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**URBAN PASTS AND URBAN FUTURES:
BRINGING URBAN ARCHAEOLOGY TO LIFE
ENHANCING URBAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS**

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Appendix of the Proceedings

Session 3: Interpretation and display

Case study: Crypta Balbi, Rome, Italy

“From the excavated site to the museum display: historical interpretation and conservation”.

Laura Vendittelli
Director of Crypta balbi Museum



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Since 1981, the Soprintendenza archeologica di Roma has sponsored the excavation of an abandoned city block in the historical centre of the city, within the Campus Martius. In antiquity, the *Crypta Balbi* stood in this area. The Crypta was a vast colonnaded courtyard annexed to the theatre erected by Lucius Cornelius Balbus in 13 B.C. 1). The name *crypta* appears in the 4th-century Regionary Catalogues, with reference to a covered passageway. This passageway could be either a double ambulatory of the portico itself or a covered walkway within the portico, perhaps between the *scenae frons* of the theatre and the portico, a passageway that corresponds with via Caetani 2). At the centre of the porticoed area existed a building, perhaps a temple, on top of which is documented the church of Santa Maria *domine Rose* already by the 8th century. On the east side of the portico opened an exedra, which was transformed into a latrine in the restoration of the Hadrianic period.

The portico was surrounded on the east side by a nucleus of *insulae*. These *insulae* are depicted on the marble *Forma urbis* and are included within the perimeter of the modern city block.

To the north of the portico, a narrow building, now recognised as a water cistern, separates the crypta from the *porticus Minucia*. These constructions date to the urban systemisation of the area undertaken by Domitian following the fire of 80 A.D. that damaged a large part of the buildings of the Campus Martius (*Dio Cass.* LXVI, 24, 1-2).

Urban archaeology

The excavations at the Crypta have revealed that life on the site continued after the ancient period. A series of transformations and reuses of the monument extended without interruption through the medieval and renaissance periods down to the present day.

This urban archaeological site investigated all of the phases of this city sector. As a result, the complex of the *Crypta Balbi* offers extraordinary evidence for the manner in which Rome evolved on top of its ancient foundations through the course of centuries.

In particular, the research has brought to light evidence of the development of social customs and economic activity in the period that marks the passage from antiquity to the medieval period, rendering possible a new, more profound comprehension.

In the early medieval period, following the end of the use of the theatre, and consequently of the *crypta*, during a brief period of abandonment, the area was used as a dump and burial place. Later, in the early Medieval period, the site was occupied by two churches, with their respective monasteries: San Lorenzo *in Pallacinis*, that was installed on top of the *insulae* outside of the Crypta, on the north-east side of the modern city block, and Santa Maria *domine Rose*, in the centre of the porticoed area.

The structure of the theatre was transformed into housing. This destination did not change over time, and concluded with the construction of the Mattei block, one of the most beautiful examples

of Roman noble Renaissance palaces. Houses and shops continued to exist on the east side of the block of the *Crypta* and along the entire perimeter of the portico. In the late Medieval period, behind the perimeter wall of the monument, a massive wall of tufa and travertine blocks surmounted by brickwork, still preserved to a considerable height, abutted the houses and palaces of noble families 3). On the ground floor of the buildings were inserted shops which gave their name to the principal artery of the zone: the via delle Botteghe Oscure. In the mid 16th century, the Conservatorio di Santa Caterina della Rosa, a religious institution to assist the needy young girls of the city, was built on the site of the Monastero di Santa Maria *domine Rose*. This complex was expanded in the course of the second half of the 16th century and the first decades of the following century. Eventually, it occupied the most substantial part of the city block with its structures and a new church, the modern Santa Caterina dei Funari. In the 1940s, the buildings of the Conservatorio were in part demolished for a new construction in the area. Fortunately, this new building was never realised, and thus it was possible, after a period of abandonment, to undertake research and restoration.

Il Museo di Roma nel Medioevo (The Museum of Rome in the Medieval Period)

A new exhibition site of the Museo Nazionale Romano, the first section of the Museo di Roma nel Medioevo (Museum of Rome in the Medieval Period) opened to the public in 2000. It has been installed in the building already restored. Thus, the first portion of the project for the restoration and display of the entire city block has been concluded.

The museum itinerary is laid out within the historical buildings, with access to the vast archaeological area below. It is set out in two sections. The first section, *Archaeology and history of an urban landscape*, illustrates the transformations that this central sector of the urban landscape underwent from antiquity through the 20th century. The second section, *Rome from antiquity to the medieval period*, depicts the evolution of the city's culture between the 5th and 9th centuries.

The exhibition method begins with a global analysis of an urban sector and reconstructs in a rigorous and stimulating way all of the most varied aspects of city life of the past.

The museum display is organised as a thematic account on wall panels in which the archaeological material is illustrated and integrated with documents, reconstructive drawings of the rooms, relief models and virtual reconstructions on computerised supports. (F9)

The story of the site evolves from when the Campus Martius was a marshy plain at the foot of Capitoline Hill, to the construction of Balbus and the restorations of the imperial period, to the ruralisation of the urban landscape in the 5th century, to the construction of churches and medieval houses in the area, through to the complex of the Conservatorio di Santa Caterina della Rosa.

Aspects of daily life and the productive activity that were undertaken in the area as both the architecture and urban landscape were transformed emerge in the account of the site: the free distribution of grain in the *porticus Minucia* in the imperial period, the activity of the limekilns already present in the 9th century, the manufacture of cloth and rope in the medieval period, the life of the spinsters of the Conservatorio in Counter-reformation Rome.

One of the most significant results of the new museum is the “visibility” acquired of late antique and medieval Rome. The most substantial nucleus of the exhibition is composed of complexes of material discovered in the course of the excavations in the *Crypta*, amongst which, most significantly, the late antique and medieval deposit in the exedra. The deposit of the 7th century of the exedra includes thousands of objects, especially pottery but also fragments of glass objects, coins, lead seals. In addition, hundreds of objects of metal, bone, ivory, precious stones as well as lead models for the realisation of terracotta matrixes for fusion in precious metals and work

instruments belonging to a workshop that produced luxury goods for clothing and ornament were recovered. This discovery has made it possible to illuminate for the first time aspects of Rome as both producer and distributor, in the 7th century, of luxury manufactured goods with a diffusion in longobard Italy and in Germanic Europe. At the same time, it was demonstrated that Rome was the point of arrival of merchandise, goods and primary materials that reached the city from the overseas provinces of the Byzantine empire: from north Africa, Egypt, the Syrio-Palestine area and Asia Minor.

The material of the Crypta has been integrated with contemporary finds from the historical collections of Roman museums and from contexts recovered in the course of urban excavations in the last decades 5)

Project for the excavation and restoration of the entire complex

The project for the entire modern city block envisages a total of five functional lots of excavation, restoration, and display that are contextually viable. The archaeological itinerary will be completed and, the installation of the Museo di Roma nel Medioevo (Museum of Rome in the Medieval Period) from the 10th through the 15th centuries will continue within the palaces of medieval date.

The museum will always be connected in function with the archaeological activity that continues to be carried out in the area. In addition, it currently has laboratories, storerooms, and study rooms at its disposition. The construction of a hall/auditorium, on which work is about to begin, is projected in the Renaissance rooms of the Conservatorio di S. Caterina della Rosa, on the west side of the complex. Therefore, the project envisages the restoration of the entire urban sector, rendering accessible to the public the ancient porticoed area through the most significant historical periods, maintaining the coherent quality of the complex that is an inseparable unicum due both to the coherency of the ancient monument on which it was formed as well as the coherent nature of its end results and transformations. The realisation of the general project according to contextual lots makes it possible to quickly offer the public access to the parts of the complex that have been restored and fitted out.

The excavations and restoration work in progress

Excavations are in progress in the *insulae* to the east of the portico. The remains of a *Mithraeum*, established there at the beginning of the 3rd century, were found in one room of the ancient building to the south of the exedra. An exhibition, currently on display in one of the rooms of the museum, recounts the events that took place in these rooms from the period of their construction in the Trajanic period through their abandonment at the beginning of the 7th century. An enormous accumulation of debris then filled the rooms to a height of *circa* seven meters. The completion of the excavations and restoration will render the ancient buildings accessible to the public.

Excavation and restoration is also on-going in the medieval palaces erected between the 11th and 12th centuries that abut respectively on the north and south perimeter walls of the Crypta. In particular, in the palace of medieval origin that faces onto via delle Botteghe Oscure.

The archaeological investigations on the north front of the portico can be said to be completed in the area outside the north wall of the Crypta, along the *porticus Minucia*. An itinerary has been opened to the public along the beaten paths, continually renewed from the 5th to the 10th centuries, that ran along behind the south wall of the *porticus Minucia*. These are the late antique and medieval roads that connected the area of the *Campus Martius* with the Capitoline and the Fora. In the course of the 11th-12th centuries, the artery slowly reached its current limit as new constructions partially occupied the area behind the north wall of the Crypta.

The excavations have completely uncovered the building constructed against the perimeter wall north of the Crypta in the Domitianic reconstruction: a cistern fed by a branch of an aqueduct, probably the *Aqua Marcia*.

The building, in the form of a corridor with partitions within which open doors, is constructed on a system of vaults that rest on flat arches and are set on the ground, on top of the sewage conduit that was covered at the same time. Into this cistern flowed the system of rain water collection whose small wells connected to the conduit and relevant vertical pipes have been discovered in several points. The building is covered by a vault that rises to *circa* 9 meters above the floor of the cistern. On the west end, there is a staircase that leads to the terrace above the ceiling vault 6).

Restorations are in progress in the palace above, whose primary nucleus is made up of two towers, one to the east and one to the west. It was equipped with a portico on the eastern part and a staircase that began outside and led to the upper storeys. In the phase of the 13th century, the coats of arms found in the pictorial decoration of the walls testify that it belonged to families unknown until now. In this phase, the palace probably was raised a story in the west part and covered with a roof. In front of the original western tower rose a new building. Restoration of the palace is currently underway that naturally take into account all of its more significant phases down to the present day, in view of the museum display 7).

Notes

1) The extremely rich proconsul Lucius Cornelius Balbus, of Spanish origin, began the construction of the theatre after the triumph that he celebrated in 19 B.C. for his victory over the Garamanti, a people of Libya.

2) As a result of the discovery of the cistern that abuts the north wall of the portico, Adriano La Regina's hypothesis is plausible that interprets the "crypta" instead as the covered passageway on the west side of the portico, a road that the modern period became the via M. Caetani. See A. La Regina, in *The Balbi Crypta and the Museum of Medieval Archaeology in Rome*, in *la Repubblica of the Arts*, 15 April 2000.

3) the Saragona documented in the palace of medieval construction overlooking via delle Botteghe Oscure, to the north, the Pier Mattei Albertoni and the Bellomo in the palaces facing onto via dei Delfini, to the south.

4) Museo Nazionale Romano- Crypta Balbi: Project and realisation: Adriano La Regina; Committee for the scientific projection and its realisation: Maria Stella Arena, Paolo Delogu, Daniele Manacorda, Lidia Paroli, Marco Ricci, Lucia Saguì, Laura Vendittelli; scientific director and head of procedures: Laura Vendittelli, restoration project and director of the works: arch. M. Letizia Conforto; museum display: arch. Franco Ceschi.; director of the physical plant Maurizio Pesce; structural consultant ing. Mario Bellini; restoration of the painted surfaces and finds: Elio Paparatti.

Work in progress in the complex: project and realisation: Soprintendente per i Beni archeologici di Roma Angelo Bottini; scientific director and head of procedures: Laura Vendittelli; director of the works: M. Letizia Conforto; structural consultant ing. Mario Bellini; restoration of the painted surfaces and finds: Elio Paparatti.

5) The refined objects that enriched the luxury life of the senatorial families of the 4th and 5th centuries, of the Symmachi and the Valerii, whose houses were found on the Celian hill to the new residential and productive settlements of the carolingian period discovered in the Fora, the marble and pictorial furnishings of the early medieval churches, all contribute to delineate the transformation of the ancient city into the early medieval city.

6) The material recovered in the excavation of the conduits and wells documents the frequentation of the building at least down to the 6th century.

7) The surveys and graphic reconstructions of the east tower and cistern are by M.C.M. S.r.l.

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