



Buildings of ancient Rome

Largo Argentina

NARRATOR:

To the North of the Circus of Flaminius, in the Largo Argentina, a row of four temples has been excavated in a block beneath the city streets. The sequence of the development of the site is complex and the divinities of the temples have not been certainly identified, but it is possible to trace their development from the third century BCE to the first century CE. For convenience the temples are known as A, B, C and D from the north to the south.

The oldest temple is Temple C, an Italic temple built on a high podium.

The area around the temple, originally paved in tufo blocks in the third century BCE, can still be seen here in the deepest part of the excavation. The steps of the temple, where the altar lay, rise towards the podium, but have been built over by later layers of paving.

Temple A was built next, on the same level of paving, this too was an Italic temple. It owes its preservation to the fact that it was converted into the church San Nicola dei Cesarini

Although most of the church has been demolished, two apses containing frescos and the altar still remain

The apses of the church can be clearly seen from behind where they are built onto the rear of the podium.

The temples closely back on to the Porticus of Pompey, which contained a theatre and gardens, including a public latrine.

Each of the temples has a complex building history, for example, the first columns on the right of Temple A are made of white travertine stone, but they are replacements for earlier tufo columns which were fluted and then stuccoed.

Towards the end of the second century the height of the podium was reduced when Temple D, the largest of the temples, was built. At the same time the whole area was repaved to prevent flooding and to set all of the three temples on the same level.

This new layer of paving can also be seen in front of Temple C, where it covers the steps of the earlier temple.

The change in the ground level can be clearly seen by comparing the level of the bottom of the podium of the adjacent temples C and the later Temple D, built nearly two hundred years later.

Temple D is only half excavated, the remainder still lies under the road. What can be seen of the steps and the podium is a late first century BCE rebuilding of the original temple, and its appearance is further complicated by the even later, white travertine paving.

The circular Temple B is the most recent. It was built at the beginning of the first century BCE. The temple would have had eighteen Corinthian columns originally, with a flight of steps at the front. In general terms it would have looked like the circular temple of Hercules Olivarius by the Tiber.

But the Greek design has columns resting on three steps, whereas this...

... Roman design has the temple on a podium...

... and the bases are more complex.

About fifty years later, the temple was redesigned: the spaces between the columns were walled up

and the podium was enlarged and a new facing and mouldings were added.

Later still after a fire in 80 CE the paving was replaced with white travertine and the steps were rebuilt with a new altar.

As a consequence, the height of the podium was reduced and a travertine moulding was added to mark its new lower edge.

The new paving extended over the whole area, and can be seen most clearly in front of Temples C and D, both of which required remodelling.

The circular Temple B is the only one that can be identified with any degree of certainty. It is probably the temple of Fortuna Huiusce Diei (Good Fortune on This Day) vowed by Quintus Lutatius Catulus during a battle in 101 BCE against the Cimbri in Cisalpine Gaul.

Temple A may be dedicated to the water nymph Juturna, and if so was built by another Lutatius Catulus an ancestor of the builder of Temple B, following a sea victory over the Carthaginians.

Temple C may have been dedicated to Ferionia, after war against the Sabines. And Temple D may have been the temple of the Lares Permarini, the guardians of seafarers, whose temple was vowed by Lucius Aemilius Regillus after a sea battle off Syria.

Given the uncertainties we cannot be sure why these temples were clustered together all facing East. But we do know that they lay at the heart of a politically important part of the city. Just to the North lay the Saepta, where the centuriate assembly the comitia centuriata met and where votes were counted. Just to the East was the Villa Publica where the Census was held, the process conducted every four years when citizens were assigned to political and social classes according to their economic status. And just to the south lay the Circus Flaminius with its military associations. This part of the campus martius was rich in locations of political significance.

Just to the west Pompey built his porticus, one of the biggest urban spaces in Rome, and his theatre and temple to Venus. Part of this complex, the curia of Pompey, was built close against the backs of Temples B and C. This became a meeting place of the Senate and it was here that Julius Caesar was murdered.