

# The Idol in the Age of Art

'''

Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World

*Edited by*

MICHAEL W. COLE

*University of Pennsylvania, USA*

*and*

REBECCA ZORACH

*University of Chicago, USA*

ASHGATE

09  
5

© Michael W. Cole and Rebecca Zorach 2009

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.

Michael W. Cole and Rebecca Zorach have asserted their moral right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the editors of this work.

Published by  
Ashgate Publishing Limited  
Wey Court East  
Union Road  
Farnham  
Surrey GU9 7PT  
England

Ashgate Publishing Company  
Suite 420  
101 Cherry Street  
Burlington, VT 05401-4405  
USA

www.ashgate.com

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

The Idol in the Age of Art: Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World. –

(St Andrews Studies in Reformation History)

1. Christian art and symbolism – Modern, 1500–. 2. Image (Theology)

3. Christianity and art. 4. Christianity and culture.

I. Cole, Michael Wayne, 1969–. II. Zorach, Rebecca, 1969–.

704.9'482'094'0903

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

The idol in the Age of Art: Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World / edited

by Michael W. Cole, University of Pennsylvania, USA and Rebecca Zorach,  
University of Chicago, USA.

p. cm. – (St Andrews Studies in Reformation History)

1. Christian art and symbolism – Modern, 1500–. 2. Image (Theology)

3. Christianity and art. 4. Christianity and culture.

I. Cole, Michael Wayne, 1969–. II. Zorach, Rebecca, 1969–.

N7862.I36 2008

704.9'482–dc22

2007046403

ISBN 978-0-7546-5290-8



Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall.

# Perpetual Exorcism in Sistine Rome

*Michael W. Cole*

In 1588, Pope Sixtus V had two colossal bronze statues placed on top of the ancient Roman columns of Trajan and of Marcus Aurelius (Figure 3.1). The statues, representing the city's patron saints Peter and Paul, were designed by Leonardo Sormani and Tommaso della Porta; they were cast by Bastiano Torrigiani. The whole operation was orchestrated, and perhaps even conceived, by Domenico Fontana, the same artist who, in 1586, had engineered the moving of the Vatican obelisk to the center of St. Peter's square and the mounting of a gilded bronze cross at its pinnacle (Figure 3.2); while at work on the column projects, Fontana was also arranging for three other obelisks to be raised in the city.<sup>1</sup>

In each of these monuments, a pagan work was used as a base for a Christian image, and Fontana himself suggested that this was a triumphalist gesture: his 1590 book, *On the transportation of the Vatican Obelisk*, recalls 'removing [that obelisk] from the opprobrium of the idols to which it had in antiquity been dedicated, canceling with this the worldly glory of the Gentiles [...] and consecrating it as the support and foot of the most holy Cross.'<sup>2</sup> There was, though, a certain paradox to these triumphs.

---

I presented material related to this paper at the 2002 Renaissance Society of America meeting in Toronto, at the University of Delaware, at University College London, at Johns Hopkins University, at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence, and at Yale University. I wish to thank my hosts for the opportunity to share work in progress and my audiences for their helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> For these projects generally, see esp. Cesare D'Onofrio, *Gli obelischi di Roma: storia urbanistica di una città dall'età antica al XX secolo* (Rome: Romana società editrice, 1992), pp. 143–280; Erik Iversen, *Obelisks in Exile* (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad, 1968), pp. 11–46; as well as Helge Gamrath, *Roma Sancta Renovata: Studi sull'urbanistica di Roma nella seconda metà del sec. XVI con particolare riferimento al pontificato di Sisto V (1585–1590)* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1987); Giorgio Simoncini, *'Roma restaurata': Rinnovamento urbano al tempo di Sisto V* (Florence: Olschki, 1990); and the essays in *Architetture per la città*, ed. Maria Piera Sette (Rome: Multigrafica, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Domenico Fontana, *Della trasportatione dell'obelisco vaticano: et delle fabbriche di Nostro Signore papa Sisto V* (Rome: D. Basa, 1590), p. 3: 'Però si compiacque di dar principio à così pio desiderio, et ardente zelo con l'Obelisco del Vaticano, che Guglia volgarmente si chiama, pietra così maravigliosa, traendolla dall'obbrobrio de gli Idoli, a cui

Sixtus was infamous for demolishing monuments of the pagan past. Cardinal Giulio Antonio Santori wrote in his diary of how, 'seeing that the Pope was quite bent on the destruction of Rome's antiquities ... many noble men came to beg me to try to persuade his Holiness to abandon his strange purpose.' Among the works the pope dismantled, Santori continues, was the Septizonium, and the pontiff 'cherished the intention of destroying' the Arch of Janus and the Tomb of Cecilia Metella as well.<sup>3</sup> Cesare D'Onofrio, referring to Sixtus's 'almost systematic destruction of Roman antiquities,' notes that the Pope razed much of what was standing at the Baths of Diocletian.<sup>4</sup> And when, in the very year that the column and obelisk projects were initiated, Sixtus had Tommaso Laureti add a painting of a cross raised over a broken idol to the center of the ceiling of the Sala di Costantino in the Vatican (Figure 3.3), the image seemed even to advertise the role the pope conceived for himself, a role, contemporaries said, that was modeled on Gregory the Great, the so-called 'Destroyer of Pagan Idols.'<sup>5</sup> Yet when we see Fontana expressly stating both that the pope regarded the columns and obelisks as 'idols' and that his goal was 'not only to repress but also to eliminate the memory of the Idols,' it becomes clear that, in the case of the columns and obelisks, the varieties of *dammatio memoriae* prosecuted by Sixtus and by Gregory could not have been more different.<sup>6</sup> Whereas Gregory, to follow the chroniclers, had ritually dismembered the city's *imagines daemonem*, Sixtus fixed what was in disrepair, added missing parts, and made the 'idols' into prominent urban features. Two of the four obelisks had to be reconstructed from found or excavated pieces. With the columns no less than the obelisks, moreover, the documents recording payments to the artists involved speak of the antiquities' 'restoration': the sculptors Silla Longhi and Matteo Castello da Melide, for example, were paid to replace the portions of the

---

fu anticamente dedicata, e cancellando con questo principio la mondana gloria de' Gentili, che rincipalmente consacrarono gli obelischi e piramidi, stimati li più ricchi e memorabili trofei, alla superstitione de' Dei loro, e purgando essa Guglia, e consacrandola in sostegno e piede della santissima Croce [...].'

<sup>3</sup> Giuseppe Cugnoni, 'Autobiografia di mons. G. A. Santori, cardinale di S. Severina,' in *Archivio della Reale Società Romana di Storia Patria* (1889), 329-72 and 13 (1890), 151-205. See also Rodolfo Lanciani, *The Destruction of Ancient Rome: A Sketch of the History of the Monuments* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1899), 235-6.

<sup>4</sup> D'Onofrio, p. 194.

<sup>5</sup> See Tilmann Buddensieg, 'Gregory the Great, the Destroyer of Pagan Idols: The History of a Legend Concerning the Decline of Ancient Art and Literature,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 28 (1965), pp. 44-65.

<sup>6</sup> Fontana, p. 3: 'Di qui è, che nel primo anno, che dalla provvidenza del sommo Motore fu assunto al Pontificato, con ogni forza possibile cercò, non solo di reprimere, ma di levare affatto la memoria de' gli Idoli, che tanto furno da Pagani essaltati con le piramidi, con gli obelischi, con le colonne, co' tempi et con altri famosi edifici [...].'



Figure 3.1 *Column of Trajan*, restored under the direction of Domenico Fontana, 1587, with the addition of St. Peter by Leonardo Sormani and Tommaso della Porta, cast by Bastiano Torrigiani. Photo: author.

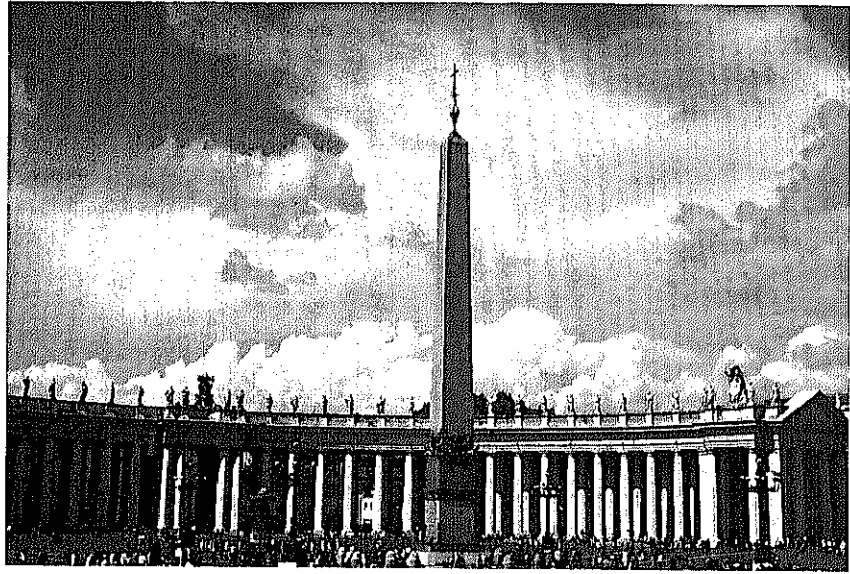


Figure 3.2 *Vatican Obelisk*, moved under the direction of Domenico Fontana, 1586. Photo: author.

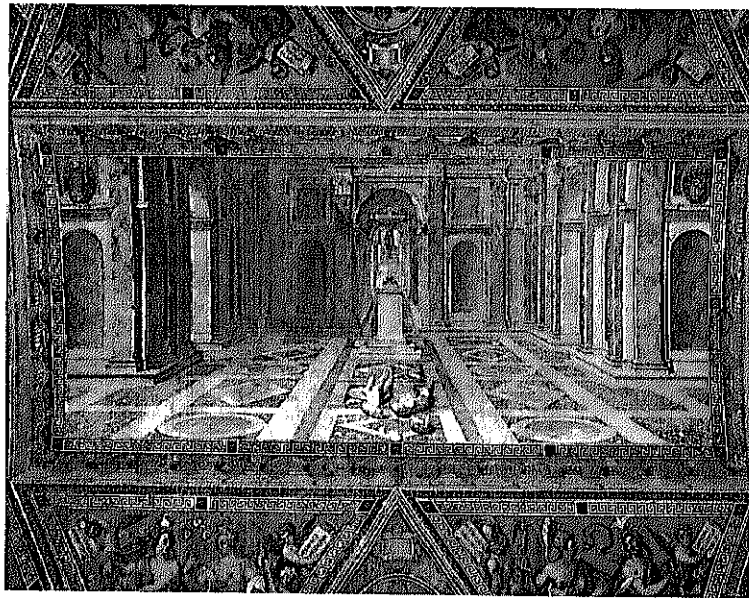


Figure 3.3 Tommaso Laureti, *Cross Raised over a Broken Idol*, Sala di Costantino, 1585. Photo: author.

Aurelian relief that were missing or damaged.<sup>7</sup> The pope was even content to destroy *Christian* antiquities in the process; as Jennifer Montagu has pointed out, the bronze for the statues of *Peter* and *Paul* came from the medieval doors of S. Agnese, from the Scala Santa at the Lateran, and from a ciborium at St. Peter's.<sup>8</sup>

Both patron and artist must have realized that, especially in their work on the two columns, they were not merely repairing injured objects, but also restoring a *type*: their declarations of victory amounted to the reintroduction of the figure-on-column format to the Roman public square. This aspect of the undertaking casts Fontana's comments about eliminating the memory of idols in a strange light. In his classic book *The Gothic Idol*, Michael Camille showed literally dozens of medieval images in which the freestanding figure atop a column betokened the pagan idol (Figure 3.4).<sup>9</sup> The sheer quantity of Camille's examples makes it clear that the device, and what it stood for, would have been immediately recognizable to medieval viewers, and there is no reason to assume that, by Sixtus's time, this had ceased to be true. Consider the major recent Italian precedents for statues on columns, most of them Florentine: There was Donatello's *Judith*, made for the Palazzo Medici in the late 1450s, moved to the *ringhiera* in front of the Palazzo Vecchio in 1495, then moved again because, it was said, 'the statue had been erected *con chattiva chonstellatione*' – literally, 'with a bad constellation' – and had brought ill fortune on the Florentine army.<sup>10</sup> The association of the elevated statue with divine intervention, moreover, was one of which Donatello himself must already have been aware. Certainly he would have known the story, told by Ghiberti, of the ancient statue the Sieneese discovered and placed atop the fountain in their town square, only to take it down (and bury it on Florentine soil) when they came to believe that the adversity suffered by their armies was divine punishment for their 'ydolatria.'<sup>11</sup> Donatello had made a statue of Joshua to go atop

<sup>7</sup> D'Onofrio, p. 274. Among the documents D'Onofrio publishes is one (p. 475) recording the November 1586 payment to Francesco Cina 'per la fatura della cornice et restaurazione' of the Vatican Obelisk and another (p. 482) on the 'spese del opera che a fatto fare il Cavalier Fontana per hordine di N. S.re in la Colonna Antonina restaurata.'

<sup>8</sup> Montagu, *Roman Baroque Sculpture: The Industry of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-making in Medieval Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). See also the excellent article by Christopher S. Wood, 'Ritual and the Virgin on the Column: The Cult of the Schöne Madonna in Regensburg,' *Journal of Ritual Studies* 6 (1992), 87–107. Wood demonstrates that after a 1516 statue by Erhard Heydenreich was transferred from the interior of a chapel to a column in an outdoor square, it came to be regarded as an idol, even though it depicted the Virgin, fully clothed.

<sup>10</sup> Johann, Wilhelm Gaye, *Carteggio inedito d'artisti dei secoli XIV, XV, XVI* (Florence: Molini, 1839–40), I, pp. 456–7.

<sup>11</sup> See Lorenzo Ghiberti, *I commentarii*, ed. Lorenzo Bartoli (Florence: Giunti, 1998), pp. 108–9, as well as Camille, p. 343.

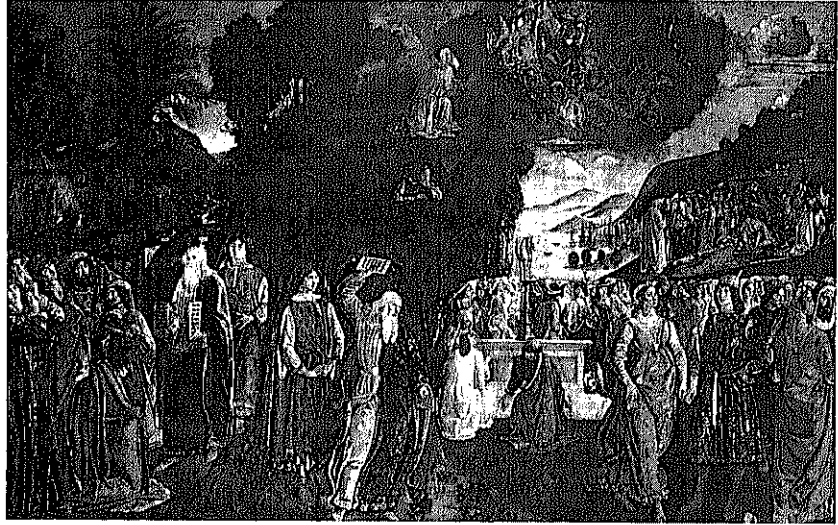


Figure 3.4 Cosimo Rosselli, *Worship of the Golden Calf*, Sistine Chapel, 1482. Photo: Art Resource.

a Florence Cathedral – the same destination for which Michelangelo’s *David* was originally made, and one that, as Charles Seymour argued, was probably chosen with an eye to the Milanese threat from the north.<sup>12</sup> David Wilkins, following a suggestion by H.W. Janson, asked whether Donatello’s *Dovizia*, too – which originally stood on a column in Florence’s main market square – was not ‘intended as an idol, to help bring about the abundance she so amply expressed.’<sup>13</sup> Nor did these ideas go out with the fifteenth century. Francesco Caglioti has recently drawn attention, for example, to an event of 1511, recorded by numerous Florentine diarists: Donatello’s bronze *David*, which was at that point standing on a column in the courtyard of the Palazzo Vecchio, was struck by lightning. That so many chroniclers dedicate so much space to the occurrence, Caglioti suggests, is not because the work itself was terribly damaged, but because ‘the damage to the *David* [...] fed the period’s passion for omens,’ reflecting fears of the ongoing invasions of the peninsula, and even foreshadowing the return of the Medici to the city.<sup>14</sup> Similar notions appear in the 1565 diary of Michelagnolo di Francesco Tanagli, who explained that Donatello’s

<sup>12</sup> Charles Seymour, *Michelangelo’s David, A Search for Identity* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967), p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> David Wilkins, ‘Donatello’s lost *Dovizia* for the Mercato Vecchio: Wealth and Charity as Florentine Civic Virtues,’ in *The Art Bulletin* 65 (1983), pp. 401–23.

<sup>14</sup> Caglioti, *Donatello e i Medici: storia del David e della Giuditta* (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 2000), I, p. 344.



*Marzocco*, too, had originally been erected 'sotto gran constellazione per una guerra che havevano i Fiorentini co' signori di Milano' (under a great constellation, on account of a war that the Florentines were having with the Milanese).<sup>15</sup>

That the *Marzocco*, into the late sixteenth century, was understood as a talisman alerts us to the apotropaic significance of the two scowling statues that joined it at the same Renaissance site, Michelangelo's *David* and Bandinelli's *Hercules*, both of which were elevated onto notably tall bases. And the association of such ideas with these works, in turn, may have conditioned both the monuments and the responses to them that followed in the middle decades of the century. Certainly the Medici Dukes shared the sense of their predecessors that the addition of a statue to a civic forum was a contribution to the *salus publica*.<sup>16</sup> Yet how literally can we take this notion? Could a 'good' statue, like the Roman icon that went by the name *Salus populi romani*, positively affect a city's well-being?<sup>17</sup>

As Suzanne Butters discovered, Sixtus V in fact claimed that the suggestion to use obelisks in his urban planning came from Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici; as the Pope thought about the transformation of his own city's *piazze*, his conception of what statues do ran close to the Florentines.<sup>18</sup> There is every indication, for example, that Sixtus, no less than Fontana, worried about the powers that might inhabit his new urban markers: when the cross was placed atop the Vatican Obelisk, the Pope ritually marked the occasion by conducting an exorcism on the stone.<sup>19</sup> Two years later, when the bronze statue of St. Peter was complete, Sixtus did the same for the Column of Trajan, which it was to surmount.<sup>20</sup> Nor does it seem to be the case that, in 'eliminating the memory of the idols,' Sixtus intended simply to neutralize their former charge. As all historians of his urbanism recognize, one of Sixtus's primary aims was to orient the pilgrims moving through the city to worship at the major basilicas. The

<sup>15</sup> Caglioti, I, p. 339.

<sup>16</sup> John Shearman, 'Art or Politics in the Piazza?' Alessandro Nova and Anna Schreurs, ed., *Benvenuto Cellini: Kunst und Kunsttheorie im 16. Jahrhundert* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2003), pp. 19–36, here 23.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Gerhard Wolf, *Salus populi Romani: Die Geschichte römischer Kultbilder im Mittelalter* (Weinheim: VCH, Acta Humaniora, 1990), as well as Amber McAlister Blazer, 'From Icon to Relic: the Baroque Transformation of the *Salus Populi Romani*,' in *Athanas* 13 (1995), pp. 31–41.

<sup>18</sup> Butters, 'Magnifico, non senza eccesso: riflessioni sul mecenatismo del cardinale Ferdinando de' Medici,' in *Villa Medici: il sogno di un cardinale*, ed. Michel Hochmann (Rome: De Luca, 1999), 35 and *idem*, 'Ferdinando de' Medici and the Art of the Possible,' in *The Medici, Michelangelo, and the Art of Late Renaissance Florence*, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 71.

<sup>19</sup> D'Onofrio, pp. 178–84, and Iversen, pp. 38–9. The ritual is also described in Michele Mercati, *Gli Obelischi di Roma* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1981), pp. 305–6.

<sup>20</sup> D'Onofrio, p. 270.



Figure 3.5 *Vatican Obelisk*. Detail: inscription on eastern side of socle. Photo: author.

columns and obelisks did not just beautify or dramatize the sites on which they were erected; they also served – as they still do today – a practical purpose. Yet to make the columns and obelisks in particular a focal point in a pilgrimage was a dangerous business. The pilgrim's *admiratio* was an acknowledgment of the charge such objects had. Consider Leonardo da Vinci's comments, recorded in the Codex Urbinas:

Do we not see that paintings that represent divine deities are continuously kept covered with the most expensive coverings, and that, when they are uncovered, first great ecclesiastical solemnities are held, with various songs accompanied by different instruments? At the moment of unveiling, the great multitude of people who have assembled there immediately throw themselves to the ground worshipping the painting and praying to the one who is figured in it, in order to acquire the health that they have lost and for their eternal salvation, as if in their minds such a god were alive and present. [...] Now if these pilgrimages continue to take place, what moves [people] without necessity? Certainly you will confess that it is this simulacrum, which does what all writings cannot do – to potently figure the virtue of such a Deity in an effigy.<sup>21</sup>

The behavior of the pilgrim, to follow Leonardo, was proof of the power of the image. And what is remarkable, with comments like this in mind, is that Sixtus seems only to have encouraged the kind of behavior that

<sup>21</sup> Farago, p. 189.

Leonardo described. Upon the consecration of the Vatican obelisk, crowds kneeled around it. As for prayers that might be said 'in order to acquire the health that they have lost and for their eternal salvation,' Sixtus decreed that pilgrims who honored its cross while in a state of grace were to be granted an indulgence of fifteen years.<sup>22</sup> The first work in Rome to recreate the conventional medieval hieroglyph for the idol in three dimensions immediately became an indulgenced image and a cult object itself.

Then there is Leonardo's further comment: that those who behaved in such a manner were likely to imagine that a god was alive and present before them. On this, of course, the boundaries of Sixtus's thinking should have been established by the Council of Trent's 1563 decree on images, with its injunction to bishops to instruct their charges diligently concerning the invocation of saints.<sup>23</sup> To follow the Tridentine guidelines, nothing was to be asked of images, and no trust was to be placed in them, 'as was done of old by the Gentiles who placed their hope in idols.' While the decree reaffirmed the traditional Catholic doctrine of intercession, specifying that 'sacred monuments' and 'places dedicated to the memories of the saints' could be visited 'with a view to obtaining [the saints'] aid,' it also specified that objects should be honored and venerated not because 'any divinity or virtue is believed to be in them,' but rather because all honor done to the image is referred to the representative in heaven whose similitude that image bore.

If Leonardo was right, such thoughts were alien to the typical pilgrim: were you to maintain, he writes, that the power an image had over travelers was due 'to the inherent virtue of the thing imitated, it may be replied that if that were the case, the minds of men could be satisfied by staying in bed, rather than going either to tiring and dangerous places or on pilgrimages as one continually sees being done.'<sup>24</sup> In other words, if the virtues the image offered came from the heavens, rather than from the object itself, why did one need to go to *just this image* at all? Nor did Sixtus exactly discourage the conclusions visitors might draw about what his new work could do. As D'Onofrio first discovered, the inscription that those approaching the obelisk from the river would first have encountered (Figure 3.5), ECCE CRUX DOMINI / FUGITE PARTES ADVERSAE / VICIT LEO / DE TRIBU IUDA, records words from Apocalypse 5:5 traditionally used in exorcism rituals.<sup>25</sup> As it happens, the actual exorcism rite Sixtus used survives – the Pope even allowed to be published – and signs

<sup>22</sup> See Mercati, p. 306, 'Fermata che è la Croce, il diacono publica l'indulgenza di quindici anni concessa da sua Santità alli presenti, e a ciascuno che, in stato di grazia passandovi, onori la Croce.' Also D'Onofrio, p. 180.

<sup>23</sup> See H.J. Schroeder, trans., *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1955), pp. 215–17, 483–5.

<sup>24</sup> Farago, p. 189.

<sup>25</sup> D'Onofrio, pp. 178–84; Iversen, p. 38.

of the cross figure prominently in it.<sup>26</sup> The ceremony – originally scheduled for September 14th, the day of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, but in the event postponed – began with a procession and the singing of Psalms.<sup>27</sup> Following this, the Pope stood with his back to the basilica, facing the obelisk (i.e., facing the same direction as the inscription). Extending his hand, he said 'I exorcize you, creature of stone, in the name of God' ('Exorcizote, creatura lapidis, in nomine Dei'). He then aspersed the stone with water, hitting it once in the middle, then to the right, then to the left, then above and below, forming a cross. Following this, a deacon handed him a knife, with the point of which Sixtus carved a cross into the stone. Speaking the words 'In nomine Patris, et Filij, et Spiritus sancti,' he crossed himself three times. Finally, after further prayers, he had the gilded bronze cross set atop the ancient form, while all around kneeled and sang.<sup>28</sup>

If the inscription gives the impression that it was the sign of the cross that caused the stone's demons to flee, the ritual only reinforces this. More remarkable, though, is that for anyone seeing the obelisk *after* September of 1586 (i.e., anyone who saw the inscription but not the ceremony), the 'Ecce Crux Domini' would most obviously refer not to the crosses the Pope had repeatedly made in the process of driving out the stone's bad spirits (the one he carved with his knife is, today, impossible to find), but to the metal figure that the whole monument supported. It is *this* cross, the visitor to the piazza can only conclude, that is to cause flight – just as the heraldic lions inserted to support the obelisk embody the 'lion of the tribe of Judah.' The intended effect is again comparable to that of Donatello's *Marzocco* or Michelangelo's *David*, though with the assertion, at least, that the cross is now the operative agent. Its power is evident in prints published on the occasion: in one, clouds seem to gather at the top of the obelisk, and the cross itself actually oversteps the frame of the image, entering into the viewer's own space. The poems that contemporaries began to dedicate to the obelisk's cross grant it similar potential. Philip Poelarius's 1586 lines are representative:

[...] Aurati fulgent molis quod vertice montes  
 Et stella auratis in montibus aurea folget,  
 Exultans nostrae felicia signa salutis  
 Ostentare Crucem, Satanae, qua diruta regna  
 Munere Sixte tuo est augustior aera, per te  
 Saxea venturo moles celebrabitur aevo.

The gilded mountains gleam from this crown of the colossus and the golden star glitters on the gilded mountains, jubilant to be able to display the cross,

<sup>26</sup> *Ordo exorcizandi, dedicandive obelisci et benedicandae crucis in eo erectae. Quinto kal. Octob. Ann. M.D.XXCVI* (Rome: Jacob Ruffinellum, 1586).

<sup>27</sup> For the timing, see Iversen, p. 34.

<sup>28</sup> See *Ordo exorcizandi*, n.p.

the happy sign of our salubrity/salvation. Oh, Satan, [your] rule is broken. And with your offering, Sixtus, this site is more august; through your doing, the mass of stone will be celebrated for all time.<sup>29</sup>

The combination of obelisk, cross, and inscription, in short, *perpetuates* the exorcism, capturing the desired outcome of the ceremony and directing it permanently against any foes who might threaten Peter's resting place. And this adds to the impression that, if anything, Sixtus's intention was not simply to destroy the city's idols, but to rehabilitate forms that would work much like Donatello's statues had worked earlier. If thoughts like those of Leonardo's pilgrim were to be rebutted, it would not be with the claim that Christian objects were meant to serve only as mental aids, but with a reading of the Tridentine position that specifically preserved for particular images their force. Let us, then, dwell a bit longer on just how contemporaries clarified the Church's position.

Significantly, the question of what it meant for the veneration done before an image to be 'referred' to a prototype was itself subject to interpretation. Consider the case of the Cremonese biographer Alessandro Lamo, who, one year before Sixtus began his restorations, published this explanation of what happens when the devout meditate on a Christian 'sign':

[God, the Virgin and the Saints] study how, entirely intent on the simulacra, and fixing our corporeal eyes only on them, we fix the eyes of our minds on Heaven, and offer the dearest gifts to God [...] By chance they see the spirit that, exiting our hearts, forms the supplicative voices that we affectionately release before the senseless Statues; they see our tears, they hear our sighs, and they do not fail to notice that that little bit of spirit, collected by the angels, flies up to Heaven. ... [There] it whispers in God's ear, it renders that ear soft and benign, and it beseeches just graces from him. [God's] most liberal hand, where incorruptible treasures are enclosed, opens to this spirit, and it returns to us, overflowing with spiritual graces ...<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Carmina a variis auctoribus in obeliscum conscripta* (Rome: Barth. Grassij, 1586), 81. Another example, from the same volume (p. 33): 'Hactenus in domina latuit vix cognitus Vrbe, / Nunc leo victrici pro Cruce victor ouat. / Daemonis haec fuerat quondam fraude obsida terris / Hostis, et à nostro pignore diues erat: / Sed caput atque altis rutilum de montibus Atlas / Extulit euictas, mox dedit ille manus / Sixtus, quod stygiis olim gens caeca trophaeum / Fixerat, eripuit, figat ut ille Cruci.'

<sup>30</sup> Lamo, *Discorso ... intorno alla scoltura, e pittura*, appended to Gio. Batt. Zaist, *Notizie Storiche de' Pittori, Scultori, ed Architetti Cremonesi* (Cremona: Ricchini, 1774), pp. 24-5: 'Ben veggono per avventura lo spirito, che dal cuore uscendoci forma quelle supplichevoli voci, che innanzi l'insensibili Statue affettuosamente snodiamo; veggono le lagrime nostre; odono i sospiri, ma non scòrgono però, che quel poco di spirito raccolto da gli Angeli, come dice Bernardo, *Credimus angelos sanctos astare orantibus, offerre Deo vota, & preces hominum, si sine deceptione levati puras manus perspexerunt*, se ne vola al Cielo. *Honor imanis pergit usque ad prototypum, & exemplar*, dice Damasceno. Sussurra all'orecchio di Dio; ce lo rende pieghevole, e benigno, impetra da lui le giuste grazie, ed aprendogli la liberalissima mano, dove rinchiede tesori incorruttibili, dovizioso di grazie spirituali ne ritorna a noi, lasciando nella celeste immortalità scritti i nomi de i divoti oratori' 16.

Lamo is careful to specify that the image itself does nothing. Nevertheless, he is comfortable imagining a scenario in which the saint that an image depicts sees what the supplicator does before the image, and even a scenario in which an *angel*, waiting with the artwork, hears the worshipper's prayers and acts on them. Given the common view that idols, to work their maleficent ways, must be visited by demons, it is of course striking that Lamo, in accounting for the instrumentality of the image, brings the demon's benign twin into his account.<sup>31</sup> What Lamo essentially does is to maintain the idea of spiritual presence, while finding a way still to insist on the real separation of object and prototype. In the end, the difference between the holy image and the idol corresponds to the difference between angels and demons: whereas demons *possess* the bodies they visit, *occupying* statues or living persons, angels merely *communicate* (the very word *angel* derives from the Greek *angelos*, 'messenger'). Devotion before an image exploits the vehicular function of angels, their role in delivering messages and visions from God to the world, but what Lamo hypothesizes is a more symmetrical relationship: angels, God's emissaries, go in two directions. It was not that a resident demon acted in the statue's vicinity; it was that the column and image functioned as a kind of portal, a channel through which the heaven and earth might reach one another.

We may wonder whether we should really consider a bronze cross atop an obelisk as this kind of sign, analogous to a simulacrum of a saint. But listen to the outburst directed at the cross in Cosimo Gaci's 1586 *Dialogo del trasporto dell'Obelisco del Vaticano*:

Oh glorious sign! Oh sublime emblem! Oh invincible standard! Oh divine banner! Oh exalted Cross! You are truly that celestial plan that finds no equal, that adored mast that, admired with devotion, heals the mortal wounds. You are that stupendous scepter that makes marvelous signs, that sublime stair, by means of which the angels ascend, carrying to Heaven the represented prayers of mortals and, descending, return with divine graces.<sup>32</sup>

Gaci regards the figure at the top of the obelisk, as Lamo regarded the sacred image (the term both use is *segno*, 'sign'), as a sort of angelic egress – the comparison of the cross to 'the sublime stair' may evoke Jacob's ladder.<sup>33</sup> For Gaci, however, the cross is this by virtue of being an insignia,

<sup>31</sup> On the demons bound to idols, see, for example, Augustine, *De civitate dei*, 8.24.

<sup>32</sup> Gaci, *Dialogo [...] del trasporto dell'Obelisco del Vaticano* (Rome: Francesco Zannetti, 1586), pp. 49–50: 'O glorioso segno, ò sublime insegna, o inuitto stendardo: o diuino vessillo, ò altissima Croce. Tù sei veramente quella celeste pianta, che pari non ritroui: tù quell'adorando stipite, che, con deuotione rimarato, sani le piaghe mortali: tù quella stupenda verga, che fai mirabilissimi segni: tù quella sublime scala, per la quale salendo gli angeli, et discendendo, portano al Cielo le denote orationi de mortali, et di colassu à quelli le diuine gratie [...]'

<sup>33</sup> A similar comparison appears in the anonymous *Obelisci vaticani et sanctissimae crucis erectae historia* (n.p.) that appeared in the same year: 'Iam praeterea, is velut Iacob,

the kind of image under which militaries move. This perspective sheds light on why it was in the Sala di Costantino that Sixtus decided to celebrate his raising of the cross over the broken idol: Giulio Romano's frescoes (Figure 3.6) show that antagonists simply collapse before a commander leading under the sign of the cross and aided by angels; they provide the model for how all future battles should go. It would also explain why Sixtus had Laureti portray, in the attic story of the same room, the series of cross-topped obelisks and saint-crowned columns he was contributing to the city. The positioning of the Vatican obelisk and for that matter of all of its Sistine counterparts begins to look defensive; standing before churches or, in the case of the Piazza del Popolo, at the northern entrance to the city, their projection of hostile force at once records the still living memory of Rome's 1527 Sack and recalls the effects that earlier idols had on allied armies.

Another guide to how the Tridentine decrees could have been interpreted in Sistine Rome comes from Ambrogio Catarino, a Siennese prelate who eventually became the archbishop of Conza. Catarino's small book on holy images actually dates to 1552, a good decade before the Council reached its conclusion. As Catarino was personally present at Trent, however, and among the participants who shaped the final position the group took, his published views – printed by the Roman Church's own typographer – are particularly relevant. In the passage most important for our purposes, Catarino tackled the question of image and prototype by focusing on a specific model for this, the biblical figure of the brazen serpent:

What was a sign was a sign of something else: they knew that those powers emanating from [the serpent] were not the healing ones they thought would emanate from it. For what were the virtues that they saw emanating from it? What virtues could come from the inspection of that statue, which could heal the wounded who had truly been bitten by those snakes? This virtue was thus attributed not to the sign, but to the signified, and similarly, the statue was regarded as a sign, such that the mind flew from there to the prototype ...<sup>34</sup>

---

erexit lapidem in titulum. Et vero, ut ille per quietem ingentis magnitudinis vidit, cuius cacumen coelus tangeret, ascendentesque et descendentes per eam Dei angelos: rem certe vidit plenam mysteriorum: sic sanctissimus Pontifex Sixtus Quintus, dum de obelisco sacrando, cruceq; in eo erigenda aliquando cogitat, aliquid tacitis mentis suae cogitationibus fortasse diuinitus praevidit, quod in eo opere visui futurum esset gloriae Dei propagationisque fidei.' (Now, therefore, he, just like Jacob, erected a stone as a monument. And in truth, just as [Jacob], in his sleep, saw the great crowd, whose peak heaven touched, the angels of God ascending and descending by means of this – he certainly saw a thing full of mystery – thus the most holy Pope Sixtus V, when sanctifying the obelisk and finally erecting a cross upon it, thought, to some extent silently to himself, and with his divinely inspired thoughts perhaps foresaw, that that work would be the vision of the future, the glory of God, and the propagation of the faith.)

<sup>34</sup> Ambrosius Catharinus, *De cultu & adoratione imaginum* (Rome: Antonius Bladus, 1552), p. 126: 'Quod autem est signum, alterius signum est: ut sic intelligerent non ab eo exire illam sanandi uirtutem quae ex illo exire uidebatur. Nam quid uirtutem quae ex

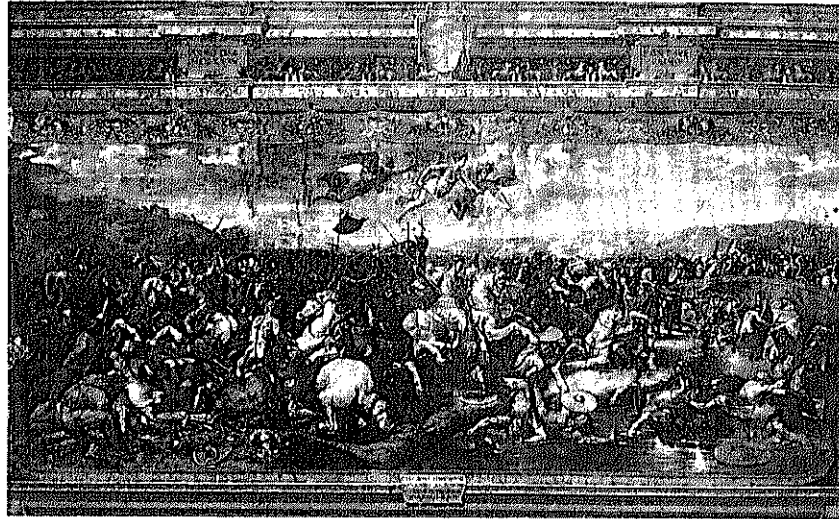


Figure 3.6 Giulio Romano, *Battle at the Milvian Bridge*, Sala di Costantino, 1524. Photo: Art Resource.

Catarino's account aims to reconcile the story in Numbers 21, according to which Moses's work of bronze had the power to heal those who looked upon it, with the episode recounted in 4 Kings 18:4, wherein King Ezechias 'broke the statues into pieces, cut down the groves, and smashed the brazen serpent that Moses had made.' Accounting for why one book of the Bible exalts the serpent when another seems to condemn it, Catarino suggests that Ezechias had watched the worship of the brazen serpent degenerating into idolatry, and had discovered that those who had witnessed its effects had misunderstood what they were seeing:

an error had advanced in that which had not previously been considered, and the thing had not been honored (as the Lord instructed) as a sign, bearing the virtues of the signified, but almost having as holiness and some divine power in itself, just as the Pagans regarded their own idols. Wherefore, banishing that error, Ezechias ordered that the serpent be destroyed, calling it a little bronze vessel, a thing to be disdained and one unworthy of worship.<sup>35</sup>

---

illo exire uidebatur. Nam quid uirtutis poterat ex inspectione illius statuæ procedere ad sanandos saucios à uerorum serpentum morsibus? Illa ergo uirtus, non signo, sed nignato erat tribuenda: & similiter illa statua tanquam signum erat aspicienda, ut inde mens ad prototypum euolarer.'

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 126: 'Error ergo processerat in hoc quòd non iam inspiciebatur & adorabatur illud (sicut praecepit Dominus) ut signum referens signati uirtuem, sed quasi habens in se sanctificationem & uim aliquam diuinam, sicut existimabant Gentes de Idolis suis. Quare ad hunc Gentium errorem amouendum iussit Ezechias confringi Serpentem illum, uocans aenulum, ut quiddam despicabile & indignum cultu.'



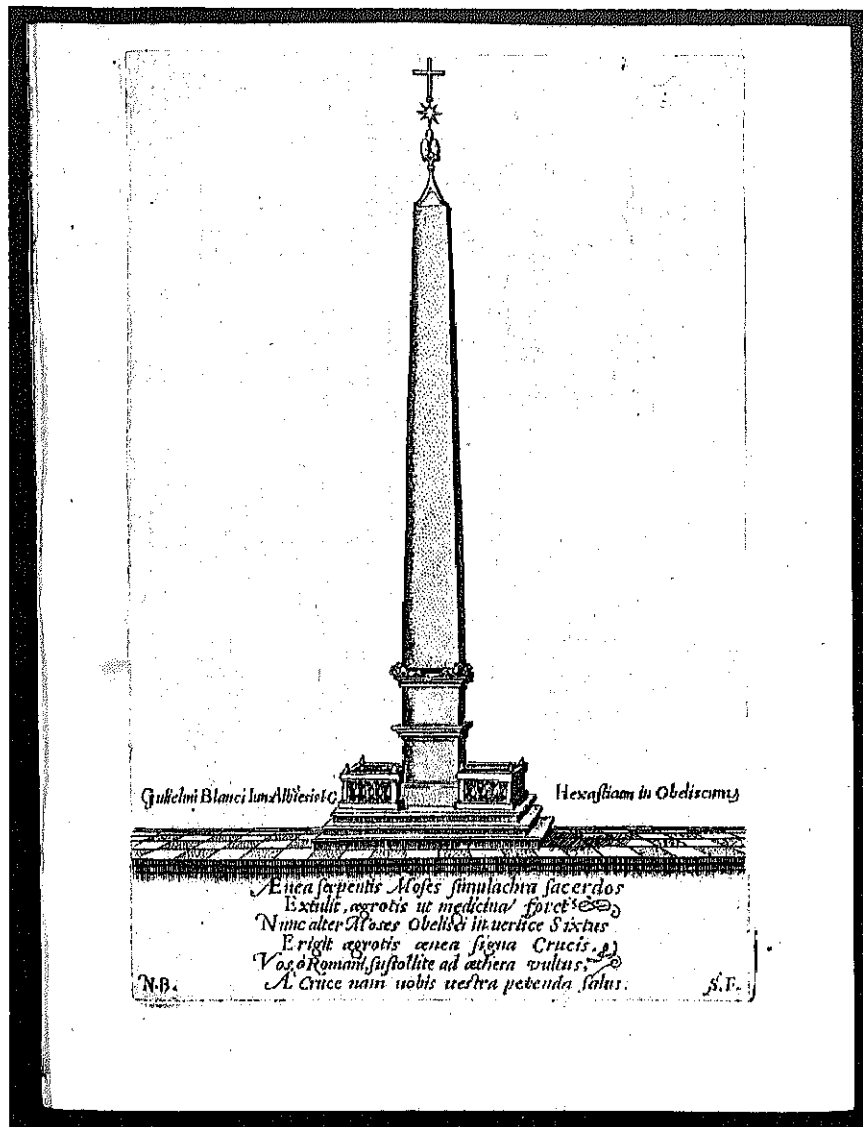


Figure 3.7 Natale Bonifacio de Sebenico, *Vatican Obelisk*, c.1585.  
 Photo: Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Important here are Catarino's ideas about what he calls 'signification.' Using the same language as Lamo and Gaci, Catarino specifies that the mind, fixed on the sign, is carried to the signified. In addition to this, however, Catarino suggests that the sign can 'bear the virtues of the signified,' as if the sign *carries* something from its prototype to the person who looks upon it. This sounds close to one of the reasons that Donatello's *Judith* was removed from its position before the Palazzo Vecchio: that it was acting as a 'segnio mortifero' – literally, a death-bearing sign. The real difference between the miracle-working statue, understood on the model of the brazen serpent, and the pagan idol, understood, say, according to the stories in the *Hermetica*, is not that one presumes the invocation of a supernatural entity and the other does not. Rather it is that the Christian *signum* is operated from on high, while the idol is inhabited, taking on a quasi-independent life. When he ultimately denigrates the serpent, Ezechias does so by calling it 'a little vessel': the distinction between idol and image turns not only on the question of true or false gods, but also on that of whether the thing is occupied, or simply worked through.

The typological connection between the brazen serpent and the cross makes this emblem of the post-Tridentine doctrine seem especially relevant to Sixtus's transformation of the city. As Catarino presents it, the story of the brazen serpent concerns not only a function, but also a format, that of a bronze image on a post; he calls Moses's standard a *statua*, a statue. The basic reference point here, for Catarino as well as for the next generation of thinkers, would have been the book of John, which treats Moses's serpent explicitly as a type of crucifix.<sup>36</sup> Such a comparison would have been particularly salient to Sixtus, for the Pope identified himself publically and prominently with Moses – most famously on the colossal fountain (ornamented with obelisks) that he had Fontana erect near his villa. Early viewers of the Vatican Obelisk, in fact, seem to have been able to put all of these things together, as is evidenced by a remarkable contemporary engraving of the obelisk by Natale Bonifacio de Sebenico, which bears a hexameter by Guglielmo Bianchi (Figure 3.7):

<sup>36</sup> Cf. also Gabriele Paleotti, *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre et profane* (Bologna: Arnaldo Forni [anastatic reprint], 1990), 100. The comparison frequently informs the way Moses's statue is rendered: sixteenth-century representations of the brazen serpent typically figure the object as a cross. For contemporary treatments of the topic, see also Lamo, p. 24.

Aenea serpentis Moses simulachra sacerdos  
 Extulit, aegrotis ut medicina foret  
 Nunc alter Moses Obelisci in uertice Sixtus  
 Erigit aegrotis aenea signa Crucis.  
 Vos, ò Romani, sustollite ad aethera vultus,  
 A' Cruce nam uobis uestra petenda salus.<sup>37</sup>

Just as the priest Moses raised a bronze simulacrum of a serpent, such that it could be medicine to the sick, so now Sixtus, the other Moses, erects for the sick a bronze sign of the Cross atop the Obelisk. Oh Romans, raise your faces in the air, entreating the Cross for your health and salvation.

At a moment when the figure of the brazen serpent was especially charged, allowing theologians to work through one form of defense against Protestant accusations of idolatry, a comparison like this carries weight.<sup>38</sup>

The brazen serpent analogy reminds us that the combination of post and image, as a Christian type, preexisted the token developed later for the idol – or, from another point of view, the Renaissance figure of the brazen serpent makes the medieval idol look like a variation on Moses's ancient statue. Sixteenth-century versions of the form could evoke either moment in the motif's history, or both. The Vatican obelisk takes the form of an idol, and it is made of an idol, but its recreation of the brazen serpent allows it to do exactly the opposite of what idols do, expelling evil and delivering health.

The biblical figure, finally, also alerts us to one other distinctive aspect of the cross atop the obelisk, a characteristic of all the images placed on posts in Counter-Reformation Rome: that it is made of gilded bronze. While structural advantages may have been a factor here, the numerous examples already mentioned of stone statues on lofty bases should alert us to the fact that bronze was hardly the only option available to patrons. To put a bronze work in such a position was a choice, and an enormously costly one, especially when the work had to be made on a scale that it would be visible from a distance.

One thing to consider, in accounting for this, is the prominent role of cast metal objects, and golden ones in particular, in the major texts on idolatry. Psalm 113 states that 'the idols of the Gentiles are silver and gold, the works of the hands of men,' and Exodus recounts the story of the casting of the golden calf, sometimes represented in sixteenth-century Italy as an independent episode. To this might be added the *mirabilia* tradition, which included stories like that of the colossal bronze idol that had once topped the Coliseum – its own name thought to have derived from the Latin *colis*

<sup>37</sup> Guilelmo Blanci, *Epigrammata in obeliscum* (Rome: Barth. Grassij, 1586), p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> It was Kings 18:4 that the preacher Nikolaus Gallus quoted when, in 1543 – less than a decade before Catarino wrote his own book on images – he ordered the Virgin on the column in Regensburg destroyed. See Wood, 103.

*eum*, or the imperative 'pray to him.'<sup>39</sup> The language that idolatry evoked could suggest a specificity of materials: the Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti's important treatise on sacred and profane images, published just three years before Sixtus's projects got under way, presented as synonyms for *idoli* not only *simulacri* and *similitudini*, but also *conflatili* (lit., things that are melted together).<sup>40</sup> Later, in books like Louis Richeome's 1608 *L'idolatrie huguenote*, references to idols 'founded in the heart' are repeated so often that their casting begins to sound like something more than a metaphor.<sup>41</sup>

Some writers conceived idolatry precisely as the materialization of the image,<sup>42</sup> and one can imagine numerous reasons why, when describing such ways of seeing, metal objects should have come so quickly to mind. Bronze, and gold even more, were of course precious, far more precious than stone or wood, and the idea that they could be converted to or from things like jewelry made them seem all the more vain. Being, in most cases, hollow, bronze figures had, literally, an *anima* or soul, making the question of whether they were vessels or channels all the more pointed. With their brightness, and their presumed origin in planetary influences, metals were, furthermore, as 'celestial' as any materials that builders could have used.<sup>43</sup> Vernacular Renaissance accounts of bronze casting sometimes associate the process with the demonic.<sup>44</sup> And the sundry reports of lightning striking the ornaments set atop obelisks and domes demonstrate that contemporaries were fascinated by the ways in which these might attract divine forces.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., John Capgrave, *Ye Solace of Pilgrims* [c.1450], ed. C.A. Mills (London: Oxford University Press, 1911), p. 36: 'Colis eum þat is to sey in english worchipis þou him.' For the designation of the bronze statue as an idol, see, for example, Francis Morgan Nichols, ed. and trans., *The Marvels of Rome* (New York: Italica Press, 1986), p. 29: 'After some time the Blessed Silvester ordered that temple destroyed and likewise other palaces so that the orators who came to Rome would not wander through profane buildings but pass with devotion through the churches. But he had the head and hands of the aforesaid idol laid before his Palace of the Lateran in remembrance of the temple.'

<sup>40</sup> Paleotti, 42v: 'L'istesso dunque accade ancora nelle imagini, poi che altre sono veramente sacre, & religiose: altre adombrate di religione, & finte, che si chamano Idoli, simulacri, sculptrili, conflatili, similitudini, & altri nomi.'

<sup>41</sup> Louis Richeome, *L'idolatrie huguenote figurée au patron de la vieille payenne* (Lyons: Pierre Rigaud, 1608), pp. 24, 25, 34, and passim.

<sup>42</sup> Paleotti 92r-v: 'Nel primo non crediamo noi che alcuna imagine sia cosa divina, o per se, o per participatione, essendo la imagine ordinariamente cosa artificata fatta per rappresentarne un'altra vera; eccetto se non havesse acquistata qualche santità in alcuno delli modi da noi narrati altre volte, I quali però non appartengono alla sostanza loro essendo materiale.'

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Georgius Agricola, *De re metallica*, trans. Herbert Clark Hoover and Lou Henry Hoover (New York: Dover, 1950), 44n.

<sup>44</sup> The most famous example is that of Benvenuto Cellini. See Giuseppe Guido Ferrero, ed., *Opere di Benvenuto Cellini* (Turin: UTET, 1980), p. 520.

<sup>45</sup> Predating all of these devices, finally, was that which originally topped the Vatican obelisk, the bronze globe, terminating in what looks like a smaller obelisk, pointing to the heavens. Prints of the obelisk before it was transferred suggest its capacity to move the sky;

These traditions reinforce the idea that the creation of bronze holy images, meant to be placed on columns, represented a translation as much as a conversion. The bronze or gold idol served as a model, and not just as an antithesis, for monumental Christian uses of the same material. Bronze brought the two classes of object together, and to a certain extent, the metal objects Sixtus erected took their place within an already extant order of things. When Antonio Lafreri made his famous engraving of the city, he gave the anachronistic though not entirely false impression that obelisks and pyramids – terms used interchangeably in the sixteenth century – had provided a model for every holy tower in the city (Figure 3.8). And among the best precedents for the function of a monument like the Vatican Obelisk were the bronze objects at the tops of those towers, *bells* that, from the twelfth century on, constituted the central features of some of the city's tallest structures. The importance of bells as objects, and not just as producers of sound, is demonstrated by the fact that bells were among the earliest bronzes to be signed by their makers. Bells were typically given names, suggesting a kind of animism. And bells were clearly intended not just to mark hours, but to expel adverse forces from their vicinity.<sup>46</sup> Even more closely related to the new obelisks and columns were the lanterns that topped church domes: crowned by a cross, and complete with relics, the lantern that now tops St. Peter's was itself a Sistine project, one underway concurrently with the obelisk in the piazza before it.<sup>47</sup> It is impossible to know just how Sixtus would have had the lantern itself ornamented, but lanterns were commonly associated with the descent of the Holy Spirit. And if, finally, these elevated bronze objects were supposed to do at least some of the same things, one cannot but wonder whether the bronze antiquities that Sixtus IV had added to the tower of the Campidoglio, rising over the center of the city, would have been endowed with similar powers. No wonder that Sixtus himself ordered these removed, 'saying that they are things for idolaters and not for Christians' (dicendo Sua Beatitudine che

---

significantly, the same imagery was then reincorporated into later prints, showing the obelisk after its transformation into a Christian image. Such images might be compared to a painting like one now in the church of San Domenico in Naples, in which a divine intercession takes place in St. Peter's Square, from all appearances directly over the newly Christianized *guglia*. Significantly, the Dominicans in Naples would themselves later erect a statue on an obelisk in the piazza before their church, imitating and conflating the Sistine projects.

<sup>46</sup> A good example of this is the bell from Frosinone preserved today in the Palazzo Venezia. Dating to 1255, it includes the founder's signature, as well as the inscription 'SONITUM HUIS. FUGIAT GRANDO. ET TEMPESTAS. GRAND. PER.mee CESSET' ('let storms flee at the ringing of this [bell] and let tempests permanently cease').

<sup>47</sup> The dome proper was completed before Sixtus's death in 1590, but the cross that was to top the lantern was only gilded and set in place in 1594. Originally, the ribs on the outside of the dome were also covered with bronze. See Ennio Francia, *Storia della costruzione del nuovo San Pietro: da Michelangelo a Bernini* (Roma: De Luca, 1989), p. 95.



Figure 3.8 Antonio Lafreri, *Pilgrims Visiting the Seven Churches of Rome*, 1575. Photo: Yale Center for British Art.

sono cose da idolatri et non da cristiani’): The pope understood precisely what bronze idols did.<sup>48</sup>

The standard art historical image of the Sistine city has been a plan, a view from above: Sixtus’s signature legacy, we read, was a rationalized network of long straight streets and noble piazzas. Visitors, however, must also have marveled at what they saw when they looked *up*, for nothing in the west had anticipated the remarkable constellation he placed over Rome. One can only conclude that the so-called destroyer of pagan idols, in the end, still hoped to remain in the good graces of the gods.

<sup>48</sup> D’Onofrio, p. 194.