



Buildings of ancient Rome

The Porticus of Octavia

NARRATOR:

A short way to the North of the vegetable market lie the remains of the Porticus of Octavia.

What survives is the gateway in to what was a large rectangular piazza with columns all around within which were two temples. Now the area has been built upon and the most visible remains are the monumental gateway, or propylon, to the precinct.

The area in front of the gate has only recently been excavated, providing us with the opportunity to carefully examine the remains of the propylon. First of all what is the overall form of the monument?

There is a large pediment supported by piers at either end, two marble columns to the left and a brick arch to the right.

The whole is not symmetrical and ordered, there are different building materials used. The building seems to be a mixture of styles, designs and materials.

To the right behind the brick arch is a brick wall with a large door at the back. This is the door to the church of Sant' Angelo in Peschiera.

In the early middle ages (the 8th century) the church was built inside the remains of the Roman building, and this led to the preservation of the original Roman structure.

The side walls of the gate were constructed of brick with a large single arch forming a side entrance.

This side view makes it clear that the gateway had depth. The brick arch is finished with a marble edging.

On the left hand side it is possible to discern the original function of the building: behind the front row of columns is another row. Going through the entrance three columns of the inner façade of the porch survive, enmeshed with the fabric of the church.

This provides an impression of its original function as an entrance into the temple precinct.

Up above the inside of the pediment, that would have been hidden from view behind a wooden ceiling, is an apparent jumble of stones.

Pieces of columns have been incorporated in the structure of the pediment. What's going on? The other side of the pediment is plain and smooth. It has been built from stone that had previously been used in a different ancient building.

On the architrave of the pediment, above the columns, are the remains of an inscription.

It starts 'Imp Caes Septimius Severus' it gives us the names of the emperor Septimius Severus and his son Caracalla and their titles including the number of times they had been granted tribunicial powers and the title imperator. These enable the dating of the inscription to 203 CE.

The bottom line of the inscription reads 'incendio corruptam rest...' although most of

'corruptam' is now illegible it means 'They restored the building that had been ruined by fire'. So this confirms the deduction made from the reused column drums that the gateway had been rebuilt.

The gateway was rebuilt using the Corinthian order. The capitals have the typical acanthus leaves, but the capitals are elongated and the leaves drawn out, a form typical of the second and early third centuries CE.

It's not certain that the re-used column drums and architraves come from the earlier porticus that was destroyed by fire, but written sources testify that the building, built by Augustus and is dedicated in the name of his sister Octavia some time after 27 BCE, was damaged by fire in 80 CE.

The Porticus of Octavia, in its turn, replaced an earlier porticus built by Quintus Caecilius Metellus Macedonicus with the spoils of his victories in Greece in 146 BCE. His porticus, of which little remains, provided an enclosure for the earlier Temple of Juno Regina vowed by Marcus Aemilius Lepidus in battle with the Ligurians and dedicated in 179 BCE. Beside this Metellus built the Temple of Jupiter Stator, the first temple in Rome entirely built of marble, and designed by a Greek architect Hermodoros of Salamis. Its statues were carved by the Greeks.

Fragments of the temples survive, encased in these buildings.

The area in front of the temples contained 34 equestrian statues representing Alexander the Great and the generals who died fighting at his side against the Persians at the battle of Granicus in 334 BCE. These statues, by a Greek sculptor Lysippos, were brought to Rome by Metellus as spoils of war. Another statue honoured Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi. It was the first public statue of a woman to be set up in Rome.