

'The mutability of all things'

The rise, fall and rise of the Meta Sudans fountain in Rome

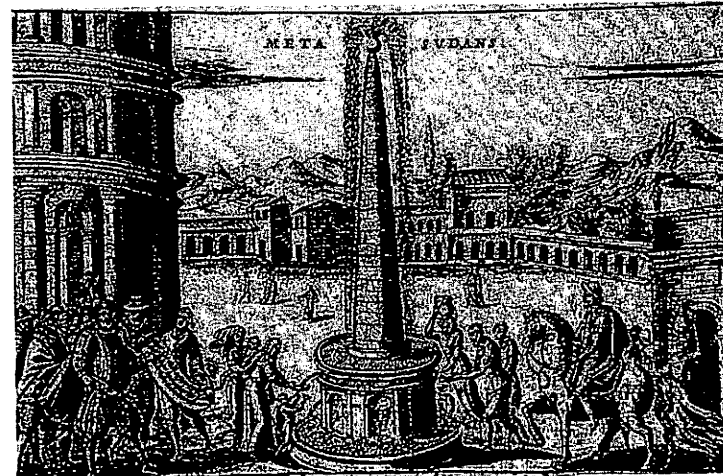
Elizabeth Marlowe

Next to the Amphitheatre of Titus one can still see the remains which are called Sudans, so called because abundant waters flowed down from it and relieved the thirst of those who had been at the spectacles in the amphitheatre . . . Here you can see the Amphitheatre of Titus on one side of the Meta and the Arch of Constantine on the other. You can also see Joannes Grossus engaged in his usual practice of showing Roman antiquities to German nobles. They, like the French nobles, are keenly interested observers of these antiquities, and rightly so. For in addition to the fact that an honest pursuit such as this befits honest men as a means of spending time both profitably and enjoyably, while others waste their time and squander their fortunes in activities that are incompatible with honesty and in the many evils that typically accompany leisure, the source of all wrongdoings, these German nobles will also profit from their reflection by recognizing the

mutability of all things (*rerum omnium vicissitudinem*); that is, how many things are now humble that once flourished . . .

Giacomo Lauro, *Antiquae Urbis Splendor*, 1641

The ostensible subject of the ninetyeth plate of Giacomo Lauro's collection of modern and reconstructed ancient buildings in Rome is the monumental ancient fountain known as the Meta Sudans, built by the Flavian emperors during the first century CE in the open square in front of the Colosseum (Figure 2.1).¹ Though originally faced with marble and almost as tall as the 67-foot Arch later erected by Constantine just to the south, all that remained of the Meta Sudans by the seventeenth century was a scrappy, 30-foot tall brick core, whose original appearance Lauro reconstructs on the basis of ancient numismatic depictions.² As both the image and the caption make clear, however, the real subject of Plate 90 is the juxtaposition of the present and the past, and the good that emerges from that confrontation. Led by the dapper, labelled figure of Hans Gross of Lucerne (member of the Swiss Guard and financier of this edition of Lauro's volume), the emphatically modern tourists assembled in the foreground examine the fountain in its emphatically ancient, long-vanished appearance. Lauro's textual emphasis on the vicissitudes of fortune sits curiously beside the image of the miraculously reprinted monument. To appreciate the 'mutability of all things', the German nobles would have had to compare and contrast both Lauro's engraving of the monument in its ancient splendour and the extant, crumbling ruins.³ Plate 90 conflates not only past and present, but also those two moments of autopsy.



2.1
'The Meta
Sudans',
engraving by
Giacomo Lauro,
plate 90

No other image in Lauro's collection includes the depiction of modern observers, nor is the text elsewhere ever so self-conscious about the act of contemplating the past. It is impossible to determine what prompted Lauro's choice of the Meta Sudans as the vehicle for this discussion; nor could he have guessed how appropriate a choice it would prove to be. There is, perhaps, no ancient monument in the city of Rome whose post-antique life has seen such extremes of fortune and misfortune. While countless classical structures were stripped of their marble adornments, saddled with awkward Christian reinterpretations, appropriated by would-be emperors, over-optimistically restored or simply bulldozed, only the Meta Sudans has undergone every single one of these metamorphoses – and not in the order one might expect. The example of this monument pushes us, I believe, beyond the question of 'misprisions of place' and forces us to confront the essential emptiness and availability of the signs of the past in changing urban contexts.

The ancient fountain

The Meta Sudans was a tall, conical fountain located in the very centre of ancient Rome. Its name ('sweating turnpost') reflects its perpetual wetness and its resemblance to the conical turning-posts at the ends of Roman race-tracks. Built in tandem with the Flavian emperors' magnificent amphitheatre and probably completed by 90 CE, the fountain's relationship to the past was ideologically fraught from the moment of its inception.⁴

The Flavian building programme in this part of Rome was trumpeted in antiquity as an erasure of the imperial palace that the Flavians' despised predecessor, the Emperor Nero, had recently built there. Known as the Domus Aurea ('Golden House'), Nero's palatial complex had covered an enormous tract of land in the centre of Rome, encompassing the Palatine, Velian, Oppian, Esquiline and Caelian hills. This area, which had been largely residential, had suddenly (and, according to tradition, suspiciously) become available thanks to a catastrophic fire in 64 CE. The imperial biographer Suetonius, at pains to convey the size and magnificence of the Domus Aurea, noted its mile-long arcade, its pool 'like the sea', its buildings 'like cities', its gardens encompassing every kind of outdoor environment.⁵ What little has been excavated of the palace's remains, including a spectacular octagonal dining room on the Esquiline, largely bears out Suetonius' description.⁶ After his suicide in 68 CE, Nero was officially proclaimed an enemy of the Roman people; subsequent histories of his reign treat the Domus Aurea as the reification of his tyranny. Tacitus, for example, considered the palace a violation of the laws of nature.⁷

Emphasizing the complexity of those elite writers' motives and prejudices, recent scholarship has begun to revise the traditional, one-sided view of Nero's reign, and even to champion him as a great populist.⁸ Whatever its basis, however, Nero's reputation as the consummate Bad Emperor was very useful to his successors. The Flavians stood to gain much goodwill by presenting their building programme as a restoration to the public of (at least some of) the land wrongfully expropriated by a tyrannical megalomaniac. Such a message fitted comfortably within the broader political programme adopted by Vespasian, the founder of the dynasty, who carefully constructed a sober, quasi-republican image diametrically opposed to the opulent, semi-bohemian gilded youth embodied by Nero. The contrast is most readily apparent in their respective portrait types, but is also evident in such acts as Vespasian's transfer of Nero's private art collection to public display in his new *Templum Pacis*.⁹

One of the most forceful articulations of the Flavian rhetoric of giving back that which Nero had taken away comes from Martial, Domitian's court poet:

Here where the glittering solar colossus views the stars more closely and where in the central road lofty machines grow up, the hateful hall of the beastly king used to radiate its beams, at the time when a single house used to occupy the whole city. Here where the mass of the conspicuous and revered amphitheatre rises up, the pools of Nero [*stagnum Neronis*] once stood. Here where we marvel at that swiftly built donation, the baths, an arrogant field had deprived the poor of their homes. Where the Claudian portico spreads its shade afar, the farthest part of the palace came to an end. Rome is restored to herself, and under your direction, O Caesar, those delights now belong to the people which once belonged to the master.¹⁰

The transformation of the private structures of Nero's Golden House to public use was, no doubt, much less systematic than Martial implies.¹¹ But the poem does seem a largely accurate summary of what happened in the space between the Velian, Oppian and Caelian hills, the area later known as the Colosseum valley for the most famous of its new, public structures. As Martial asserts, the Flavian amphitheatre was built on the filled-in site of the '*stagnum Neronis*', presumably the same sea-sized pool mentioned by Suetonius. Of unprecedented scale and refinement, the amphitheatre offered to 50,000 spectators the kind of lavish entertainment and spectacle that Nero had made the hallmark of his private domain. Its curved form may also have served as a permanent reminder of the aqueous body it replaced.

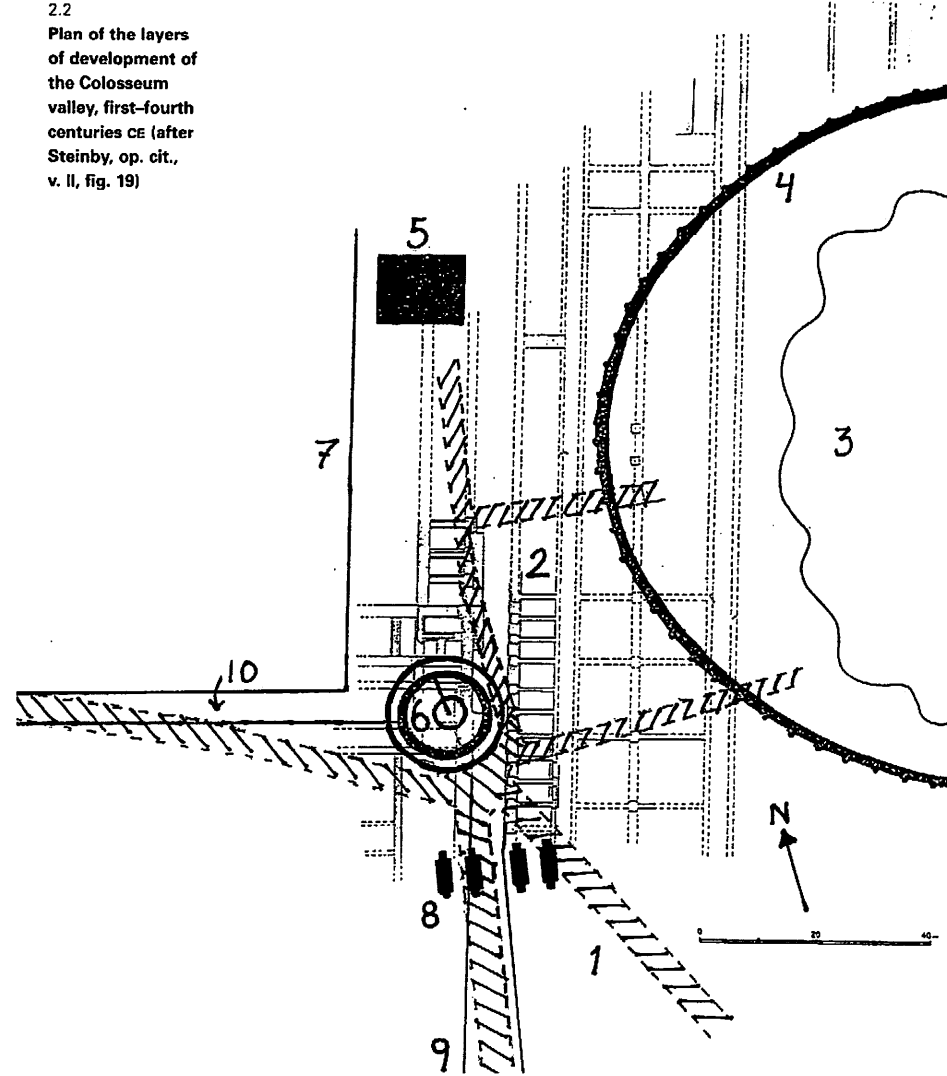
The amphitheatre was, however, only one element in the Flavian programme to overwrite the marks Nero had made upon the valley. Vespasian transformed the features of Nero's 120-foot-tall portrait, installed in the palace vestibule on the Velian, into those of the far less offensive Sun-god.¹² He also undid Nero's transformation into a nymphaeum of the half-finished structures of the Temple of the Divine Claudius on the Caelian, and completed the building of the temple.¹³

After the amphitheatre itself, however, the most impressive new feature of the Flavian Colosseum valley must have been the open, public square to the west of the amphitheatre (Figure 2.2).¹⁴ The creation of this area amounted to a radical (and permanent) alteration of the ancient topography of the valley. The filling in and smoothing out of the depression of Nero's lake and the surrounding area raised the level of the valley by perhaps as much as ten metres. This new, flat, open space replaced a densely built up segment of the Domus Aurea's 'mile-long portico', the foundations of which have recently been excavated. Nero's portico encompassed, and effectively built into the palace, two of the oldest and most important traffic routes in the city: a north-south road that ran along the valley floor between the Velian and Caelian hills (probably the 'central road' which Martial tells us was superseded by Nero's 'hateful hall'), and an east-west segment of the ceremonial Sacred Way that climbed the Velian and ran along the edge of Palatine to the Forum.¹⁵ The Flavians demolished the north-south portico and repaved the area, thereby restoring the thoroughfare to the fully public realm. The relatively broad, open space of the piazza can be understood not only as a response to the density of the Neronian construction but also as an erasure of its insistently rectilinear contours.

It was at the site of the former intersection of the two roads that the Flavians built the Meta Sudans, the monumental fountain that embellished their new piazza. This precise topographical coincidence suggests that the relationship between the new structure and the old is rather like that between the Flavian amphitheatre and the Neronian lake: while completely replacing its predecessor, the form and location of the new monument are carefully calculated to remind the viewer that something else had stood there previously, and thus, in a sense, to memorialize the act of erasure.

The Flavians may have been playing an even deeper game. It has recently been argued that this valley had been Rome's central traffic hub from the mid-Republican period up until the fire of 64 CE, and that the area around the Meta Sudans had formerly seen the intersection not of two but of five major roads.¹⁶ While the Flavians did not restore all of these pre-Neronian roadways – one was buried beneath the amphitheatre – the opening up and paving of the piazza would have allowed traffic to circulate freely through the

2.2
Plan of the layers
of development of
the Colosseum
valley, first-fourth
centuries CE (after
Steinby, *op. cit.*,
v. II, fig. 19)



- 1) pre-Neronian roadways (indicated in dashed lines) (after Panella, *op. cit.* 1990, fig. 20); 2) porticoes and other structures of the Domus Aurea (after Steinby, *op. cit.*, v. II, fig. 19); 3) 'Stagnum Neronis' (artificial lake); 4) Flavian Amphitheatre; 5) Colossal statue base (after its relocation by Hadrian); 6) Meta Sudans; 7) platform of Hadrian's Temple of Venus and Roma; 8) Arch of Constantine; 9) via San Gregorio ('Triumphalis'); 10) via Sacra.

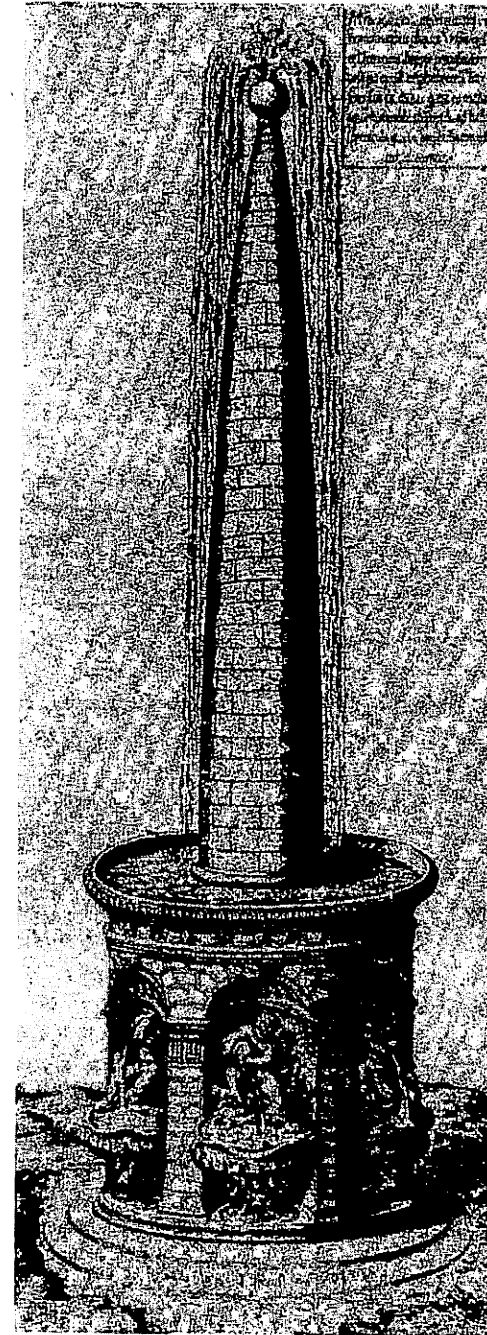
area once again. Furthermore, the old roads had served as boundaries between four (or perhaps five) of the fourteen administrative *regiones* or wards into which Augustus had divided the city.¹⁷ It has even been argued that their intersection was the *punto d'origine* of Augustus' urban system, and that the spot was very likely monumentalized in some way from at least that period.¹⁸ If this is correct, the construction of the Flavian fountain would have signalled not only the return to the public domain of the private terrain of Nero's Domus Aurea; it would also have suggested the symbolic restoration of the city as it was organized and monumentalized by Augustus, the memory of whose reign had, by this time, already taken on quasi-mythic proportions as a bygone golden age.

Independent of its historical referents, the fountain would surely have been a welcome gift in this bustling piazza. Due to a number of natural and unnatural phenomena occurring over the subsequent centuries (including Mussolini's removal *in toto* of the Velian hill), the Colosseum valley is much more open and spacious today than it was in antiquity. In the Flavians' day, even without the Neronian structures, the constricted space within the valley's steep walls must have felt oppressively crowded, particularly when thousands of agitated spectators were thronging towards, or bursting out of, the amphitheatre's west entrance, or lining the streets to watch triumphal parades pass by along the *via Sacra*. It also must have been stiflingly hot for much of the year. The Meta Sudans seems to have been purpose-built not only to provide fresh, abundant drinking water from the spigots around its base, but also to cool the surrounding air. Its ingenious (though imperfectly understood) design somehow managed to raise water all the way up an inner pipeway in the cone, from which it burst forth out of a spherical finial and then



2.3
Aureus from the
reign of Titus
depicting the
Meta Sudans and
Amphitheatre
(Colosseum), 30 CE

2.4
The Meta Sudans'



flowed down the sides to collect in a basin below. The fountain’s great height would have widened the range of its cooling mists.

The sensual pleasures afforded by the Meta Sudans would have included the aural and the visual, as well as the tactile. While nothing survives of the fountain’s marble cladding, the depictions of the monument on coins minted by the Emperor Titus clearly show niches around its base (Figure 2.3), which presumably contained statuary. In fact, in the sixteenth century, Pirro Ligorio reports having witnessed the carting off to a private warehouse of the ‘marine monsters, heads of ferocious animals and images of nymphs’ from the area around the fountain.¹⁹ These fragments may have been the inspiration for the Triton in the niche in Du Pérac’s elegant reconstruction of 1575 (Figure 2.4).²⁰ Overall, the fountain must have been a most attractive landmark in the new Flavian piazza, and it is not surprising that many of the numismatic commemorations of the amphitheatre proudly display the Meta Sudans alongside it as an integral component of the Flavian building programme in the valley.

The close association and equal fortunes of the Meta Sudans and the Flavian amphitheatre continued through the Roman imperial period. On third-century coins commemorating imperially sponsored repairs to the fire-damaged Colosseum, the Meta Sudans is still featured beside the amphitheatre on the reverses. Likewise, when the Emperor Constantine, in the early fourth century, sought to highlight his (fictitious) dynastic association with the first-century Flavians, he did so not only by erecting a triumphal arch at the southern entrance to the piazza in front of the amphitheatre, but also by further monumentalizing the Meta Sudans.²¹ This was achieved through the construction of a low wall around the structure, which increased the diameter of the monument from 16 metres to 25 metres.²² This parapet may have served as some sort of bench, encouraging spectators to stop and admire the work of Constantine’s ‘ancestors’, or may have been surmounted by a colonnade, thereby increasing the grandiosity of the fountain as a whole.

The motives behind Constantine’s building projects in the Colosseum valley were complex.²³ The Emperor was seeking both to shore up his dynastic credentials and, like the first-century Flavians, to respond to the architectural programme of his rival and predecessor, Maxentius, whom he had recently defeated in an ugly civil war. Like Nero, Maxentius had been a prolific builder in the city of Rome; but unlike Nero, most of his commissions had been highly civic-minded (a new basilica, the rebuilding of the fire-damaged Temple of Venus and Roma, etc.).²⁴ Constantine’s approach to the problem of Maxentius’ spectacular architectural legacy, much of which was concentrated on the Velian hill, was twofold. First, he simply had the Senate

dedicate the new buildings in his own honour, thereby putting it officially on record that they existed because of *his* benefaction.²⁵ Second, he matched Maxentius’ concentrated nucleus of buildings on the Velian with a nucleus of his own just down the hill in the Colosseum valley. Here, too, Constantine cut corners, so to speak, making highly visible alterations to existing structures rather than building new ones. In addition to the parapet wall around the Meta Sudans, he also installed a new inscription on the base on the Colossus of Sol. The one new structure he did erect here, the Arch, served as a monumental entranceway to the piazza, thereby framing and appropriating the entire space behind it as Constantine’s own.

Constantine’s appropriation of the Flavian piazza thus served to underscore the connection between his neo-Flavian dynasty and that of the first century, and to match Maxentius’ Velian ensemble with his own pseudo-Forum just down the hill. It is also possible that Constantine intended the topographical analogy between himself and the Flavians very literally. Like his ‘ancestors’, he took pains to present his predecessor as a tyrant (even explicitly referring to him as such in the Arch’s dedicatory inscription) and himself as a restorer of the city. By inserting himself into the architectural history of the piazza, Constantine may have sought not only to link himself generally to the Flavians, but specifically to the Flavian legacy of restoring the city after the depredations of a tyrant. The analogy would have extended to Maxentius, now a modern-day Nero, whose infamy in the fourth century as a Bad Emperor was undiminished.²⁶

Thus, by late antiquity, the Meta Sudans, together with the adjacent amphitheatre, was already endowed with a complex, self-referential, multi-layered past, in which the voices of as many as five historical moments re-echoed, and in which good and bad connotations alternated like the tides: the golden age of Augustus, the megalomania of Nero, the civic benefactions of the Flavians, the tyranny of Maxentius and the restoration of Constantine. This ‘classical’ phase of both monuments’ histories ended almost simultaneously, with the Colosseum seeing its last *venationes* in 523 and the fountain ceasing to function after the cutting of the aqueducts in 537.²⁷ It is at this point that the fortunes of the two Flavian structures set off on their disparate paths.

From fountain to ruin

The accurate depiction of the spatial proximity of the two monuments on ancient coins, the descriptive name *meta* and the distinctive, conical form, ensured that, through the middle ages, Renaissance and beyond, the identity of the fountain as the Flavian Meta Sudans was never lost. The eighth-century

Einsiedeln Itinerary refers to it by name, as does the twelfth-century *Ordo Romanus*.²⁸

By the time of the Renaissance, the Meta was the object of a surprising amount of attention, despite the monument's relatively decrepit state (contemporary *vedute* show it as a crumbling, misshapen tower of brick). This was due largely to the fountain's association (by its name) with Roman circuses and to the perceived resemblance of its conical shaft to an obelisk, favoured form of the Renaissance imagination. While this region of Rome was largely depopulated during this period, the two perpendicular roads that intersected at the Meta continued to function as such, albeit now under the names of the *via Sacra* and the *via Papalis*. It has recently been argued that the monumental effect created by the Meta Sudans at the crossing of these two straight roads was the model for the plan of Sixtus V to set up obelisks at the intersections of his new boulevards through the city.²⁹

The graceful Du Pérac reconstruction drawing also did much to enhance the monument's reputation. The image served as the model for a number of fountains designed (though not built) for the gardens of noble palazzi, including those of the Pamphilj, Aldobrandini and d'Este families.³⁰ It may likewise have been an inspiration for Bernini's Four Rivers fountain in Piazza Navona, which reassembled the Du Pérac Meta's components of obelisk, Tritons and water, now in the apt setting of an ancient circus.

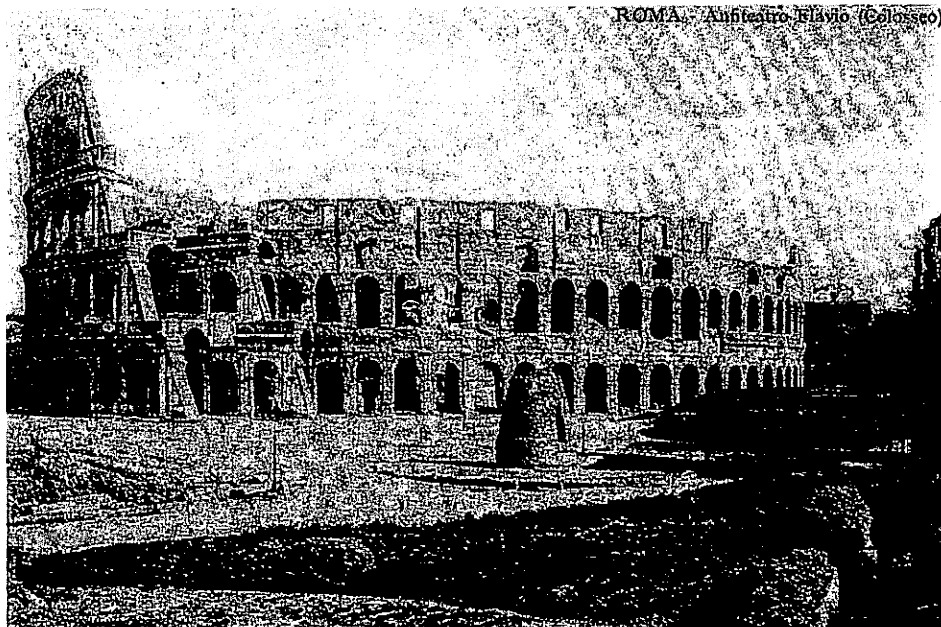
Contemporary with Du Pérac's drawing is an unpublished manuscript produced at the papal court of Gregory XIII and recently examined by Philip Jacks, which presents a very different, heavily Christianizing reinvention of the ancient fountain.³¹ A treatise on an imagined 'Meta di Salute Eterna', the text discusses the Meta Sudans in historical terms, associating its construction with the Flavians and its purpose with the refreshment of visitors to the amphitheatre.³² But the ancient monument (or again, probably Du Pérac's reconstruction of it) also serves as a model for a 'Meta of Eternal Health'. This mysterious, metaphysical structure is represented as a large cone topped by the Holy Dove, from which the four rivers flow down the sides. The niches of the Meta Sudans morph into flames around the base of the structure; the ring of the basin above them is delineated by two of the heavenly streams, while the tall shaft of the cone becomes the *lignum Crucis*, which springs from the belly of the recumbent figure of Adam. The humble Meta Sudans thus becomes a metaphor for an ideal Christian universe.

A Christianized version of the Meta Sudans reappears a century and a half later in Carlo Fontana's papally-sponsored design for the installation inside the Colosseum of a church dedicated to the martyrs of the amphitheatre. The round 'temple' (modeled on the Pantheon and Bramante's Tempietto) was to have stood within the west curve, with the entrance to the

complex at the other end of the amphitheatre's long axis, and a baptismal font in between.³³ Fontana explicitly described the fountain as an imitation of the Meta Sudans, noting that as the ancient structure had washed 'the filth from the bodies of the cruel gladiators', so the waters of the 'sacred Meta, used for the sacrament of Baptism, will wash the filth from the soul, stained with Original Sin'.³⁴

By the eighteenth century, a more decidedly antiquarian attitude toward the Meta Sudans obtained. The monument was of particular interest to scholars trying to trace the waterworks of ancient Rome; Ficoroni even excavated the Meta's foundations in 1743 and followed the line of its underground piping for several metres in an attempt to ascertain its water source.³⁵ Under Antonio Nibby's direction, the whole area of the Flavian piazza was cleared of post-antique detritus in 1828, lowering the ground level to that of the Arch of Constantine, exposing the basin of the fountain and bringing to light the remains of the base of the Neronian Colossus some 200 feet to the north.

These excavations should be understood in the context not only of the scholarly exploration of the Meta Sudans but also of the Colosseum's soaring Romantic reputation. The amphitheatre, deemed 'a noble wreck in ruinous perfection' by the much-quoted Lord Byron, had become *the* emblem of the grandeur of ancient Rome. The clearing of the terrain around it was a product of a newly emerging urban aesthetic, whereby great monuments were thought to be best appreciated in dramatic isolation from their surroundings.³⁶ The Meta Sudans did, to a certain extent, continue to bask in the reflected glory of the amphitheatre, rating a mention in popular guidebooks to Rome, for example, as the site where gladiators would wash after their toils in the arena.³⁷ But over the course of the nineteenth century, the former fountain came increasingly to be seen as so much more detritus obstructing the full visual impact of its neighbour. Already in 1816, the architect Valadier had lamented the fact that the passage of time had produced 'the most wretched ruins [*disgraziatissime rovine*]' right in front of the 'Famous Flavian Amphitheatre'.³⁸ A major restoration campaign undertaken in mid-century can be understood as an attempt to address the problem of the Meta's ugliness. The precarious, upper reaches of the cone were removed, the concavities of the former niches filled in and its jagged, timeworn surfaces smoothed, producing the stable (if somewhat dumpy) appearance of the Meta seen in numerous photographs and postcards of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Figure 2.5). As the caption in Figure 2.5 makes clear, these postcards were, of course, of the Colosseum; the Meta Sudans was included only by chance, as this was the best angle from which to view the amphitheatre's triple circuit of arcaded walls.



2.5
Early twentieth-century postcard of the Colosseum (also showing the Meta Sudans)

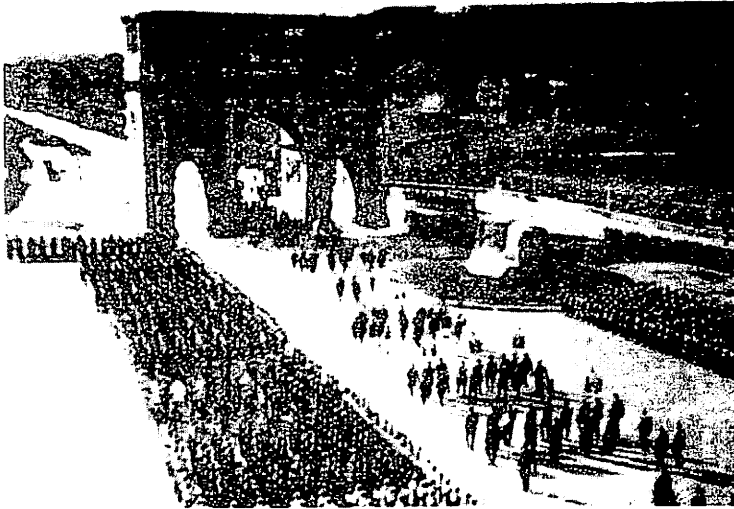
The fame of the Colosseum, the new isolation-aesthetic, and the vigorous aggrandizement of the post-unification 'Third Rome' would ultimately prove too much for the meagre remains of the Meta Sudans.³⁹ The official commission of 1871 advocated the undertaking of 'all those demolitions that will enhance the grandeur [*imponenza*]' of the major monuments of Rome, with the aim of creating the 'most scenic vantage points free from clutter or inconvenience [*senza ingombro e senza disagio*]'.⁴⁰ Under these conditions, the Flavian fountain could no longer compete with its erstwhile sibling, although it would take sixty years, and the force of Mussolini's urban '*sventramenti*' (disembowelings) to finally bring the axe down.⁴¹

The vestiges of ancient Rome, carefully selected and manicured, played an important role in Mussolini's creation of a monumental city-centre worthy of grand, Fascist spectacles.⁴² While planners had long recognized the need for an artery linking Piazza Venezia with the southern part of the city, the issue for Mussolini was less one of circulation than of symbolism. One should be able to stand at the Piazza Venezia, seat of the new government, and see the Colosseum, emblem of Rome's glorious past. Like his Risorgimento predecessors, he believed that 'the millennial monuments of our history must loom gigantic in their necessary solitude'.⁴³ Never mind the fact that the Velian hill, three churches and 5,500 units of housing stood in the way. All were

demolished during the 1932 creation of the 'via dell'Impero' (now the via dei Fori Imperiali), a showcase of the Fascist appropriation of the past.⁴⁴ The mostly buried ancient imperial fora that flanked the route of the new boulevard were excavated, and the road lined with bronze statues of the emperors associated with the fora, along with maps chronicling the expansion of the Roman Empire in antiquity and in the Fascist era.

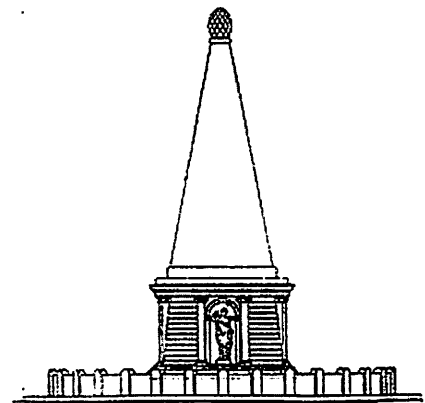
But Mussolini wasn't finished yet. His new parade route was not to be limited to the via dell'Impero, but would continue to the south, past the Colosseum, through the 'Flavian piazza' and the Arch of Constantine and down the via S. Gregorio to the Circus Maximus. The via S. Gregorio was thus widened, repaved, spruced up with Fascist dedications and rechristened the 'via dei Trionfi', to underscore the topographical and ideological parallels between this route and that of the ancient Roman triumphal procession. Most importantly, the Stele of Axum, Mussolini's trophy from his newly conquered Ethiopian empire, was installed in 1936 at the new terminus by the Circus. The Duce's gesture in some ways parallels Constantine's erection of the Arch some 1,600 years earlier. By positioning prominent, heavily ideologically laden monuments at the head of the (ever-wideningly defined) valley, both rulers sought to appropriate the pre-existing imperial buildings directly to the north, echoing, but ultimately overwriting, their ancient connotations, and replacing them with modern meaning.

Mussolini, however, was even more brutally pragmatic than Constantine when it came to the ancient structures he inherited. Rather than adapting each of them to suit his needs, the Duce simply removed the ones that did not meet his standards of majesty and monumentality. The Meta Sudans and the colossal statue base were doubly doomed. Not only were they not very attractive, but they stood directly in the path of the central passageway of Constantine's Arch, thus preventing parades from marching straight through. A photograph of a ceremony held just after the inauguration of the via dei Trionfi reveals all too plainly the awkwardness and asymmetries that ensued (Figure 2.6), and which prompted the Governatore of Rome, Francesco Boncompagni Ludovisi, to declare the ruins 'a most serious embarrassment'. This skewed topographical relationship had been acceptable under Constantine, when the triumphal route had turned left just beyond the Arch and continued up the via Sacra through the Forum Romanum to the Capitoline temple. Much of this very route had been self-consciously retraced as recently as 1536, when Charles V made his triumphal entrance into Rome. But the Fascist parade route ignored the via Sacra, continuing instead up the full length of the Colosseum piazza, and only turning left once it reached the via dell'Impero.

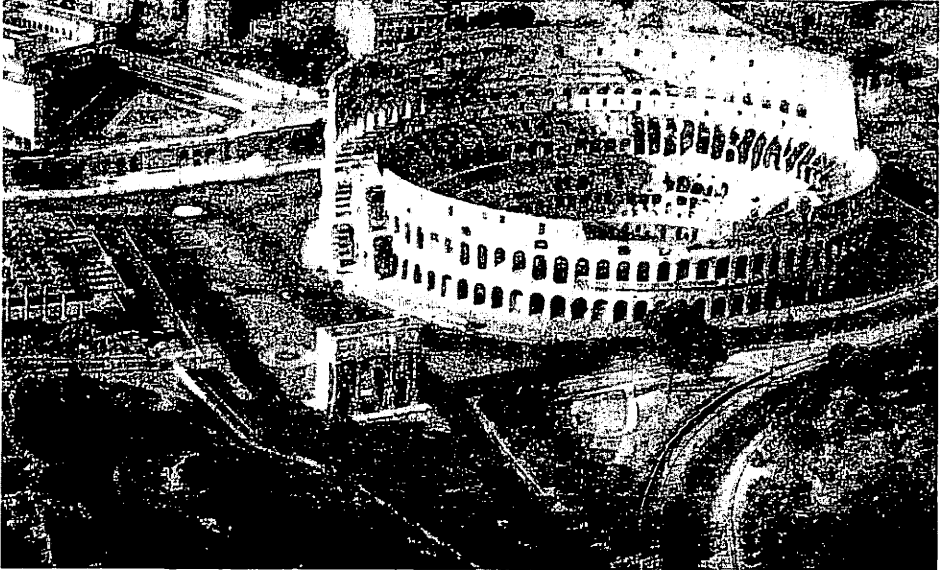


2.6
Fascist parade through the Colosseum valley. Both the spectators and the procession itself are arranged awkwardly around the Meta Sudans, which has already been partially demolished in preparation for its final removal

To make the piazza serve the function of ceremonial thoroughfare, the Meta Sudans, as well as the statue base, had to go. Both were razed in 1936, the year of the dedication of the Stele of Axum. On Mussolini's orders, however, the memory of the decrepit structures was not to be entirely erased. The archaeologist A. M. Colini was given two years to investigate thoroughly the remains of the ancient fountain, and his findings were published along with two careful reconstruction drawings by the Fascist architect Italo Gismondi (Figure 2.7).⁴⁵ Moreover, like the police chalking around a fallen body, the contours of the monuments' vanished forms were outlined in a lighter coloured stone on the surface of the newly repaved piazza,



2.7
Reconstruction drawing of the Meta Sudans by I. Gismondi, completed together with the archaeological excavations of A. M. Colini, just before the monument's destruction in 1936



2.8
The Colosseum valley as it appeared from the mid-1930s to the mid-1980s, with white outlines marking the locations of the demolished Meta Sudans and Colossal statue base

as if Mussolini were seeking to convey not his revival of the grandeur of ancient Rome but his power to destroy that which is old, unsightly or superfluous (Figure 2.8).

A modern fountain?

For the next sixty-odd years, it looked as if this were the end of the story of the Meta Sudans, the only exception being some important archaeological explorations of its remaining foundations in the mid-1980s and 1990s.⁴⁶ But perhaps no episode in the long, tortuous history of the monument is as strange as the one unfolding today. In recognition both of the Holy Jubilee of 2000 and of its own fortieth anniversary, the Rotary Club Roma-Est has recently proposed to recreate the ancient fountain on the site. The project was outlined and promoted in a widely distributed, 34-page, folio-sized publication entitled *The Meta Sudans: The Most Ancient Fountain of Rome*.⁴⁷ According to this volume, the project would be overseen by the Rotarian, Maurizio Pouchain, head of a firm specializing in architectural restorations, and appeared to have the backing of the Soprintendenza Archeologica of Rome, perhaps because the Pouchain firm agreed to pay for the preliminary archaeological studies. The idea is not so much to rebuild the ancient structure as to recreate its effect:

limited to a recomposition only of its vertical element, not by means of masonry, but through a play of water and effects of lighting to recreate the memory of that monument which was probably covered in sparkling marble, and which, even as a ruin captured the imagination and piqued the curiosity of Romans and of thousands of visitors to the Eternal City, for so many centuries.⁴⁸

The stipulations are, of course, that nothing irreversible be done to the site, and that no harm come to the ancient foundations. Nevertheless, the published report suggests that when it is complete, the hydraulic capacity of the fountain will be around 180 litres of water per second.⁴⁹

Despite the Rotarian rhetoric that the recreation of the fountain will foster scientific discussion and reach a wide audience (thereby signalling a new way of 'doing Rotary [*fare Rotary*] in the new millennium'), the project is unabashedly political. The very first page of the proposal notes that the fountain survived intact from the 'Rome of the Kings to the Rome of Mussolini, only to be destroyed by him in 1936 to make room for his troops to celebrate the triumphs of Fascism by marching through the Arch of Constantine'. It goes on to state that the project was first proposed by Urban Planning Professor and Rotarian Piero Lugli, son of the archaeologist Giuseppe Lugli, who, we are told, was 'the only intellectual who dared to protest the demolition'. The proposal to rebuild the fountain can thus be understood as an attempt to undo the legacy of the Fascist era on the ancient monuments of the city centre and, as such, was very much a product of its political moment under the centre-left Amato government.

In this regard, Rotary's Meta Sudans project is quite similar to the contemporary endeavor to replace the glass shell erected around the Ara Pacis during the Fascist period with a new, more conservation-minded building, designed by the architect Richard Meier. It is perhaps not a coincidence that it was also the Roman Rotary Club that paid for the glass of that original Ara Pacis building. They themselves make the connection in the very first line of their Meta Sudans publication, as evidence that the proposal is nicely in keeping with 'the tradition of the Roman Rotary Club', albeit mentioning neither the Fascist context of the Ara Pacis project nor the fact that their glass had just been torn down.

It seems possible that neither project will survive Italy's marked turn toward the right, heralded by the re-election of Berlusconi, and evident in the increasing number of public expressions of nostalgia for the Fascist era.⁵⁰ One of the first acts of Berlusconi's government was to stop all work on Meier's project; his Undersecretary of Cultural Affairs [*Beni Culturali*] Vittorio Sgarbi has even commissioned an alternative project that deliberately echoes

the demolished forms of the Fascist pavilion.⁵¹ Likewise, the large, proud sign that was installed at the Meta Sudans site in March 2001, promising the 'Archaeological Excavation and Restoration' of the fountain by June 2002 and advertising the sponsorship of the project by the Rotary Club and an additional private company,⁵² has since been quietly taken down.

While the Rotary proposal promises to rebuild the Meta Sudans in a way that is physically non-invasive, historically minded and politically neutral, none of this is true. That much is clear not only from Rotary's own language but also from the wider lens of the fountain's tumultuous history. The current project is only the latest in an infinite cycle of appropriations. Today, as in Mussolini's day and as in antiquity, what one does with the Colosseum valley monuments depends on how one wishes to present one's relationship to previous builders there, whether it be to liken oneself to them or to memorialize one's erasure of their traces. The shifting fortunes of the Meta Sudans remind us that there is no true, objective past which we can simply restore or celebrate or 'mis-take' (in the sense of a 'misprision'), only an intrinsic 'mutability of all things', our own innumerable rewritings of that past.

Notes

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- 1 G. Lauro, *Antiquae Urbis Splendor: hoc est praecipua eiusdem templa, amphitheatra, theatra, circi, naumachiae, arcus triumphales, mausolea aliaque sumptuosiora aedificia, pompae item triumphalis et colossaeorum imaginum descriptio/opera & industria Iacobi Lauri Romani in aes incisa atque in lucem edita*, Rome, 1641 edn, pl. 90. Basic information about Lauro's book can be found in D. del Pesco, 'Una fonte per gli architetti del barocco romano: l'*Antiquae urbis Splendor* di Giacomo Lauro', in *Studi di Storia dell'arte in Memoria di Mario Rotili*, Benevento: Banca sannitica, 1984, pp. 413–36. I would like to thank James Woolard for his translation of Lauro's text from the Latin.
- 2 The coins date from the reigns of Titus and Alexander Severus (H. Mattingly (ed.), *British Museum Coins of the Roman Empire*, London: British Museum, 1962–65, v. II, p. 262, n. 190 and v. VI, p. 128, nn. 156–8) and from that of Gordian III (F. Gnecci, *I Medaglioni Romani*, Milan: Hoepli, 1912, v. II, n. 104.5).
- 3 Whence the modern, spiral-bound picture-books at souvenir stands around Rome, comprising photographs of the ruins below plastic overlays that magically restore them to their original state.
- 4 The Flavian dynasty comprised three rulers: Vespasian (r. 69–79 CE), his elder son Titus (79–81) and younger son Domitian (81–96).
- 5 Suetonius, *Nero* 39.

- 6 See the numerous entries under 'Domus Aurea' in E. M. Steinby, *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae*, Rome: Quasar, 1995, v. II, pp. 49–64. I. Iacopi, *Domus Aurea*, Milan: Electa, 1999.
- 7 Tacitus, *Annals* 15.42 (*rus in urbe*), Cambridge, Loeb Classical Library, 1970.
- 8 J. Elsner, 'Constructing decadence: the representation of Nero as imperial builder', in J. Elsner and J. Masters (eds), *Reflections of Nero: culture, history, & representation*, London: Duckworth, 1994, pp. 112–17; M. P. O. Morford, 'The distortion of the Domus Aurea tradition', *Eranos* 66, 1968, pp. 158–79; D. Hemsoll, 'The architecture of Nero's Golden House', in M. Henig (ed.), *Architecture and Architectural Sculpture in the Roman Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 10–38; E. Champlin, 'God and man in the Roman House', in M. Cima and E. La Rocca (eds), *Horti Romani: atti del convegno internazionale*, Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1998, pp. 333–44; P. J. E. Davies, "'What worse than Nero, what better than his baths?': "Damatio Memoriae" and Roman architecture' in E. R. Varner, *From Caligula to Constantine: tyranny and transformation in Roman portraiture*, Atlanta: Michael C. Carlos Museum, 2000, pp. 27–44.
- 9 Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, 34.84, Cambridge, Loeb Classical Library, 1969; J. Isager, *Pliny on Art and Society: the Elder Pliny's chapters on the history of art*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 103.
- 10 Martial, *Liber Spectaculorum*, 2 (trans.) J. J. Pollitt, *The Art of Rome, c.753 BC–AD 337: sources and documents*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- 11 There is, for example, some evidence suggesting that the Esquiline wing of Nero's compound continued to function as an imperial residence well into the Flavian period. P. G. Warden, 'The Golden House reconsidered', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 40, 1981, 271–8.
- 12 F. C. Albertson, 'Zenodorus's "Colossus of Nero"', *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 46, 2001, 95–118. Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, 34.45. This statue was known as the Colossus, whence the amphitheatre would derive its modern name.
- 13 Suetonius, *Vespasian*, 9; C. Buzzetti, 'Claudius, Divus, Templum', in Steinby, op. cit., v. I, pp. 277–8. R. H. Darwall-Smith, *Emperors and Architecture: a study of Flavian Rome*, Brussels: Latomus, 1996, pp. 48–55.
- 14 C. Panella, 'La valle del Colosseo nell'antichità', *Bollettino d'archeologia* 1–2, 1990, 74–82.
- 15 C. Panella, 'Domus Aurea: area dello stagnum', in Steinby, op. cit., v. II, pp. 51–3; Panella, op. cit., 1990, pp. 64–5. The lines of these roads roughly correspond to the modern via S. Gregorio and via Sacra.
- 16 Panella, op. cit., 1990, 53–6.
- 17 On Augustus' administrative reforms, Suetonius, *Augustus* 30.1; Cassius Dio 55.8.6–7.
- 18 Panella, op. cit., 1990, 53. Indeed, during the most recent campaign, excavator Clementina Panella discovered the curved foundations of a structure she identifies as an Augustan version of the Meta Sudans (pers. com. Archer Martin and Eric De Sena, who saw the structure while it was still uncovered). No report of these finds has been published yet.
- 19 This important notice, discussed by P. Jacks, 'A sacred Meta for pilgrims in the Holy Year 1575', *Architectura* 19, 1989, p. 146, has not been incorporated into the archaeological literature on the Meta Sudans.
- 20 In E. Du Pérac, *I Vestigi dell'antichità di Roma Raccolti et Ritratti in Prospettiva con ogni Diligentia*, Rome: Apresso Lorenzo della Vascheria, 1575.
- 21 Constantine's appropriation of the Flavian monuments of Rome is one of the central topics of my forthcoming dissertation, 'Symbolic capital: Constantine's Rome'; the contents of the next two paragraphs are based upon that research.
- 22 S. Zeggio, 'L'intervento Costantiniano', in C. Panella, *Meta Sudans I. Un'area sacra in Palatio e la valle del Colosseo prima e dopo Nerone*, Rome: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 1996, pp. 189–96.
- 23 Some of the issues are discussed by J. Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital. Rome in the Fourth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 70–90.
- 24 On Maxentius' building programme, see M. Cullhed, *Conservator Urbis Suae: studies in the politics and propaganda of the Emperor Maxentius*, Stockholm: Skrifter utgivna av Svenska Institutet i Rom, 1994; and F. Coarelli, 'L'Urbs e il suburbio. Ristrutturazione urbanistica e ristrutturazione amministrativa nella Roma di Massenzio', in A. Giardina, ed., *Società Romana e Impero Tardoantico*, Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1986, pp. 1–35.
- 25 Aurelius Victor, *Liber de Caesaribus*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994, 40.26.
- 26 E. Cizek, 'Néron chez certains auteurs d'abrégés du IV^e siècle ap. J.-C. (Aurélius Victor et Festus)', in J.-M. Croisille, R. Martin and Y. Perrin (eds), *Neronia V. Néron: histoire et légende*, Brussels: Latomus, 1999, pp. 21–35.
- 27 Cassiodorus, *Varia*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1992, V.42; G. Ville, 'Les jeux de gladiateurs dans l'Empire Chrétien', *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome* 72, 1960, 273–335.
- 28 R. Valentini and G. Zucchetti, *Codice Topografico della Città di Rome*, Roma: Tipografia del Senato, 1940–53, v. II, p. 196 and v. III, p. 219.
- 29 M. Fagiolo, 'La scena delle acque', in M. G. Bernardini and M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Regista del Barocco*, Milan: Skira, 1999, p. 139.
- 30 R. Preimesberger, 'Obeliscus Pamphilius. Beiträge zu Vorgeschichte und Ikonographie des Vierströmebrunnens auf Piazza Navona', *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* 25, 1974, 95–100.
- 31 P. Jacks, op. cit., 137–65.
- 32 Codex Vaticanus Chigianus Latinus G. II, f. 249r, cited by Jacks, op. cit., 147.
- 33 H. Hager, 'Carlo Fontana's project for a church in honour of the "Ecclesia Triumphans" in the Colosseum, Rome', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 36, 1973, 319–37.
- 34 C. Fontana, *L'Anfiteatro Flavio*, Rome, 1725, 5.1. The complete text of Fontana's lengthy treatise on the Colosseum, which served as a prelude to his designs for the new church, is given as an appendix in M. Di Macco, *Il Colosseo. Funzione simbolica, storica, urbana*, Rome: Bulzoni, 1971, pp. 385–431 (quotation at 430).
- 35 F. Ficoroni, *Le Vestigia e le Rarità di Roma Antica*, Rome: G. Mainardi, 1744, pp. 36–8; see also A. Cassio, *Il Corso dell'acque Antiche Portate da Lontane Contrade Fuori e Dentro Roma Sopra XIV Acquidotti*, Rome: Giannini, 1757, pp. 192–201.
- 36 This approach to city-planning in Rome was first articulated during the period of French occupation (1809–1815), when the Commission des Embellissements de Rome called for a 'place circulaire' and a 'grande allée elliptique autour du Colisée'. Cited by A. Capodiferro, 'Anfiteatro flavio e meta Sudans', in B. Tellini Santoni et al., *Archeologia in Posa. Dal Colosseo a Cecilia Metella nell'antica documentazione fotografica*, Milan: Electa, 1998, p. 21.
- 37 E.g. A. J. C. Hare, *Walks in Rome*, London: Strahan, 3rd edn, 1872, v. 1, p. 206.
- 38 Valadier was affiliated with the Academy of San Luca; the quotation is from a letter to the Deputy of the Direzione degli Ornamenti di Rome. Cited by Di Macco, op. cit., p. 101.
- 39 The story of the transformation of Rome during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been told a number of times recently; see for example L. Cardilli Alloisi and D. Fuina (eds), *La Capitale a Roma. Città e Arredo Urbano, 1870–1945*, Rome: Carte Segrete, 1991; I. Insolera, *Roma Moderna: un secolo di storia urbanistica, 1870–1970*, Turin: Einaudi, 1971; S. Kostof, *The Third Rome, 1870–1950. Traffic and Glory*, Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1973.
- 40 *Commissione Incaricata di Esaminare i Piani di Ingrandimento e di Abbellimento della Città di Roma*, 1871, cited by Capodiferro, op. cit., p. 21.
- 41 A. Cederna, *Mussolini Urbanista: lo sventramento di Roma negli anni del consenso*, Rome: Laterza, 1980; D. Manacorda and R. Tamassia, *Il Piccone del Regime*, Rome: Armando Curcio, 1985.

- 42 R. Visser, 'Fascist doctrine and the cult of Romanità', *Journal of Contemporary History* 27, 1992, 5–22. D. Atkinson, 'The road to Rome and the landscapes of Fascism', in K. Gilliver, W. Ernst and F. Scriba (eds), *Archaeology, Ideology, Method. Inter-Academy Seminar on Current Archaeological Research*, Rome: Canadian Academic Centre in Italy, 1996, pp. 39–53. L. Cantora, *Le Vie del Classicismo*, Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1989; D. Cofrancesco, 'Appunti per un'analisi del mito romano nell'ideologia fascista', *Storia Contemporanea* 11, 1980, 383–411.
- 43 Speech given 31 December 1925; cited by Kostof, op. cit., p. 14.
- 44 I. Insolera and F. Perego, *Archeologia e Città: storia moderna dei Fori di Roma*, Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1983; L. Barroero, *Via dei Fori Imperiali: la zona archeologica di Roma, urbanistica, beni artistici e politica culturale*, Venice: Marsilio, 1983.
- 45 A. M. Colini, 'Meta Sudans', *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia* 13, 1937, 15–39.
- 46 Panella, op. cit., 1990 and 1996.
- 47 A. Gabbrielli, *La Meta Sudans. La Più Antica Fontana di Roma*, Rome: Dedalo, 2000.
- 48 Gabbrielli, op. cit., 8.
- 49 Gabbrielli, op. cit., 33.
- 50 Evident in, to name only a few examples, the well-attended public commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of Mussolini's March on Rome on 28 October of this year (2002), or the sale in the bookstalls of Rome of a humourless Mussolini calendar for the year 2003.
- 51 According to reports in *La Repubblica* and *Il Tempo* of 19 June 2001.
- 52 The Fondazione BNC.

Chapter 3

Piranesi's Pantheon

Susan M. Dixon

In the famous plan of a reconstructed section of ancient Rome that serves as the main illustration of *Il Campo Marzio*, 1762, and in a corollary bird's-eye view, Piranesi offered an image of a Pantheon contextualized in relation to many Imperial monuments (Figures 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3). The Pantheon was one of the best preserved and arguably the most visited and commented upon architectural works in the city in the mid-eighteenth century, as it is today. It was often represented; architects from at least the late fifteenth century forward captured various aspects of the building: its façade and interior decoration, and its measurements.¹ However, none before Piranesi had positioned it in a plausible urban reconstruction of ancient Rome.² The result is that it appears as just a bauble in the vast network of structures and infrastructure in the *Ichonographia*. In other words, Piranesi denigrated its significance by overwhelming it with other monuments, such as the *Thermae Agrippae*, not just bigger but more impressive in design and in structural complexity. I will here explore the possibility that the artist's version of the Pantheon was a polemical response to a long tradition of idolizing and isolating the structure to the point that it came to epitomize rather than hint at the artistic achievements of ancient Rome. In its place, he offered an opportunity to supplant the numerous misprisions of the Pantheon, and in the process, he proposed his own: the Pantheon as a mere shadow of the magnificence of the ancient Roman capital.