

Muri dei bassi secoli in Rome: observations on the re-use of statuary in walls found on the Esquiline and Caelian after 1870

Robert Coates-Stephens

Introduction

After Rome was declared capital of a unified Italy in 1870, the fabric of the semi-rural Papal city was irremediably altered by a vast modernisation and expansion programme. Major new roads were cut through the mediaeval quarters of Trastevere, the Campus Martius and the Suburra; new ministries, hospitals and barracks were constructed; and great swathes of the largely unsettled *disabitato* were parcelled up for new housing. The zone chosen for the first wave of new buildings was, as E. La Rocca has pointed out, both closest to the main railway station and farthest from the Vatican, stretching from S. Maria Maggiore in a south-easterly direction over the brow of the Esquiline to Porta Maggiore (fig. 1). No standing ancient remains were spared demolition, with the massive exceptions of the Minerva Medica, the Trophies of Marius, and the Aurelian Walls. Of the hundreds of new discoveries made during the works, only the so-called Auditorium of Maecenas and one or two stretches of the Servian Wall were preserved. Even archaeologists of the calibre of R. Lanciani and A. Pellegrini found it impossible to keep up with the vast amount of excavation, demolition, and new building. It is not therefore surprising that in a period which could not even supply clear documentation of such fabulous imperial complexes as the Horti Lamiani, details regarding late antiquity and the Middle Ages were never recorded.¹

The ancient topography of the zone had been dominated from the Augustan period by the *Horti*, rambling residential complexes whose principal characteristic was their extensive gardens, interspersed with such structures as *nymphaea*, summer-houses, *cryptoportici* and small baths. By the early 2nd c. these seem to have become absorbed into the imperial patrimony. Their later history remains mysterious: of the original properties, the Regionary Catalogues of the 4th c. record only the *Horti Pallantiani*, although earlier but now defunct estates lived on through toponyms such as *in Taurellum* and *palatium Licinianum*. Early mediaeval texts record principally churches and monasteries, although some of the aqueducts and roads were maintained, and enigmatic properties such as the *domus Merulana* and the *domus Pilati* are mentioned. Even in the 10th and 11th c., the Esquiline was very far from resembling the *disabitato* of Duperac's and Nolli's celebrated panoramas and maps: property documents record thriving settlements around S. Maria Maggiore, S. Vito (mod. piazza Vittorio Emanuele) and Porta Maggiore, and ancient topography still had its echoes in names such as *Massa Iuliana* and *Superagger*.²

Since habitation of the Esquiline was more or less continuous until at least the later Middle Ages, our date-range for the poorly named *muri dei bassi secoli* is potentially very wide. It

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- 1 Most exasperating for the current study is the absence of any photographs of the statue-built walls. Cima 1986 and La Rocca 1987, 1-4, summarise the excavations of "Roma capitale" and give details of the bibliographical and archival sources, to which may be added the collected edition of Lanciani's articles written in English for *The Athenaeum* (Lanciani 1988). F. Gori, who showed some antagonism to Lanciani and his colleagues, provides an original description of the excavations in his own short-lived journal, *Archivio storico artistico archeologico e letterario della città e provincia di Roma* 1-5 (1875-83), including, for example, the surprising claim that much of the material of the Servian Wall was sold off to builders and used in the foundations of the new piazza Vittorio Emanuele (ibid. 5, 60).
 - 2 *Horti* in *LTUR* III, 56 (*Calyclani*) to 88 (*Variani*); for late antiquity and after, see Guidobaldi 1998; De Rossi and Gatti 1890; Coates-Stephens 1996, 246; for hamlets and toponyms in the 11th c., see De Rossi 1889 and documents 12, 104 and 120 in *Regesto Sublacense* (edd. L. Allodi and G. Levi; Rome 1885).