Aby Warburg:
His Aims
and Methods

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and Methods

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Dante, Botticelli, and Trajan. An Open Note

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> Why Rome is good, so this is so,
> that there were so many poets in him.
> Caesars, of course, as I suppose.
> But history – not they, and that, what the poets say.
>
> Iosif Brodskij, *Marble*

This note starts from a detail in Botticelli's illustrations for Dante's *Commedia*. Looking at the drawing for Canto X of *Purgatory*, where the verses tell of a bas-relief that Virgil reads to Dante as the episode known as the Justice of Trajan:

> Quiv'era storïata l'alta gloria / del roman principato, il cui valore / mosse Gregorio a la sua gran vittoria; / i' dico di Traiano imperadore; / e una vedovella li era al freno, / di lagrime atteggiata e di dolore. / Intorno a lui parea calcato e pieno / di cavalieri, e l'aguglie ne l'oro / sovr'essi in vista al vento si movieno. / La miserella intra tutti costoro / pareva dir: "Segnor, fammi vendetta / di mio figliuol ch'è morto, ond'io m'accoro"; / ed elli a lei rispondere: "Or aspetta / tanto ch'i' torni"; e quella: "Segnor mio", / come persona in cui dolor s'affretta,
> "se tu non torni?"; ed ei: "Chi fia dov'io, / la ti farà"; ed ella: "L'altrui bene / a te che fia, se 'l tuo metti in oblio?"; / ond'elli: "Or ti conforta; ch'ei convene / ch'i' solva il mio dovere anzi ch'i' mova: / giustizia vuole e pietà mi ritene".

> And there the noble action of a Roman / prince was presented he whose / worth had urged on Gregory to his great victory / I mean the Emperor Trajan; and a poor / widow was near his bridle, and she stood / even as one in tears and sadness would. / Around him, horsemen seemed to press and crowd; / above their heads, on golden banners, eagles / were represented, moving in the wind. / Among that crowd, the miserable woman / seemed to

be saying: "Lord, avenge me for / the slaying of my son, my heart is broken."
/ And he was answering: "Wait now until / I have returned." And she, as one
in whom grief presses urgently: "And, lord, if you / do not return?" And he:
"The one who'll be / in my place will perform it for you." She: / "What good
can others' goodness do for you / if you neglect your own?" He: "Be
consoled; my duty shall be done before I go: / so justice asks, so mercy
makes me stay."
(*Pg.* X, 73-93) [Translation by Allen Mandelbaum, 1982*].

1 | Sandro Botticelli, drawing for Dante's *Purgatory* Canto X (1481-1495).
Silverpoint, ink and pen on parchment, Berlin Kupferstichkabinett (detail).

It is beyond the limits of this note to contextualise the episode in
Purgatory and to explore the versions of the Legend and how it reached
Dante. This note focuses on one specific point: the drawing. It is evident
that, in order to provide an image to that bas-relief described by
Dante, Botticelli takes as a model one of the ancient *spolia* then visible in
Rome: a bas-relief of the fornix of the Arch of Constantine. Furthermore, it
can be said following, what has been proposed in punctual contributions
in an archaeological perspective since the beginning of the twentieth
century, that it is precisely that bas-relief the generator of the legend later
taken up by Dante and then re-proposed in a visual key by Botticelli (a
review of the *status quaestionis* on the visual matrix of the Legend is in
Centanni 2022a). In this sense Botticelli's drawing for Canto X of
Purgatory would fit into the genealogy of the Legend. It was Aby Warburg
who first related Botticelli's drawing to the *spolia* of the Arch of
Constantine, writing:

Le illustrazioni di Botticelli per la *Divina Commedia* inducono ad altre considerazioni. Una schiera di cavalieri si precipita, col suo comandante che però deve arrestarsi, se non vuole travolgere una donna che si butta davanti a lui. Mi sembra che un rilievo con l'imperatore che cavalcando impetuosamente travolge i nemici morti, che trova già una sua barbara espressione nella medaglia di Valente, sia un engramma, che sfida la stilizzazione che investe il piano etico. Siamo di fronte qui a una inversione energetica del significato di antiche formule di pathos: ritroveremo altri effetti di questo tipo nell'Arco di Costantino (Warburg [1929] 2014, 23-24).

[Botticelli's illustrations for the *Divine Comedy* lead to other considerations. A host of horsemen are rushing, and their commander must stop, lest he should run over a woman who throws herself in front of him. It seems to me that a relief with the Emperor riding impetuously and sweeping away his dead enemies, which has already found a barbaric expression in Valens' medal, is an engram that defies the stylisation of the ethical level. Here we are faced with an energetic inversion of the meaning of ancient formulas of pathos: we will find other effects of this type in the Arch of Constantine (Author's translation)].

In line with the same interpretation, Warburg writes:

Even the Church had managed to lend the self-glorification of the Trajan relief Christian sentiment, by means of a legend that was still alive in Dante. The famous story of the "Pietà" of the Emperor towards a widow who was pleading for justice is probably the subtlest attempt at transforming imperial pathos into Christian piety, through the energetic inversion of its meaning; the Emperor, bursting out of the inner relief, becomes an advocate of justice, and bids his followers halt, because the widow's child has fallen under the hoofs of a Roman rider (Warburg [1929] 2017, 18).

Warburg took his starting point from an article by Giacomo Boni in 1906, which he then elaborated on and went beyond, clarifying his idea in different contributions, gradually arriving at a precise identification of the bas-relief that would have served as the visual matrix for the Legend and constituted the model for Botticelli's drawing.

In his 1929 contributions, Warburg recognises the ancient bas-relief and Botticelli's drawing as particularly valuable examples for the concept of energy inversion (on this topic, see Monica Centanni's article in this issue of Engramma, where a precise profile of the evolution of Warburg's intuition is depicted: Centanni 2022b). But in this recognition there remains one point still to be explored: how Botticelli was able to trace and recognise in those bas-reliefs of the Arch of Constantine a depiction of Trajan and in particular the episode of the widow and the emperor. Botticelli is not mistaken in identifying in the bas-relief in the archway's fornix an artefact referable to Trajan. As we know, the Arch is an assemblage of resemantised parts of arches and other monuments, taken by Constantine to build a monument to his own image and triumph by gathering different fragments coming from monuments of selected predecessors: Marcus Aurelius, Hadrian, Trajan and others (see Zeri 2004, in particular the "Quarta conversazione", 67-80). It is in this context that the bas-relief under examination also fits, taken from a Trajanic monument, reshaped in faces, and redefined by the inscription LIBERATORI URBIS to become part of the Arch of Constantine. But this is what we know today, after centuries of archaeological and antiquarian studies on the ancient monument. Thus Zeri:

> Quando si è incominciato a studiarlo, quando l'archeologia moderna, più scientifica, ha iniziato a occuparsene, ci si è accorti che l'arco è fatto di elementi compositi. Per di più si è scoperto che i due rilievi all'interno, e quelli sui fianchi, formano in realtà un unico grande rilievo, eseguito secondo uno stile che è quello dell'epoca di Traiano; quindi risale alla prima metà del II secolo. Poi si è visto che anche un altro fregio è traianeo, ed è tutto continuo, è unico pezzo diviso in quattro punti, due settori all'interno e due all'esterno (Zeri 2004, 45-46).

> [When modern and more scientific archaeology began to study it, it became clear that the arch is made of composite elements. What is more, the analyses found out that the two reliefs on the inside, and those on the sides, actually form a single large relief, executed in a style that is that of Trajan's time; thus dating from the first half of the second century. Another frieze was found to be Trajanesque, and it is all continuous, a single piece divided into four parts, two sections on the inside and two on the outside (Author's translation)].

2 | *Spolia* system in the Arch of Constantine. Trajan (98-117), the four statues above the columns, in red; Hadrian (117-138, the four roundels in blue; Marcus Aurelius (161-180), the panels in the attic, in yellow and Constantine (306-337), the spandrels of the archways and the bases of the colums, in green.

Summarising Botticelli's personal and artistic story, we see how the trip to Rome made in 1480 for the frescoing of the Sistine Chapel under Sixtus IV would prove decisive in his artistic career. In that season, he introduced classical references into his painting that would remain in the years to follow. For example, a putto in the lower right-hand corner of the fresco with the *Temptations of Christ* is inspired by a Roman copy of an ancient Greek model – with the same snake and serpentine pose. Likewise, in the frescoes for the Sistine Chapel, he inserts in *The Punishment of the Rebels* the now lost *spolia* of Septimus Severus, and next to it, with a certain precision but somehow reinvented, the Arch of Constantine (Lightbown [1978] 1989, 106). After his Roman experience and starting in the three frescoes with the stories of the Old and New Testaments – perhaps inspired by the spiral frieze of Trajan's Column with the same narrative structure – he inserts, in his drawings for the *Commedia* made after his return to Florence, the structure of the continuous narrative with the presence in the same painting of one or more characters repeated several times. This narrative formula, as well as the Arch of Constantine that will be mentioned years later in the fifth of the *Stories of Lucretia*, are legacies of the Roman visit. The quotations from classical works and the continuous narrative are also part of the design for *Purgatory* X. There we see Dante and Virgil first in front of the depiction of the Annunciation scene; then in front of King David dancing; finally beside the bas-relief with Trajan stopping his horse's fury in the middle of the battle in front of the widow begging for mercy, after her own son has just been killed. The bas-relief depicted by Botticelli is a very precise quotation of the bas-relief

in the fornix of the Arch of Constantine with the inscription LIBERATORI URBIS above it.
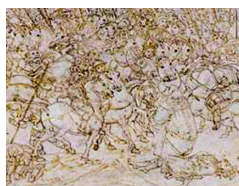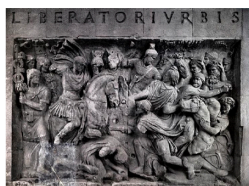
3 | Rome, Arch of Constantine, (315 AD). Bas-relief from a Trajanic monument, inserted in the main archway of the Arch, with the inscription LIBERATORI URBIS above it.
4 | Sandro Botticelli, drawing for Dante's *Purgatory* Canto X (1481-1495). Silverpoint, ink and pen on parchment, Berlin Kupferstichkabinett (detail).

Thanks to the progress of more than three centuries of archaeological and antiquarian science, we today know that the bas-relief originally pertained not to Constantine but to Trajan. Yet the question is: how could Botticelli have known this in the fifteenth century? This is what our research is concerned with, some data of which we can anticipate even though there is not yet a definitive answer. Dante has knowledge of some Roman artefacts (see among others Fiero 1975), but he makes no reference to that particular bas-relief, nor do we have any sources that give us the precise information about those bas-reliefs in the Arch in his time. The situation was different in the fifteenth century, when attention to ancient artefacts grew as the decades progressed, and led to Raphael and Baldassarre Castiglione's letter to Pope Leo X where for the first time it was said that those reliefs were referred to Trajan:

> E tra l'altre dall'arco di Costantino; il componimento del quale è bello e ben fatto in tutto quello che appartiene all'archittettura: ma le sculture del medesimo arco sono sciocchissime, senz'arte o bontate alcuna. Ma quelle che vi sono delle spoglie di Traiano e d'Antonino Pio, sono eccellentissime, e di perfetta maniera (Letter from Baldassarre Castiglione to Pope Leo X, 1519).

> [And among others by the Arch of Constantine; the composition of which is beautiful and well-done in all that belongs to architecture: but the sculptures of the same arch are very poor, without any art or goodness. But

what remains of Trajan and Antoninus Pius, is most excellent, and in perfect style (Author's translation)].

But how did the information reach Raphael in 1519? Probably in the same way it got to Botticelli – the problem is that we do not know the steps. However we do know that in the fifteenth century there was a rediscovery of antiquity and a real fascination for triumphs. So our research looked into the sources of the time that had the *spolia* of Rome as their subject.

There is no reference to the Trajanic origin of some elements of the Arch of Constantine in Biondo Flavio, *Roma Triumphans and Roma Instaurata* – his works date back 1457-59. There is no reference to the Arch of Constantine in the slightly earlier *Descriptio Urbis Romae* by Leon Battista Alberti; likewise, nothing is said in the twelfth book of *De Re Militari* by Roberto Valturio, which deals with ancient triumphs. There is no trace of Trajan's bas-reliefs in Pomponius Leto's *Antiquitates*, nor in Andrea Fulvio's *Antiquitates* where the Arch is mentioned – at the beginning of the fourth book – but nothing is said about what interests us. Another fifteenth-century source is Giovanni Marcanova's *De dignitatibus romanorum*, *triumpho et rebus bellicis,* unfortunately lost and therefore not available, and nevertheless, we cannot take it as a mediating text. If we look at sources prior to the fifteenth century there is no reference to bas-reliefs either in Eusebius' *Vita Constantine* or in Lactantius or the medieval *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*. At the end of the twelfth century, in the *Annales Ecclesiastici* (A.D. 312, Pope Melchiades anno 2, Constantine anno 7, ch. LXV, *De arcu triumphali Constantini elucidatio* and LXVI *Ornatus arcus Constantini ex diversis*), Baronius says that some parts of the Arch are re-used from other works, yet without giving specific indications. On the other hand, there are no answers to our question either in articles or essays from recent decades that touch on Dante or Botticelli, for example the recent contribution by Marcello Ciccuto (Ciccuto 2021); Barbara J. Watts' older study (Watts 1996), or that by Nancy J. Vickers (Vickers 1983). Similarly, the consultation of historical-archaeological studies dedicated to the Arch of Constantine or the monuments of Rome in general, such as those by Silvano Agosti and Massimo Farinella and by Antonio Pinelli (Agosti Farinella 1984; Pinelli 1985) collected in *Memoria dell'antico nell'arte italiana* was of no use. Nor were the studies by Richard Krautheimer (Krautheimer [1988] 1993) and those collected by Rota

Colisei (Colisei 2002). Nor, the articles in the classical tradition by Stefano Miccolis (Miccolis 1998) and the more recent article by Manuela Morresi (Morresi 2010). And lastly, not even consulting the papers and drawings contained in the work by Alfonso Bartoli, a fellow student of Giacomo Boni, *I monumenti antichi di Roma nei disegni degli Uffizi di Firenze*, was conclusive.

5 | Trajan's panel in the Arch of Constantine.

Having completed this first and perfectible survey of modern, late antique, medieval and up to fifteenth-century sources, we can perhaps attempt a hypothesis. The hypothesis – based not on the identification of a source but on the very absence of one – is that Botticelli recognised the bas-reliefs as Trajan's because of a common knowledge of the origin of those elements: a *vox populi*. To support the hypothesis a few hints here and there save it from a quick fall. Evidence is offered by Federico Zeri, who reminds us how in Rome at the time there was a good knowledge of the works of the past among the people who were the guardians of this common knowledge:

> I romani, vedendo quei rilievi, dovevano assolutamente sapere da quale monumento provenivano e individuavano il rapporto simbolico fra Costantino e il testo del passato che era stato inserito nel suo arco trionfale (Zeri 2004, 47).

> [The Romans, seeing those reliefs, absolutely had to know which monument they came from and identified the symbolic relationship between Constantine and the text from the past that had been inserted in his triumphal arch (Author's translation)].

We can accordingly read an eighteenth-century source, Bernard de Montfaucon, who dealing with the parts that make up the Arch of Constantine writes:

Anaglypha sublimiora, mira arte caelata, doctam manum produnt: opinioque vulgaris est ex arcu Trajani huc comportata, indeque ortam nuncupationem, arco di trasi, qua insignitur arcus hodieque (Montfaucon 1702, 144).

The appeal is therefore to common opinion, to the *vox populi*, attested, however, at least to the best of our knowledge at this stage of research, only in the seventeenth century. Moreover, that knowledge of ancient works passed by word of mouth from generation to generation is told by such a sixteenth-century erudite as Marcello Adriani who wrote in a letter to Vasari:

In Roma si vede ancora l'arco di Settimio ornato di molte belle figure e molte altre opere egregie, delle quali non si sanno i maestri essendosene perduta la memoria (Adriani [1567] 1966, 226).

[In Rome, we can still see the Arch of Septimius adorned with many beautiful figures and many other egregious works, the masters of which are unknown as their memory has been lost (Author's translation)].

We do not know who they are because there is no memory of them, the *vulgata* has been lost, the *vox populi* has been interrupted.

In conclusion: the question of how Botticelli could have come to know that the bas-relief LIBERATORI URBIS from the Arch of Constantine was a work from Trajan's time, and related to an episode from Trajan's life, remains open. Meanwhile, we can say that, if the source was indeed the *vox populi*, we cannot but note once again how it is the vulgate that wins over history, and specifically in the sign of the 'energetic inversion' (to quote Warburg): Trajan's sanguinary victory over the Dacians in popular imagination turns into the cue for the legend of his justice – finally sanctioned by Dante. But we can also note how the popular legend about Rome's ancient monuments is taken up by Botticelli who, in his artistic work, puts on paper the recognition of the Trajanian origin of the bas-relief of the Arch of Constantine, anticipating by centuries the discoveries of art-historical and archaeological studies.

A Conclusion in the Form of a Legend

In his *Commentary* on the *Commedia*, Iacomo della Lana reports a legend that constitutes an element of complex tradition of Trajan's justice (Centanni 2022a). The source relates that in Rome, at the time of Pope Gregory the Great, the head of a deceased person was found in some excavations. Despite the time that had passed after the burial, the head had the peculiarity of having "la lingua così rigida, carnosa e fresca, come fosse pure in quella ora seppellita" – "a tongue so rigid, fleshy and fresh, as if it had just been buried" (Author's translation). To general astonishment, the tongue was brought to Gregory the Great, who questioned it; the tongue answered: "Io fui Traiano imperadore di Roma, che signoreggiai nel cotale tempo, dappoi che Cristo discese nella Vergine, e sono all'inferno perch'io non fui con fede" – "I was Trajan the emperor of Rome, who ruled at such a time, since Christ descended in the Virgin, and I am in hell because I did not stand in faith" (Author's translation). Trajan was then baptised by the pontifex and therefore taken to Paradise. But in the light of what we have written, the legend perhaps tells us something more. We can imagine that the rigid fleshy and fresh tongue is but the figurative representation of our vox populi, which together with the legend conveyed the knowledge of the origin of Trajan's bas-reliefs in the Arch of Constantine.

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For Text and Translation of Dante's Divine Comedy*, see* http://www.worldofdante.org.

English abstract

In his illustration for Canto X of *Purgatory*, Sandro Botticelli draws the legendary episode of the Justice of Trajan. In order to illustrate the legend, Botticelli apparently takes inspiration from the bas-relief in the fornix of the Arch of Constantine with the inscription liberatori urbis, a bas-relief that, thanks to modern archaeological studies, is known to come from a monument of Trajan. In the Note here published, we question how Botticelli could have known the Trajanian origin of the bas-relief. The analysis is carried on by surveying all the sources available at the time and the critical studies. At this stage of the research, the conclusion that could be reached is that the identification of the bas-relief as pertaining to a Trajanian monument might have derived from a *vox populi*.

Keywords | Arch of Constantine; Dante; Botticelli; Trajan.