



Palazzo Valentini (Rome, Italy) - Archaeological Investigations and Preservation

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Abstract

The archaeological remains of ancient Roman houses uncovered beneath Palazzo Valentini, the institutional centre of the Provincia, but also one of the most important renaissance palaces of Rome, are now on permanent display, adding to Rome's already rich historical and artistic heritage.

Here we summarise the archaeological work stressing the difficulties to overcome in order to allow visitors to be all round the site. We also list some of the diagnostic investigations performed to both increase the knowledge of the site and to evaluate its conservation state.

Valentini Palace

Valentini Palace is located in the historical centre of Rome. The building born in the middle of 1500 and was reconstructed by Cardinal Michele Bonelli at the end of the same century as a part of his project of the Fori Imperiali's redevelopment. In 1827 it was bought by the banker Vincenzo Valentini. In 1873 it became the head office of Provincia di Roma [1].

The archaeological site

The archaeological excavations conducted by the Provincia di Roma [1, 2, 4, 5] began in 2005 in some rooms at the underground level and represent the first phase of an articulated project, connected to the study of the history and architecture of the building, of restoring and taking a new function of the area. The project, which involves a team of archaeologists, art historians and architects, most of all working for the provincial Administration, is directed and coordinated by dr. Roberto Del Signore, with the aid of the architects Rosella Russo and Luisa Napoli. The excavations, directed by Prof. Eugenio La Rocca and me, with the collaboration of the Cooperativa Parsifal and of the Società Archeometra, have been particularly complex for the presence of the palace above and for the existence of very deep earth fillings. Moreover the groundwater outcrops, now as in the antiquity, at the level of about 6 metres below the street level and it contributes to create a very humid microclimate, in spite of an air-conditioning system planned for the site and always in function.

It has been also very complex to plan and carry out the visitor's itinerary, for which we had to respect the archaeological and historical structures and their visibility and, at the same time, the security and the possibility of a disabled (wheelchair) access. So in all rooms in which we excavated we



Fig. 1; One of the Domus's room and the reconstructed pavement of the upper floor

chose an itinerary made of glass and iron floors and runways linked to the foundations of the palace or to walls without decorations.

The excavations have been conducted in four different areas: in the rooms under the Consiliar Hall, along Vicolo di S. Bernardo on the west side of the palace; in the rooms along Via di S. Eufemia, on the east side; in the so-called Piccole Terme at the NW corner; in the cellars called ex Carceri on the southern side.

In the first area the limited excavation [6] has revealed some walls in opus latericium of the beginning of the Hadrianic period, probably related to the podium of a public building, whose function has not yet been surely discerned, but probably the Temple of Traianus Divus. This hypothesis seems to be confirmed by the results of a recent excavation in the ex Carceri [6]: here we found a huge foundation in opus caementicium and big blocks in travertino and peperino which probably supported enormous monolithic columns (diameter m 1,83-1,90; presumable heigh m 15) in Egyptian grey granito from the Mons Claudianus. Parts of these columns were found collapsed over the spoiled foundation during the XII century. Columns and foundation were probably part of the famous temple.

In the other two areas the excavations have disclosed part of a high residential headquarter of the mid- and late Empire “in the shade” of the Trajan’s Forum.

The five rooms excavated between 2005 and 2007 on the east side of the palace have revealed a continue series of building phases between the 1st and the 5th century A.D. The most important remains belong to two rich domus of the mid- and late Empire, called domus A and B [1], with luxurious internal decoration (figure 1) and a thermal complex belonging to one of them [2].

We ignore the names of the owners and the possible tenants of the two domus, but for their position in the centre of the Urbs, adjoining the Imperial Fora, and for their dimensions and plan, typical of the important late Roman domus, we can suggest that they were senators or dignitaries of the imperial court [3].

Diagnostic investigations

Together with the colleagues of the Department of Chemistry of the University of Rome “La Sapienza”, we regularly control the microclimatic situation. They are also studying the right lighting to reduce or even to prevent the growth of vegetable microorganisms.

The origin of degrading stains on the floor of one room was also looked for and, in the same room, the salts content was determined on one of its wall.

Coins, marbles and glasses, found during the excavation, were also analysed.

Conclusions

The cooperation among archaeologists, art historians, restorers and conservation scientists, thank to funding from Rome’s Province and to the virtual “in site” reconstruction cured by Piero Angela, allows people to plunge into the ancient roman atmosphere.

References

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