

A grotto-shrine at the headwaters of the *Aqua Traiana*

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This article reports, in a preliminary fashion, on a discovery of great significance to the history and archaeology of the aqueducts of Rome. In spring 2009, after a period of intensive archival research and communication with public authorities in the districts of Bracciano and Manziana, two of the present authors (M. and E. O'Neill) gained temporary access to a defunct spring source on the W rim of the caldera of Lake Bracciano, 45 km northwest of Rome. The area has long been valued for its abundance of springs delivering premium-quality water for a variety of destinations and uses. Many of them have been exploited since antiquity, but few preserve visible traces of Roman engineering. The source in question, buried deep within a thicket of mature fig trees and lost to modern scholarship,¹ is a nearly pristine grotto-shrine of the Roman Imperial period, later adapted to accommodate a hermitage church named S. Fiora (fig. 1). Not only does the grotto encompass a capacious springhouse, in well-preserved Roman masonry, but it connects to several feeder conduits uphill and to c.80 m of an equally well-preserved aqueduct channel downhill. By all appearances, S. Fiora began its life as the headwaters of the *Aqua Traiana*.

The *Aqua Traiana*

The *Aqua Traiana* was dedicated on 24 June, A.D. 109, two days after the *Thermae Traiani* on the Oppian Hill and less than 6 months before the *Naumachia Traiani* in the *Ager Vaticanus*. These two grand waterworks may have offered justification enough for introducing a new aqueduct to Rome, but the *Fasti Ostienses* add an important detail about the system serving them: the *Traiana* was *tota urbe salientem*, a pan-urban network of streetside outlets and basins. With so vast an urban distribution network, the new aqueduct probably rivaled its largest predecessors in volume.² Trajan celebrated his great project with a series of coins issued between 109 and his death in 117 (fig. 2).

Since the 17th c., it has been known that the *Traiana's* numerous sources originated in the water-rich volcanic hills west and northwest of Lake Bracciano. Gathering these waters along the way, the conduit circled clockwise around the lake before turning toward Rome. Fieldwork and archival research conducted by the O'Neills in 2010 has clarified many details about this system (fig. 3). As recently as the mid-18th c., A. Cassio was able to identify three principal sectors from which the *Traiana* drew its waters, but by the 1870s R. Lanciani could positively identify none of them. Cassio refers to the headwaters (*capi*) of the network as "those that came from the so-called Fosso di Fiora", a stream running past the church for which it was clearly named. He said nothing more about these *capi*, remarking only that they were *smarrite* (lost),³ by which he presumably meant not that they were

1 The only modern reports of which we are aware are two brief articles, with photographs, in the local periodical *La voce del lago* — one by Architetto G. Curatolo (no. 40, Nov. 2005), the other by Dott. S. Cecconi (no. 61, May-June 2010); both are available online. We are grateful to Arch. Curatolo for his assistance in exploring S. Fiora.

2 Bloch 1944, 339. On the *Aqua Traiana* within the city, see also Van Buren and Stevens 1915-16; Bell 1993 and 1994; Evans 1994, 129-33; Taylor 2000, 207-47, and id. 2010; Wilson 2000. On the *Naumachia*, see Berlan-Bajard 2006, 178-215; Mazzei 2008; Cariou 2009, 111-61.

3 Cassio 1757, 1.170: "Le sorgenti in tempo di Trajano scorrevano da tre parti in numero maggiore di quelle sono al presente; perchè i Capi di quelle, che venivano dal Fosso che si diceva