opposing to the already existing mausoleum of Augustus a monument for his family, the Antonini. This had to have an even more imposing appearance and be very near to the other one, built in an outlying area of the city where, at that period, the erection of tombs was allowed.

Hadrian would have never imagined that by this work of beauty and ambition he was starting an anthology of military architecture which would have been a reference for many centuries.

**Second period** – In the year 271, the Emperor Aurelian encircled the city of Rome with new walls and made them pass on the left side of the Tiber river, with a great strategic intuition; reaching the bridge built by Hadrian, he used the tomb as a fortified outpost on the other side of the river.

In this period, two other bridges linked the sides of the river, one to the North, very far, the Ponte Milvio, and the other a few hundred meters South the mausoleum, the Ponte Neroniano.

About a century later this second bridge will be demolished to increase the defensive importance of Pons Elius. This technique of creating an outpost

linked to the principal defence, in military architecture, will be used again, many centuries later, by various famous engineers, among which, Matteo Gattaponi in the XIV century with his fortress of Assisi ordered by Cardinal Alborno, and Antonio da Sangallo the Younger, in the XVI century with his fortress of Perugia, erected for Paul III Farnese.

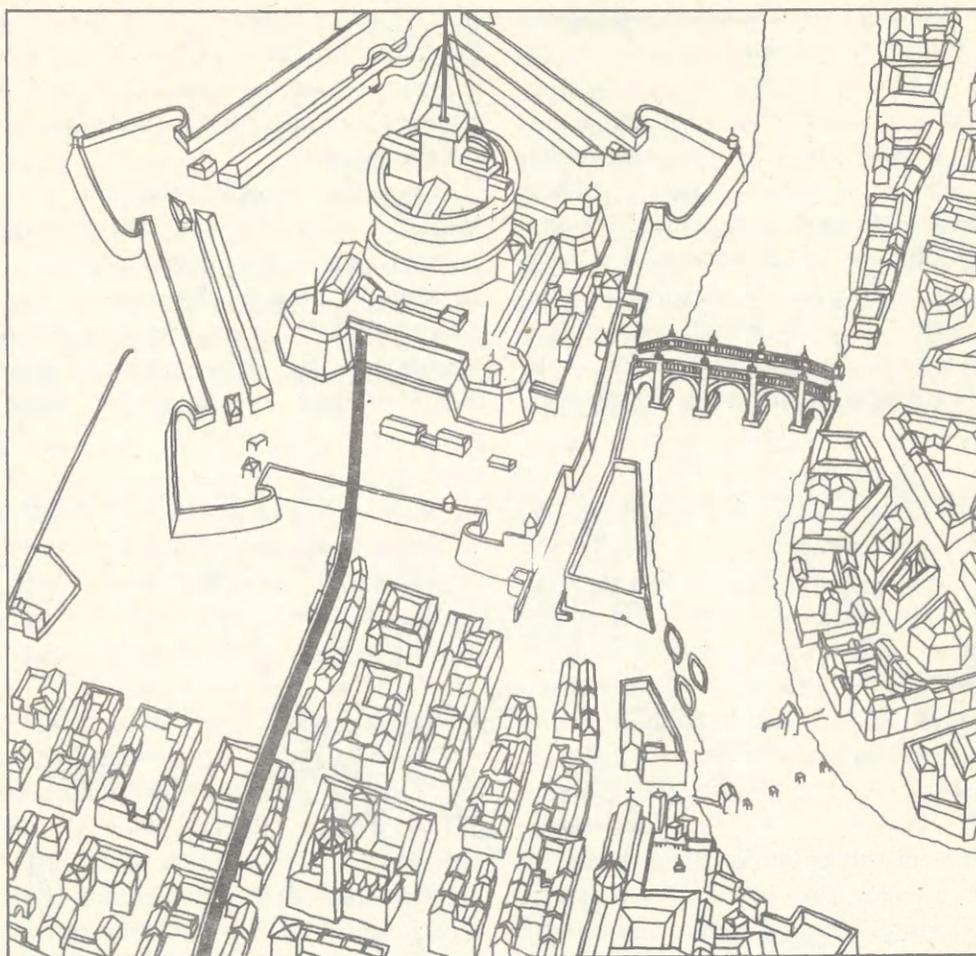
This first fortress was built in order to protect the access to Rome after the experience with Barbarossa (Frederick I); the second to demonstrate to the rebel inhabitants of Perugia the power of the Pope. These two fortifications were furnished with a long passage on high walls which outled from the central part to an advanced tower, a hundred meters far, which used to be an outpost towards the direction of major danger.

**Third period** – Quite soon new circumstances demonstrated the effectiveness of the dangers envisaged by Aurelian, in building the new walls of Rome. Alaric first and then Vitige, reached Rome at the head of the Goths and the impregnability of the fortress was then clearly shown, as it is said by Procopio, who fought with Belisario against Vitige in the battles for the conquest of Rome. Always according to the testimony of Procopio, in these occasions the defenders started throwing marble pieces of the decorations and sculptures using them as hand shells or shells for the catapults against the attacking men. Pieces testifying this usage have been even discovered in recent excavations; the ancient technique used by the Trojans to defend the palace of their King Priam was then being repeated.

A few years later, after Vitige had left Rome, Totila arrived with his Germanic tribes. He attacked the city in different periods. During one of them, the Goth King built a fortified quarter between St. Peter's tomb and Hadrian's mausoleum, overturning this way, the main criteria of military engineering and utilizing the fortress against, rather than in defence of Rome. One of the sides of Totila's fortified quarter will become, one day, the wall on which the passage, later called “Passetto”, will be constructed to connect the Vatican with Castel S. Angelo.

Recent studies tend to demonstrate that during this period the famous horses decorating the front of the church of San Marco in Venice and which arrived there from Byzantium (Costantinopoli) in the year 1204, were part of Hadrian's quadriga and were taken to Costantinopoli by a Byzantine Emperor. The comparison between these horses and Marcus Aurelius' one in Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome, is extremely interesting.

Another important fact for the history of the monument and concerning this period, is the legend of the new name given to the mausoleum, Castel Sant'An-



2. Present aerial view: the Fortress, the Bridge, the "Passetto" (passageway), and the Vatican

gelo. During the Pontificato of Gregorius Magnus, at the end of a pestilence, in the year 590, the Archangel Michael appeared on top of the mausoleum.

A statue reproducing the archangel was then set up on top of the castle giving the definitive name to the fortress. That statue was replaced many times during the centuries due to destruction. The last one, which we can see today, was sculptured by Peter Werschaffelt and raised in 1753.

Another statue of the archangel, the only one saved, sculptured by Raffaello da Montelup, is now in the "Balls Courtyard", also called "Courtyard of the Angel". In 1667 Pope Clemens IX (Rospigliosi) wanting to emphasize the name of the Castle, ordered several statues of angels to be placed on the bridge – these were made by Bernini.

**Fourth period** – For about a hundred years, the fortress becomes the ambitious aim of the powerful Roman families or of those aiming to obtain power through the fights in Rome, with or against the Church. It passed, then, from family to family, through alliances, plots and riots, as token of power. In the XII century the castle resisted the attack of Frederick

Barbarossa, who in vain assailed many times al. Angelo. The first figurative representation of the monument dates back to the XIII century, in a fresco of Cimabue, Giotto's master, painted in St. Francis Church in Assisi.

**Fifth period** – Having understood the importance of the possession of this fortress, towards the end of the XIV century, the popes will never leave, at any cost, the monument. It becomes, then, a luxurious residence and a pleasant dwelling with theatres, gardens and the most modern comforts including bathrooms and elevator. In fact the first elevator was constructed under Leo X Medici in the XVI century.

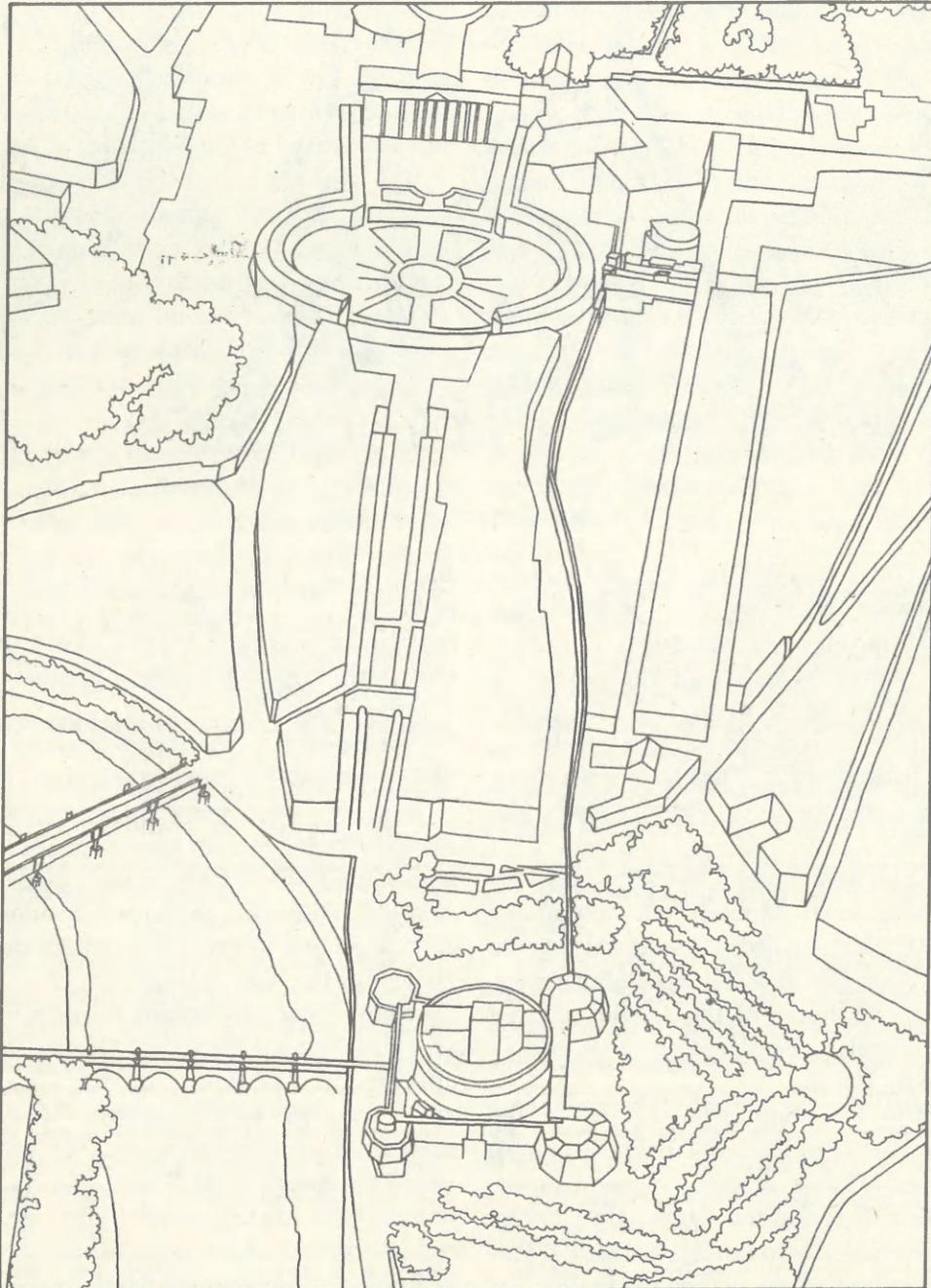
Many were the famous persons imprisoned here and condemned: Cardinals, Popes, Bishops, artists, adventurers. The money needed for special expenses such as war, was withdrawn from this treasury, and this same treasury included, besides the money of the State also the treasure of St. Peter's and the Tiara, a maximum symbol of the Papal authority. In these centuries, rich of in events, the most important facts of the history of Rome, of Italy and the world of that period, passed through the walls of this monument. With the discove-

ry of the artillery and with its perfecting, continuous structural transformations modified the defences for the new types of attack. Three towers were built, at different times, one around the other at the four angles of the basement in order to resist the always increasing power of artillery. New bastions were added; and new towers, as the one of Giuliano da Sangallo, built under Pope Alexander VI Borgia, and demolished by Urban VIII Barberini. In the Czartoryski Collection at the Cracovian Museum there is a beautiful sample of Italian parade shield, in the Negroli style (mid-16th century) in which Castel Sant'Angelo Fortress is

clearly seen in the structure of that period. During the Pontificate of Urban VIII, while Lorenzo Bernini was the director of the foundry of the Castle, he had cannons built out of bronze nails that were taken from the Pantheon.

Upon their return to Rome from Avignon, in the XV century, the Popes found their old residence, the Laterani palaces completely in ruins.

Mainly attracted by the security that Castel S. Angelo offered them, they transferred their official residence to the Vatican territory, utilizing the walls that Totila built to connect the Vatican directly with



3. Castel Sant Angelo today

the fortress. That secret passage on the high wall is still called the "Passetto". With this device the Popes utilized Totila's idea, applying again the defensive military criterion that Aurelian adopted for the first time one thousand years in advance. It would be too long to illustrate here the list of historical events that took place near the walls. Few periods are so full of facts linked with the temporal power of the Popes, which ended only in 1870. Famous military architects, such as Michelangelo, the Sangallos, together with Bramante, applied their knowledge and experience to the military aspect of the fortress.

Important artists such as Pinturicchio, Perin del Vaga, Giulio Romano, or Bernini were engaged in its decoration; famous names such as Alexander Farnese, before being elected Pope with the name of Paul III, or Benvenuto Cellini and Cagliostro were imprisoned in the sad prisons of the fortress. Charles V and Joachim Murat came under these walls to try the adventure of Rome.

Each Pope as guardian and guarantor to his interest, as soon as elected, designated the military castle commander, who was a close person to the Pope, often his relative, and who had his full reliance. The defence behind the three enceintes of bastions that encircled the castle, continued inside the walls arriving gradually to the top, with doors, draw-bridges, trap-doors, loopholes, in order to guarantee the sequence and movements of final defence up to the top of the central keep.

During the Sack of Rome, in 1527, the low part of the castle was occupied while Clemens VII in the higher part resisted the soldiers of Charles V.

Water wells, reservoirs, oilstores, silos and mills for wheat, guaranteed the survival for long period sieges. Only at the beginning of the XVII century Pope Paul V

Borghese, organized an Armoury for 12.000 infantry-men. An arsenal of which we still have evidence through the cartouches engraved on the stones of the various cannon balls.

The Prince de Condé in 1634, after having visited the fortress, wrote that he was surprised in seeing arms in such great quantity. Inventories of various periods testify to the different types of arms which have been adopted in the past centuries; unfortunately on account of the vicissitudes occurred, among which the last three French occupations, all these have been taken away. On those occasions the hostility was such to induce them to chisel off and destroy most of the coat-of-arms of the Popes and of the Governors. The monument maintains this political function until 1870 when Rome is conquered by the Sabauda Reign and becomes Italy's capital; being a fortress is then occupied by the military who until today partly controls it. The present armoury, created at the beginning of this century with wider ambitions, shows today only material collected for didactic purposes. The arms collections have been organized according to five sections. The first section concerns the archaeological group with stone, iron, and bronze arms, up to the I millennium. The second section includes arms from the XIV to the XVIII centuries; defence and offence arms, hunting and parade weapons, spurs, polearms, swords, daggers, firearms and artillery. Third section is the modern armoury with various samples of guns, bayonets and pistols. Fourth section for oriental arms. And finally the fifth section shows the historical part of the museum, with uniforms, medals, flags, documents and photos concerning the various Italian States.

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