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Guidoboni E., Comastri A. e Traina G., *Catalogue of ancient earthquakes in the Mediterranean area up to the 10th century*. Bologna 1994

⟨ 257 ⟩ **29 April 801 c.8 p.m. ●Rome, Spoletium ▷landslides<**

sources 1 *Einhardi Ann.* 114; *Lib. Pont.* 2.9-10

sources 2 *Ann. Blandin.* 23; *Ann. Iuvav.* 736; *Ann. Fuld.* 352; *Ann. Til.* 223; *Ann. Mett.* 32; *Ann. Ratisp.* 582; *Ann. Regni Franc.* 114; *Annalista Saxo* 564; Bernold. *Chron.* 419; Petrus Bibl. *Hist. Franc.* 417; Herimann. *Augiens. Chron.* 101; Ptol. *Lucens. Hist. Eccl.* 989; Regino Prum. *Chron.* 563

literature de Rossi G.B. (1874); de Rossi M.S. (1874); Lanciani (1918); Valentini and Zucchetti (1942); Guerrieri (1951); Krautheimer *et al.* (1971); Ferrari and Marmo (1985); Molin and Guidoboni (1989); Marmo (1989 b); Budriesi (1989)

catalogues Bonito (1691); Abbati (1703); von Hoff (1840); Perrey (1848); Mallet (1853); Capocci (1861); Mercalli (1883); Baratta (1892, 1899, 1901); Galli (1906); Grumel (1958); Carrozzo *et al.* (1973); Guidoboni (1989); Alexandre (1990)

The *Annales* traditionally attributed to Einhard were probably written not long after the events they record. Having first referred in general terms to the reorganisation of public, private and ecclesiastical administration in Rome and throughout Italy carried out by Charlemagne during the winter after his coronation, they then go on to record that on 25 April 801, the emperor left Rome for Spoletium (now Spoleto). The text then reads: “[The emperor] arrived in Spoletium. While he was there, on the day before the Calends of May [30 April] at the second hour of the night, a very severe earthquake occurred, which violently shook the whole of Italy. As a result, a large part of the roof of the church of San Paolo Apostolo collapsed with its beams, and in some places towns and mountains collapsed”.

[Imperator] Spoletium venit.

*Ibi dum esset, ii. Kal. Mai. hora noctis secunda terrae motus maximus factus est, quo*

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*tota Italia graviter concussa est. Quo motu tectum basilicae beati Pauli apostoli magna ex parte cum suis trabibus decedit et in quibusdam locis urbes montes ruerunt.*

The life of Pope Leo III (795-816) in the *Liber pontificalis* concentrates on the contributions of the Pope to the restoration of San Paolo in the Via Ostiense, thereby throwing further light on the extent of the earthquake damage: "In the ninth indiction, because of the weight of our sins, an earthquake suddenly occurred on the day before the Calends of May [30 April], and the church of San Paolo Apostolo was shaken by an earthquake, and its roofs entirely collapsed. When the great and illustrious Pope saw this, he was much troubled, and began to lament over the silverware and other items which were broken and destroyed inside. But with the approval and protection of the Lord, the Pope made a concerted effort to restore the church to its former state, and he devoted much energy to restoring and improving its appearance with marble decoration; for he decorated both the presbytery and the rest of the church with marble, and renewed its porticoes. And at the same time he restored all its roofs and offered three gold images, namely of our Saviour Jesus Christ and of the Apostles Peter and Paul, and he placed another image of the Saviour, made of silver and decorated with gold, over the entrance doors, at a cost of sixty *librae*. And he made the church windows extremely beautiful with metal and plaster decoration".

*Nona vero indictione, peccatis nostris imminetibus, subito terre motus factus pridie kl. mai., ecclesia beati Pauli apostoli ab ipso terre motu concussa, omnia sarta tecta ruerunt. Qui conspiciens magnus et praeclarus pontifex in magna evenit tribulatione; lamentare caepit tam pro argento quamque pro ceteris speciebus quibus ibidem demolitae et confractae sunt. Sed Domino annuente et beatorum apostolorum principem protegente prelatus pontifex ex totis nisibus suis certamen ponens, instar sicut ex antiquitus existebat, ampla et maxima fortitudine ponens, in meliorem deduxit statum et in meliorem speciem ea marmoribus decoravit, tam presbiterio quamque tota aecclisia marmoravit et eius portica renovavit. Simulque et in navem quae est super altare sarta tecta omnia noviter restauravit, quatinus et tres imagines aureas ibidem offeruit, scilicet Salvatoris domini nostri Iesu Christi, beatorum principum apostolorum Petri et Pauli, seu aliam imaginem argenteam Salvatoris deauratam super postes in introitu posuit, pens. lib. LX, sed et omne argentum ibidem quod conquassatum inerat noviter restauravit. Necnon et fenestras ipsius aecclisiae mire pulcritudinis ex metallo gypsi-no decoravit.*

It is clear from the above that it was not just the church roof which was damaged, for the external porticoes were apparently also repaired, and perhaps the floor (Lanciani 1918, p.18). It may also be important to remember that during the reign of Pope Gregory III (731-741), many of the beams in San Paolo had been renewed, as had the roof, from the altar to the main doors (*Lib. Pont.* I, p.420): "he renewed five beams in the church of San Paolo, and repaired and restored the whole roof of the church from the altar arch to the main doors".

*In ecclesia beati Pauli mutavit trabes num. v atque totum eiusdem basilicae tectum ab arco altaris et usque ad regias recursit ac restauravit.*

Further work on the church had been carried out by Hadrian I (772-795) and Pope Leo III himself before the earthquake, but this had been almost entirely for decorative purposes (*Lib. Pont.* I, p.499, II, p.2). When the earthquake occurred, therefore, the building must have been in a good state of preservation.

The church of Santa Petronilla in the Via Ardeatina (well known as the church where St.Nereus and St.Achilleus were buried) may have collapsed as a result of this earthquake. Judging from a study made by the seismologist M.S. de Rossi (1874), it seems that the church collapsed all at once. The columns, moreover, were found lying almost



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parallel, as one can see from the excavation photographs (in Krautheimer *et al.* 1971, p.130). At the time of the earthquake, the church of Santa Petronilla must already have been abandoned for some time. Under Pope Paul I (757-767), in fact, the remains of St.Petronilla had been removed from the church to the Vatican and, since the *Liber pontificalis* has nothing to say on the matter, one can only surmise that perhaps the remains of St.Nereus and St.Achilleus were also transferred, before the end of the 8th century, from the cemetery church to the church in the city dedicated to them, which stood near the Antonine Baths (see Guerrieri 1951, pp.43-4).

This theory is supported by the fact that when the cemetery church collapsed, it had already been officially closed; for the excavations show that "the main door of the church was found closed, there were no liturgical furnishings inside, nor were there any seats round the apse, and there was no altar, no throne and no ambons; and the doorway at the end of the north wall had been filled in with masonry" (Guerrieri 1951, p.44; and he refers to G.B. de Rossi 1874, p.18). Further confirmation of this theory lies in the fact that none of the sources (most importantly the *Liber pontificalis*) has anything to say about the church itself. The latest references to the church are in fact to be found in the *Itinerarium Einsidlense* and in the collection of inscriptions contained in a single codex in the monastery at Einsiedeln and dating to the end of the 8th century (Valentini and Zucchetti 1942, II, pp.156 and 162; the church is mentioned on pp.172 and 200).

The two sources which record the earthquake are independent of each other and, thanks to the fact that they use different dating systems, confirm each other: for the year 801 coincides with the ninth indiction mentioned in the *Liber pontificalis*. While both give the date as 30 April, we have to take into account another factor, if we want to narrow down the time when the earthquake started. Einhard claims that it started at the second hour of the night of 30 April, and in doing so he is clearly adopting the Roman system of counting the hours (Ferrari and Marmo 1985, pp.692-6). This corresponds to about 8 p.m. on the previous day, local time. For in the Roman convention, the first hour of the night began at sunset, and so what were for the Romans the first hours of the night of 30 April are for us the last hours of 29 April.

Einhard's words "in some places towns and mountains collapsed" suggests that the greatest damage occurred in places other than Rome and Spoleto, but we cannot narrow this down, for lack of information about other parts of central Italy. Einhard goes on to record another earthquake, on the Rhine, which damaged places in both Germany and France. This latter earthquake obviously has nothing to do with the one at Rome and Spoleto. The fact that only Rome and Spoleto are mentioned in the sources is largely due to their being the seat of the chief political and ecclesiastical authorities. This is another earthquake which acquired a considerable reputation in the medieval historiographical tradition, as is clear from the numerous works which mention it down the centuries.

The 16th century Italian historiographical tradition records an earthquake in 896, the information being based on a collapse reported in the *Liber pontificalis* (II, p.229) in the church of San Giovanni, during the papacy of Stephen VI (896-897). In actual fact, the collapse was the result of progressive deterioration in the fabric of the building, as the source clearly indicates (see Molin and Guidoboni 1989, pp.194-202 for a technical consideration confined to the city of Rome, and Marmo 1989 b, pp.302-4 for the earthquake as treated in the sources).