# The New St Peter's: Basilica or Temple?

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As the principal church of Western Christendom, St Peter's can be seen as the solid expression of Christianity itself, the product of an at times uneasy marriage between the traditions and thought of the Jewish and Graeco-Roman worlds. Both strands have long been recognised in the symbolic significance of St Peter's as we shall see, but how far did these ideas make themselves felt in the fabric when the question of rebuilding arose in the Renaissance?

By the time of the Renaissance there was a long-established tradition of regarding Rome as the successor to the earthly Jerusalem. A good example of this can be found in the church of S. Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome, which was established in the fourth century in a hall of a palace belonging to Helen, mother of Constantine the Great. An early sixteenth-century inscription preserved there in the subterranean chapel of Helen asserts that Helen's translation of the relics of Christ's Passion from the Holy Land to that church, combined with the inde-ficient faith of the inhabitants of Rome, make the city the truer Jerusalem.

It follows that if Rome is equated with Jerusalem then its major church will be compared to the Temple. Strictly speaking, Rome's premier church is the Lateran Basilica, which is the city's cathedral, and we do indeed find that it has associations linking it with the Temple. Not only were the ornaments and treasures plundered from the Temple on its destruction by the Romans believed to have been given to the Lateran by Helen, but also the readings in the Mass commemorating the dedication of the Basilica (9th of November), all refer to the Temple. However, the wider spiritual authority claimed by the Bishop of Rome is derived from St Peter, leader of the Apostles, and thus the church built on the presumed site of his tomb has come to represent the Catholic or Universal Church. It, too, is associated with the Temple, through the twisted white marble columns decorated with vine leaves which, in Old St Peter's founded by Constantine, were first used to support the canopy over the saint's tomb. There were originally six, but the gift of another six similar columns prompted Pope Gregory the Great to rearrange them to form a screen across the apse. Eight of them are now used to frame the niches of the four most precious relics of St Peter's, which are hollowed out of the piers supporting the dome. Bernini reproduced their form on a gigantic scale in the four columns of the Baldacchino. The columns are now thought to originate from second-century A.D. Asia Minor, but formerly they were believed to have been in Solomon's Temple, and to
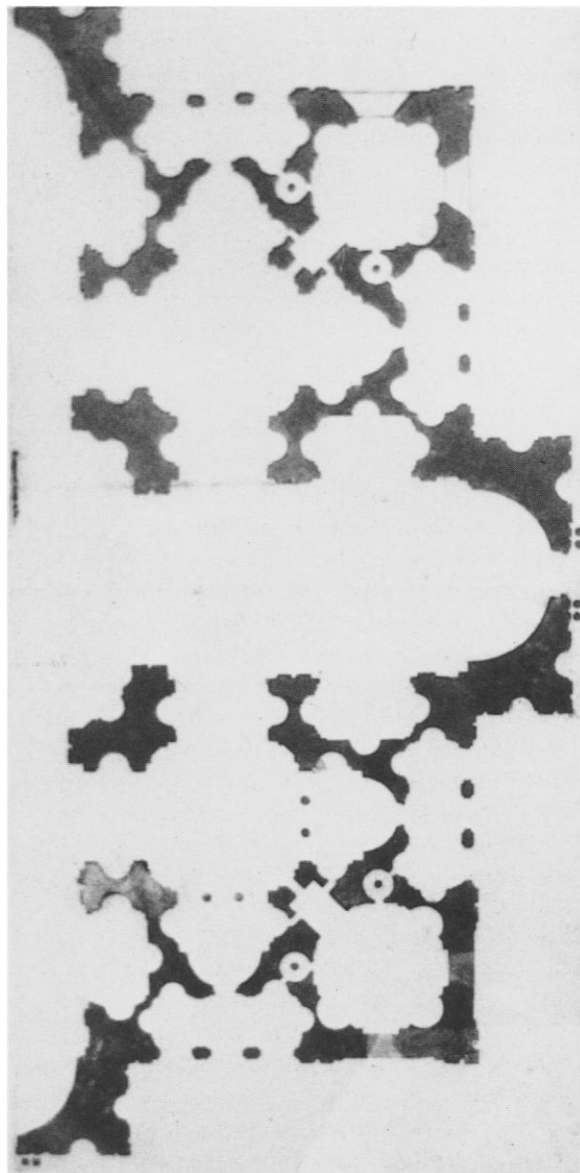
Fig. 1. Donato Bramante: 'Parchment plan', dark brown ink and ochre shading, 111 (max.) × 54.4 (max.) cm. Architecture Ir, Uffizi, Florence.

have been brought to Rome by Helen. In fact, Solomon's Temple had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, long before the Romans, who demolished the third Temple, that of Herod the Great, which had in turn replaced that of Zerubabbel, built after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian Captivity.

When Martin V entered Rome in 1420, after the Papacy's own 'Babylonian Captivity', followed by forty years of the Great Schism, he found St Peter's
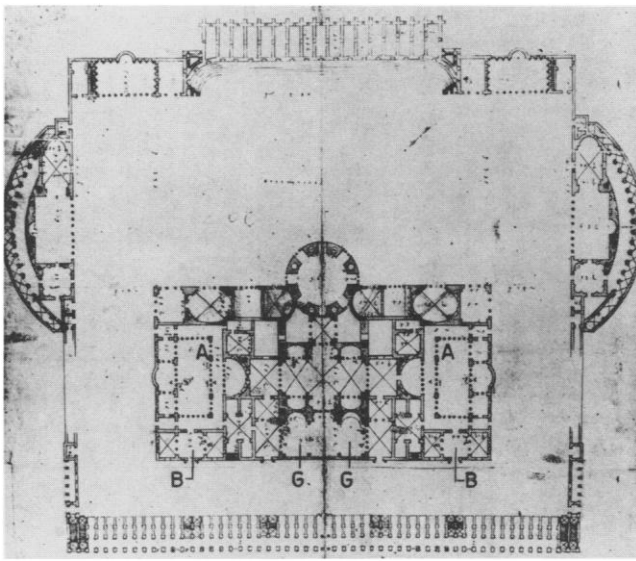
Fig. 2. Andrea Palladio: Baths of Caracalla, pen and bistre wash, 39.6 × 46.7 cm. Vol. 4 f.I, Royal Institute of British Architects, London.

in a bad state of repair and made a partial restoration. However, by the time of Nicholas V's papacy it was clear that more drastic measures were called for. In a biography of Nicholas, written very shortly after his death, we read that, shunning the oracles of Apollo and the writings of Socrates — the example of Classical Antiquity — the Pope studied the descriptions of Solomon's Temple and palace in the Old Testament. After quoting the relevant passages, the biographer goes on to show how far superior Nicholas' schemes for rebuilding St Peter's and the Vatican were to Solomon's, just as Christianity is to Judaism.

Nicholas' plans were thwarted by his early death in 1455, leaving only the beginnings of a vast choir and transept. Another fifty years had to pass before the project was taken up again by Julius II, who laid the foundation stone in 1506. Again, Solomonic parallels were drawn: in an address to the Pope in 1507, Aegidius of Viterbo compares him to Solomon and Zerubabbel, as well as to Pope Silvester and Constantine, founders of the first basilica, and exhorts him to surpass their achievements, raising the pediment as high as heaven. Similarly, in a papal bull of 1513, Julius speaks of Solomon the Wise, who, although unenlightened by Christianity, yet spared no sacrifice to build a house worthy of God.

Unlike Nicholas, however, Julius was fully prepared to associate himself with the Graeco-Roman tradition. He is notable for extending and consolidating the Papal States thus restoring some of Rome's temporal power, as well as attempting to bolster its spiritual aspirations. His dual aim is perfectly expressed in his choice of name on election to the Chair of Peter. The only previous Pope to bear it is remembered chiefly for having asserted the primacy of the See of Rome over the bishops of

the Eastern Church during the fourth century. However, there is a more famous Julius from Antiquity, namely Caesar: the former Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere did not eschew comparison with the bellicose founder of the Roman Empire, and a medal, thought to have been struck for Julius' triumphal entry into Bologna in 1506 after the capture of that city by papal troops, bears the legend JULIUS CAESAR PONT II. Caesar, moreover, was already associated with the Vatican, through the sphere at the top of the obelisk then standing to the south of Old St Peter's, which was reputed to contain his ashes. Indeed, Bramante, Julius' architect, wanted to build the new church to the south west of the old so that the obelisk would be in front of it, but the Pope vetoed the suggestion, because he did not want to violate the shrine of Peter.

Thus, we can see that there is a substantial ideological programme behind the New St Peter's. We must now examine how far this is reflected in the architecture. There is nothing to suggest that the Temple of Jerusalem was taken as a model for the basilica, although there is reference, during the papacy of Sixtus IV (1471-84) to the Temple's being a model for the Old St Peter's. It has also been recently suggested that the dimensions of the Sistine Chapel are based on those of the Temple as described in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, as one would expect, it was the physical remains of Classical Antiquity littering Rome which inspired Bramante and his successors. The architectural vocabulary employed, including arches, cupolas and coffered barrel vaults, is more reminiscent of the great imperial bath complexes (or *thermae*) than of temples, with the exception of the Pantheon, to which we shall return. This resemblance is even stronger in some of the earlier schemes of Bramante and his followers than in the church as it stands today, which owes most to Michelangelo. The juxtaposition of spaces of different sizes and shapes, separated by screens of columns, in Bramante's so-called 'parchment plan' (Fig. 1), is similar to that found in the Baths of Caracalla (Fig. 2), or those of Titus, while a plan in the 'Menicantonio sketchbook' (Fig. 3), deriving from the circle of Bramante, shows St Peter's surrounded by an enormous precinct wall, composed of elements taken from those enclosing the Baths of Diocletian (Fig. 4) and those of Caracalla.

It is understandable that Renaissance architects should have been thrilled by these *thermae,* which are among the largest and most spectacular remains in Rome, but they are hardly suitable models for the greatest church in Christendom. However, the architectural forms of the great baths are used in another building in Rome, the Basilica Nova (Fig. 5), which was begun by the emperor Maxentius and completed by Constantine in the early fourth century. Its original form of a large nave, ending in an apse, and flanked by three inter-connecting

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bays each side, all of which were covered by coffered barrel vaults (Fig. 6), is very similar to that of the great central hall of the Baths of Diocletian, built a few years previously. Constantine made some alterations, including the addition of an apse to the middle bay of the north side, but the basilica's parentage is still obvious.

By the Quattrocento, the central vault and most of the south side of the Basilica had collapsed, leaving only the three northern bays and the western apse, which, however, still make one of the most impressive sights of Rome. The real identity of the ruins had long been forgotten, and they were commonly thought to belong to the Temple of Peace, the precinct of which abuts onto the north-western corner of the basilica. It is this case of mistaken identity which provides the key to our story, for there is a persistent tradition that Bramante's scheme for St Peter's was based on the idea of the Pantheon resting on the Temple of Peace. Although it is impossible to find a source for this tradition, there is strong circumstantial evidence in its favour: Serlio's plan of Bramante's intended dome (Fig. 7) is very similar to the ground
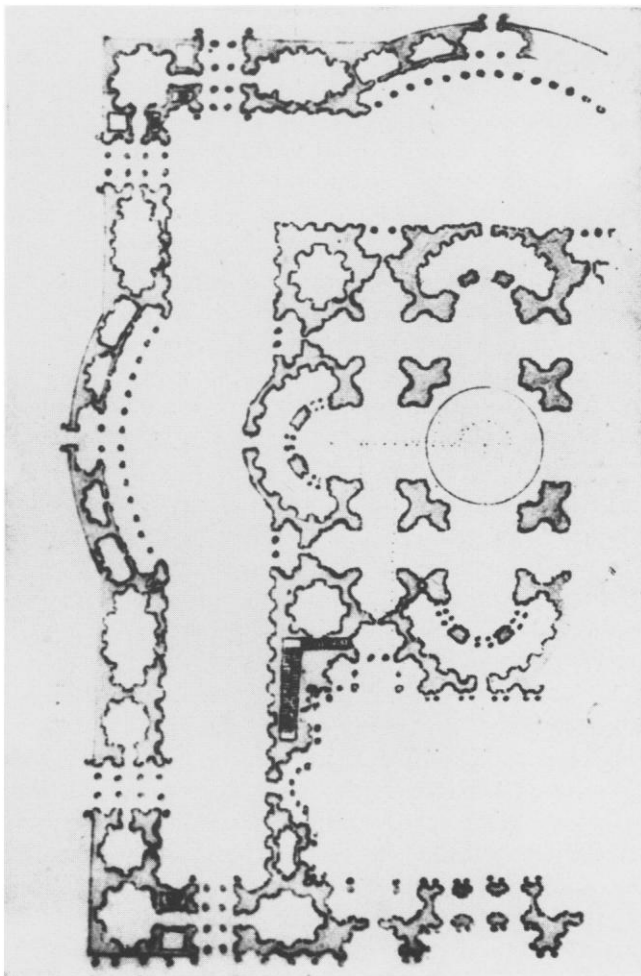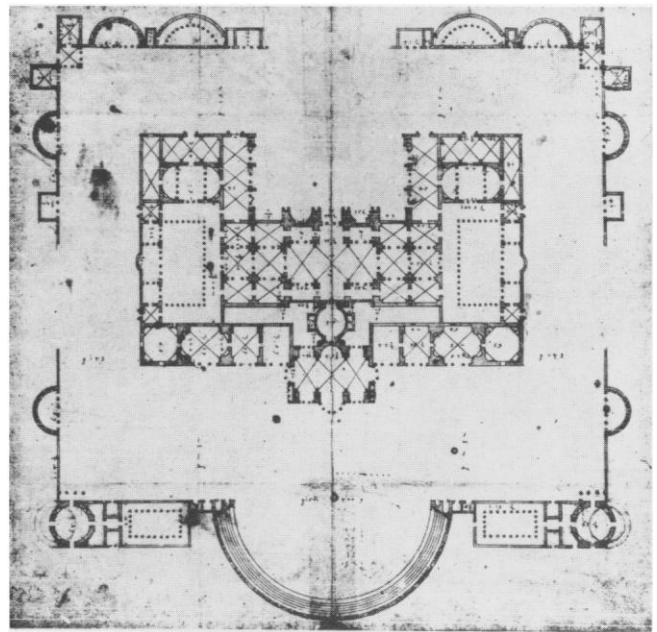

Fig. 4. Andrea Palladio: Baths of Diocletian, pen and bistre wash, 43.4 × 45.4 cm. Vol. 5 f.I, Royal Institute of British Architects, London. The juxtaposition of the plans of the Baths with two early schemes for St Peter's is meant to demonstrate only general similarities in the manipulation of space, for example, the common use of interconnecting curved and rectangular spaces of different sizes, some kept discrete by screens of columns. However, more specific correspondences can be seen. The angle pavilions and adjacent spaces in Fig. 1 resemble those facing the large semi-circular exedra of the Baths of Diocletian.

plan of the Pantheon (Fig. 8), each having eight openings divided by pairs of columns, between eight slightly longer stretches of solid wall. Similarly, there are several schemes by followers of Bramante showing a thinly disguised Basilica Nova adapted to suit the plan of the church (Figs. 9 and 10). (The Basilica Nova was almost always reconstructed with three apses, until its original plan was discovered at the time of its excavation in the nineteenth century.)

Bramante had good reasons for picking these two monuments in particular, besides the obvious aesthetic ones. Firstly, any pagan associations of the Pantheon had long been exorcised since its conversion to use as a church around 609. Its dedication to S. Maria ad Martyres commemorates the translation there from the catacombs of martyrs' remains, probably because circular plans were considered particularly suitable for *martyria*. It has been suggested that the Pantheon's association with the martyrs, who exemplify the Church Triumphant, explains its use in St Peter's — not only does it serve as a *martyrium* over the grave of the Prince of the Apostles, but it also represents the triumph of the Church, resting on the Pax Romana, the shape of the Temple of Peace. One could also add that the Pantheon is the first temple in Rome to have been converted into a

Fig. 3. A scheme for St Peter's from the Menicantonio de' Chiarelli sketchbook (f. 70v), dark ink with bistre shading, 210 × 144 cm. Mellon Collection, Washington.

Fig. 5. Sebastian Vrancx (1573-1647): Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine, drawing in pen, ink and wash, 27.7 ×
42.4 cm. Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth.

church, thus symbolising even better the triumph of the church over paganism.

There were equally good reasons for choosing the Temple of Peace. Pliny tells us in his *Natural History* (XXXVI, 27) that it was considered one of the three most beautiful buildings of ancient Rome, and other sources also testify to its magnificence, which would naturally make it an object worthy of imitation. Serlio treats it in his third book on Roman buildings, after the Pantheon and S. Costanza, probably reflecting a common Renaissance belief in the superiority of the circle over other forms. Peruzzi, in his list of temples recorded on a drawing in the Uffizi (Arch. 489r), places it immediately after the Pantheon, while Palladio, in his *Fourth Book of Architecture*, gives it pride of place. The Temple of Peace was also already associated with the idea of the triumph of Christendom over paganism through the mediaeval legend that it collapsed on the night that Christ was born.

The wider dissemination of the classics in the sixteenth century discredited this story, by showing that the Temple of Peace was not actually built until seventy years or so after the Incarnation. Vespasian had founded it to commemorate the quashing of the Jewish Revolt of 70 A.D., during which his son, Titus, had razed the Temple of Jerusalem to the ground. The sacred ornaments and treasures he found there were brought back to Rome, as can be seen on the Arch of Titus, and eventually installed in the new Temple of Peace. Thus, it becomes even more appropriate for use in St Peter's, for not only could the dome/Pantheon be seen as the Church triumphing over, and resting on, the achievement of Rome as represented by its greatest temple, but that temple itself symbolises the defeat of Judaism.

Although in St Peter's, as built, the dome bears little similarity to the Pantheon except in size, Maderno's extension to the nave, dating from the early seventeenth century, ensures that the Temple of Peace will not be forgotten, since its plan of three-bay nave, aisles and entrance vestibule is clearly based on the Basilica Nova.

It is fortunate that the architects of St Peter's believed that the remains of the Basilica Nova belonged to a temple. The resulting interior, with its gilded coffered vaults and walls revetted with marbles, gives us a much better impression of imperial public architecture at its grandest than do the surviving stark brick and concrete skeletons of the buildings themselves. It is thus hardly surprising that most visitors should complain of its too secular air. To realise, however, that the makers of St Peter's were profoundly concerned that it should embody the traditions of the dual heritage of Christianity — Jewish and Gentile — may go some way to compensate for its apparent lack of a sacred quality.
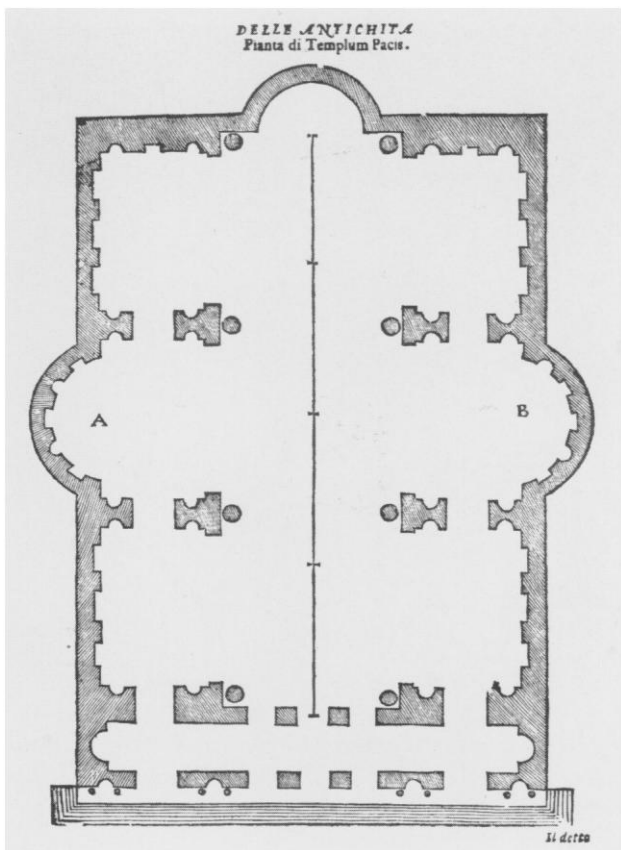
Fig. 6.

Fig. 6. Ground plan of Basilica Nova from Sebastiano
Serlio, Tutte le opere di Architettura, *Venice, 1584,
f.58v. Serlio's reconstruction is reasonably accurate except for
the left-hand apse, a feature common to most pre-nineteenth-
century plans, but which never existed. In its place should be a
portico.*

Fig. 7. Plan of Bramante's design for the dome of St Peter's,
as recorded in Sebastiano Serlio, *Tutte le opere di Archi-
tettura, Venice, 1584, f.66r.*

Fig. 8. Ground plan of the Pantheon, Rome, from Sebastiano
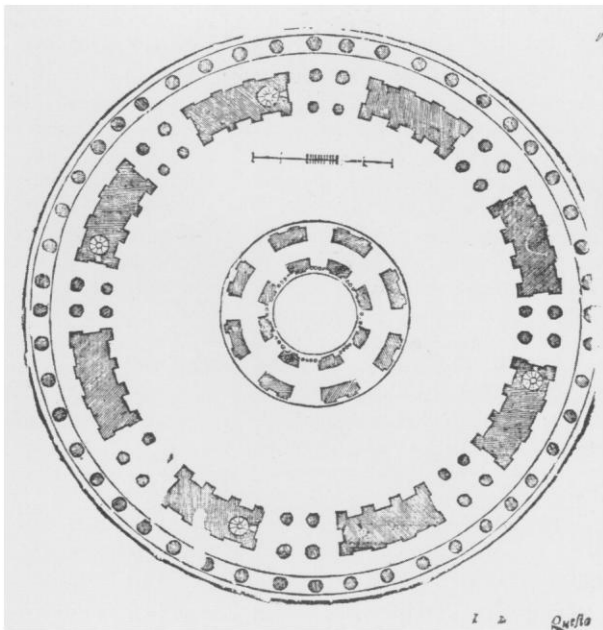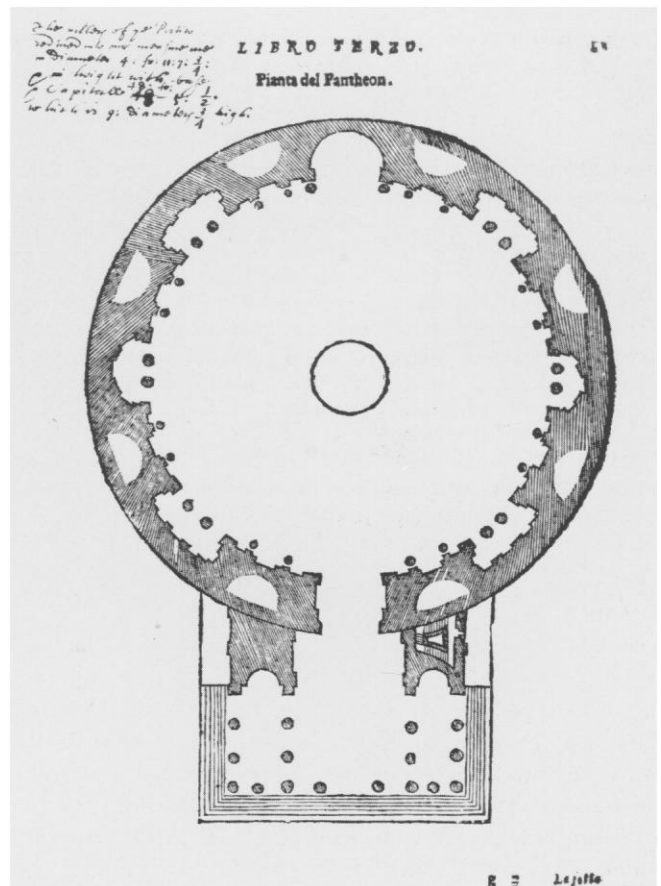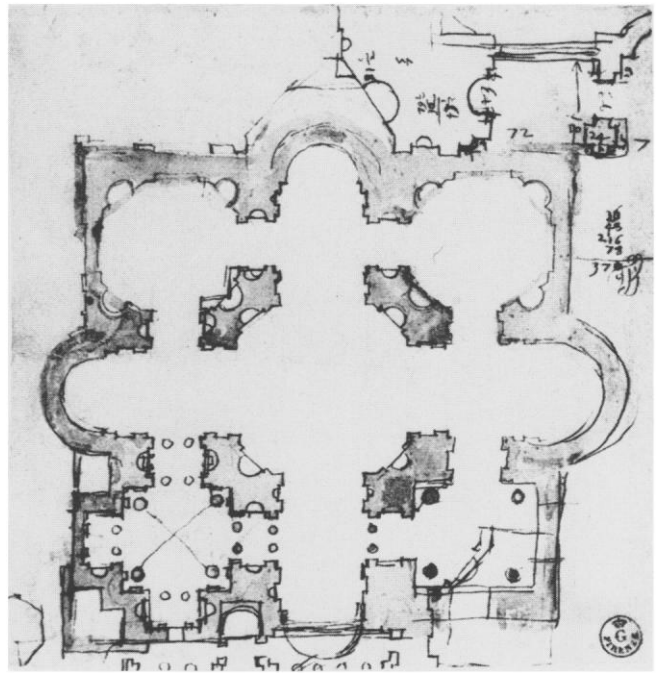Serlio, *Tutte le opere di Architettura, Venice, 1584,
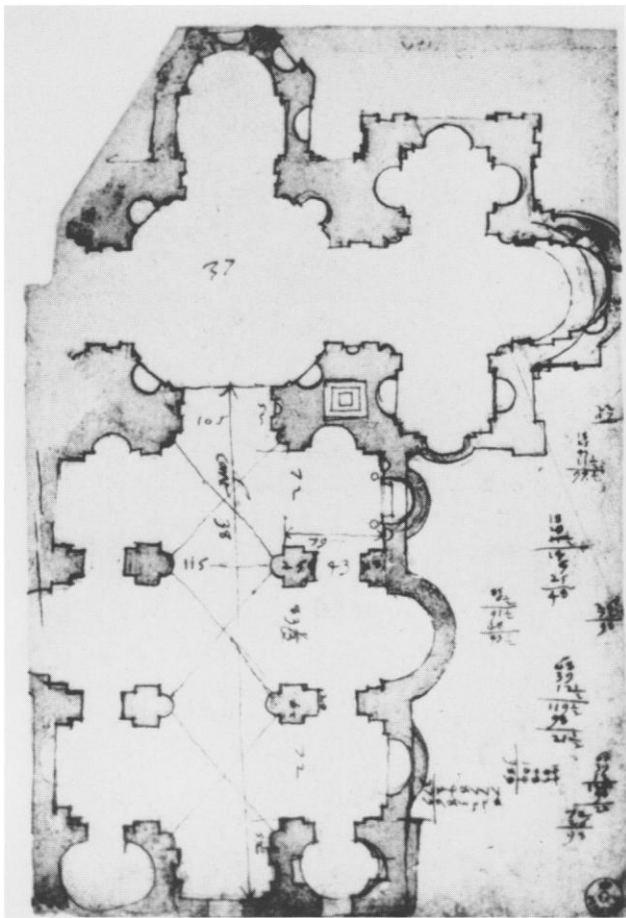f.51r.*

Fig. 7.

Fig. 8.

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Fig. 10. Baldassare Peruzzi: scheme for St Peter's, brown ink and bistre, 19.5 × 19 cm. Architecture 19r, Uffizi, Florence.

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Fig. 9. Baldassare Peruzzi: scheme for St Peter's, ink, 29 × 19 cm. Architecture 17r, Uffizi, Florence.

Bibliographic Note:
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1965, p.79, and also E. Battisti, 'Roma apocalittica e Re Salamone', in *Rinascimento e Barocco,* Turin, 1960, pp. 72-95. The 'parchment plan' and subsequent plans of St Peter's referred to are discussed in F. Graf Wolff Metternich, *Die Erbauung der Peterskirche zu Rom im 16. Jahrhundert,* Vienna, 1971, pt. I. For the Basilica Nova of Constantine, see B. Platner, *Topographical dictionary of Ancient Rome,* completed and revised by T. Ashby, London, 1929, p.387, and Pastor, op. cit., vol. 6, p. 466 for the idea that Bramante's scheme combined the Pantheon and the Temple of Peace. On the conversion of the Pantheon to a church see W. Buchowiecki, *Handbuch der Kirchen Roms,* Vienna, 1970, vol. 2, p. 672, and for its connection with St Peter's because of its association with martyrs, see P. Murray, 'Observations on Bramante's St Peter's, in *Essays in the History of Architecture presented to Rudolf Wittkower,* London, 1967, pp. 53-9. The Temple of Peace is included in S. Serlio, *Il terzo libro di Serlio, nel qual si figurano e descriuono le antiquita di Roma,* Venice, 1540 and A. Palladio, *I Quattro libri di Architettura* Venice, 1570. Valentini and Zucchetti (op.cit., vol. 4, Rome, 1953, p. 145) quote the mediaeval legend concerning the Temple's collapse. See Platner (op.cit., p. 386) for the Arch of Titus.