

# Hadrian's lost Temple of Trajan

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Our knowledge of the topography of ancient Rome is a fragile construct, concocted from disparate mixtures of written, pictorial and material sources, loosely bound together in a judicious balance of probabilities. One tiny piece of new documentary evidence can upset the balance; new archaeological excavations can bring about a total collapse. The largest excavations in the city for 70 years are currently underway on both sides of Via dei Fori Imperiali, attempting to finish the job left so tantalisingly incomplete when the road was created in the 1930s, only stopping short of digging up the road itself. To some extent the results are confirmation of what we already knew (or are being treated as such), but at the same time everything is subtly changing before our eyes. Almost every detail of I. Gismondi's famous 1933 plan of the Imperial fora, on which three generations have been trained, is having to be corrected and it is going to take years for the implications to be fully absorbed. My particular focus here is the Temple of Divus Trajan, which in the last 10 years has gone from being one of our most solid constructs to one of the most precarious.

For centuries, during which next to nothing was known of his Forum or Basilica, topographers confidently placed Trajan's temple somewhere close to his Column, if only because they are linked in the Regiary Catalogues for *Regio VIII (templum divi Traiani et columna cochlis)*. In 1534 Bartolomeo Marliani, on the evidence of two colossal column shafts lying beside S. Maria di Loreto, which had been dug out when building the church in 1507-27, positioned the temple on axis to the north;<sup>1</sup> around the same time Pirro Ligorio, also citing massive column shafts he had seen in excavations, preferred to locate it on axis to the east.<sup>2</sup> In the 18th and 19th c. Marliani's northward placement gained support every time building operations disturbed the ground under the adjacent Palazzo Bonelli-Imperiali-Valentini (now Provincia di Roma; hereafter Valentini). Lengths of broken granite column shaft, white marble capitals and pieces of cornice attested to a building with a colossal Corinthian order, some 22 m (75 Roman feet) high, its columns 60 Roman feet high, the shafts once monoliths 50 Roman feet long.<sup>3</sup> In the 19th and 20th c., during which the central section of the Basilica Ulpia and the E porticus of Trajan's Forum were eventually uncovered, the Temple of Trajan remained hidden, but no one doubted its existence. Its position and architectural style, its relationship to the Column and the rest of the Forum, were analysed and reconstructed on paper in increasing detail.<sup>4</sup> In the later 20th c., it acquired a special resonance in sustaining the theory of a Trajanic 'master-plan', in which the Column was designed from the start to become Trajan's tomb, with a library on either side and the temple positioned at the apex to form a fitting climax to the whole suite of Imperial fora.<sup>5</sup>

Then, in the 1990s, R. Meneghini, archaeologist in the service of the Comune di Roma, published a series of articles which threatened to turn the picture upside down.<sup>6</sup> Access to the cellars of Palazzo Valentini and to the results of some geological cores which had been drilled around its perimeter in 1989, combined with various unpublished documents he had examined in the State and municipal archives, led him to conclude that the temple was not where it should

1 B. Marliani, *Topographia antiquae Romae* (Lyon 1534) 102: *Ex columnis vero, quas diximus, duae mirae magnitudinis sub tellure adhuc iacent prope ecclesiam S. Mariae cognomento Loreti.*

2 *Infra* n.77.

3 *Infra* nn. 48-53.

4 *Infra* n.20.

5 P. Zanker, "Das Trajansforum in Rom," *AA* 1970, 499-544, followed by S. Settis *et al.*, *La colonna traiana* (Turin 1988); J. Packer, *The Forum of Trajan* (Berkeley, CA 1997) 276-83; F. Coarelli, *The Column of Trajan* (Rome 2000) 14; and J. W. Stamper, *The architecture of Roman temples* (Cambridge 2005) 173-83.

6 R. Meneghini, "Nuovi dati sulle biblioteche e il templum divi Traiani nel Foro di Traiano," *BollArch* 19-21 (1993) 13-21; "Templum Divi Traiani," *BullCom* 97 (1996) 47-88 (= Meneghini 1996); "L'architettura del foro di Traiano attraverso i ritrovamenti archeologici più recenti," *RömMitt* 105 (1998) 127-48 (= Meneghini 1998); "The Temple of Deified Trajan" in Coarelli (*supra* n.5) 250-54.