

NOTES FROM ROME 2018-19

by Amanda Claridge and Christopher Siwicki

This gazette presents to the reader outside Rome news of recent archaeological activity (in the second half of 2018 and the first half of 2019) gleaned from public lectures, conferences, exhibitions, and newspaper reports.

Questa gazetta ha lo scopo di presentare ad un lettore fuori Roma notizie della recente attività archeologica (per la seconda metà del 2018 e la prima metà del 2019), tratte da conferenze, convegni, mostre e relazioni su giornali

Via Alessandrina, once the major artery of a new quarter laid out in the valley of the imperial forums by Cardinal Michele Bonelli (1541-98) in the late sixteenth century, is soon to be no more. Its southern end and all the houses and shops that lined it were levelled in the 1930s to make way for the Via dell'Impero, leaving only the northward end, with a public park on one side, the other side overlooking the newly excavated hemicycle of Trajan's Markets, the eastern porticus of the Forum of Trajan and the east ends of the Forums of Augustus and Nerva. In 2000-2010, much of that length was closed to traffic and pedestrians while the park was excavated in the hope of finding the lost temple of Divus Trajan, an operation which removed the public park and replaced it with a huge hole in the ground containing the concrete bedding of Trajan's Forum square, a robbed-out court, and a confusion of post-Roman overburden. After that, pedestrian access was restored so that visitors could still look down into the Forums of Nerva and Augustus though not into the Forum of Trajan, for which further excavation was planned by the Sovrintendenza Capitolina, demolishing the road itself. This was delayed by the number of cables and other services that turned out to be buried beneath it, but since April 2019, financed by €1 million from the Republic of Azerbaijan, a stretch of about 90 metres is under excavation, presumably all the way to the concrete bedding of Trajan's Forum, barring anything more interesting.¹ Apropos there was a flurry of excitement towards the end of May when a late medieval wall on the site, constructed of rubble stone and compacted earth, was being demolished and the rubble was found to include an over lifesized head of Dionysus/Bacchus in high quality white marble, filmed as it was being extracted from the wall with trowels and brushes.² Both the mayor Virginia Raggi and her deputy Luca Bergamo raced to greet the discovery through their social media channels, and held a press conference, which

¹ Google Earth currently provides a good aerial view as of 2019, where the older street bed and demolished buildings on the east side can be seen. The Sovrintendenza website (http://www.sovrintendenzaroma.it/i_luoghi/roma_antica/aree_archeologiche/via_alessandrina) observes that the street has become completely decontextualised, its surviving tract 'divides' the forums and makes it difficult to understand them, while acknowledging that it forms a good viewpoint. It will be interesting to see if and how the dilemma can be resolved.

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=10&v=-3tPWprR_Ss

was widely reported.³ With long curling hair and the eyes hollowed for inlay, the head is very similar to one from Rome now in the British Museum.⁴

Earlier in the month, a discovery made in the *Domus Aurea* in late 2018 hit the news.⁵ Conservators at work on the vault of room 72 (a small triangular shaped space adjacent to the large Sala della Volta Dorata), could see through a crack in the rear wall that there was another vaulted room on the other side of the wall. The room is still filled with earth up to the springing of the vault, and its frescoes, in a delicate fourth-style architectural scheme in red, yellow, and gold, on a white ground, are very well-preserved, enhanced with figural motifs, amongst them a sphinx, after which the room, in time-honoured fashion, has been named. At its west end is a high level window with an embrasure on the inside, into which the decoration continues. The common wall between the two rooms predates the construction of the *Domus Aurea*, belonging to an existing building on the hillside, which Nero's builders of AD 64 incorporated into the fabric of the ground floor of the new palace, but the paintings, like those in room 72, date from AD 65-8. The exposed surfaces have been conserved, but it has yet to be decided whether to excavate the room in its entirety.

Across the river in Trastevere in the summer of 2018, in the eighteenth-century gardens to the rear of Palazzo Corsini on Via della Lungara (seat of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei), works to install the water tank for an emergency fire-sprinkler system came across the remains of a Roman industrial quarter buried immediately below the surface. A trial excavation was undertaken by the Soprintendenza Speciale di Roma, directed by Renato Sebastiani and Paola Fraiegari, presented at a press conference in April and open to the public for a day in June 2019.⁶ Evidence for activity on the site dates from the 1st century BC to the 5th century AD, including a large rectangular pottery kiln of the 2nd-3rd century AD, the first of its kind to be found inside the city. Wasters indicate that the kiln produced cooking and finer dining wares, perhaps also *ceramica invetriata*. Close beside the kiln, to the north, were a small stack and a low wall formed of two rows of Dressel 20 amphorae, of uncertain function, perhaps horticultural, and a water channel leading from the Janiculum towards the river. Bone was also being worked in the vicinity, making pins.⁷ If funding can be found, more excavations will be carried out, but for the time being the site is to be back-filled and the garden reinstated.

³ https://www.ilmessaggero.it/video/roma/statua_campidoglio_dioniso_archeologia-4513306.html;
https://parcocolosseo.it/sito/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Rassegna-stampa_Via-Alessandrina.pdf;
<https://www.wantedinrome.com/news/experts-say-ancient-head-found-in-rome-is-dionysus.html>

⁴ A.L. Smith, *Catalogue of Sculptures in the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, vol. III* (London, 1904) 48 no. 1627; illustrated in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* III.1 (Munich and Zurich, 1994) 445 Dionysos 201c [C. Gasparri].

⁵ <https://parcocolosseo.it/sito/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/CS-Sala-della-Sfinge-08.05.2019-1.pdf>;
http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cultura/arte/2019/05/08/domus-aurea-riemerge-sala-della-sfinge_1e6a50d5-48dc-4a6c-bba9-9bbd72d6f1a1.html

⁶ https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cultura/arte/2019/06/20/fai-visita-scavi-romani-palazzo-corsini_4272589a-cd69-4996-855f-d83259da2b19.html; https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cultura/arte/2019/04/17/scoperta-a-roma-la-fornace-di-trastevere_83068787-ab2b-4bc9-913e-ee8ed30a8756.html

⁷ <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/news/2019/05/06/ancient-roman-workshop/>

Further upstream on the right bank, along Via Capoprati, not far from Ponte Milvio, a discovery of November 2017,⁸ which had to be back-filled to protect from winter floods, was re-opened in the spring of 2018 by the Soprintendenza Speciale di Roma, directed by Marina Piranomonte, assisted by Cooperativa Archeologia.⁹ Four rooms of a substantial building of the 4th or 5th century AD, the walls constructed in *opus vittatum*, were partly exposed in the narrow trench, two of them apsidal in form and set back to back, one facing towards, the other away from the river. A rectangular room to one side preserved a floor of exceptionally fine *opus sectile*, in green and red porphyry and yellow marble, laid in a complex repeating design of squares and quadrilobate patterns.¹⁰ The position and a sizeable cemetery excavated beside the building has led some to speculate that it was an early Christian cult site, venerating Constantine's vision on the eve of the battle of the Milvian bridge, but the architecture and decoration are those of a late Roman dining suite, presumably part of a very wealthy suburban villa occupying the riverfront and extending up the hill behind.

Important discoveries continue to be made in the archaeological storerooms, especially those of the state superintendency. Presented at a day conference in June 2019 were fragments of twelve youthful male heads with thick wavy hair, a neck, and several hands in Parian marble.¹¹ Their scale is large (one-and-a-half times life-size) and the style Augustan, divisible into two types. They come from the Basilica Aemilia/Paulli on the Forum, found in Boni's excavations of 1903 and Bartoli's of 1932, but most had never been unpacked from their crates (one that had strayed to Trajan's Markets was mistakenly associated with the Forum of Augustus). The bodies to which they belong are slightly better known, though not as yet published either: clothed in 'oriental' dress, carved in Phrygian purple (*pavonazzetto*) and Numidian yellow (*giallo antico*) marble, with one arm raised, the other lowered at their hip, they were celebrated components of the basilica,¹² apparently combined with pedestals of Pentelic marble ornamented with acanthus. The new finds show that the raised hand was bent in support of some horizontal element level with their heads, which were veiled, suggestive of offerers.

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⁸ Simon Keay, 'Notes from Rome', *Papers of the British School at Rome* 86 (2018) 294, and <http://romanord.romatoday.it/ponte-milvio/ponte-milvio-ritrovamenti-tevere-novembre-2017.html>

⁹ <http://romanord.romatoday.it/scoperta-archeologica-a-ponte-milvio-ecco-cosa-e-rimerso-lungo-il-tevere.html> ; <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/news/2018/08/24/newly-discovered-ruins-rome-earliest-churches/>; <https://hyperallergic.com/453107/archaeologists-may-have-discovered-a-church-built-on-the-site-of-constantine-the-greats-conversion-to-christianity/>

¹⁰ Closely related to one in a *domus* near Arco di S. Bibiana: F. Guidobaldi and A. Guiglia Guidobaldi, *Pavimenti marmorei di Roma dal IV al IX secolo* (Rome, 1983) fig. 37.

¹¹ *Giornata di studi: statue di barbari in marmi colorati. Novità dal Foro Romano e Terracina*, organised by the Parco archeologico del Colosseo and held in the Curia Julia, 6 June 2019, together with an exhibition of a selection of the heads.

¹² R.M. Schneider, *Bunte Barbaren. Orientalstatuen aus farbiger Marmor in der römischen Repräsentationskunst* (Worms, 1986) 115-20; R.M. Schneider, 'Context Matters: Pliny's *Phryges* and the basilica Paulli in Rome', in J.Bintliff and K.Rutter (eds), *Archaeology of Greece and Rome: Image, Text and Context, Studies in honour of Anthony Snodgrass* (Edinburgh, 2016) ch. 17.

There have been a number of exhibitions about the ancient world held in Rome during the past year. At the Capitoline Museums, *La Roma dei Re. Il racconto dell'Archeologia* explored the city of Rome and its habitants between the 12th and 6th centuries BC.¹³ Bringing together a range of material excavated across the city from the 19th century to the present day, the exhibition included many objects that are either not normally on view or have never been on public display. Beginning in reverse chronological order, the first room contained the pediment and decoration of the temples at Sant'Omobono. The superb terracotta ornament, which includes panthers and a statue group of Hercules and Minerva, was moved from its permanent location near the structures of the temple of Capitoline Jupiter. In the exhibition, this was united with material from the recent excavations at Sant'Omobono and presented with new interpretations for the appearance of temple (although the reason for reconstructing the Hercules and Minerva pair as standing in the pediment rather than at the apex of the roof is unclear). The subsequent rooms displayed ceramics and small finds associated with religion and ritual that were discovered in the vicinity of the *Comitium* in the late 19th century, near the Velia in the 1930's, and on the slope of the Palatine Hill between 1987 and 2017.

The exhibition contained a significant amount of material from funerary contexts ranging from 1000 to 500 BC in the areas later occupied by the Forums of Caesar and Augustus. The objects, including hut urns and terracotta sarcophagi, demonstrate the varied practice of cremation and inhumation across this period. Particularly interesting to see were objects from the Esquiline necropolis, here presented to explore the theme of trade with the Greek world between the Bronze Age and Orientalising period.

The only upside of the Museo della Civiltà Romana still being closed for restoration is that parts of its collection now frequently appear in temporary exhibitions, and the large model of the early city was on display here. Inevitable inaccuracies aside, the model provides a thoughtful impression of the topography of the late 6th-century city, and it was combined effectively with a video and light show. The final section of the exhibition considered archaeological method in the 19th century, including some erroneous early attempts at reconstruction.

Despite its title, much of *La Roma dei Re* chose not to address directly the controversy of Rome's kings. It presented the visitor with the objects alongside detailed panels about their dating and provenance, but not the idea that this activity necessarily occurred during a particular reign. In this way, it provided a welcome and effective balance to interpretations of the early history of the city that insist on framing the archaeology through the 'historical' narrative of Rome's kings and the Romulean foundation myth.

The Scuderie del Quirinale hosted *Ovidio. Amori, miti e altre storie*, in celebration of the bimillennium of the poet's death.¹⁴ The exhibition explored both the times in which Ovid lived

¹³ 27 July 2018 – 2 June 2019, curated by Isabella Damiani and Claudio Parisi Presicce. No printed catalogue accompanied the exhibition. <http://www.museicapitolini.org/it/mostra-evento/la-roma-dei-re-il-racconto-dell-archeologia>

¹⁴ 17 October 2018 – 20 January 2019, curated by Francesca Ghedini, who edited the accompanying catalogue: <https://www.scuderiequirinale.it/mostra/ovidio-amori-miti-e-altre-storie-000>.

as well as the reception of his writings in later periods, and the visitor was greeted with Latin and English quotations of Ovid in multicoloured neon lettering by artist Joseph Kosuth. Among the ancient works were a number of objects selected around the themes of love and eroticism, including the Venus Callipyge from Naples. From Pompeii there was a garden fresco from the House of the Golden Bracelet and scattered throughout the show were marble statues and reliefs depicting mythological scenes described by Ovid, including a 2nd-century AD statue of Leda and Jupiter in the guise of the swan. The exhibition helps to underscore that Ovid did not write in a literary vacuum, but created his versions of the stories alongside an existing visual culture.

Interesting to see were the array of manuscripts of Ovid's works gathered from various collections, several with beautifully illustrated margins reimagining the characters and creatures of the tales. Perhaps the standout document was the 11th-century 'Neapolitan Ovid' manuscript of the *Metamorphoses*, now in Naples but possibly originally from the Monastery of San Benedetto di Bari. Given the fantastical stories of the *Metamorphoses* and their potential for artist interpretation, it is unsurprising that this text was well represented among the early modern pieces in the exhibition. These included a fresco of Narcissus by Domenichino, a series on the fall of Icarus by Carlo Saraceni, and the superb 16th-century headboard depicting 'The Loves of Jupiter' by Alessandro Allori from Florence and made for the Medici court.

The blockbuster show of the summer was *Roma Universalis. L'impero e la dinastia venuta dall'Africa*.¹⁵ It sought to tell the story of the Severan dynasty and its impact on the city of Rome, connecting also to the wider empire through subjects such as commerce and the imported amphorae of Monte Testaccio. Spread across the Forum Romanum, Palatine, and Colosseum, the majority of objects were on display in the latter, adjacent to the newly installed permanent collection of graffiti, inscriptions, images, and small finds relating to the Flavian amphitheatre. There was a fine selection of busts of the imperial family and it was interesting to see the fragmentary reliefs from a Severan era honorific arch depicting a naval scene, recently uncovered in Naples during excavations connected to the metro. It was also nice to see sections of the Severan *Forma Urbis* on display, including the fragments depicting the temple of Peace. In terms of new material, the most notable display was in the 'temple of Romulus' by the Forum. This installation included seven portrait busts of the Severan era, along with twenty-six other fragments of marble sculpture, all of which were reused as fill for a 6-7th-century AD wall near the so-called 'baths of Elagabalus'.

Re-excavated and restored, the baths themselves, located on the north-east slope of the Palatine, were made accessible as part of the exhibition. Indeed, one of the best aspects of *Roma Universalis* was that a number of sites around the archaeological park that were previously off limits could be visited. Among these were the Severan substructures of the south-east corner of the Palatine, from where it was possible to enter the 'sunken stadium' of Domitian and the so-called 'hall of capitals', which still contains a number of second- and third-century AD examples that gave the space its name. Also accessible was the *vicus ad carinas*, itself subject

¹⁵ 15 November 2018 – 25 August 2019, curated by Rossella Rea, Clementina Panella, and Alessandro D'Alessio: <https://www.coopculture.it/en/events.cfm?id=954>; the exhibition catalogue is published by Mondadori Electa.

to recent excavations. Running between the basilica of Maxentius and the temple of Peace, it offered good views of a well-preserved section of the firewall and stunning marble floor of the interior of the latter. Frustratingly, due to the ongoing work around the *Comitium*, the arch of Septimus Severus – a numbered feature of the exhibition – remains closed off. This continues the paradoxical situation that it is not possible to walk through a single ancient monumental arch in the historic centre, thereby ignoring the very function of their form (brave the traffic, and you can go through the so-called ‘arch of Drusus’ at Porta San Sebastiano).

Access to sites more generally across the Forum and Palatine has been considerably improved with the introduction in 2018 of the S.U.P.E.R ticket (Seven Unique Places to Visit in Rome). Although having two differently priced tickets causes understandable irritation to anyone who only realises they have purchased the basic one when they attempt to enter a particular location, it is now possible to visit the so called ‘temple of Romulus’, the superbly restored Santa Maria Antiqua, the ‘cryptoporticus of Nero’, and the late-Republican houses of ‘Augustus’, ‘Livia’, and the ‘Aula Isiaca’, the last visible from the 16th century loggia Mattei, decorated with frescos by the workshop of Baldassarre Peruzzi.

The most exciting development was the opening in April, following a decade of restoration, of part of the so-called *Domus Transitoria* of Nero. Located near the centre of the Palatine, the entrance is down an ancient marble staircase below the banquet hall of the Domitianic palace. Here, it is possible to visit a series of rooms thought to have belonged to Nero’s first palace complex, before the ‘Great Fire’ of AD 64 allowed for the construction of the *Domus Aurea*. The stairs descend to a subterranean dining suite laid out in front of an elaborate fountain, designed to imitate the form of a theatre backdrop. Throughout, there are traces of exceptional marble flooring and wall revetment, high quality frescos, and stucco coffering on the ceilings. Further sections of the painted ceiling, *opus sectile* floors and figural ornament are on display in the Palatine Antiquarium. As in the Esquiline wing of the *Domus Aurea*, which was demolished to make way for the Baths of Trajan, the rooms of the ‘*Domus Transitoria*’ are cut by the foundations of later buildings, but through a well-executed Virtual Reality reconstruction, these walls are removed to restore a sense of the original space. The other main feature of the site is an underground fifty-seater latrine, once reached by a wide stair leading down from the direction of the temple of Apollo. Perhaps unlikely to have been intended for the builders of the ‘*Domus Transitoria*’, as the onsite interpretation suggests, it is all the same an indication of the sheer number of people who visited and worked at the imperial palaces.

Occupying the gallery space of the upper floor of the Villa Giulia is *Mæternità. Maternità e allattamento nell'Italia antica*, one of the smaller exhibitions this year.¹⁶ In an effort to go beyond discussions about maternity that focus exclusively on mothers, the exhibition also looked at the roles which others played in the raising of children and the importance of religion, magic, and medicine. Focusing on the Etruscan and early Roman world, themes included breastfeeding and the extended family, with attention given to the presence of the maternal aunt. While some of the objects were taken from permanent displays on the ground floor of the

¹⁶ 23 March– 2 June 2019, curated by Giulia Pedrucci and Vittoria Lecce:
https://www.beniculturali.it/mibac/export/MiBAC/sito-MiBAC/Contenuti/MibacUnif/Eventi/visualizza_asset.html_650017218.html.

museum, a number of pieces were brought out of storage for the first time. On display was material from sites in Etruria, including ex votos of breastfeeding mothers from the sanctuary of Campetti at Veii, representations of families from the sanctuary of Mater Matuta at Satricum, and three Hellenistic-style terracotta sculptures of children from Vulci. An interesting piece was the tuff sculpture of a seated woman bearing four swaddled babies from the sanctuary of Fondo Patturelli near Capua. It is one of two hundred such sculptures found at the site, some holding up to twelve infants.¹⁷ The final display contained dedications to gods connected with mothers and children, including a terracotta uterus with the name of the goddess ‘vei’ cut into it, as well as a bronze spearhead with an inscription to Diana from the nurse of the *gens Paperia*. Focusing the exhibition, small though it was, on a theme such as maternity proved an effective way to draw attention to ‘everyday’ objects that might otherwise be overlooked in a museum that boasts an incredible collection of monumental and visually stunning pieces.

Following *Traiano. Costruire l’Impero, creare l’Europa* in late 2017,¹⁸ the trend of centring exhibitions around emperors continued with *Claudio Imperatore. Messalina, Agrippina e le ombre di una dinastia* at the Museo dell’Ara Pacis.¹⁹ The show sought to balance discussion of the emperor’s lineage and familial relations, with the broader context of his reign, including subjects such as the construction of Portus and the invasion of Britain. A version of the exhibition was first shown at Lyon (Claudius’ birthplace) and a number of the objects travelled to Rome. Among the most significant of these was the bronze *tabula Claudiana* (often called the ‘Lugdunum Tablet’), a speech by the emperor advocating admission of people from the Three Gauls into the Senate. There were also several excellent sculptures from the Louvre, including fine busts of Agrippina the Elder, a person variously identified as either the military commander Corbulo or the conspirator Longinus, an over-lifesize heroic semi-nude of Claudius (found at Gabii), and possibly Messalina and Britannicus in the guise of Eirene (Peace) carrying her son Ploutos (Wealth). The exhibition collected a number of fragments of relief thought to belong to an arch of Claudius commemorating his British triumph which spanned the via Lata (via del Corso), including the particularly noteworthy ‘Praetorians’ relief, also from the Louvre. In the same room were casts of the iconographically rich ‘Medinaceli’ reliefs. Argued as being Claudian in date, these panels depict the battle of Actium and an associated processional scene featuring an image of the Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius group. The original reliefs are dispersed between collections in Spain and Hungary, but were brought together for the first time in 2013 for the *Augusto* exhibition at the Scuderie del Quirinale, so it was good to see the casts displayed here. *Claudio Imperatore* concludes with the emperor’s deification, as represented by the depiction of his temple on the Severan *Forma Urbis* (again, always welcome to see out of storage) and two statues – Agrippina the Younger and an

¹⁷ See further the article by Maureen Carroll in this volume, ‘Mater Matuta, ‘fertility cults’, and the integration of women in religious life in Italy in the fourth to first centuries BC’.

¹⁸ Simon Keay, ‘Notes from Rome 2017-2018’, *Papers of the British School at Rome* 86 (2018) 294-5.

¹⁹ 6 April – 27 October 2019, curated by Claudio Parisi Presicce, Orietta Rossini, and Lucia Spagnuolo; its substantial catalogue published by L’Erma Di Bretschneider contains essays covering topics far beyond those represented in the exhibition itself. https://www.beniculturali.it/mibac/export/MiBAC/sito-MiBAC/Contenuti/MibacUnif/Eventi/visualizza_asset.html_1767559959.html

unidentified youth – thought to be from the *templum divi Claudii*, carved in striking Egyptian bekhen-stone.

Finally, in Museo Centrale Montemartini, the portrait relief of Eurysaces and his wife Atistia has gone on display, their tomb being that of ‘the baker’ at Porta Maggiore. The head of Atistia, stolen in 1934 when it was still on show near the monument, has now been replaced with a cast. Montemartini also hosted an interesting photographic exhibition *Volti di Roma*, which showcased eighty images of ancient portraits in the museum collection by photographer Luigi Spina.²⁰ The close-up, black and white photographs accentuates specific facial features rather than the bust as a whole, helping the viewer to focus on the detail in the face and allowing a personality to emerge.

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²⁰ 18 April– 22 September 2019, curated by Claudio Parisi Presicce, with catalogue published by Silvana Editoriale; <http://www.centralemontemartini.org/it/mostra-evento/volti-di-roma-alla-centrale-montemartini>.