

# The urban strategy of Pope Paul III

## The conclusion of the Trident of Piazza del Popolo

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*Abstract: During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the transformation of Rome promoted by the Papal Government aimed not only to answer to the needs of a modern state but also to represent the Papacy as an absolute monarchy. The visit of Emperor Charles V in 1536 became the opportunity to improve urban connections and to build architectural complexes such as the Capitoline Hill. The importance of these places was highlighted by putting them at the head of new streets: Pope Paul III made the Capitol visible from Via del Corso, renovated in 1538 as a part of the Campo Marzio general urban plan. If Pope Leo X imagined two streets (Via del Corso and the new Via di Ripetta) leading into the square in front of Porta del Popolo, and Clement VII began the third axis, it was Paul III who should be properly considered as the inventor of the trident of Piazza del Popolo. On the other hand, the pope experimented with the employment of straight roads that organized the territory as symbols of power also in his residence in Caprarola, an effective laboratory of absolutism.*

*Keywords: Rome, Pope Paul III, Emperor Charles V, the Trident, urban strategies.*

It's at least from the fourteenth century that the opening of long straight roads and the building of regular squares became the way through which the Papal Government reorganized Rome as a modern capital city and, on the other hand, affirmed itself as an absolute monarchy. However, unlike what happened in many other European cities, in the *Urbs* rarely these interventions were acted uniquely by the pope, representing instead the result of the many interests involved, among which there were also private ones<sup>2</sup>.

In this sense, the urban approach of Pope Paul III Farnese (1534-1549) was unusual<sup>3</sup>. The arrival of Charles V (1500-1558) in 1536, for

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2. In order to understand the dynamics related to the growth and the development of Rome during the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, see ANTINORI 2008.
3. For an overall look at the urban policy of Paul III: GUIDONI-MARINO 1982.

whom a triumphal entrance was arranged from Porta San Sebastiano, continuing through Via di San Gregorio and the *Forum*, and from there, through Via di Marforio, up to Piazza San Marco and Via Papale, revealed how Rome was far from appearing like a modern capital city<sup>4</sup>. The visit became the opportunity to improve some important connections and to build, simultaneously, urban and architectural complexes, such as the one of the Capitoline Hill. Since the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Paul III invested substantial resources in this project: the fifteenth-century San Marco palace – and, in particular, the annexed *viridarium*, the so-called *Palazzetto* – was directly connected, through an overhead passage, to the top of the hill, where, later, next to the church and the convent of Santa Maria in Aracoeli, was erected the new papal residence, known as the Tower of Paul III. At the same time, the northern side of the hill was interested in the opening of the new Via Macel de' Corvi, later called di Marforio, while on the southern one, the transformations concerned first the link between the church and the Arch of Settimio Severo, then the configuration of the square designed by Michelangelo Buonarroti, although the project was completed some decades later<sup>5</sup> (*fig. 1*).

The importance of such a complex was highlighted by placing it at the center of a privileged point of view: the pope undertook the improvement, among the others, of via del Corso (*fig. 2*). Since 1538, the section of the road that connected Piazza San Marco to the no more existing Arch of Portugal was expanded and embellished, while the part leading to Piazza del Popolo, almost uninhabited, was completed around 1542<sup>6</sup>. In the same years, Pope Paul III worked also on the opening of Via Capitolina, the current Via dell'Aracoeli, which would have linked the southern side of the Capitoline Hill to Piazza del Gesù and Via Papale (*fig. 3*). Although the first interventions for the construction of the street have to be dated back to the years 1537 and 1538 – when a series of buildings in the ancient Piazza degli Altieri were destroyed – and went on at least to the seventies of the sixteenth century, the project can be considered as a part of the works

4. Paul III held a fundamental role in the mediation of the conflicts that animated the greatest European powers in the sixteenth century. A detailed analysis of the works for the triumphal entrance of Charles V in Rome is in SALATIN 2017.

5. The transformations of the Capitoline Hill, from the tenth to the nineteenth century, are described in BRANCIA DI APRICENA 2000.

6. About the intervention of Paul III on Via del Corso: LANCIANI 1975.

promoted for the visit of Charles V, probably to insert the Capitol in the paths of the papal processions, from which the hill had been excluded till that moment<sup>7</sup>. After all, when the square designed by Michelangelo and the access stairway were finally completed, and also the Via Capitolina was gradually rectified, the street itself became very relevant – as long as this was not intended since the beginning – as a canal of observation of the new complex. On the other hand, this was not the first time that Pope Paul III imagined long straight roads that were also axes of visual enhancement for the buildings they connected. It is the case, among the others, of Via Paola which starts from Piazza di Ponte Sant’Angelo, begun by Pope Clement VII Medici (1523-1534) and renewed to frame the new façade of the church of San Giovanni dei Fiorentini (*fig. 4*), but also of Via dei Baullari and the Farnese palace (*fig. 5*). The opening of this last street, that represented just the final intervention on the area, caused, as the construction of the square, a series of demolitions in the urban fabric that was extraordinary for that time. The system consisting of the street and the palace, to which it has to be added also the regular space of the square, becomes even more complex considering the unfinished Michelangelo’s project, who imagined connecting the residence with the Farnesina building on the other side of the Tiber River, creating a continuous sequence from Via dei Baullari and Piazza Farnese, through the vestibule designed by Antonio da Sangallo the Younger, and its repetition in the rear end of the palace, up to the garden and, finally, the bridge<sup>8</sup>.

The refashioning of Via del Corso was not only intended to satisfy the needs of access and visibility of Capitoline Hill, but it has to be considered as a part of the urban process that started at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Although some of the cadastral documents date back to the first land concessions in 1509, it was Pope Leo X Medici (1513-1521) who operated consistently in the area<sup>9</sup>. The pope aspired, on one side, to link the ancient city, through the preexisting

7. About the opening of Via dell’Aracoeli and its meaning: BEDON 2008 and SIMONCINI 2008.

8. The system street-palace as conceived by Paul III is largely discussed in GUIDONI 1981.

9. Rome State Archive (ASR), *Ospedale di San Giacomo - Canoni delle case*, vol. 1504 (1661). The analysis of the so-called cadasters or books of the rents of the ecclesiastical bodies that in the sixteenth century owned lands in the Campo Marzio district – among which the church and the hospital of San Giacomo degli Incurabili stand out – is systematically conducted in FREGNA-POLITO 1971a, FREGNA-POLITO 1972 and BILANCIA-POLITO 1973.

Via Sistina and the new Via di Ripetta, to the northern entrance of the city, Porta del Popolo; on the other, to connect two important poles, the church of Santa Maria del Popolo and, through Via di Ripetta and the subsequent lengthening of Via della Scrofa, the *Studium Urbis* and the unbuilt Medici palace in Piazza Navona<sup>10</sup>. The new street along the river, very similar to those Via Giulia and Via della Lungara already opened by Pope Giulio II della Rovere (1503-1513), had to be part of a project that should have enhanced the church of Santa Maria del Popolo and the near door by the arrangement of a new square and a *bivium*, consisting of Via di Ripetta and Via del Corso, and leading into the same place: two *motuproprio* issued by Pope Leo X refer to such a plan, that particularly emphasized the building at the joint of the two streets, while no references are made to a third axis, the future Via del Babuino<sup>11</sup>.

The opening of this last one is traditionally placed under the pontificate of Pope Clement VII Medici, thanks to an inscription, nowadays lost, that assigns the so-called Via Flaminia *trifaria*, that is tripartite, to the two Medicean popes<sup>12</sup>. Nevertheless, the analysis of other evidence allows us to anticipate the concessions of land in this area to the first years of the sixteenth century<sup>13</sup>. However, the most consistent part of the works has to be attributed to Pope Paul III, after whom the street was initially named. Already Rodolfo Lanciani found a reference, in 1536, to a «via noviter facta prope Beatam Mariam de Populo versus montem», where the mount was, reasonably, that one on which the

10. About the intervention of Leo X on Via di Ripetta: ZANCHETTIN 2005.

11. Just one of the two *motuproprio* of Leo X reached us. In the document, in which there are many references to the previous one, particularly concerning the project for the new Piazza del Popolo, the pope asked the people responsible for the plan – that is to say the Camera Apostolica, the Maestri di Strade and the architect Antonio da Sangallo the Younger – to strictly respect the dispositions already given. The project was about the configuration of the square on the side of the church of Santa Maria del Popolo and, on the opposite one, the entrance in the same space from Via di Ripetta and Via del Corso. Another document, dated back to the 14 December 1520 and transcribed in GÜNTHER 1985 (Appendix I, doc. IV, nn. 1-4), gives some details about the lot of land at the joint of the two streets, corresponding to the area in which still existed the monument known as *Trullo* or *Meta*: the tenants of the building had been constricted to realize in a short while a structure to cover with travertine marble on the three visible sides, and to put on it the emblem of Leo X. The prescription clarifies how the pope thought to a monumental head of the square as this resulted from a *bivium*, and not from the current *trivium*.

12. The inscription says: «LEO X ET CLEMENS VII MEDICES, FRATR. PATRUEL. PONTT. MAXX., FLAMINIAM INTRA URBEM TRIFARIAM, DIVISAM ADHIBITIS VICOR. MAGISTRIS, DIREXERUNT SECTIONES DE SUO NOMINE, LEONIANAM CLEMENTIASQUE, APPELLARI IUXERUNT, ANNO IUBILEID. The year of the Jubilee was, presumably, the 1525.

13. FREGNA-POLITO 1972.

church of the Santissima Trinità stands<sup>14</sup>. The cadasters of the rents of the ecclesiastical bodies that owned lands in the area, and that, at the time of Pope Leo X – and also before, as we have seen – started to concede their properties to private citizens to build in there, providing interesting information. Thanks to the cadaster of the church and the hospital of San Giacomo degli Incurabili, it is possible to retrace, among others, the history of the land owned by Domenico de' Massimi, extended between Via del Corso and the Mount Pincio, that «fu poi per ordine di papa Paolo III divisa in due parti con occasione di far la strada nuova, che dal nome del pontefice fu detta Paolina»<sup>15</sup>. A similar annotation appears in the cadaster of the company of the Santissima Annunziata, referring to the lands owned by the same Domenico de' Massimi, bought in 1551 by Giovannino de Lupatis «alias Margut», after whom the later Via Margutta took its name, lands «dove fu fatta la strada nova a tempo di papa Paolo III»<sup>16</sup>. In the end, the letter sent to the Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga by his agent Nino Sernini on 4 March 1542, in addition to attest the continuation of the works under the pontificate of Pope Paul III, clarifies how the street was conceived, in the idea of the pope, as part of a more articulate system: «Nostro Signore disegna fare un'altra strada et vole che entrando dalla porta del Popolo se ne truova tre dove al presente ve ne sono due: l'antica [Via di Ripetta] et questa nuova di l'arco [Via del Corso]. L'altra ha da traversare sotto la Trinità per quelle vigne et credo che habbia da riuscire al giardino di messer Agnolo del Bufalo»<sup>17</sup> (*fig. 6*). An indirect reference to the construction of the third street of the Trident, can be deduced also from the cadaster of the monastery of San Silvestro in Capite, the properties of which, placed between the end of Via del Babuino toward Piazza di Spagna and Via della Trinità, in the segment that corresponds, nowadays, to Via dei Condotti, were interested in a strong allotment just after the 1550 and the completion of the works for Via del Babuino and the same Via della Trinità, proving an increased interest of private citizens in those lands due to the creation itself of the new valuable streets<sup>18</sup>.

14. ASR, *Collegio dei Notai Capitolini*, Not. Alessandro Consoni, prot. 626, c. 209. The information can be found in LANCIANI 1975.

15. ASR, *Ospedale di San Giacomo - Minuta di catasto*, b. 120 (1551-1690).

16. ASR, *Compagnia dell'Annunziata - Catasto dei beni*, vol. 825, c. 226v (1574).

17. State Archive of Mantova, *Archivio Gonzaga*, b. 1912, c. 63r. The document is in REBECCHINI 2020.

18. ASR, *Monastero di San Silvestro in Capite - Catasto dei canonici*, vol. 5613 (1712-1715).

The intervention of Pope Paul III aimed, in fact, not only to build the Trident but also to define the transversal axis, consisting of the current Via dei Condotti, Via della Fontanella di Borghese, and Via del Clementino, that from the *Platea Trinitatis*, still an amorphous widening at the base of the church of the Santissima Trinità – the façade of which would have been visible from the new road – goes to Piazza Nicosia, creating another connection between the ancient city and the new expansion of which Via del Babuino was intended as a guideline. The new street can be considered as the real link between the two tridents created by Pope Paul III: one of Piazza del Popolo and the other one of Piazza di Ponte Sant'Angelo. In this last case, on one side the pope renewed Via Paola begun by Pope Clement VII, on the other one, he doubled the road symmetrically concerning the current Via del Banco di Santo Spirito, opening the new Via di Panico and obtaining a second, smaller, *trivium*, to connect the *Città leonina* and the *Urbs*<sup>19</sup> (fig. 7).

In either case, the trident constitutes a strong sign on the city, and his employment, even duplicate, is the unmistakable expression of a definitely absolute power. On the other hand, while Paul III in Rome built long straight roads with prospective values, in other cases, outside the city, and in particular in Caprarola, created a model of urban settlement in which the city and the whole territory were geometrically organized: becoming a significant precedent for the great royal residences of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, from Versailles to Caserta, that one of Caprarola was, in all respects, a real laboratory of the absolutism.

The interventions in the Capital city can be observed in the same light. The trident as a formal device is an extremely rational structure, and this is clearer when it is inserted in contexts, such as the one of the ancient city, developed for progressive additions and so strongly diversified. If the trident of Piazza di Ponte Sant'Angelo was imposed in a stratified ambient of this kind, that one of Piazza del Popolo can be seen, instead, as a generating element of an expansion not yet begun in the Campo Marzio district and destined, in this way, to a more regular growth in respect to that one of the river bight. If Leo X and Clement VII foresaw in which direction the city would have

19. About Paul III's ideas for the trident of Piazza di Ponte Sant'Angelo: LANCIANI 1975.

been expanded at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Pope Paul III transformed that first idea into a finally modern sign, to the point that, rather than concluding the Renaissance season, he gave birth to that series of urban interventions that culminated in the pontificate of Pope Alexander VII Chigi (1655-1667).

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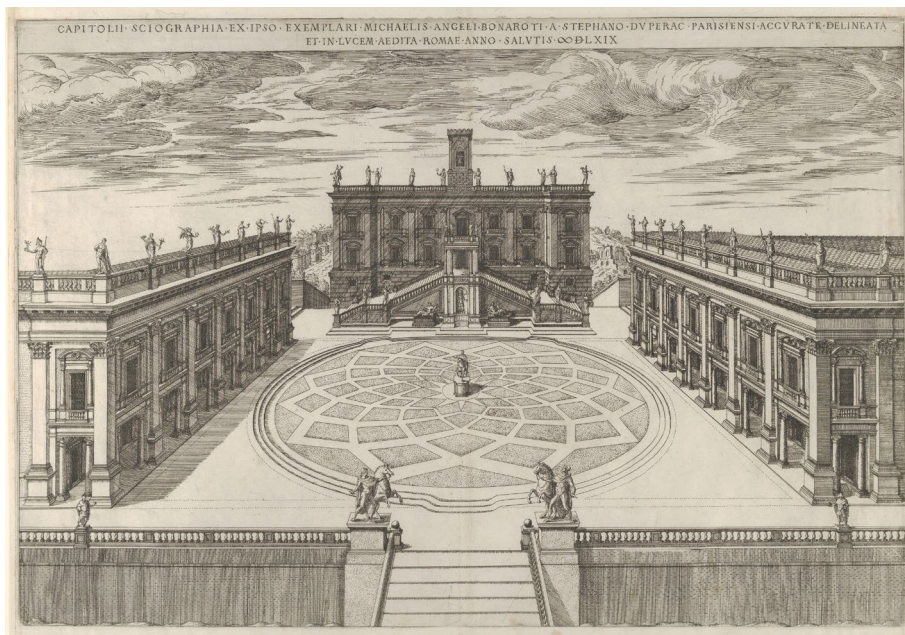


Fig. 1 – Etienne Du Pérac, Piazza del Campidoglio according to Michelangelo's project, 1569 (*Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae*).

Fig. 2 – Giuseppe Vasi, *The San Marco Palace and, on the background, the Tower of Paul III seen from Via del Corso*, 1747-1761 (*Delle Magnificenze di Roma antica e moderna*).





Fig. 3 – Giuseppe Vasi, *Piazza del Gesù and Via Capitolina in direction of the Capitoline Hill, 1747-1761* (Delle Magnificenze di Roma antica e moderna).

Fig. 4 – *San Giovanni dei Fiorentini from Via Paola* (online photo).



*Fig. 5 – The Farnese Palace from Via dei Baullari (on-line photo).*



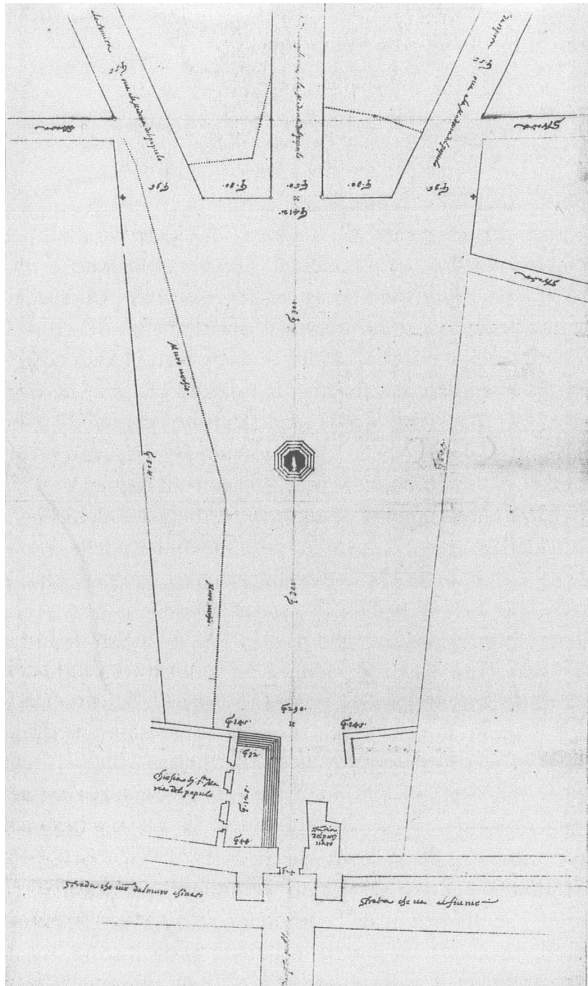


Fig. 6 – A drawing of the second half of the sixteenth century representing Piazza del Popolo. The trace of a «muro vecchio» in front of the convent of Santa Maria del Popolo allows to reconstruct with good approximation the elongated shape of the square before the opening of Via del Babuino (ZANCHETTIN 2005).

Fig. 7 – Matthijs Bril, The Trident of Piazza di Ponte Sant'Angelo, fresco, 1580 (GÜNTHER 2002).

