

On Giacomo Boni, the origins of the Forum, and where we stand today

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The pioneer in excavating early sites in the Roman Forum was Giacomo Boni (b. Venice 1859; d. Rome 1925). He lived through the turbulent years when the new nation of Italy was starting to find its stride. A number of puzzles associated with his life and work, in particular the origins of the Forum, are starting to be better understood; by digging more deeply into archives in Milan, Rome and Venice, it has been possible to make gains. A conference held recently in Venice gave the opportunity to bring together the two sides of his life in Venice and Rome.¹ In a moment, something will be said about the new perspectives that were discussed at the *Convegno*.² Then I will turn to Boni's work in the Forum and his ideas about its origins.³ In the final section I will discuss briefly where the study of the origins of the Forum now stands. Returning to this question⁴ gives an opportunity to update the gains (e.g., the discovery of clay beds in the Velabrum) that have been made over the last 25 years, specific questions that remain open (the dating of the first gravel pavement of the Forum), and the work that needs to be done.

The key years in Boni's work around the Forum ran from October 1898 through 1904 when he had the opportunity to conduct excavations at more than 8 different sites, including the Comitium, Regia and Sepolcreto. Boni is well known for taking a stratigraphic approach to the excavation of classical sites, using aerial photography to study the topography of the Forum, and for pioneering collaboration with specialists in the natural sciences, including geology. He was the first archaeologist in a good position to reach deeply buried archaeological remains in the Forum. While clearly trying to do too much in too short a time, he did manage to produce at least one preliminary report on almost all of his Forum excavations (Tables 1-2 below), with the notable exception of his deep sounding of 1903-4 in the center of the Forum (see its location on fig. 1 in color) which has long been a major puzzle for scholars of early Rome. Dug beneath the foundations of the monument that he called the *Equus Domitiani*, it was in technical terms his most difficult excavation. Starting at the Forum's marble pavement, he dug down to a depth of 6 m where, at the base of a long stratigraphic sequence, he found several human skeletons resting on natural soil. He made sure that the fieldwork was well documented in visual terms (fig. 2) but he never published a report on the lower levels of the deep sounding, and there is, to my knowledge, no unpublished report. Why was Boni unable to write even a short preliminary report on his deep sounding? For many years it was unknown whether Boni had his own ideas about how the Forum began. In fact, his ideas about the origins of the Forum were at odds with what he found: he did not know what to make of the skeletons resting on the natural soil.

In this sounding, the challenge was that of digging the lowest 5 levels (fig. 2: strata 25-29) in waterlogged soils below the water-table of the modern city. It took a Venetian

1 The conference, "Tra Roma e Venezia, la cultura dell'antico nell'Italia dell'Unità. Giacomo Boni e i contesti", was held at the Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arte in Venice on Sept. 18-19, 2015. The first day was devoted to Boni in Venice, the second to his life and work in Rome.

2 Since it will be 2-3 years before the conference proceedings appear, my introduction to the conference, "Boni between Venice and Rome", will appear in *Atti Veneto* 174 (2015-16) 419-53.

3 *Infra* n.30.

4 A. J. Ammerman, "On the origins of the Forum," *AJA* 94 (1990) 627-45.