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3. Studying the valley of the Colosseum (1970-2000): achievements and prospects

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In 1985, a detailed report covering 17 years of archaeological study of the Colosseum was published.¹ In 1968 the responsibility for conservation of the amphitheatre had been transferred from the Soprintendenza ai Monumenti di Roma e del Lazio to the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma. This transferral was more than an administrative change: the definitive acknowledgement of the archaeological importance of the monument paved the way for a different conservation policy, one that was no longer sectoral but was directed towards re-inserting the monument in its ancient topographical context, from which it had been separated for much of this century. The attention given exclusively to conserving ancient structures by the organizations responsible for its care, as well as massive earth-moving operations carried out since the early 19th c. to 'isolate' the building, had both had negative consequences not only for archaeological knowledge but also for a broader understanding of the original nature and topographical context of its historical configuration. Work carried out in the 19th c. had arrested the course of destruction, and the structural coherence and unity of the Colosseum, which had been lost due to its exploitation over centuries as a quarry for building materials, was restored sufficiently to guarantee its conservation. Its collapse had been stemmed by erecting gigantic buttresses and by reconstructing certain missing sectors.² At the same time the huge archaeological patrimony recovered in the building and in the valley of the Colosseum was dispersed on no scientific criteria, passing into the possession first of the Papal State, then of the Italian State, and finally of the Comune di Roma.³ The division of objects affected particularly coins and worked marbles. In general, antiquarian research found itself rather deceived, as early as the Napoleonic era, since the majority of the finds turned out to belong to the Late Empire and therefore considered not very valuable artistically.⁴

The first half of the 20th c. was characterized by measures taken for the purposes of political propaganda. The monument was adapted to the needs of mass audiences and the general public. Once the ruins of the Meta Sudans and the foundation of the Colossus of Nero were demolished, and the valley floor was covered with asphalt to benefit the circulation of traffic, the valley was transformed into the piazza del Colosseo (fig. 1). The excavation of the subterranean chambers was carried out in various stages from the beginning of the 19th c. and ended in 1938. Those responsible for the excavations were not motivated by any antiquarian spirit but by the need to preserve from ruin structures already discovered (they had been subject to filling up with residual materials). Unlike what had happened in the previous century, the excavation did not provoke any cultural debates: once it was freed from earth and subjected to restoration works (not always respecting the original forms), the *hypogea* became part of the panorama that could be enjoyed from the belvederes that were erected at the ends of the axes along the first two levels.⁵

On the other hand, specific studies of the large number of inscriptions were conducted. The Colosseum produced more than 500 inscribed items, most of them found during the excavation

1 *Roma. Archeologia nel centro I*, 113-46.

2 This refers, in particular, to the two large buttresses at the ends of the major axis by R. Stern and L. Valadier respectively; to the reconstruction of part of the south façade, the work of G. Salvi; and to the reconstruction of the *summa cavea* on the opposite side, done under L. Canina. Cf. Rea in *Il Colosseo* 1999, 214-15.

3 Rea 1998, 71-81.

4 *Ibid.* 74-75.

5 Schingo and Rea 1993, 65-101.