

Roman Forum and Palatine Hill

Rome, Italy

Photographs by Alan Ward 2002, 2006

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

The Roman Forum and Palatine Hill are the sites of the earliest settlements in Rome, as well as the setting for the story of the mythological founding of the city. Initially, the Forum was a landscape with outdoor spaces for gathering and assembly; it was the public domain for a multiplicity of uses, that evolved to become an architectural ensemble. Large residences overlooking the Forum were added on Palatine Hill, organized around courtyard landscapes to make distinctly private realms, that were designed as an idealized version of country life. The layers of history over eight to ten thousand years of human occupation make the past seem palpable and reverberate, in what is now a landscape of ruins.

Palatine Hill rises over forty meters from the flood-prone Tiber to be a strategic location for defense, and it is the most central of Rome's hills, while still proximate to the river. An island in the Tiber with shallow rapids, made this a favorable point for the first viable crossing, more than 20 km from the sea, so that contact and trade between north and central Italy traversed these sites. Archeological evidence supports the theory that Rome's earliest settlements, during the Iron Age around the tenth century B.C., occurred on Palatine Hill with clusters of huts, and perhaps at lower elevations as well, along the edges of marsh land, that after being drained, became the Forum. In what may be an elaborated and distorted recall of historical events, the myth of the founding of the city by Romulus and Remus in 753 B.C., takes place at the Tiber River, Palatine Hill, and the future site of the Forum (1).

The Etruscans made the Forum a gathering space, beginning around 600 B.C., following the first channeling of springs to partially drain the wet soils.

The Forum originally referred to an outdoor space; the word "forum," derived from Latin, translated literally as "what is out of doors." It was a space with a full array of public uses, where political, civic, legal, social, as well as commercial activities took place at the center of the city. Originally a landscape, with references to meetings under the shade of fig trees, the Forum evolved in the Roman Republic by adding multiple buildings to shelter these activities (9). The Forum was an accumulation of structures, while not the product of a unified design, it was the built expression of the characteristic rhythmic and functional patterns of the culture. At the height of the empire in the second century, the Forum was an imposing architectural setting, however still loosely organized along a linear urban landscape, the north to south Via Sacra (4,9). The Forum was expanded architecturally to the north, with additional fora built under the rule of Augustus and Julius, along with the Colosseum to the south, and the Forum of Trajan, the last of the imperial fora to be built (13).

Palatine Hill was a prominent site for residences, evolving from houses on the hilltop and slopes, to large palaces built by modifying the terrain and terracing the steep grades. These enormous structures, while dominating the limited site area, were designed with courtyards and gardens open to the sky (27). Emperor Domitian had a royal palace built with a stadium-shaped courtyard, still visible today in ruins, that was probably a large planted landscape or garden (25,26). Courtyard gardens were an essential space in a Roman house to make an urban oasis and place of reflection, an illusion of the landscape of the country brought to the city in response to Rome's oppressive heat, unsanitary practices, and a public

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environment with multitudes of people. It was also a vivid reminder of the city's mythical origins in a landscape.

The Roman Forum and Palatine Hill became less significant after the capital of the empire was shifted to Constantinople in 310 AD. The fall of the empire, beginning with invasions in the early fifth century, followed by the severing of the aqueducts in 536, led to the center of power shifting after a millennium, from the Forum and Palatine Hill, to significant locations of the Christian church around the city. The population of Rome, over one million at the height of the empire, fell to less than one hundred thousand people clustered along the Tiber. The once vital expression of the Roman Republic at these two sites became bleak, desolated landscapes used for grazing animals, while the marble of the structures was plundered to melt down into *calc* to reinforce mortar. During the Middle Ages, the Forum had accumulated layers of debris covering the historical structures, and had reverted to a pastoral landscape, known as the *Campo Vaccino*, or cattle field (12). Palatine Hill also deteriorated to become a more open landscape with fields and vineyards, however, a few churches arose surrounded by small villages, recalling the earliest settlements at this location.

During the Renaissance, the reverence for the classical world shifted the perception of these landscapes. The powerful Farnese family aimed to restore Palatine Hill to its former significance in 1550 by engaging Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola to design one of Europe's first private botanical gardens. The gardens, interwoven with small, elegant buildings and grottoes, are partially preserved (18-20). Vignola, who would later design Villa Lante,

composed the site with trees, shrubs, and vines on an array of terraces, along with fountains and aviaries, inspired by ancient Roman gardens.

What was once an architectural ensemble of classical structures at the Forum and on the Palatine, is now a visitor destination, a designed landscape that is an outdoor museum of forty hectares, attracting over four million visitors a year. Artists, architects, writers and poets, had for centuries made the Forum a significant pilgrimage for those seeking the classical legacy, however it wasn't until the early twentieth century with the establishment of the Antiquarium, that it became formalized as a visitor destination. The *Via dei Fori Imperiali* now bisects the historic sites, however, it is still possible in the early morning, to experience and reflect on the Forum and Palatine as a landscape with a multiplicity of meanings. Rome has pastoral origins in the story of Romulus and Remus, which takes place on Palatine Hill, and on the future location of the Forum, which has a semblance of that original landscape with ruins now preserved in green spaces with trees, including a sizable, solitary fig tree (9,16). The sites have transitioned from primarily an architectural ensemble, with an expression of the value of shelter, to a landscape where natural processes have taken over, while primarily cultural assets, they are now significant green spaces with environmental and ecological value. The stone fragments, some preserved and others restored, can also be experienced as its own distinctive form of art – as in a sculpture garden. However, it is foremost a landscape that elicits a reflection on the past, a place to contemplate Rome's contributions to the conceptual underpinnings and framework of Western Civilization.

List of Photographs

1. Walkway to Forum from Capitoline Hill, Romulus and Remus sculpture, former site of the *Tabularium*
2. Palatine Hill, Temple of Saturn, Temple of Vespasian, path from Capitoline Hill
3. View south of Arch of Septimius Severus, Palatine Hill, Temple of Saturn
4. View south of Via Sacra and Arch of Septimius Severus
5. View west of Temple of Saturn, Arch of Septimius Severus
6. View north of Julia Basilica, Capitoline Hill
7. Julia Basilica (foreground), Curia Julia, and the Comitium
8. IMPO: *Imperator*, AVG: *Augustus*, TRIB: *Tribunica Potestas*
9. Curia Julia, Basilica Emilia, Via Sacra, Arch of Titus, fig tree, Palatine Hill
10. Temple of Antonius and Faustina, Temple of Romulus, Basilica of Mexentius
11. Basilica of Mexentius, Temple of Venus and Rome, Arch of Titus
12. Fragments of the Colussus of Constantine, now on Capitoline Hill, originally in the Basilica of Mexentius
13. Forum of Trajan, Monument to *Vittorio Emanuele II*
14. Forum and Markets of Trajan
15. View north, Palatine, Capitoline Hill, former site of the *Tabularium*
16. View north, Capitoline Hill, Monument to *Vittorio Emanuele II*, Temple of Antonius and Faustina
17. Palatine Hill, Capitoline Hill
18. Arch of Titus, Palatine Hill, Farnese Gardens
19. Remains of Farnese Gardens
20. Pavilions and pines in the Farnese Gardens
21. Path to Palatine Hill
22. Path and stairs in the Farnese Gardens
23. Visitor stairs to pavilions in the Farnese Gardens
24. Former convent of the Visitation Nuns, *Casina Farnese*
25. View west of Stadium courtyard in the Palace of Domitian
26. View east of Stadium courtyard in the Palace of Domitian
27. Courtyard, *Domus Tiberiana*
28. *Domus Augustana*
29. View north to Saint Peter's Basilica from Palatine Hill
30. View from Palatine Hill to the Colosseum
31. View south of Aventine Hill from Palatine Hill
32. Arch of Constantine, Colosseum































































Notes

See *The Epic City: Urbanism, Utopia, and the Garden in Ancient Greece and Rome* by Annette Lucia Giesecke for the pastoral origins in the founding of Rome, and “Forum Romanum: A Kaleidoscopic Analysis” by Allyson Zuckerberg for the early patterns of use of the Forum, and “Landscapes of Ruin and Imagination in the Antiquarian Gardens of Renaissance Rome” by Kathleen Christian for the meaning of ruins.