WILLIAM L. MACDONALD

THE PANTHEON

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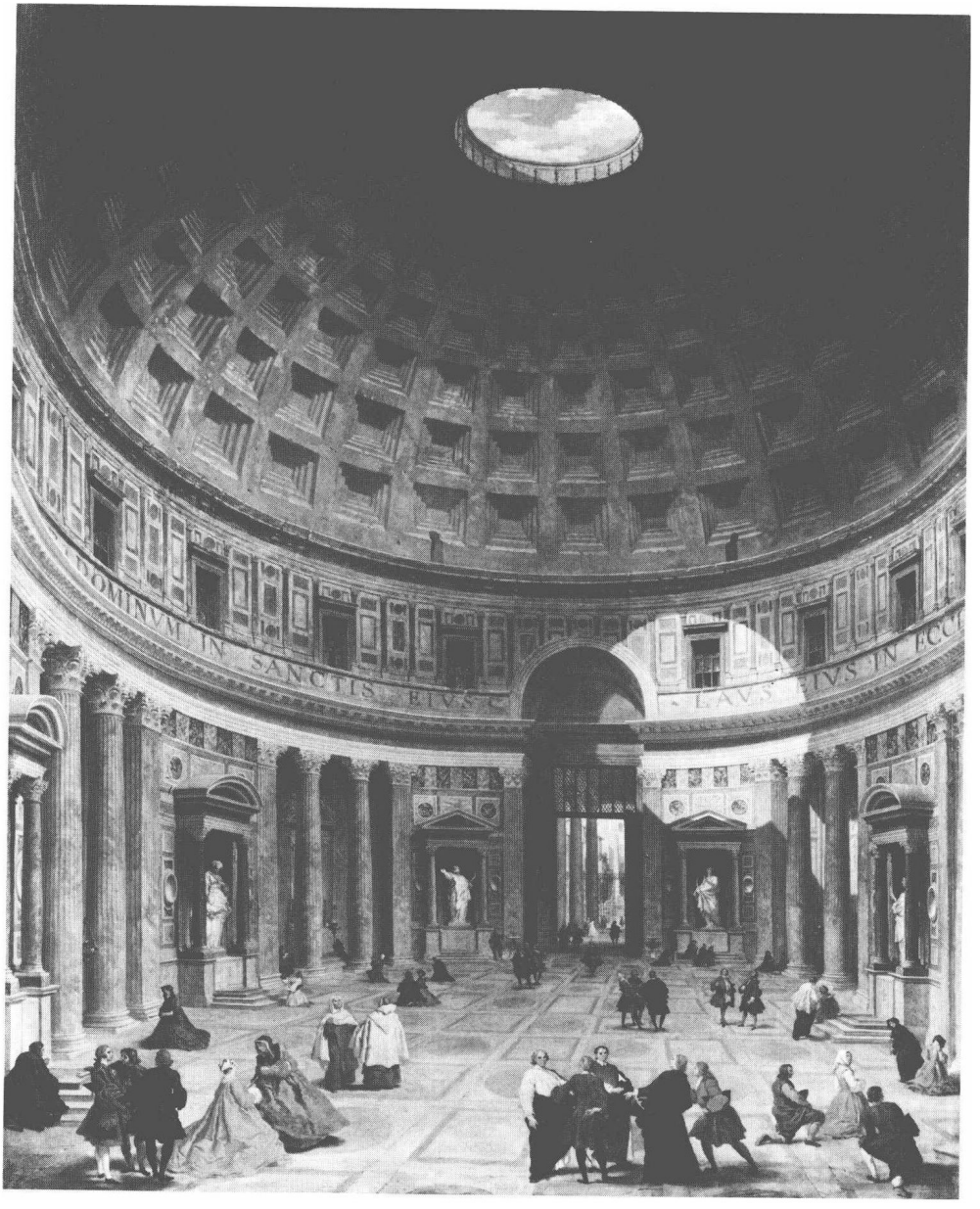
DESIGN, MEANING, AND PROGENY



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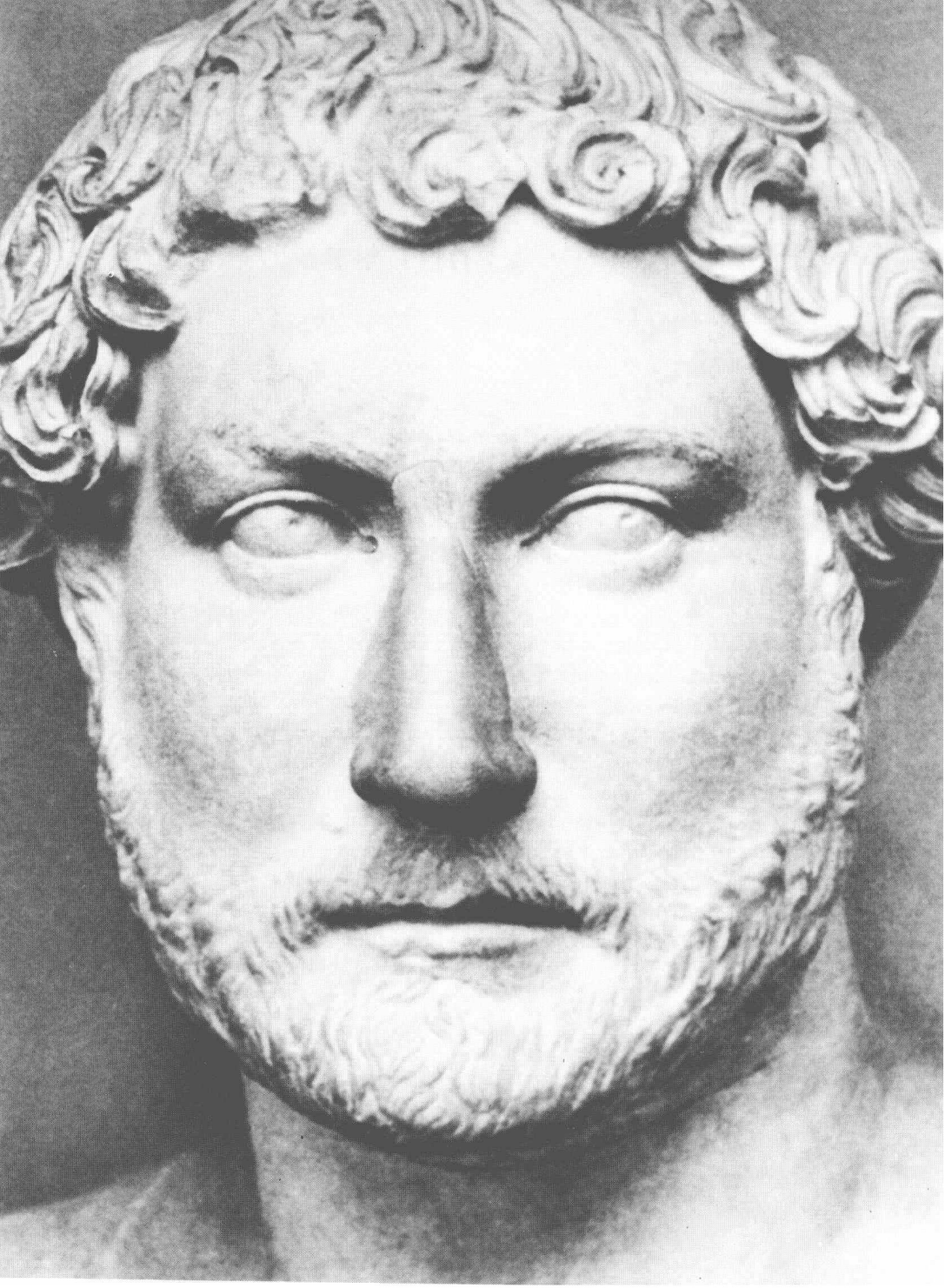
Northampton, Massachusetts *W.L.M.*
September 1973



1. The Emperor Hadrian.

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IN THE TEMPLE OF THE WHOLE WORLD

Hadrian's Pantheon is one of the grand architectural creations of all time: original, utterly bold, many-layered in associations and meaning, the container of a kind of immanent universality. It speaks of an even wider world than that of imperial Rome, and has left its stamp upon architecture more than any other building. Its message, compounded of mystery and fact, of stasis and mutability, of earth and that above, pulses through the architecture of western man; its progeny, in both shape and idea, are all about. The force of its presence and its planetary symbolism still works irresistibly upon the visitor who, passing through the bronze doors into the enclosing rotunda, experiences the awesome reach of its canopied void [Title page].

Did Hadrian and his architects intend all this? Is it possible to be specific and convincing about such things? At present the answer to these questions is both yes and no. The far-reaching influence of the Pantheon upon subsequent architecture is undeniable, and is documented for both design and certain aspects of meaning; scholars and architects have worked a good deal on these problems. As for Hadrian, we can warrant his brilliance and his deep interest in architecture, as well as the audacity and sophistication of his architects. And it can clearly be shown that the conception and design of the building were original. But although there is a fair amount of data, the ultimate meaning of the Pantheon remains, in its complexity, enigmatic. That each of us tends to make of his subjective experience of the building what he will is a measure of the depth and universality of its message.

The pages that follow contain both fact and speculation, in an attempt to describe Hadrian's potent creation and to estimate its meaning and significance. Facts are given first: the evidence for

dating, a brief life-history of the building, and a description of its parts and structure. The principles and historical background of its architectural design are then discussed. There follows a reconnaissance of several levels of meaning and symbolism; and the book finishes with an assessment of the catalytic role of the Pantheon in the history of architecture.

The architect of the Pantheon is unknown. Almost certainly it was not Hadrian himself, though his name has been suggested. A thoroughgoing professional would have had to make the drawings and models, calculate all details of design and construction, and supervise the complicated, exacting work as it progressed. But whoever the architect may have been, Hadrian's building it was and is; he stands in relation to it as Justinian to the Hagia Sophia or Louis XIV to Versailles. Hadrian, the Pantheon, and the cultural texture of the early second century are all inextricably interwoven, and there can be no doubt that the conception of the building and the motivating personality behind its creation were Hadrian's.

He was born in Roman Spain of an established colonial family during the reign of the emperor Vespasian in the year 76.* He served successfully in a variety of government posts, chiefly military, and was given preference by his kinsman the emperor Trajan (reigned 98–117); when Trajan died Hadrian became emperor. He was a deeply cultivated man, at home with all things Greek, a multi-faceted yet apparently restless and rather difficult person, who nevertheless seems to have borne his heavy responsibilities well [1]. There may have been elements of genius in him; at the least he was exceptionally intelligent and accomplished in a number of different activities – administrative and military matters, of course, but also poetry, painting, and architecture. If an ancient view of his nature is reliable, it is no wonder that his contemporaries failed to warm to him:

> He was, in the same person, austere and genial, dignified and playful, dilatory and quick to act, niggardly and generous, deceitful and straightforward, cruel and merciful, and always in all things changeable (*et semper in omnibus varius*).

An aspect of his apparent willfulness was the omission of his name from some of the imperial inscriptions put up on public buildings erected or renovated round the Empire during his reign (117–38), a most un-emperorlike thing to do. Where the Pantheon stands there had been an earlier, rectangular sanctuary of the same dedication,

*The designation 'A.D.' is not used here, though 'B.C.' is.

built by Augustus' great minister Agrippa and dedicated about 25 B.C. That building, twice burned before Hadrian's accession, was entirely replaced by him with the present structure. Yet he restored Agrippa's original inscription on his new building: M·AGRIPPA·L·F·COS·TERTIVM·FECIT – Marcus Agrippa the son of Lucius, three times consul, built this [2]. Considerable confusion has resulted from this inscription. Even now, the Pantheon is not infrequently said to have been built in the time of Augustus Caesar – a date wide of the mark by a century and a half – because of the inscription in bold bronze letters (they are modern, but faithfully reproduce Hadrian's) that spreads across the entablature of the great porch.

The correct date is the first half of Hadrian's reign. The building was not begun before 117, and was probably dedicated about 126–8. During the second century, Roman brickmakers methodically stamped a proportion of their large, tile-shaped bricks [3] with the names of their brickyards and of the consuls currently in office, or with similarly datable information. Some of the bricks in every consignment were pressed with wooden stamps before firing, perhaps for purposes of inventory or taxation. It was done when the clay was still comparatively wet and soft, and in this fashion a lot of information was recorded in abbreviated Latin. In our own time epigraphers, specialists in inscriptions, have carefully studied very large numbers of these stamps, which can be seen in the actual buildings, in fallen structures, during modern restoration and repair, and the like. As we know the dates the annual consuls were in office, we can date bricks bearing consuls' names. Frequently dates can also be obtained from other information yielded by stamps – the names of master potters, of brickyards, or the shape and design of the stamp itself – because of the accumulation of interrelated data in this discipline. As a result, the work of architectural historians and archaeologists in dating imperial buildings is sometimes much simplified. Brick-stamps establish a *terminus post quem*, since the building in whose structure they are found could not have been built before the earliest dates recorded on them. And through the knowledge of Roman imperial building practices that has gradually been accumulated, it is often possible to estimate within fairly narrow limits the time between manufacture and use. In the body of the Pantheon there is a preponderance of brick-stamps of the early 120s, and it is upon this fact, more than any other, that the dating of the building is based.

But there is other useful information. Analysis of style and architectural design, in the story of the evolution of Roman architecture, is crucial, and it will be made in a later chapter. But it should be said

here that the conception, scale, and technology of the Pantheon [4] can be shown to have been the product of their time, datable steps in that evolution. It is also significant that Hadrian, after an absence on a tour of inspection of the provinces that had lasted several years, was in or near Rome in 125–8; perhaps the Pantheon was dedicated toward the end of that period. Hadrian's own chief architectural creation, the huge Temple of Venus and Rome [5], was begun after the Pantheon, in 121, and not finished until 136 or 137.

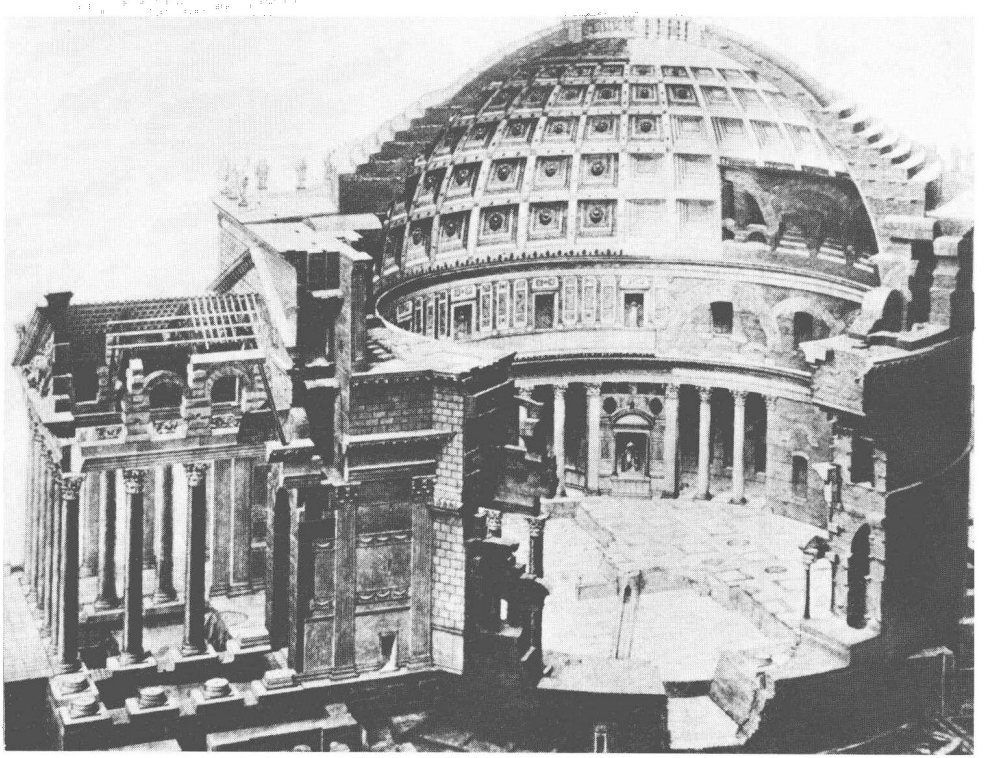
A final word about dating. There are those who have held that the columned, temple-like porch is related to the domed rotunda in such an inept way that the two parts must differ in date [6 and 7]. The porch may be Agrippa's, it has been said, for after all the inscription clearly says so. The argument continues that Hadrian came along and gracelessly attached his new rotunda to the earlier porch [8]. Sometimes this supposed inelegance is adduced as evidence of Hadrian's own amateurishness in architecture, that is, it has been claimed that he designed the whole building, but because he was an amateur he could not adjust the two parts satisfactorily – a strange kind of argument, that gives him great talent and then takes it away. We will see that in this marriage of temple front and domed rotunda an entirely new idea was being tried, and because of this some elements of design are not as finished in their visual and decorative effects as they might otherwise be. Also, there were sound reasons for regarding the juncture of the major parts as a relatively insignificant aspect of the whole design. All these matters will be discussed more fully in the chapter on architectural design. It need only be said that the temple-front porch, the domed rotunda, and the blocky form interposed between them are beyond any doubt all of Hadrianic date [9].

Apart from its actual construction, the most important fact about the physical existence of the Pantheon is that about the year 609, in the depths of the Dark Ages, the emperor in Constantinople gave permission for Pope Boniface IV to consecrate it as a church, Sancta Maria ad Martyres, 'after the pagan filth was removed'. Rome by then had shrunk to little more than a village, but this renewal of a pagan temple as a Christian church, highly significant as an act of care by the impoverished Romans for the monumental relics of their momentous past, went a long way toward insuring the Pantheon's survival. Its conversion into a church placed it under whatever program of maintenance the papal town could provide. However crude this work may from time to time have been, the minimum necessary was done. And if Byzantine emperors and popes themselves now and then removed its bronze and gilded fittings, the excellence of its

be acquired in proper sequence and in the right relation to the other virtues. This emphasis on proper order and the weaving of subtle distinctions points towards what is perhaps the most significant distinction between the Cistercian and Victorine schools in the twelfth century. While the Cistercians opposed the introduction of dialectic into sacred science and shunned the developments of the schools, the Victorines from their earliest days strove to integrate the pursuit of the ascetic, contemplative life with rigorous intellectual inquiry.[14]

There are many similarities between the *VMO* and the mystical writings of Richard of St. Victor. Both authors sought to instruct others on the contemplative life and both emphasise the duty of the mystic to do so. Both highly esteemed the ministry of preaching, and for both preaching was not a work of discipline but the fruit of contemplation. Jacques saw himself as Marie's preacher, sent by God because she, a great contemplative, could not exercise this precious gift. He prayed for her, ministered the Word and directed her steps. But rapt in ecstasy, Marie turned from a disciple into a master; she "belched forth" wondrous readings and read from the book of life.[15] Both Richard and Jacques taught by means of exempla. Richard's use of the exemplum arose from his belief that human experience alone leads to the highest knowledge of God, for it is through experience in relationship with God that the soul comes to know God.[16] This intimate relationship with God is mirrored in charity towards others[17] which, in turn, provides the basis of a spirituality in which as Ewart Cousins has said, "deep friendship and intimate human love provide the matrix of spiritual development."[18]

These general similarities between Richard's mystical writings and the *VMO* suggest that his influence upon Jacques de Vitry was strong, but a closer comparison of the structure and teachings of Richard and the life of Marie lead one to believe that the VIVIO constitutes an attempt on the part of Jacques to popularise Richard's teachings.



4. The Pantheon, analytical drawing.

5. The Temple of Venus and Rome, Rome.