



ROMAN LETTERS: DISCOVERIES AND EXHIBITIONS IN THE ETERNAL CITY

(OCTOBER 2020)

This report from the Norwegian Institute in Rome intends to provide scholars, students, and members of the public in Norway with news about recent excavations and exhibitions in Rome, primarily, although not exclusively, relating to the city's ancient history.

There is a long tradition of filing archaeological reports from Rome. Between 1876 and 1913, the magazine *Athenaeum* published the correspondence 'Notes from Rome' of the Italian archaeologist and topographer Rodolfo Lanciani, informing readers outside of Italy about archaeological discoveries in the Eternal City.¹ Lanciani wrote at a time of dramatic urban change, when the fabric of Rome – lately inaugurated as the capital of the newly established Italian state – was being transformed, with the population swelling from 200,000 to over half a million in a matter of decades. Such was the rate of discoveries that Lanciani sometimes filed reports weekly.²

The present enterprise cannot hope to replicate the frequency of Lanciani's reports, rather, it seeks to summarise and make accessible to audiences in Norway what its authors judge to be significant findings and activity. Links are provided to press releases, newspaper articles, and sources which provide additional details and images.

2020 is a strange year to start this newsletter. As the Capital of the first European country to 'lock down' due to the COVID-19 health crisis, Rome has received only a fraction of the millions of visitors who usually flock to the city. While this has presented those living in Rome with the unique opportunity to experience practically empty sites and museums, it has also deprived these places of essential revenue, and planned activities have been either postponed or cancelled. Yet 2020 is also perhaps the most opportune moment to commence such a report. With international travel restricted, recording and disseminating academic news to audiences overseas has never been so important.

¹ Collected and published in Lanciani, R. and Cubberley, A (ed.) *Notes from Rome*, 1988 (London).

² Since 2008, *The Papers of the British School at Rome* have published their own 'Notes from Rome', authored by Robert Coates-Stephens. An annual gazette, it remains the most comprehensive English-language summary of archaeological activity in the city; most recently, Coates-Stephens, R. 'Notes from Rome 2019-2020', *Papers of the British School at Rome* 88, 2020: 343-7.

EXCAVATIONS

THE TOMB OF ROMULUS IN THE FORUM

Excavations have been ongoing for nearly a decade in the Roman Forum in front of the *curia* (senate house) at the site of the Republican-era *comitium* (an open-air assembly area for political activity). Recently, this has involved the removal of the steps constructed at the entrance to the *curia* in the 1930s, when it was ‘restored’ to its ancient appearance and the vestiges of the Church of Sant’Adriano al Foro – to which it had been converted in the 7th century – were demolished.



Figure 1. The Church of Sant’Adriano al Foro before its restoration as the senate house. Excavations have exposed the Roman-era paving level and left the door of the church inaccessible. This photo was taken in 1902, before the construction of a stair, which has now been removed (Photo courtesy of the Van Deman Collection, Photographic Archive, American Academy in Rome).

In February, shortly before all activity ceased, the excavation excited international media attention when Alfonsina Russo, Director of the *Parco archeologico del Colosseo* and responsible for the Forum, announced the discovery in this area of a *subterranean* space or 'chamber'. Contained within are a rectangular 'sarcophagus' carved of local volcanic tuff, measuring 140cm in length, 70cm wide, and 77cm deep, as well as a circular, tuff 'altar' measuring 75cm in diameter, both of which are dated by the excavators to the 6th century BC.³

The sensationalist story circulating in the press was that the tomb of Romulus had been discovered, based on an ancient tradition that this was the place where Rome's eponymous founder was buried in the 8th century BC, as reported by the 1st century BC antiquarian Varro. The two-century discrepancy between the dating for the discovery and the legend is only one of the difficulties with this interpretation.

In all likelihood, Romulus was a fictitious figure and his story a retroactive invention (our earliest unambiguous direct evidence for it comes at the beginning of the 3rd century BC). Real or not, it is apparent that later generations of Romans associated this area with the city's founder, and, therefore, potentially, with these objects too. Yet there is no single, agreed upon foundation legend, and ancient authors themselves disagreed over the manner and place of Romulus' death – this part of the Roman Forum is only one of the possibilities they suggest.⁴

The *comitium* was first excavated by Giacomo Boni in 1899 and led to the much heralded discovery of the Lapis Niger. This is a small patch of black stone paving which is known from literary sources, some of which associate it with either tomb of Romulus or his adoptive father, the shepherd Faustulus (*Schol. On Horace Epodes* 16.13, 14; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 1.87).



Figure 2. The Lapis Niger in 2007, before the current programme of restoration (Photograph: Christopher Siwicki).

³ https://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/02/17/news/roma_scoperto_al_foro_ambiente_ipogeo_con_sarcofago-248802027/

⁴ <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/romulus-romes-legendary-foundations/>

The discovery generated a great deal of scholarly and popular interest at the time, as recorded by Lanciani in his *Notes from Rome* during those years. Found below the black paving was an earlier, partially destroyed cult site comprising an altar of the 4th century BC, a conical column base of the 3rd century BC, and a four-sided *cippus* (stone boundary marker) carrying inscriptions in archaic Latin from at least the mid-6th century BC. Much of the discussion (and controversy) surrounded the apparent reference in the inscription to a king – proof to some that the legend of Rome's regal history had a basis in fact.

The 'chamber' of the new excavations had also been found by Boni in 1899 – making it a rediscovery.⁵ Quite how this rediscovered space relates to the sacred area of the Lapis Niger is not yet apparent. Nor is it clear how the competing claims that Romulus' tomb was associated with both places, which are some twenty metres apart, will be reconciled. Likewise, questions remain as to why the circular stone and rectangular tuff container are respectively identified as an 'altar' and a 'sarcophagus' (140cm seems rather short and Boni originally labeled it a 'box or tub'). Answers will hopefully be provided when the results are published in full.

PAVING IN FRONT OF THE PANTHEON

Just as Rome was preparing to emerge from lockdown at the end of April, a narrow sinkhole opened in the piazza in front of the Pantheon.⁶ Investigations to ensure the stability of the surrounding area extended the trench and revealed a strip of seven ancient paving stones about two and a half meters below the modern ground level.



Figure 3. The Pantheon and Piazza della Rotonda, by Lievin Cruyl, early 1670s. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; 1975.1.578.

⁵ *Notizie degli Scavi Antichità* 1900: 299-300.

⁶<https://www.lastampa.it/roma/2020/04/27/news/roma-voragine-di-fronte-al-panteon-giu-una-quarantina-di-sanpietrini-1.38770406>

The Pantheon, as rebuilt by the emperors Trajan and Hadrian in the early 2nd century AD, was originally fronted by a large, rectangular, open space surrounded by a colonnade, to which the recently revealed paving belongs. The exact size of this forecourt is a matter of dispute; chance discoveries of sections of paving over the last several centuries indicate that it very likely extended beyond the present-day Piazza della Rotonda, perhaps stretching 160 meters in length as far as Via delle Coppelle. While finds from the late 19th century indicate that the surrounding colonnade was built of coloured marbles, the forecourt itself was paved in travertine – a durable off-white limestone quarried some 25 kilometres outside of Rome near Tivoli.

This particular stretch of paving was actually first exposed in the 1990s during the laying of pipes and cables. It was subsequently given a protective layer of volcanic pozzolana sand and then covered over (as it has been again now).⁷ Sinkholes occur when underlying strata become weakened or are washed away, often after a heavy rainfall. They are a periodic problem in modern Rome, a city built on top of many earlier incarnations of itself.

AN ‘ENIGMA’ BY THE TIBER

In September, the *Soprintendenza Speciale di Roma* announced a discovery located approximately twelve kilometers outside of the city walls, not far from the river Tiber and next to the via Ostiense – the road that connected Rome to the port town of Ostia. What was found proves difficult to interpret and has been labelled an ‘enigma’.

Work started in 2019 as part of a rescue/preventative excavation on land earmarked for development. Finds of terracotta and metal objects, as well as inscriptions, indicate that the area was occupied from the 5th century BC to the 4th century AD (although evidence of prehistoric habitation has been found at the nearby *fosse di Malafede*).⁸ A layer of accumulated silt and clay acted also to preserve wooden artefacts, including a cylindrical fragment with an Etruscan inscription carved into it.

The most impressive structures on the site belong to the 4th century BC; in particular an enormous basin constructed from tuff and measuring 48 meters long by 12 meters wide and 1.8 meters deep. The purpose of this vast stone tank, one end of which is ramped (presumably to facilitate access), is not immediately clear. The structure was designed to hold water, but whether at a constant level and to what purpose is not yet known – the presence of the ramp confusing the possibility that it was simply a cistern (a ritual function has been suggested, but production of some kind seems more likely).

⁷ https://www.soprintendenzaspecialeroma.it/eventi/piazza-del-pantheon-riemerge-pavimentazione-di-eta-imperiale_115/

⁸ <http://www.arte.it/notizie/roma/l-enigma-della-vasca-di-malafede-cinque-secoli-di-storia-in-un-ritrovamento-archeologico-alle-porte-di-roma-17659>

EXHIBITIONS

It has been a difficult year for museums. Forced to close for several months, they have suffered dramatic falls in visitor numbers. Despite the attendant challenges of making spaces safe for staff and the public, museums and sites are now again open, although it is often necessary to book in advance and to follow a prescribed route when inside. While some events and exhibitions were regrettably cancelled outright, others were extended or postponed. This includes the much-anticipated exhibition at the Capitoline Museums of ancient marble sculptures from the Torlonia collection (which has not been on public display for over half a century and will be covered in the next edition). Due to have opened in April, it will now be possible to see from October.

RAFFAELLO 1520-1483



Figure 4. Detail of the cover of the *Raffaello 1520-1483* exhibition catalogue in the Norwegian Institute library.

Opening on March 5th, it was possible to visit the exhibition ‘Raffaello 1520-1483’ at the Scuderie del Quirinale for only a few days before the nationwide lockdown began.⁹ Relaunched in June, such was the demand to see the show that its run was extended to August, and for its final weekend the doors were open 24 hours a day. This ‘once in a lifetime show’, commemorating 500 years since the artist’s death, brought together an extensive range of material and showcased the breadth of Raphael’s repertoire.

As indicated by the title, the exhibition began with Raphael’s death and a full-scale replica of his tomb in the Pantheon, before then working backwards through his career. The relevance of the remains of ancient Rome to Raphael was emphasised through his sketches of various monuments, as well as the placing of classical sculpture alongside his paintings. Also on display was Raphael and Baldassare Castiglione’s 1519 letter to Pope Leo X outlining the case for the preservation of Rome’s ancient monuments, which at the time were still subject to widespread destruction and spoliation.

⁹ Curated by Marzia Faietti and Matteo Lafranconi with the contribution of Vincenzo Farinella and Francesco Paolo Di Teodoro. <https://www.scuderiequirinale.it/mostra/copia-di-raffaello>

Raphael's plans for St Peter's Basilica and the unfinished Villa Madama reminded visitors of his architectural work, as well as of the elasticity of the role of artists in Renaissance Italy. Yet, perhaps inevitably, it was Raphael's extraordinary talent as a painter which was the focus of the show. Among the pieces on display were his late portrait of Baldassare Castiglione from the Louvre, a version of Raphael's melancholic oil-painting of Julius II from the National Gallery in London, and his portrait of Pope Leo X, the controversial loan of which from the Uffizi in Florence provoked the resignation of the museum's scientific committee. From the Vatican were tapestries for which Raphael had made the preparatory drawings, although his finest works in the Papal palace remain fixed to the walls of Pope Julius II's apartments.

CIVIS CIVITAS CIVILITAS. ROMA ANTICA MODELLO DI CITTA

Until October, Trajan's Markets hosted '*Civis Civitas Civilitas. Roma antica modello di citta*'.¹⁰ This modest exhibition comprised 58 plaster models of ancient buildings (represented in either their actual ruinous state or as reconstructions of their original appearance) and six casts of ancient sculpture in order to explore the idea of the Roman city.

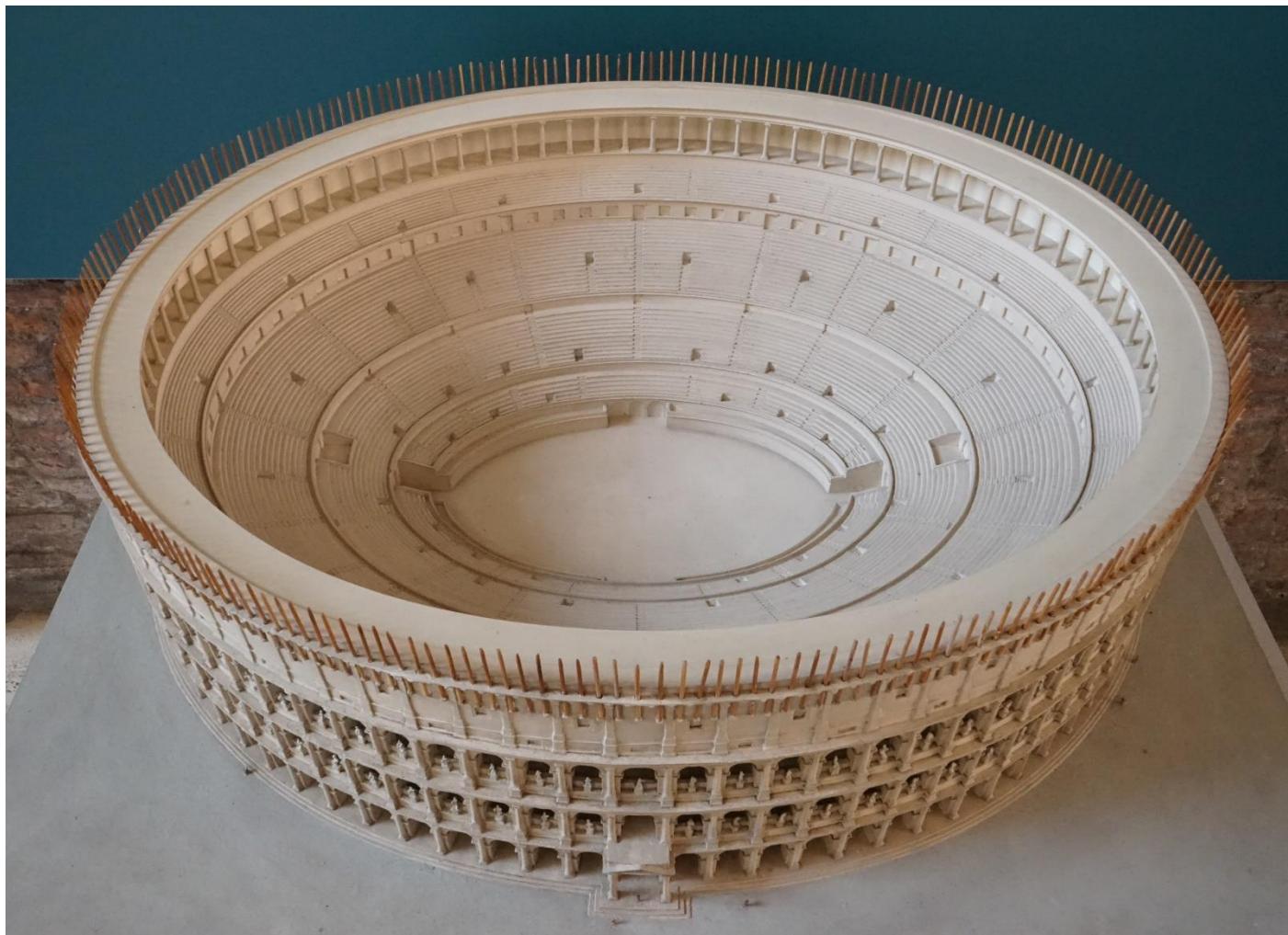


Figure 5. Model of the Colosseum (Photograph: Christopher Siwicki).

¹⁰ Curated by Claudio Parisi Presicce e Claudia Cecamore con la collaborazione del Museo dei Fori Imperiali e del Museo della Civiltà Romana. <http://www.mercatiditraiano.it/it/mostra-evento/civis-civitas-civilitas-roma-antica-modello-di-citt>

With the aim of presenting the quintessential features of Roman urban architecture, the exhibits were categorised into forums, *capitolia* (temples to the gods Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva), baths and fountains, theatres and amphitheaters, arches and gates, tombs and trophy monuments. Here could be found the *curia* of Leptis Magna in Libya, the three-tiered Pont du Gare aqueduct in the south of France, the emperor Trajan's monument to Dacian wars in Romania and, most impressive, a large model of the Forum of Pompeii. Each section was accompanied by quotes from ancient authors describing either the function of, or the activities associated with, the type of structure.

While there were some observations on more recent developments in the study of Roman architecture (for example, the difficulties in identifying a *capitolium* from archaeological evidence alone – just because a temple had three rooms, arguably for Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, it does not actually mean a deity did occupy each of these spaces), the arrangement did little to challenge broader questions of what a Roman town actually was. That said, a strength of the grouping was that it allowed viewers to compare the design of particular buildings as they were conceived in different provinces of the Roman Empire, since the display included examples from across Europe, Asia Minor, and North Africa.



Figure 6. Model of the forum of Pompeii (Photograph: Christopher Siwicki).

Some of the models are recent commissions, although the majority were originally made by Italo Gismondi for the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* in 1937. This earlier exhibition was intended to demonstrate the brilliance of the civilization of ancient Rome and link it to Mussolini's fascist regime as the heirs of the Roman Empire (which also perhaps explains why models of buildings from Italy's former North African colonies are so well represented in the collection). In this way the models themselves are an interesting historical collection, which is permanently housed in the *Museo della civiltà romana*. Regrettably, this fascinating educational museum, part of the fascist-era EUR district, has been closed since the building was damaged in 2014. After years of delay, a partial reopening of the museum was mooted for 2021, but progress towards this remains uncertain.¹¹

¹¹ <https://www.romatoday.it/politica/planetario-apertura-museo-civiltà-romana-.html>

COLORI DEGLI ETRUSCHI. TESORI DI TERRACOTTA

At *Museo Centrale Montemartini* – the early 20th-century power station beautifully converted to an archaeological museum – the richness of Etruscan artistry was on show in the ‘The Colours of the Etruscans’.¹² This exhibition brought together a series of terracotta frescos and sculpture which once decorated the walls and roofs of temples, houses and tombs, ranging in date from the 8th to 3rd BC.

Nine large panels showing the exploits of Hercules led the discussion of Etruscan mythology, while scenes painted on other terracotta panels attested to Etruscan aristocratic interests in dance and athletics, and helmeted figures brandishing weapons emphasised the centrality of warfare to society. This showcasing of Etruscan culture was supplemented by bronze armour, statues, and a varied display of exceptional ceramic vessels, some of which were imported to Etruscan communities in Italy from workshops in Greece.



Figure 7. Fragment of wall painting depicting a warrior, c. 490 BC, Cerveteri (Photograph: Christopher Siwicki).

In addition to the wall paintings, the exhibition included a number of architectural terracotta plaques intended to be nailed to the roofs of important public buildings, thereby serving both to protect and to decorate the wooden superstructures. The stand-out piece of architectural sculpture

¹² Curated by Alfonsina Russo, Claudio Parisi Presicce, Leonardo Bochicchio, Daniele Federico Maras and Rossella Zaccagnini. <http://www.centralemontemartini.org/it/mostra-evento/colori-degli-etruschi>

was a superb, life-sized group in terracotta, which once stood at the apex of a temple pediment and dates from the 3rd century BC. Preserved are the lower half of a figure wearing a short tunic and hunting boots, and another partially preserved naked man kneeling on a rock while being attacked by two dogs. The scene very likely illustrates the myth of Actaeon, who, while hunting, came across the goddess Diana bathing and was turned into a stag and set upon by his own hounds as punishment.



Figure 8. Pediment group of Actaeon, mid-3rd century BC (Photograph: Christopher Siwicki).

Yet this was not simply an exhibition about Etruscan art as a subject in itself. It was comprised of pieces that were illegally excavated and have subsequently been recovered or repatriated, some on public display in Italy for the first time. Many of the fresco paintings were seized from a warehouse in Geneva in 2016 as part of a major operation by the *Comando Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale* – Italy's police force responsible for the protection of cultural heritage.

The looting of ancient sites and Etruscan artefacts is not a new phenomenon; fueled by soaring prices in the antiquities market, the 1950s to 1980s saw a dramatic increase in illegal digging, which caused irreparable damage to Etruscan archaeological settlements. Wall paintings, vases, statues, and weapons were smuggled out of Italy and sold to private collectors as well as museums in Europe and the United States. A considerable number of pieces on display in the exhibition – including a temple pediment from the Etruscan settlement at *Caere* – had been returned by museums, notably the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek Museum in Copenhagen, as the result of a recent agreement signed with the *Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e per il Turismo* – Italy's Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism.

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