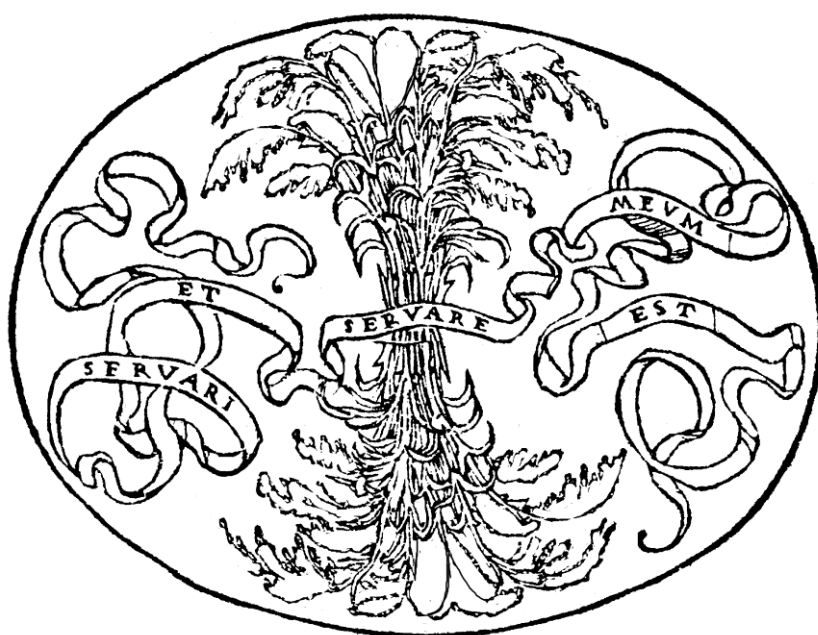


STUDI
DI
MEMOFONTE

Rivista on-line semestrale

36/2026



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ISSN 2038-0488

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**ANGELO BREVENTANO: ARTIST, ANTIQUARIAN, NUMISMATIST,
EXPLORER OF THE CATACOMBS**

One of the most recent acquisitions of the historiographical study of Christian archaeology is undoubtedly the valorisation of figures considered secondary, but who instead played a role in the world in which the most famous scholars moved. This new focus has helped to identify groups of often unknown people who actually contributed to the development of research, particularly in the field of 'archaeological' investigations of the catacombs of Rome.

Some of them are known at least by name because they are mentioned in Antonio Bosio's *Roma Sotterranea*, published in 1632 after a complicated editorial process¹ and universally recognised as the first book dedicated to the historical and archaeological description of the Christian catacombs of Rome. Among them is Angelo Breventano, a man with extremely eclectic occupations who unfortunately left few documentary traces and who to this day remains obscure even if he was a very interesting figure².

The first known mention of Breventano comes from Principio Fabrizi da Teramo, who, while collecting iconography of dragons for his *Delle allusioni, imprese, et emblemi sopra la vita, opere, et attioni di Gregorio XIII*, describes a gem about which (as we shall see) he writes «Vidi in Romae apud Angelum Breventanum Papiensem antiquitatis studiosissimum, ac historiarum naturalium eruditissimum et singularem»³. Fabrizi's testimony also outlines Breventano's profile as a man of great erudition and a prominent antiquarian. The work was published in 1588, allowing us to date Breventano's presence in Rome to a period prior to that year⁴. His presence in Rome at the end of the sixteenth century is confirmed by an archaeological source: a signature he left in a cubicle in the catacombs of Via Anapo dated 1591⁵. This is the first of a long series of signatures he left in the catacombs of Rome during that period. In around 1593, he is mentioned in Ulisse Aldrovandi's correspondence, who cites his origin and profession: «sta in Roma Messer Angelo Breventano da Pavia depintore»⁶. In 1594, the Flemish scholar Macarius informed the geographer Abraham Ortelius that «nondum comparavit quod sciam, munus à tè Breventano, mihique missum»⁷, thus identifying a friendship between the three and, indirectly, Breventano's presence in Rome. The same author, through the same medium, announced to Ortelius on 25 October 1597 that «Breventano noster suo illo languore tandem confectus obiit (quod dolendum) nuperrime»⁸, giving a definite year of death and also information about a long illness. Indeed, Macarius, pseudonym of Jean L'Heureux, often mentions Breventano in his texts: they were evidently closely connected, so much so that he defined him, in his work *Hagioghypta* of around 1600 «mihi olim familiari»⁹.

Given his friendship with Macarius and Ortelius and delving deeper into the sources of Breventano's life, one perceives his remarkable diversity of interests but above all a strong connection with important circles of Roman antiquarians of the highest level. At the same time, he was in contact with all the leading experts on the Christian catacombs of Rome.

According to sources, his work in the Christian cemeteries of Rome dates back to at least 1591-1592. The chronological ends are derived from the aforementioned signature in the

¹ CECALUPO 2020.

² HERKLOTZ 2007; ROSSI 2012; CECALUPO 2020 touched the figure of Breventano in the past without offering a clear panorama on his work.

³ FABRIZI 1588, p. 315.

⁴ There is no information about Breventano in Roman parish books: VODRET 2011.

⁵ DECKERS-MIETKE-WEILAND 1991, I, p. 5.

⁶ Bologna, University Library, Fondo Aldrovandi, ms 36, t. XIX, f. 242v.

⁷ ABRAHAM ORTELII 1887, n. 247, 14.5.1594.

⁸ Ivi, n. 310.

⁹ MACARIUS 1856, p. 72.

catacombs and the death of Philips van Winghe, a Flemish antiquarian famous for visiting and recording the catacombs of Rome in the late sixteenth century¹⁰. Breventano actually appears as van Winghe's companion in the production of the plans of the catacombs in Bosio's *Roma Sotterranea*. In the caption accompanying the plan of the cemetery of Priscilla on the Via Salaria, Bosio states that it was produced some time earlier «dal Vinghio, e dal Breventano»¹¹ (Fig. 1). Bosio provides further details on this attribution in the manuscript version of the work, when, again referring to Priscilla's plan, he wrote: «acciò si possa conoscere il sito loro, porremo prima qui di sotto una pianta di questo Cemiterio fatta da Filippo Vinghio, et Angelo Breventano Persone curiose, con sommo studio nel principio, che fù questo Cemiterio scoperto»¹². Breventano, therefore, collaborated assiduously with the man who was the first to undertake an extensive iconographic recording of the catacombs of Rome. He explored the underground cemeteries in their entirety, recorded them and became an important expert on them.

His underground activities, however, also probably touched the antiques market. The name Angelo Breventano appears in two places in the fascinating inventory of the possessions of Fulvio Orsini, a famous numismatist, top-class collector and librarian to the Farnese family, dated 21 January 1600¹³:

601) Nel 7.º tiratore sono 37 medaglie picciole di bronzo da Costantino in giù tutte col segno del Christianesimo, delle quali dodici furono pagate scudi 25 a M. Angelo Breventano, nelle quali sono li due Costantini principali col segno che li apparse, tutte l'una per l'altra costano S. 50 [...] 605) In un altro scattolino simile pur tondo è la medaglia con la testa di S. Pietro et di S. Paolo di bronzo, comprata da Ms. Angelo Breventano S. 15¹⁴.

This document may suggest that Breventano, during his underground visits, did not limit himself to observing and recording monuments, but also removed antiquities to sell to collectors, according to a widespread and common practice which was entirely accepted, at least until the first legal measures for protection were issued by the popes¹⁵, to the maximum benefit of scholars and collectors.

This also included his own collection, which arose both from his direct contact with ancient monuments and from his assiduous frequenting of Roman antiquarian circles. Breventano's private collection of antiquities is perhaps the best-known aspect of his life: it consisted of epigraphs, coins and other small antiquities, as evidenced by multiple sources. In the manuscript of the Vatican Apostolic Library Vat. lat. 10545, containing notes and copies of Roman antiquities by van Winghe prior to 1592, there is mention of a Christian epigraph¹⁶, probably from the cemetery of Priscilla¹⁷, seen by the author «Apud Angelum Breventanum»¹⁸ (Fig. 2). Macarius, when referring to an inscription of Rutilia Priscilla¹⁹, also notes that «erat apud Angelum Breventanum»²⁰. The presence of ancient coins is attested in various passages from Baronio's *Annales*²¹, in which he states he saw some coins bearing the effigy of Constantine

¹⁰ SCHUDEDEBOOM 1996.

¹¹ BOSIO 1632, p. 591F.

¹² Rome, Vallicelliana Library, G31, f. 654r. See CECALUPO 2024.

¹³ DE NOHLAC 1884, pp. 209-210

¹⁴ Rome, Angelica Library, C con capanna 2/11, n. 62.

¹⁵ GHILARDI 2005.

¹⁶ ICVR I, 3728

¹⁷ DE ROSSI 1886, p. 128.

¹⁸ Vatican Apostolic Library (hereafter BAV), Vat. lat. 10545, f. 247r.

¹⁹ CIL VI, 25678.

²⁰ MACARIUS 1856, p. 63. Regarding other inscriptions held by Breventano (CIL VI, 23264 and CIL VI, 15038) see *infra* note 36.

²¹ BARONIO 1592, pp. 70-71; GARRUCCI 1866, p. 81. And then BARONIO 1592, pp. 313, 335, 565, 575.

in Rome, located «apud Angelum Breventanum Papiensem» (among them, Fig. 3). Principio Fabrizi, as already mentioned, describes a very unusual figurative gem in 1588²²:

Vidi in Romae apud Angelum Breventanum Papiensem antiquitatis studiosissimum, ac historiarum naturalium eruditissimum et singularem, anularem lapillum, quam iaspidem appellant, in quo Mercurius capite galli, et serpentinis pedibus, cuius dextera flagellum, sinistra clipeum tenebat, erant incisus²³.

Fabrizi also provides an engraving of the piece described (Fig. 4).

This profile of Breventano as a scholar is confirmed by the works he wrote and published, which are now almost completely unknown. Two references appear in Macarius. First, he comments on an iconography of Constantine on a quadriga on a coin «repertus non a multis annis, editus est ab Angelo Breventano mihi olim familiari, in serie familiae Constantini Magni»²⁴. He then refers to a coin of Constantine with the Christogram on the helmet (probably the same one published by Baronio) that «Angelus Breventanus edidit». Macarius could certainly be referring to unknown works, but there are exact matches with the 1590 text (reprinted in 1593) *Series Imperatorum a Claudio Gotthico usque ad Fl. Cl. Julianum. In qua eorum genealogiae et praecipue Constantini Max. continentur*²⁵, an imperial family tree based on coins, a copy of which is preserved in Rome in the Angelica Library²⁶. It is a work printed on a single sheet, with a series of numismatic images of emperors forming the imperial series leading up to Claudius Gothicus with their genealogies (Fig. 5). At the bottom of the sheet is a dedication to Sixtus V, who was seen by Breventano as a new Constantine due to his recent works of raising obelisks with strong symbolism of exaltation of the Christian cross on monuments of pagan flavour:

Sanctissimo D.N. Sixto V Pont. Opt. Max.

Cum pridie in animo haberem, Beatissime Pater, aliquid operae ponere in eorum Imperatorum stirpe illustranda, qui declinante imperio fuere, cogitans quantum lucis haec res esset allatura (?) cum sacris historicis tum profanis, qui haec obscure admodum scriptis mandarunt. Cumque horum Imperatorum, quotidie monumentum aliquod colligerem, et iam manum operi admove coepissem, ecce mihi occurrunt (divinum sane donum) tres nummi aerei Constantini Max. genuini vereque antique; quorum duos nemini hactenus (quod sciam) videre contigit. Ex his alter expresse labarum habet signo xp salutiferi nominis Christi insignitum. De hoc autem signo, quod iussit Constantinus in vexillo delineari, ita scribit Eusebius Cesariensis qui quidem Imperatori familiaris fuit. Erat corona affixa, lapidibus praetiosis, et auro polite circumtexta. In ea salutaris appellationis salvatoris nota, inscripta, duobus solum expressa elementis, id est duabus primis litteris nominis Christi erat enim littera. Primis o medio litera X curiose et subtiliter inserta quae totum Christi nomen perspicue significarunt quas litteras (sub dit Eusebius) deinceps semper Imperator in galea gestare consuevit. Quod in altero nummo quilibet aspiciendum magna cum voluptate damus. Tertius vero habet Constantinum quadriga coelum, ascendentem, coelestis illius manus auxilio, quam (ut ego opinor) sibi visam, eiusque contactu, a le[lacuna]foeditate mundatum, confessus dicitur. Quibus è nummis, certissimis antiquitatis monumentis, quid non splendoris, quid non fidei astruitur historiae quam evidenter eorum calumnia profligatur, qui aliquando de Constantini rebus et fide fuerunt ausi dubitare quos com penes me habere thesauri instar, non potui tamen non eos hac Imperarorum serie, in qua integerrima stirps Constantini visitur, spectandos proponere. Haec tibi, Beatissime pater dedico, cum multis de causis, tum praesertim quod idem tibi est cum Constantino studium signi gloriosae crucis extollendi. Ut enim ille in labaro quod prius profanum erat, ita tu vastissimis illis rupium apicibus crucem irradiare, et illustribus locis unde quaque

²² FABRIZI 1588, p. 315.

²³ Rome, Angelica Library, C con capanna 2/11, n. 62.

²⁴ MACARIUS 1856, p. 73.

²⁵ According to RUFFINI 2005, p. 115, this text also influenced some later works by Fabrizio.

²⁶ Rome, Angelica Library, C con capanna 2/11, n. 62.

christianorum oculos perstringere iussisti. Stupendos obeliscos inquam, vanis Diis impio ritu olim sacratos, tot annorum spatio terrae visceribus abditos, immensis absumentibus (sic) ad gestandam crucem Christi erectos. Cuius Sanctum nomen nunc in Constantino detegitur, quod tibi coelum reservasse crediderim; ut te [lacuna]ris agente, nihil quod ad nominis eius exaltationem spectat, occultum remaneret. Ad tuae igitur Sanctitatis pedes procumbens obixe (?) summissequerogro ut hoc munus benigno animo suscipias. Deus Opt. Max. Sanctitatem tuam diu feliciterque conservet. Superiorem permissu.

Romae 1590 Idibus Martii

Sanctitatis tuae humillimus servus Angelus Breventanus²⁷.

The three coins at the top of the sheet, presented as authentic and never before published, are explicitly identified as coming from his collection («me habere thesauri instar»), as are probably all the other coins, treated by Breventano as «certissimis antiquitatis monumentis», beyond their splendour and their testimony to the Christian faith.

De Langobardorum Origine, de Regibus, compendiosa narratio edita ab Angelo Breventano Papiensi. Et denuo in lucem edita a Petro Stephanonio Vicentino dates back to 1593. It is a commented list with short biographies of the Lombard kings based on available historical and numismatic sources, divided into Lombard kings *extra Italiam* and Lombard kings in Italy. The text was printed by Pietro Stefanoni of Vicenza, a famous printer close to Orsini and Roman antiquarian circles between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries²⁸. This text was probably accompanied by a genealogical table of *Reges Langobardi* engraved by Nicolaus van Aelst in 1593, which is mentioned in the British Museum's catalogue of printed works²⁹.

These are therefore works of historical research that start from numismatics, which is clearly Breventano's main interest, and which fits perfectly into the field of historical studies on numismatics and early Medieval Italy. A field in which Breventano was expert, thanks to his direct knowledge of both the archaeological landscape and that of erudite antiquarians. In this context, it is worth noting that, at that time, scholarship on the post-classical period had been revolutionised to some extent by the work of Carlo Sigonio, particularly with regard to the themes of Lombard kingship. In particular, in his 1574 volume, Sigonio succeeded in providing the critical and methodological tools for the systematic study of the sources, promoting an interpretation of the early Italian Middle Ages and the invasion by the barbarian populations as a tragic period, yet nonetheless extremely significant³⁰. Sigonio became an essential reference point for anyone studying the Lombards when he presented them, Franks and the Germans as the founders of the Kingdom of Italy, its institutions and its legal system, moving beyond a view that was extremely focused on Rome and the classical age³¹.

Breventano combined his vocation as antiquarian with that of a first-hand expert on the Christian sites of Rome. While his frequent visits to the catacombs certainly encouraged a certain type of collecting and trading in antiquities, what he learned technically in the production of maps of the catacombs alongside Philips van Winghe became a stimulus for artistic work applied to cartography.

In the map of Lazio produced in 1595 by the geographer Abraham Ortelius³², the copper engraving of Mount Circeo (Fig. 6) appearing in a box at the bottom left, has the caption: «Mons Circaei ad vivum delineatus ab Angelo Breventano». This is an illustrative drawing of Mount Circeo made 'live' by Breventano specifically for Ortelius' map of Lazio (Fig. 7). There are two

²⁷ Rome, Angelica Library, C con capanna 2/11, n. 62.

²⁸ ROSSI 2012. A digitised copy of a manuscript version of this work is preserved in a historical miscellany in Libraries of the University of Pennsylvania, Ms Lea 362, ff. 555-579.

²⁹ BRITISH MUSEUM 1884, s.v. Breventano (Angelo).

³⁰ SIGONIO 1574, pp. *iir-v, 1.

³¹ MCCUAIG 1989; BARTOLUCCI 2026.

³² ORTELIUS 1595.

interesting letters about the creative process behind this map, which dates before 1593. The first was written by van Winghe to Ortelius on 13 July 1592, from Rome, where he reports that he had finally managed to gain access to the ‘galleries’ (probably the gallery of maps in the Vatican) to copy the map of Lazio that Ortelius had been waiting for so long³³. The work was begun by van Winghe, interrupted by his death in September 1592, and continued by his collaborator Breventano. A letter from Breventano to Ortelius, the only one known to date, provides further information on the genesis of the work. It is worth quoting it in its entirety because of its importance in defining Breventano:

Molto Magnifico Signor Abrahamo. Gratissima quanto si può dire mi è stata l’amorevolissima lettera di V. S. in risposta della quale mi dole non poterle dare quella intera satisfatione che io vorrei intorno al dubbio de Romuli, nondimeno gli diro che io tengo per fermo che il NOB. CAES. nella medaglia che pone il Goltzio altro non voglia dire che NOBILIS CAESAR modo di scriuere in que tempi usitatissimo, ma che NV. potesse dire il medesimo che NOBILIS non mi posso credere, atteso che per il piu egli si trova steso cossi NVBIS. il CONS. poi ancor che tall’hor vogli dire CONSVL. per il piu è specialmente nella maniera chegli e posto quivi s’intende per CONSERVATOR, nel qual senso ancor nelle medagiette di Gallieno si trova spessissimo, come per essemplio IOVI. NEPTVNO. MARTI. DIANA. etc. CONS. AVG. Ora in satisfatione di V. S. porro l’inscrizione del dritto di tutte le medaglie di Romulo che io ho vedute. DIVO. ROMVLO. NV. FILIO. DIVO. ROMVLO.NVBIS.CONS. DIVO. ROMVLO.NVBIS.C. La sepoltura poi d’Elpenore nella carta del Circello non so di certo se è d’esso ma è cossi chiamata volgarmente da paesani. V. S. di piu avertisca che nell’ istessa carta dove per errore è scrittorio Martino si ha da scrivere Evola fiume, perche il rio Martino è molto addentro nelle palude Pontine. Altro per ora non mi occorre se non pregarla si degni comandarmi. De Roma alli 9. di Gennaro 1593. Di V. S. sempre per servirla Angelo Breventano³⁴.

In this interesting letter, Breventano first responds to a previous request from Ortelius regarding certain monetary legends, providing examples drawn from his experience as an expert on late antique numismatic finds: for Ortelius, therefore, Breventano is an authority in the field of numismatics. In the second part of the letter, there is an explicit reference to the map of Circeo (Circello), which had evidently already been drawn by Breventano and sent to Ortelio. He first refers to the traditional but dubious location of the tomb of Elpenor, Ulysses’ companion, who in Book X of the *Odyssey* dies and is buried on Eea, the island of Circe. Secondly, he points out an error in the river toponymy of his drawing and offers his services to Ortelius once again, given their deep-rooted friendship.

This letter was previously considered to be the only autograph text by Breventano that has come down to us. However, recent research into Philips van Winghe’s explorations of the catacombs has led to the discovery of a new text, which is presented below. Inside van Winghe’s notebook of notes and drawings of Roman antiquities, preserved in the Royal Library of Brussels³⁵, there are many citations of Angelo Breventano, especially as collector of ancient inscriptions³⁶. In addition to these, was found the following poem:

Sonetto del pittore disperato.

³³ *ABRAHAM ORTELII* 1887, n. 217.

³⁴ *Ivi*, n. 227.

³⁵ SHUDEBOOM 1996.

³⁶ Among others: Bruxelles, Royal Library Albert I, 17872-3, ff. 324 and 361, Breventano is noted as possessor of the epigraphs *CIL VI*, 23264 (today at the National Archaeological Museum in Palermo, inv. 3731) and *CIL VI*, 15038 (of which apparently there are two versions (copies?), one at the British Museum – inv. 1867,0508.69, one at the National Archaeological Museum in Perugia – inv. 1886/265).

Mi vuo del tutto un giorno spittorare
E lasciar tante macchie bozze e schizzi
Disegni coloriti e ghiribizzi
Forme e penelli e'l tanto impastringiare
Né piu vuo nasi e bocche occhi imitare
Né visi far hor belli or neri or vizzi
Ne augel che voli o né pesce che guizzi
E cielo e foco et aria e terra e mare
Lo star tra i stili regole e compassi
Archipendoli e squadre fu mai sempre
Nemico al genio mio non punto folle
Taccio gli ogli, le gomme cole e tempre
Coquigli e pignatte, vasi, et ampolle
Che nel pensarle sol mi truovo lasso
Conviemmi or alto or basso
Schicherar tele, mura legna e carte
Mirate or se per me faccia questa arte.

Angelo Breventano³⁷.

In this ironic text, Breventano perhaps refers to his own experience, presenting himself as an all-round painter and providing information about his artistic work, which is still very vague today. Another noteworthy consideration, albeit limited from a scientific point of view, concerns language and handwriting. Many parts of the Brussels manuscript can be identified as written in Italian and/or in the same handwriting: obviously, no similarity in handwriting can be considered certain, but if this sonnet was written by Breventano, and if we consider that van Winghe usually took his notes in Latin or Flemish, we could go so far as to attribute all the parts in Italian to Breventano. In this way, as a close collaborator of van Winghe, he would have left a corpus of texts (especially copies of epigraphs and ancient texts and descriptions of objects) of considerable importance.

In light of what has been presented in this text, gathering published and unpublished information on Angelo Breventano has served to collect what is known about this interesting scholar, also presenting one of his autographed and unpublished texts. Outlining the profile of this figure certainly contributes to defining the network of scholars, collectors and antiquarians who combined art, archaeology and history and populated the cultural landscape of Rome at the end of the sixteenth century.

³⁷ Bruxelles, Royal Library Albert I, 17872-3, f. 392.



Fig. 1: Map of the catacombs of Priscilla by Philips van Winghe and Angelo Breventano (before 1592) from BOSIO 1632, p. 591F

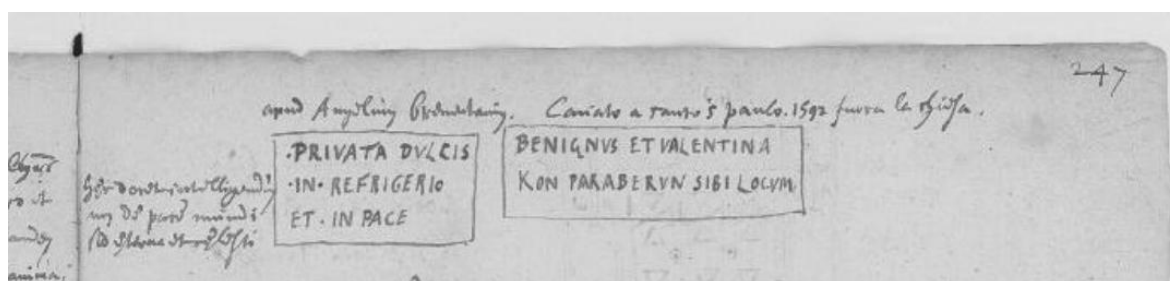


Fig. 2: Christian inscription from the collection of Angelo Breventano (detail from BAV, Vat. lat. 10545, f. 247r. © Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, permesso prot. 2026/1044/S-E998)

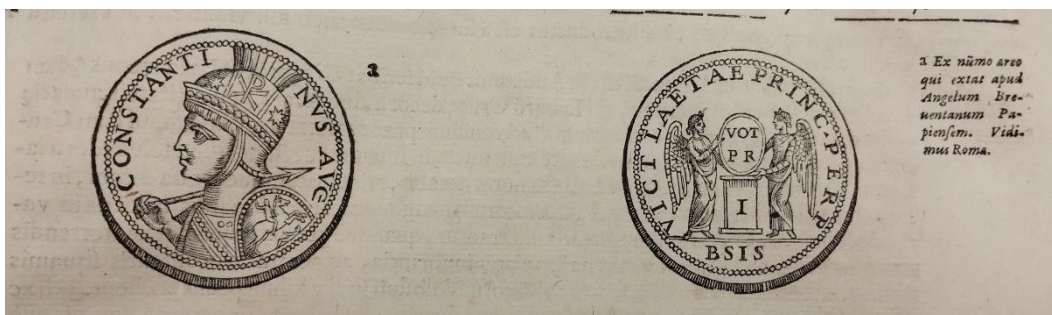


Fig. 3: Coin from the collection of Angelo Breventano from BARONIO 1592, pp. 70-71



Fig. 4: Gem from the collection of Angelo Breventano from FABRIZI 1588, p. 315

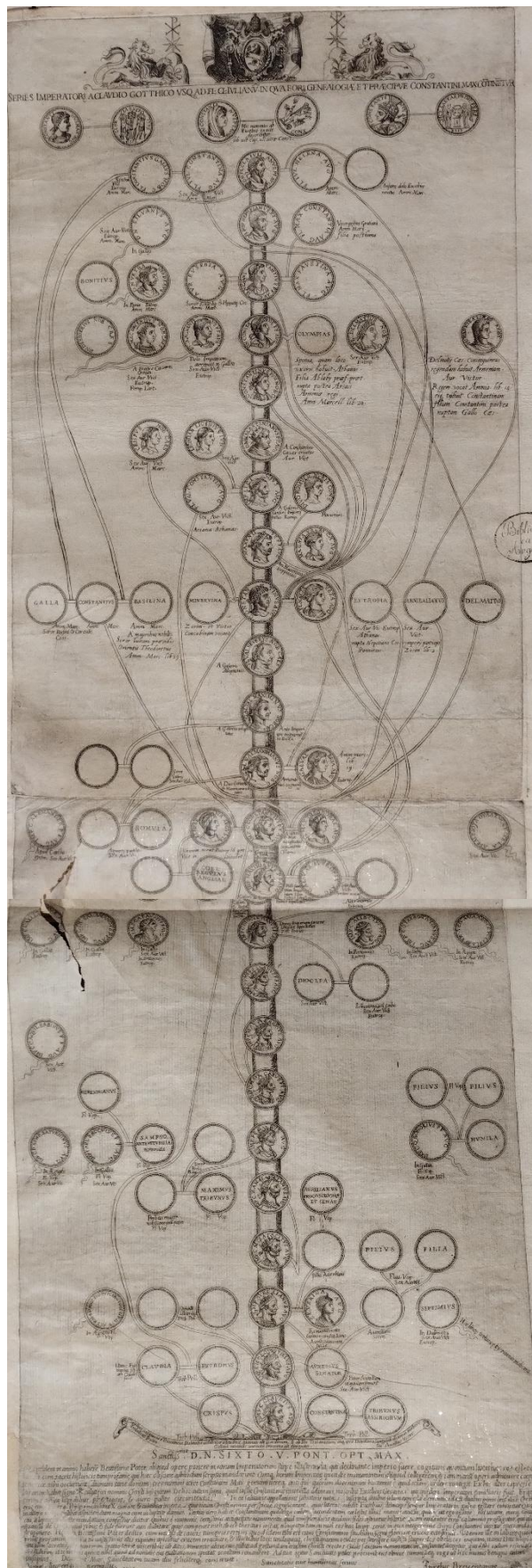


Fig. 5: Angelo Breventano, *Series Imperatorum a Claudio Gotthico* (1590) from the Angelica Library of Rome (C con capanna 2/11, n. 62)

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Fig. 7: Map of Latium region in ORTELIUS 1595

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ABSTRACT

This article brings together archival documents and ancient texts, to outline the figure of Angelo Breventano from Pavia (late sixteenth century) as an artist, antiquarian, numismatist, and explorer of the catacombs. Beyond his professional activities, information about his private collection is also presented. It contributes to defining the network of scholars, collectors and antiquarians who combined art, archaeology and history in the cultural landscape of Rome at the end of the sixteenth century.

Questo articolo raccoglie documenti d'archivio e testi antichi per delineare la figura di Angelo Breventano da Pavia (fine del XVI secolo) come artista, antiquario, numismatico ed esploratore delle catacombe. Oltre alle sue attività professionali, vengono presentate anche informazioni sulla sua collezione privata. Tutto ciò contribuisce a definire la rete di studiosi, collezionisti e antiquari che combinavano arte, archeologia e storia nel panorama culturale della Roma di fine Cinquecento.