

## ROMA ANTICA. CENTRO STORICO

### Introduction

Founded by Romulus in 753 BC, according to tradition, and definitively fallen as capital of the Roman Empire in 476, Rome was born at the crossroads of the road that connected the coastal salt pans with the interior of the peninsula, with the one between Etruria and Campania. Very soon, on the left bank of the Tiber, cosmopolitan places of exchange developed. In the 6th century BC, with the Etruscan dynasty of the Tarquinii, the civic centre of the city was structured around the Forum thanks to daring drainage work that until then had been marshy. The end of the Punic wars in 146 B.C. led to a rapid development of the city. The power of the Republic was celebrated by the construction of temples, basilicas, triumphal arches and memorials, mostly concentrated in the Forum area. Very soon, the growth of the city made the construction of new public spaces necessary. Thus, over little more than two centuries, five new Forums developed, those of Caesar, Augustus, Vespasian, Domitian/Nerva and Trajan, aimed at exalting the dynasty then in power. Until the fall of the Empire, many Emperors tried to gain the favour of the Roman people by commissioning performance buildings - circus, stadium, theatre, amphitheatre, *odeon*... -, commemorative monuments - arches, columns, nymphaea... - as well as large thermal complexes.

### History

To the west, the Republican Forum, crossed from east to west by the Via Sacra, was dominated by the façade of the *Tabularium*, seat of the city archives, in front of which stand the eight columns of the temple of Saturn, which served as the seat of the treasury of the Roman state. Leaning against the *Tabularium* are the foundations of the temple of Vespasian and Titus, deified emperors: of this temple only three columns are preserved, next to which stand the three arches of the Arch of Septimius Severus, built in 203, whose bas-reliefs narrate episodes of the emperor's campaigns against the Parthians. Near the arch, the *Curia Julia*, built by Caesar, was the meeting place of the senators. Occupied by minor monuments and honorary columns, the large space in front of the *Tabularium* is bordered to the north by the *Basilica Aemilia*, dating back to the 2nd century B.C., and to the south by the *Basilica Julia*, begun by Caesar as part of a major project to monumentalise the Forum. Further east, the temple of the Dioscuri, dating back to the first years of the Republic, but rebuilt in the age of Tiberius, stands opposite the temple of Antoninus and Faustina, whose façade has kept its six marble columns; this temple was transformed into the church of S. Lorenzo in Miranda in the Middle Ages. On the right side of the church, the temple of Romulus was dedicated by Maxentius to his son, deified in 309. At the eastern end of the square, the arch of Titus commemorates the conquest of Jerusalem in 71 AD, while the basilica of Maxentius was inaugurated by Constantine after his victory at the Milvian bridge, in 312. From the last century of the Republic, new spaces of leisure, commerce and commemoration were created: the Forum of Caesar, with the temple of Venus; the Forum of Augustus, dominated by the temple of Mars the Avenger; the Forum of Vespasian; that of Domitian, completed by Nerva; finally, the most grandiose, built by Apollodorus of Damascus for the Emperor Trajan after his triumph over the Dacians, between 107 and 113. To the east of the Forum, inside the park of Nero's *domus Aurea*, in 68 AD Vespasian undertook the construction of an amphitheatre known as the Colosseum, derived from Nero's bronze *Colossus*, 35 m high, which stood next to it; its complex network of service basements dates back to an

intervention by Domitian. To the north of the amphitheatre, Titus had a thermal complex built on a scale then unheard of in Rome. In this same area, marked by a monumental conical fountain of Domitian age, the *Meta sudans*, Hadrian built one of the largest temples in the city, dedicated to Venus and Rome; later, Constantine celebrated his victory over Maxentius with the construction, on the ancient triumphal way, of a splendid three-arched arch.

### **Rediscovery and restoration**

During the Renaissance, the rediscovery of the monuments of the Roman Forum, which became known as Campo Vaccino ("Cow's Field"), sealed by several metres of floods, was followed by an intense season of excavations: while inscriptions and statues went to enrich private collections, the buildings were mainly used as quarries for building materials throughout the 17th century. The first systematic excavations, started in 1788, gradually brought the ruins to light: between the last quarter of the 19th century and the beginning of the following century, almost the entire area we visit today was already visible. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the Colosseum was for a long time used as a quarry, sparing however its northern part, included in the important pilgrimage route that connected St. Peter's with the Basilica of St. John Lateran. The plundering of the enormous building stopped only during the pontificate of Pius VII, who consolidated the preserved part of its outer ring, so as to make it a remembrance site of Christian martyrs. The base of the *Colossus* was destroyed in 1936, together with the *Meta sudans*, to give way to the military parades of the fascist regime. Incorporated in the convent of Santa Francesca Romana, the temple of Venus and Rome was subject to extensive digging and restoration between 1933 and 1935. All these monuments are part of the area added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1980, extended in 1990, which now includes the historic centre of Rome *intra muros*, the extraterritorial properties of the Holy See and St. Peter's Basilica *fuori le Mura*, for a total of more than 1,430 hectares. The numerous public buildings in Rome, extremely well preserved, bear witness to the almost 3,000 years of Rome's history, when it was at the centre of a powerful Empire. The city, from the Renaissance onwards, has profoundly influenced the evolution of architecture, painting and sculpture throughout the European world, and beyond. The Roman Empire, both pagan and Christian, allowing for unification of much of the ancient world, thus gave a fundamental contribution, particularly in the fields of art, architecture, literature and law, to the establishing of Western civilisation.