

# A (short) survey on the Colosseum valley, the Imperial Forum and the Oppio hill

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## Abstract

Don't worry, this paper doesn't pretend to be an imitation of the serious and respectable Baedeker guide which poor foreigners are used to drag along visiting Rome on their "Grand Tour". It's just an easy essay on the monuments close to the Engineering Faculty that you can read at your convenience maybe at lunch time or during the coffee breaks. Enjoy your staying in Rome.

## Colosseum Valley

### The valley before Colosseum

In the ancient times the Colosseum's valley was very different from now. From the pre-antropic period until the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. there was nothing but two rivers: one flowed from north to south (across the present subway stop towards Colosseum), the other from west to east (from Titus' arch - Palatine hill- to Colosseum). In the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. the rivers were drained and two streets were built upon their path. For more than six centuries life went quiet in the valley: a holy area was erected in the south part and on the north-eastern slopes of Palatine hill (where Constantine's arch is now), private houses (rich private houses!) were built in the north part.

At the very beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Augustus (the first Roman Emperor) divided Rome in 14 districts or *regiones*. The original streets of the Colosseum's valley formed the boundaries of four central districts and at their crossing a huge fountain was built (the so called *Meta Sudans*) to stress the relevance of the new urbanistic arrangement. The particular shape of

the fountain, namely a stone-cone spilling water, was probably inspired by Apollo's cult.

Some years later a catastrophic event changed Rome and the Colosseum's valley: it was the night of July 18<sup>th</sup>, 64 A.D. when a big fire destroyed many of the structures in the valley. Ancient writers documented this fire and some of them wrote that the Emperor himself, Nero, started it. Anyway the fire gave Nero the chance to redesign the valley: its level was raised of 4 meters to allow the construction of part of the new luxury residence of the Emperor, the *Domus Aurea*; Golden House; only the big entrance hall and the pond were supposed to be in the valley, the main structures were and still are on (below) the *Celio* hill. The valley lost its public role and turned into a private property of the most eclectic, crazy, beloved and betrayed Emperor Rome ever had.

When Nero died in 68 A.D. the construction of *Domus Aurea* stopped and the new Emperor Vespasianus changed again the function of the valley. Its original public function was restored. The Colosseum was built in place of Nero's pond. Circus and gladiatorial games took place in it: the games were free and this helped the Emperor to gain the Romans sympathy.

## The Colosseum

The Colosseum is an elliptical-shaped arena, 50 meters high and has three levels, each one made of 80 travertine arches. The arches are surrounded by Doric semi-columns on the 1<sup>st</sup> level (smooth, round capitals), Ionic semi-columns on the 2<sup>nd</sup> level (volutes decorate the capitals), Corinthian semi-columns on the 3<sup>rd</sup> level (capitals are decorated with scrolls, acanthus leaves and flowers).



Figure 1: View of the Colosseum from *Belvedere Cederna* (upper level exit subway Metro-B)

The entrances were strictly reserved, namely 68 arches were meant for the ordinary people, 6 arches on the short sides (minor ellipse axis) were meant for the Emperor, his family, other politicians and the gladiators. The 4<sup>th</sup> floor is a huge travertine wall with small windows and shelves. Wooden poles were placed on the shelves: they held the fabric-curtain (*velarium*) designed to protect the spectators from sun-strokes and (unexpected) showers. The inner arena resumes the outer elliptical plan and is surrounded by the *cavea*, i.e. the seats for spectators. The seats near the arena were reserved for the Emperor and senators (*ima cavea*), the middle seats were meant for knights

(*media cavea*). Poor people were only allowed to the seats on the top of the cavea (*summa cavea*).

The cavea held 50.000 ÷ 80.000 spectators. Most of the state of the art technological devices of the Colosseum were hidden below the arena. Two levels of service corridors were exploited to lead tigers, lions and (sometimes) gladiators towards their scenographic entrance into the arena.

Not far from Colosseum along the present *via Labicana* there is the *Ludus Magnus* which was a barrack for gladiators. It was built by the Emperor Domitian (Vespasianus' son). It was a "small Colosseum" entirely made of bricks. We can still see part of the arena and small chambers (the remainder is buried under *via Labicana*): they were meant for gladiators' training and rest. The *Ludus Magnus* was joined to the Colosseum through an underground gallery.

Most of gladiators were slaves from Greece or western countries; if they were good and brave enough to survive that kind of life and retire, they became rich, wealthy people but still not appreciated by Romans. Romans appreciated gladiators just fighting in the Colosseum, they were not part of the Roman society. There were 8 different kinds of gladiators characterized by different armors and fighting approaches: *thraeces*, *equites*, *sagittarii*, *essedarii*, *velites*, *secutores*, *spatharii*, *murmillones*. A wounded or defeated gladiator was at the mercy of the auditorium; a downward thumb, was meant for death, an upward thumb saved their lives.

## The Titus Arch



Figure 2: View of the *Arco di Tito* by Gaspar Van Wittel (oil on canvas, 1710)

Vespasianus' son Titus (79-81 A.D.) built not far from the Colosseum a one fornix arch: we can still see it on the top of *Via Sacra* at the entrance of *Foro Romano*. The inscription on the top and the decorated panels inside celebrate the capture of Jerusalem: they represent the victorious army entering Rome with the booty from Jerusalem symbolized by seventh-branched candelabrum. However only the panels and the inscriptions date back to the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century the arch was incorporated in the Frangipane's fortification<sup>1</sup> and so remained until the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century when architect Giuseppe Valadier de-

<sup>1</sup>Frangipane was a noble Roman family

stroyed the fortification and used the marbles pieces to reshape as in a puzzle Titus' arch according to ancient maps. The reconstruction of the Titus' arch is still an open issue debated by archeologists.

### The temple of *Venere e Roma*

Opposite the Colosseum the temple of *Venere e Roma* was erected by Emperor Hadrian (117-138 A.D.). According to the tradition, Hadrian himself was the architect. *Apollodorus Damascenus*, the most famous architect of the time (the official architect of Emperor Trajan (98-117) - Hadrian's predecessor) got mad at the Emperor since he was not involved in the design and sourly criticized Hadrian's project. Few days later he died mysteriously...

The Temple is set on a basement (145x100 m) with a peristyle of gray granite columns. The temple consisted in two chambers (*cellae*), symmetrically arranged back to back. One chamber was dedicated to the Goddess of love *Venus*, the other to the goddess Rome, symbol of the eternity of the town. Each chamber had a statue of the goddesses, both seated on a throne. Four columns stood at the entrance of each chamber, ten columns on the two long sides. A monumental staircase led down to the Colosseum. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century part of the temple was incorporated in the church of *Santa Maria Nova* (the church was restored in the 17<sup>th</sup> century).

### The *Constantinus* arch



Figure 3: *Arco di Costantino* as it looked at the beginning of the last century. (black and white picture by C.Bogi, visit <http://www.romasparita.eu>)

The last monument erected in the valley near the Colosseum was Constantine's arch. It dates back to 315 A.D. when Constantine (the 1<sup>st</sup> Christian Emperor) built it to celebrate his victory against his rival *Maxentius*. It is a three fornices-shaped arch, 21 meters high, made by white and colored marbles. Most of the decorations were not made for the arch but were grabbed from 2<sup>nd</sup> century imperial monuments. Undoubtedly Constantine won the war, but it was not Augustus time when the empire reached its maximum richness. At Constantine time the empire and the Emperor were "broke", so why should money be spent for new decorations if older ones could be re-used?

The inscription on the top reminds Constantine's victory. The statues were recycled from the Forum of Trajan (2<sup>nd</sup>

century A.D.) and represent Dacian captured soldiers, defeated by the Trajan army. The relief panels between the statues were created for Marcus Aurelius (161-180 A.D.) and represent episodes from the war against *Quadi* and *Marcomanni* (German populations). The roundels are from Emperor Hadrian's time (117-138 A.D.) and represent scenes of hunting and animals sacrificed to gods. The sculpted heads of Emperor Hadrian were modified to outline Constantine features.

Above the sides fornices, under the Hadrian roundels, there's a frieze: this was created by Constantine's sculptors for this arch. These decorations are of a much lower quality than those of the Hadrian and Trajan time, denoting an overall decadence of the empire. The frieze represents the war of Constantine against Maxentius and his triumphal parade. The most famous scene is the battle at *Ponte Milvio*, a bridge on the Tiber. According to the legend, Constantine had a divine vision before the battle: he saw a Cross in the sky and this words: *in hoc signo vinces* (you'll win the war thanks to the Cross). So he converted himself to Christianity and became the 1<sup>st</sup> Christian Emperor.

### **Beyond the Empire**

After Constantine's arch construction the curtains of the Imperial splendor closed. In the late roman period of the Empire and on the Middle Ages the area was abandoned. The first level of Colosseum's arches laid underground; the valley and the *Foro Romano* were known as *Campo Vaccino*, i.e. a place where sheep and cows grazed. Shops, private houses, maybe even a cemetery were installed in Colosseum's arch and on the arena. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Popes put the cross stations inside the Colosseum; the monument where many Christian presumably died on persecutions became the focal point of the Good Friday's ceremonies. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century excavations started to get the valley back to its ancient splendor. From '80s to 2003 University of Rome "La Sapienza" excavated the area, giving a big contribution to the knowledge of the ancient topography. Excavations are still on-going along the north-eastern slopes of Palatine hill.

### **Imperial Fora**

On both sides of *Via dei Fori Imperiali* you can see the Imperial *Fora* constructed between the half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. and the half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D by Roman Emperors. The *forum* was a public square surrounded by institutional buildings where people could meet, pray or trials were discussed. Before Imperial *Fora* were erected, Rome already had already the

*Foro Romano* which dates back at the republican age (6<sup>th</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.). However Emperors thought Rome needed new public squares and, most of all, they needed to show off their generosity and power.

### **Cesar Forum**



Figure 4: View of the Cesar Forum; in the background the “white” monument of king Vittorio Emanuele II facing *Piazza Venezia* (informally known as “the typewriter” among roman people).

At the center of the square a bronze statue of Caesar riding his horse was erected. Along the south side of the portico some *tabernae* (small shops) and *thermopolia* (an ancient take-away!) were built.

The first Imperial Forum was built by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C. Julius was a Roman general and step-father of Augustus. He wasn’t an Emperor but played a very important role into the events that led to the rise of the Roman Empire. His Forum was supposed to be an extension of the older *Foro Romano*. In fact, the square is just behind the *Curia*<sup>2</sup> on the western side of *Foro Romano*.

Caesar’s *Forum* was a rectangular square (160x70 m) with an open portico on three edges. On the free short side the temple of *Venus Genetrix* was erected.<sup>3</sup> Caesar intended to celebrated, through *Venus*, his divine blood, by attributing to *Venus* the roots of his family. The temple was build of marble, had 8 Corinthian columns on the front (just 3 of them survived). Inside the temple there was a statue of *Venus*, one

### **Augustus Forum**

When Augustus became Emperor few years after Caesar’s death, he claimed his own Forum and built it on the eastern side of Caesar’s one. The Forum is again a rectangular square with an open portico on the long sides turning into large semicircular exedras. The tuff high end-wall divided the *Forum* from the popular neighborhood of *Subura* and served as a firebreak, protecting the *Forum* from the fires which frequently happened nearby. In the *Forum* the temple of

<sup>2</sup>Curia was the building where senators met together and discussed politics

<sup>3</sup>Venus was the goddess of love and *genetrix* means “mother”



Figure 5: View of the Augustus Forum taken from *via dei Fori Imperiali*

*Mars Ultor*<sup>4</sup> was erected to commemorate Augustus' victory over Caesar's murderers. The temple has the same style of *Venus Genetrix's* one: it's set on a high platform, had 8 Corinthian columns on the front and 8 on both lateral sides; inside there were the statues of *Mars* and her lover *Venus*<sup>5</sup>. The decorations concerned the mythical origins of Rome and of its Emperor. But that wasn't enough for Augustus: he placed in the arcades statues of *Romulus*, *Enea* and their offspring to recall the ancient origins of the city and to propose himself as the new founder of the Empire. The focal point of the square

was the bronze statue of Augustus riding a *quadriga*, i.e. a chariot pulled by four horses. The western portico opened into a room called "the *Colossus'* room": it housed a big statue of *Genius Augusti*, i.e. the Emperor represented as a god.

### **Vespasian Forum**

Few decades later Emperor Vespasian erected his own *Forum* nearby Augustus' *Forum*. The square surrounded by arcades had a temple on one side: it was the Temple of Peace, the largest and most beautiful of all the buildings in the city, according to ancient writers. It was built to celebrate the conquest of Jerusalem. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. part of the gallery was covered by the *Forma Urbis Romae*, a marble map of ancient Rome. The wall is now part of the church of *Santi Cosma e Damiano*, where the holes retaining the hangers of the map can still be seen. The central area of the *Forum* was not paved but served as a garden, with pools and pedestals for statues, so that it was similar to an open-air museum.

### **Nerva Forum**

Emperor Nerva (96-98 A.D.) built his own *Forum* in the limited space between the *Forum* of Augustus and Vespasian. It is also known as the "passage forum" because of his position. It was a long, narrow square with porticos and a temple devoted to *Minerva*, the goddess of wisdom. We can

<sup>4</sup>*Mars* was the god of war, *Ultor* means the avenger

<sup>5</sup>According to mythology, *Mars* was not *Venus'* husband but *Vulcan*, the god of Fire. However the poor *Vulcan* was not a classical beauty so... well gods too can have their part of rumors!

still see part of the columns of the gallery: the frieze represents the myth of *Arachne*. As a curious fact, *Arachne* was a girl who pretended her skills were greater than *Minerva*'s. The goddess took offense and set up a contest in weaving between herself and *Arachne*. The goddess won and turned the girl into a spider.

### Trajan Forum

When Emperor Trajan (98-117 A.D.) claimed his own *Forum*, there was no room left in the district. However in the ancient Rome there was nothing that an Emperor could not do, so Trajan flattened the hill on the side of Augustus' Forum, the *Velia*, and created enough space for his monumental square. The inscription on the column raised on the north-western side of the *Forum* celebrate the huge flattening works and reminds that the column is as tall as the erased hill. The frieze on the column represents scenes from the war against *Daci*, a population from central Europe, likely the present Romania. According to the tradition, the sculptor of the frieze had his inspiration from the scrolls preserved into the latin and greek libraries, erected on the right and left side of the column respectively.



Figure 6: Trajan Forum as represented by G.B. Piranesi (Aquatforte, 1756)

Trajan changed the classical plan of the Imperial *Fora* introducing a new building, the so called *Basilica Ulpia*. The Basilica was meant for the administration of justice and commerce. On one side there was an open space with a bronze statue of the Emperor riding a horse and two exedras on short sides. On the back of the north-eastern exedra there was, and still is, the facade of *Mercati di Traiano*. In contrast to the *Forum*, the markets were built with bricks. Archeologists still debate about the function of the construction. The small chambers inside could be shops suggesting that commercial

activities took place. However other scientists do not exclude that also administrative activities took place in that rooms.

Recent excavation unearthed part of the temple of Divine Trajan which, however, was erected by Hadrian to the memory of his predecessor. The decoration of the Trajan's *Forum* was made of marble statues and friezes representing the defeated *Daci*.



### **Final remarks on the Imperial *Fora***

The area of Imperial *Fora* didn't survive unhurt the Roman Empire crisis. From the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century the place was no more the center of Roman politics. The buildings were abandoned, churches and monasteries were built on the ancient structures. In the middle ages the level of the ground was raised by four meters and a tower was built in the middle of the markets. Many ancient marbles were taken away and recycled for the construction of modern (at that age) buildings. At the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century a complete residential district was erected on the Imperial *Fora*, leaving just few ruins still visible. In '30s Benito Mussolini decided to destroy the residential district and give the *Fora* back to the town. However Mussolini was neither a philanthropist nor an archeologist: the area was not excavated with scientific criteria causing a terrible and irreversible loss of many informations otherwise preserved underground up to nowadays. The *Duce* didn't even care about ancient topography, the Imperial *Fora* were just meant to be a monumental scene of the new street he built, *via dell'Impero*, now *via dei Fori Imperiali* which led the fascist parades from *Piazza Venezia* to Colosseum.

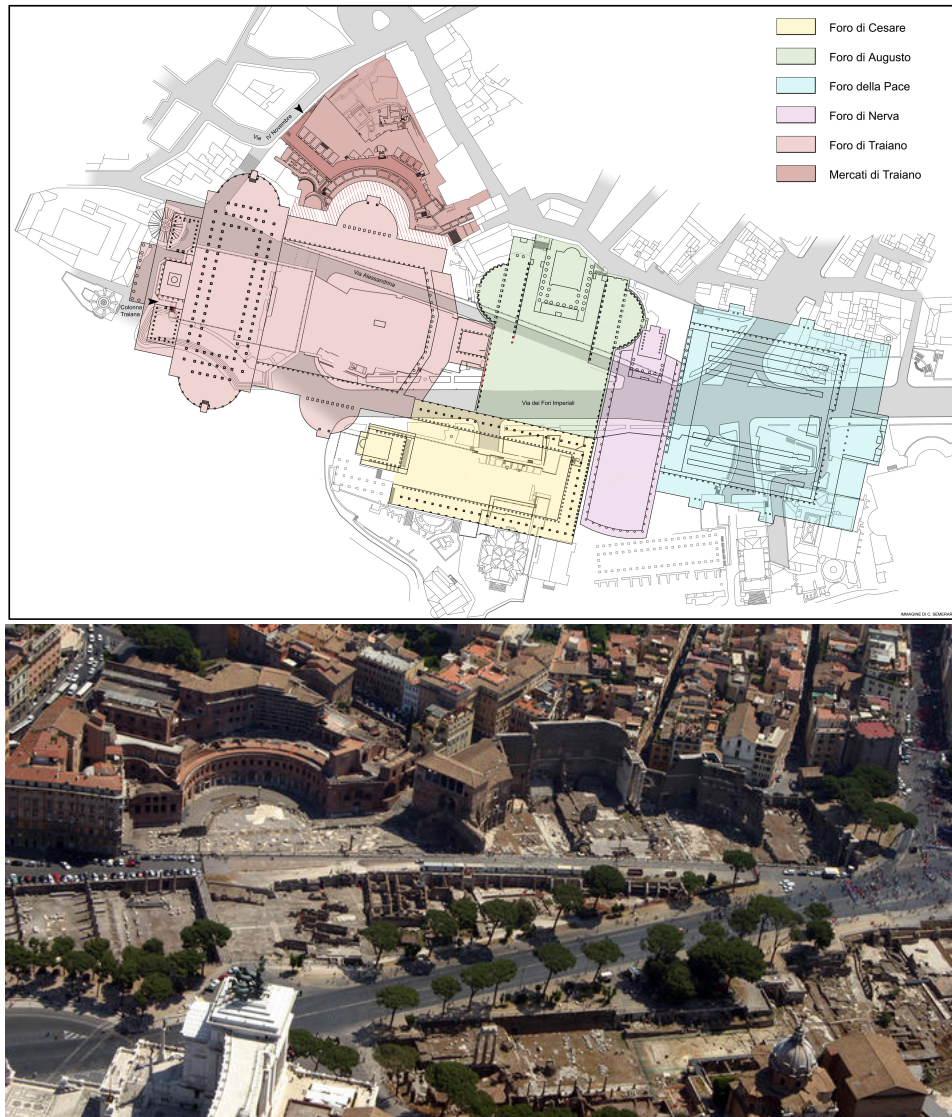


Figure 7: Top panel: original arrangement of the Imperial *Fora* superimposed to the present *Via dei Fori Imperiali* and nearby streets. Bottom panel: aerial view of the Trajan Forum (round exedra), Augustus Forum (flat wall), Nerva Forum (square on the right close to the trees) and Cesar Forum (square below *via dei Fori Imperiali*) as they look today.

## The Oppio hill and the area of San Peter in Chain (conference venue)



Terme di Traiano - Roma Italia  
foto: RyanFreisling it.wikipedia.org

Figure 8: Trajan baths as they appear now. Note in the background few windows in a “yellow” building, the present Faculty of Engineering.

The picture on the side is a view of the roman public bath ruins, that you can see behind Engineering faculty on the Oppio hill. This baths were built by Emperor Trajan at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. and were the largest, most elegant baths Rome ever had. The architect *Apollodorus Damascenus* erased the previous buildings erected on the hill, i.e. Titus baths and part of Nero Golden House. The baths were a squared shaped area with porticos on each side widening into exedras. The porticos were meant for cultural activities and entertainment. The picture captures the big exedra which was supposed to be the library: the niches probably were scrolls cupboards. In the big area between the porticos, there were three swimming-pools, dressing and

service rooms. The pools contained water at different temperature: *frigidarium* (cold), *tiepidarium* (warm) and *calidarium* (hot).

Another important monument near the school of Engineering is the church of *San Pietro in Vincoli*. It was built in the 5<sup>th</sup> century by the will of *Licinia Eudossia*<sup>6</sup>, the wife of Emperor Valentinian III (425-455 A.D.). According to the legend, the empress wanted this church to keep the chains of San Peter martyrdom (you can still see the chains under the main altar). The most important piece of art inside the church is the statue of Moses (1513-1515) sculpted by Michelangelo Buonarroti for pope *Iulius II* tomb. A document dated 1489 records the construction of a convent and a cloister near the church (it’s the conference venue, where you are right now!). The holder of the church and the convent was cardinal Giuliano della Rovere (the future pope *Iulius II*), as you can see from the blazons in the cloister. Instead of the present classes and offices, the convent had rooms for the friars daily life, a library and an archive. The cloister is the heart of the convent, consists of a central open space surrounded by porticos with Ionic columns. At the center you can still see the original well.

<sup>6</sup>Via Eudossiana was named after her.

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