

# ARCHEOLOGY AS FRIEND OR FOE: THE CHURCHES OF THE ROMAN FORUM

David Watkin

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Piranesi's panoramic views of the Forum and its ruinous remains feature six roofed and working buildings which all turn out to be churches: S. Adriano, built into the Senate House, S. Lorenzo in Miranda, built into the Temple of Antoninus and Faustina, SS. Cosmas and Damian, S. Francesca Romana, SS. Luca e Martina, and the now demolished S. Maria Liberatrice. The Forum had become a Christian sacred space. Indeed, it has been a place of worship for about two thousand eight hundred years, and for over half that time the worship has been Christian. The churches were all entered from, and looked on to, the Forum. But the growth of archaeology and the transformation of the space into a designated archaeological site means that those of them that survive now tend to be entered from outside the Forum, in other words from their rear. They have in effect been written out of the Forum's history. This hostility to them goes back to the early days of the archaeological process: for example, in her three-volume *Rome in the Nineteenth Century* (1820), Charlotte Eaton dismissed S. Lorenzo as 'now shut up, but ought to be pulled down', while Horace Marucchi in *The Roman Forum and the Palatine* (1906) welcomed the recent destruction of S. Maria Liberatrice and called for a similar fate to be meted out to S. Lorenzo.

Nonetheless, the standing buildings that the modern visitor to the Forum sees are still churches which is a nice echo of the ancient Roman Forum where, it should not be forgotten, the great majority of buildings were religious in function, even if modern accounts of the Forum tend to stress its political significance above all else. These churches contain everything that is to be expected in the historic Catholic churches of Italy: frescoes, mosaics, altar pieces, tombs, monuments, shrines, relics, and objects of veneration such as an ancient Roman stone, preserved in S. Francesca Romana, which supposedly bears the imprint of the knees of Saint Peter. However, with



*Piranesi's view of the Forum as viewed from the Capitoline Hill, 1775*

the huge decline in Mass attendance and in vocations to the priesthood, following the self-destructive reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the prime function of the churches in the Forum is now to provide a colourful setting for weddings. Nonetheless, as we shall see, they are wonderful places to visit, even if they have become difficult to appreciate for a range of reasons, notably their banishment from the Forum of which they were once a part.

Christianity already had a presence in the city when Saint Peter preached there c. AD 60 and Saint Paul wrote his letter to the Romans from Corinth. By the end of the second century or mid-third century, a prosperous Christian community flourished in Rome. The decline of the Roman Empire was associated not so much with the rise of Christianity as with the military anarchy which characterised the third century AD. However, emperors often found Christians a convenient scapegoat and their punishment a symbol of imperial power as well as a reaffirmation of the power of the traditional, pagan, gods. Among those seeking to restore order was, for example, Diocletian (284-305), who reorganised the entire empire, was a great builder, but a persecutor of Christians. But the new religion received a great boost on October 28, AD 312 when Constantine (306-337), a Christian supporter who

was formally baptised on his death bed, wrested the city of Rome from his co-emperor Maxentius (306-12). Maxentius had been a major architectural patron, as was Constantine, who built churches as well as public buildings, including the completion of the Basilica of Maxentius in the Forum.

The earliest churches were built on the margins of Rome and thus did not touch the Forum. The great Roman families who dominated the Senate and the centre of the city were still pagan, but Constantine built churches which were mostly in fact memorials to martyrs in Christian cemeteries (this was the origin of Saint Peter's among several others). These could only be built over tombs and were therefore outside the city in the suburbs. In choosing distant sites in the *suburbium*, Constantine helped create the wide spread of the present city and determined its sacred geography – the very earliest large churches being away from the ancient pagan centre of Rome.

The first person to use an ancient Roman building in the Forum as a church was Pope Felix IV (526-30) when he founded SS. Cosmas and Damian. There had been little call for pagan temples to be turned into Christian churches, partly because they remained imperial property even after the suppression of paganism in 395, and so not immediately avail-



able to the church for conversion. In 395 the Roman Empire was also split into two halves, both Christian and both with its own emperor. The eastern, or Byzantine, empire, with its capital at Constantinople, survived until the Turks completed their conquest of it in 1453 with the capture of Constantinople. The short-lived western empire, with its capital first at Milan, and then at Ravenna, was subject to constant barbarian invasion. On its fall in 476, Italy was ruled by the Ostrogoth kings. One of these, Theodoric (493-526), another great builder, appointed Pope Felix IV who, by founding the church of SS. Cosmas and Damian, started the 'Christianisation' of the Forum. Rome had become virtually an outpost of empire by this time, and its population was falling (from a million or a million and a half at the height of the empire to around 90,000 at the end of the sixth century), so it was no longer the vast imperial conurbation it had once been. Yet the Forum still retained real clout. Hence it saw a series of ecclesiastical foundations, though modest in some respects in keeping with the smaller scale of the city.

The process of Christianisation was slow. The sixth century saw the creation of just two churches, SS. Cosmas and Damian and S. Maria Antiqua. S. Martina came in the seventh century; the modest SS. Sergio e Baccho had appeared by the late eighth-century; S. Maria Nova (now S. Francesca Romana) came in the ninth century; and S. Lorenzo by the eleventh century. This is not a particularly impressive

list, making it clear that the Forum must still have been dominated by ancient Roman buildings. It was not, however, the kind of depopulated wasteland at this time that it is often supposed to have been. We should note, for example, the stress on the Forum as worthy of continual upkeep by the Byzantine administration in the mid-sixth century; the installation of S. Maria Antiqua at around the same time; the prominent placing of the statue of Phocas in 608; the papal election held in the ancient Comitium before the entire populace in the eighth century; and the maintenance of the paving at the original level until at least the sack of Robert Guiscard and his Normans in 1084.

Unlike the earliest foundations on the periphery of the city, most of the churches founded in Rome in the sixth century up to the time of Gregory the Great (590-604) and the following thirty years were centred on the Forum, the Via Sacra, and the Palatine, at the heart of imperial Rome. These were all adaptations of ancient pagan buildings, despite there being some reluctance to take over imperial property. Indeed, Pope Honorius I (625-38) needed an imperial decree to allow him to take the bronze roof tiles from the Temple of Venus and Rome in the Forum to Saint Peter's, while the same Pope turned the Senate House in the Forum into the church of S. Adriano. It was not until the mid-ninth century that a new church, S. Maria Nova, was to be built as an entirely new building on a site in the Forum. From this point on the city began to disintegrate po-

litically and socially. Between the tenth and thirteenth centuries the impoverished population was reduced to about 35,000, probably dropping to as little as 17,000 during the period from 1309-77 when the popes and the curia were in Avignon.

### Saints Cosmas and Damian

The church dedicated in AD 527 to the saints, Cosmas and Damian, physicians from Syria who were supposedly martyred under Diocletian, is one of the most fascinating yet challenging monuments in the Forum. It is fascinating because it shows the complexity of the path from paganism to Christianity, being one of the main Christian monuments of the Forum yet occupying a couple of side rooms of the Templum Pacis (Temple of Peace) - a vast complex built between AD 71 and 79 adjacent to, but outside, the Forum itself, to celebrate Roman victory over the Jews ('Temple of Pacification' might be a better translation). It was King Theodoric as representative of imperial authority who gave permission for these publicly owned halls to be turned into a church, while a continuity between paganism and Christianity is shown by the fact that the main hall, probably deserted by c. 520, seems to have served as a medical office in an area which had been settled by doctors in public civil service from the Imperial age onwards. The church thus Christianised an ancient tradition, for, dedicated to two physicians, it was associated with healing and salvation. Like other early churches in the Forum,



Former narthex of the Basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian



Apse mosaic added by Felix IV in the 520s



it also had a special flavour, not being primarily parish churches or containing relics, but *diaconiae*, that is welfare centres providing food and relief to the poor and to pilgrims. Into this category fell the churches of S. Adriano and S. Maria Antiqua, as well as the little oratory of SS. Sergio e Bacco which was built against the south side of the Arch of Septimius Severus.

The church is also challenging, firstly because the frequent changes made to it, right up to interventions by current archaeologists, pose the problem of how to present buildings with such a long history of development. How should we decide to what period or phase of their development they should be put back? Secondly, we now approach the church awkwardly from the modern Via dei Fori Imperiali, via the convent attached to it, rather than as originally from the front, in the Via Sacra as it passes through the Forum. The circuitous route begins at the entrance to the convent through the tall, plain arch of white travertine marble which was added in 1947 by the architect Gaetano Rapisardi. Below the prominent bell turret, the left hand range in ancient brick survives from the Temple of Peace when it was used to display the Marble Plan of Rome, that remarkable map of the city inscribed for the Emperor Septimius Severus. We then enter the cloister with arcades on three sides of its ground floor, designed by Luigi Arigucci in the 1630s and frescoed by Francesco Allegrini. We finally enter the church itself, somewhat unexpectedly, from a corner of the cloister.

Nonetheless, it is exciting to visit what is the most intact, roofed survival

of part of an ancient Roman building in the Forum. In fact, it comprises two halls from the Temple of Peace, ceded to the pope by the emperor: its nave had probably served as an audience chamber for the city prefect by the early fifth century, while its vestibule or antechapel, a much smaller, domed, circular building, is the so-called 'Temple of Romulus', dating from the early fourth century AD.

Since Felix IV took over these two existing buildings, his church is not really an Early Christian building as it is sometimes described, for the apse and upper walls date from the mid-fourth century and are thus purely pagan. Indeed, it echoes the form of the audience halls of late antique rulers, inspired by imperial throne rooms. Felix IV merely added the Early Christian mosaics to the apse and its semi-dome in the 520s, leaving the interior to retain, as it does today, something of the secular flavour of the ancient Roman building, an effect also aided by its great width. However, the sixth-century gold-ground mosaics in the half-dome of the apse are among the earliest and most beautiful in Rome. They include depictions of Saints Peter and Paul introducing Saints Cosmas and Damian, in rich red and violet robes, to Christ who is in golden draperies and holds a scroll like an ancient Roman orator. Saint Felix IV on the extreme left, presents a model of the church, while in a band below these figures are twelve lambs symbolising the apostles, and four rivers symbolising the four gospels. The bold figures and shadows show that the illusionistic traditions of Hellenistic art had not been forgotten

by these artists.

The apsed crypt or lower church is now fairly featureless apart from fragments of a Cosmati work marble floor. Arigucci continued this marble floor into the circular 'Temple of Romulus' so that it formed a noble vestibule to the church. The façade to the Forum of the 'Temple of Romulus' was also given at about this

time a Baroque flavour with an attractive cupola and a segmental pediment rising high above the front walls. The pediment was needlessly destroyed in 1879-80 though the cupola was surprisingly retained and survives today. The eighteenth-century Neapolitan *presepe* (crib), recently moved to a domed lobby in one corner of the cloister, was handsomely displayed in this vestibule until around 1990 when the archaeologists destroyed Arrigucci's marble floor. It had been the perfect home for the *presepe*, a huge and elaborate assembly of many fine figures in terracotta, porcelain, and wood, depicting the Adoration of the Magi.

One can look into the circular 'Temple of Romulus', now an empty and functionless vestibule, from a wall of glass installed at the end of the nave of SS. Cosmas and Damian in 2000 and can also enter it from the Forum. But the decorative treatment has been removed from its walls, leaving bare brick, so that it has neither an antique Roman flavour nor a seventeenth-century one. The survival of a well below its floor has led to the suggestion that it may have been associated with the healing arts of the two saints to whom the church is dedicated, an echo of the temple opposite of the twin gods, Castor and Pollux.

### Santa Maria Antiqua and Oratory of the Forty Martyrs

We now turn to other ruined buildings which have been excavated and restored by archaeologists where similar problems arise. The church of S. Maria Antiqua, dating from the reign of Justin II (565-78) about fifty years after the foundation of the church of SS. Cosmas and Damian, was the second adaptation in the Forum of an ancient Roman building as a church. This time, it was not a temple that was adapted for Christian use but a square atrium with porticoes near the foot of the Palatine at the back of the Temple of Castor and Pollux. This was part of a complex structure built in the late first century by the side of a great ramp begun by Domitian to lead up to the palaces on the Palatine. It is thus fascinating to see a church being made out of an ancient building whose function was secular, in this case part of the forecourt of an imperial palace. There is also an irony in that the exposure of the remains of S. Maria Antiqua by twentieth-century



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Interior of Santa Maria Antiqua



archaeologists was only made possible by the total demolition of the handsome Renaissance church of S. Maria Liberatrice which had been built into it.

In the mid-sixth century, when Rome was politically just a town in a province of the Byzantine empire, its viceroy from Ravenna used the building as part of a guard house to protect the approach to the palace, still on the Palatine. Like the guard house in the imperial palace in Constantinople, it was decorated with Christian murals. As we can tell from archaeological excavation on the site, when the building became the church of S. Maria Antiqua, the original brick piers were replaced by four granite columns surmounted by carved capitals, and an apse was formed out of the solid brick wall mass at the end of the atrium vestibule. The church was also provided with marble and mosaic pavements and many wall paintings from at least the sixth to the ninth centuries, including an early representation of the Virgin Mary wearing a crown as Queen of Heaven, or member of the imperial court. This splendid structure was not to last long. Partly destroyed in an earthquake in 847, its rights and possessions were transferred to a new church of the Virgin Mary, S. Maria Nova within the Temple of Venus and Roma – hence the title Antiqua for this one.

In front of S. Maria Antiqua is the Shrine or Oratory of the Forty Martyrs, in origin a hall of the first century AD whose function, like that of around half a dozen buildings in the Forum, including the enormous Domitianic Hall, we do not now know.

### Santa Maria Liberatrice

For Piranesi the church of S. Maria Liberatrice was an important landmark in the Forum. It featured prominently in several of his views, defining the south side of the Forum, just as the church of S. Lorenzo in Miranda which it faced across the Via Sacra, defined the north side. In the last of its several forms, this was a handsome Renaissance church of 1617. Originally built in the thirteenth century, it engulfed what remained of the church of S. Maria Antiqua after the earthquake. Its main purpose was to commemorate the nearby site of the home of the legendary dragon, chained by Pope Sylvester I (314-35), in fulfilment of a command from Saint Peter in a vision.

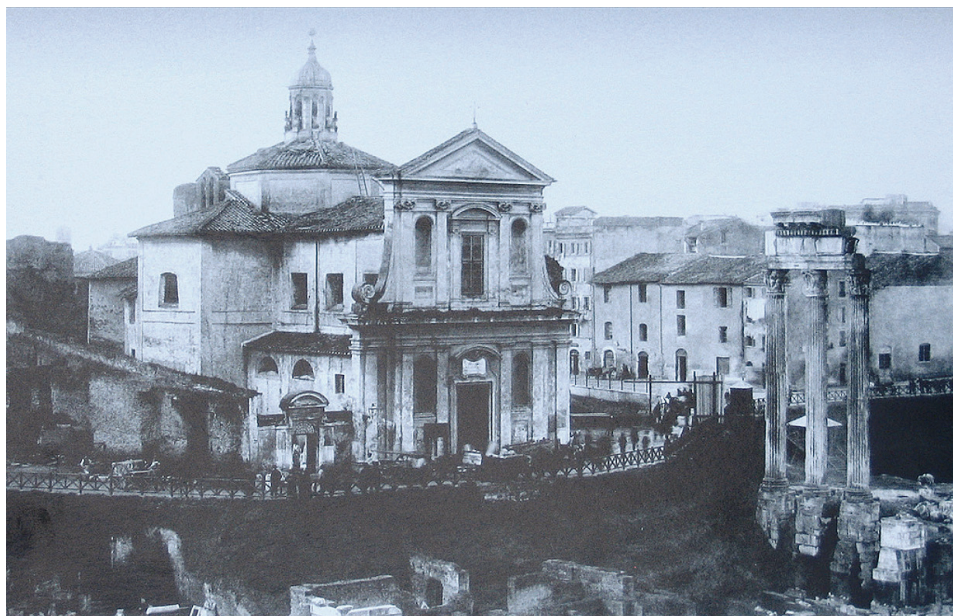


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*Santa Maria Liberatrice in the Forum before and during demolition, 1900*

The name 'Liberatrice', referring to the liberation of the inhabitants of Rome from the fearsome dragon, was transferred to the Virgin Mary to whom the church was dedicated. The site is near the House of the Vestals who were traditionally supposed to have fed the dragon. In the twelfth-century account known as the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* (Marvels of the City of Rome), we are told that near the Church of Saint Anthony, or the oratory of the forty martyrs 'is a place called Hell because in ancient times it burst forth there and brought great mischief upon Rome.' The author of this curious but gullible work also referred to 'the Temple of Vesta, which - it is said - a dragon crouches beneath, as we read in the life of Saint Silvester.'

The mediaeval church of S. Maria Liberatrice was rebuilt in 1617 with a new façade and cupola from designs by Onorio Longhi (1568-1619), father of the more prolific Martino Longhi the Younger. Onorio was the architect of the vast church of SS. Carlo e Ambrogio al Corso in Rome, begun in 1612. His pedimented entrance front at S. Maria Liberatrice, two-storeyed and adorned with round-headed niches and an order of pilasters, was a miniature version of the late Renaissance façade of 1571-84 by Giacomo della Porta (c.1533-1602) at the influential church of Il Gesù in Rome. Over the crossing at S. Maria Liberatrice, Longhi placed a cupola over a low octagonal drum, a north Italian form. The architect Francesco Ferrari (1703-50) restored and enriched



the interior in 1749 with stuccowork and paintings by leading artists of the classicising trend of the day, Sebastiano Ceccarini and Lorenzo Gramiccia, showing the importance then attached to this church.

However, it is now sadly gone. For nearly three centuries, Longhi's attractive church was a key element of the Forum but was doomed when the remains of S. Maria Antiqua, first partially uncovered in 1702, were fully excavated in 1900 by Giacomo Boni (1859-1925). In accordance with the archaeological doctrine that the older anything is the more important it must be, Boni, though supposedly upholding Ruskin's views on sensitive restoration, was bent on demolishing S. Maria Liberatrice in order to expose surviving elements of the original Roman building. In fact, the church proved to have been so solidly built that dynamite was necessary to destroy it. Boni made no proper record of what he had demolished, allowing cartloads of fragments, some featuring faded Early Christian wall-paintings, to be taken away for disposal. During extensive excavations and repairs in 1985-7, the concrete vaults were reconstructed in order to help preserve such paintings as still survive from S. Maria Antiqua, though the church is not normally open to the public.

### Sant' Adriano

An even more striking example of re-use and restoration is the church of S. Adriano. Formed in the early seventh century inside the Senate House (which dated to the late third or early fourth century), this church was given a superb Baroque interior in the mid-seventeenth century. In its first conversion in AD 630 the marble steps for the senators' seats were retained together with the extravagant decoration and splendid furnishings: indeed, these features were valued so much that the Catholic liturgy had to take place around them. S. Adriano was remodelled in the Romanesque style in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century when a tall campanile was added at the rear and antique columns with richly ornamented bases were introduced as spolia into the interior to make a six-bay nave and aisles. These columns were later encased in a Renaissance pier arcade under Pope Sixtus V Peretti (reigned 1585-90), but a more im-

portant and complete remodelling was carried out in 1653-6 by Martino Longhi the Younger (1602-60), whose masterpiece was the dazzling church of SS. Vincenzo ed Anastasio (1646-50), built for Cardinal Mazarin opposite the Fontana di Trevi. The most daringly inventive of the talented Longhi family of architects, he also published poetry and an architectural treatise.

It was not until 1860 that the building which housed Longhi's masterly church was first identified by an archaeologist as the Senate House. From this moment its survival was threatened, though it was not to be deconsecrated until 1935. The baroque structures were entirely removed from 1935-8, leaving grim, bare walls, which, unlike Longhi's work, give no impression whatever of the richness of the antique Senate House. The present wooden ceiling is also modern. One critic has rightly observed that 'a building such as the Curia offers a warning of the hazards of partial restoration', for it is hard to see the purpose of ripping out the vibrant work of Longhi which imaginatively demonstrated the timeless continuity of the classical language of architecture. In a masterpiece entirely compatible with the ancient structure, Longhi had contrived to combine references to ancient buildings in the Forum, such as the Temple of Venus and Rome, with modern Baroque architecture. Nonetheless, some visitors see what they wish to see, so that another archaeologist claimed that it has now been 'restored to its ancient form'. One even believed that 'it is one of the most splendid interiors to survive from classical Rome.'

### San Lorenzo in Miranda

The one place where it is still possible to appreciate the rich drama of



S. Adriano interior before archeological destruction in 1935

the Baroque Forum is the church of S. Lorenzo in Miranda. For once, a church has happily been suffered to survive within a Roman temple. First recorded in 1074, it was built within the Temple of Antoninus and Faustina which had been begun in AD 140 by the Emperor Antoninus Pius in honour of his wife who had been declared a goddess by the Senate after her death. Imitated in antiquity, for example in the 'Temple of Diana' (c. AD 200) at Evora, Portugal, it later became familiar through the woodcut illustrations by Palladio in his *Four Books of Architecture* (1570), and by the more sophisticated engravings by Antoine Desgodetz of 1682 in his *Les Edifices Antiques de Rome* (The Ancient Buildings of Rome). Palladio could not resist 'improving' the temple by setting it in a temenos (a walled sacred precinct), probably inspired by that of the Forum of Caesar, and by enriching its interior with statues.

Its fame inspired modern imitations far afield. The external frieze of the temple is carved with scrolls of leaves of the acanthus plant and candelabra which are placed between pairs of griffins facing each other. Today these are, of course, in a fragmentary and damaged condition so that, except to the specialist, they may be disappointing. Their afterlife, as with so much Roman decorative work, is rather more

impressive. For example, this frieze was often imitated in buildings without sacred associations, notably by William Kent in his palatial attempt to create an ancient Roman house at Holkham Hall, Norfolk (1734-65). He based his version on the representation of the frieze by Desgodetz, a fact recorded on a nineteenth-century board handed out to visitors to the house. This cites the same source for details in other interiors which Kent took from the Temple of 'Fortuna Virilis' (Portunus) and the Basilica of Maxentius in Rome.

In the fifteenth century Pope Eugenius IV (1431-47) not only dismantled the rear wall of the cella to reuse its materials in rebuilding the Lateran Palace but gave the church of S. Lorenzo in Miranda to a guild of apothecaries. Their successors, the Collegio Chimico Farmaceutico, still occupy it, housing their museum in the crypt or lower church. But it is the complete rebuilding of the structure in 1601-14 by Orazio Torriani (d. 1657), and the dramatic incorporation of the ancient temple, that give the present church much of its charm. The modern approach to it is disappointing, for visitors to the Forum today, coming from the entrance off the Via dei Fori Imperiali, first see the bleak and unadorned largely modern office

wing, harshly restored in 1935, at the back of the church. To restore meaning to the building, it should once more be entered from its original doorway in the Forum which should not be impossible to contrive.

Torriani's new façade is crowned by a tall and ebulliently Baroque broken pediment which was completed later in the seventeenth-century. It is a vivid reminder of the appearance of the Forum as the Campo Vaccino (Field of Cows) in the eighteenth century when it was alive with recent buildings incorporating the remains of ancient Roman ones. The interior of the church with its well restored paintings is little known or visited, though it boasts a High Altar by the great Baroque architect and painter, Pietro da Cortona (1596-1669).

The staircase up to the portico was excavated in 1876, though the modern one is a displeasing reconstruction of it in the inappropriate material of brick. The row of old houses adjacent to the building on the left was demolished in 1899 to excavate the floor of the Basilica Aemilia. The survival of Torriani's church of S. Lorenzo is astonishing in view of the calls for its destruction by the archaeological purists we have already cited, such as Charlotte Eaton and Horace Marucchi.

Instead, visitors have to take a circuitous route up the steep road parallel to the Via dei Fori Imperiali to an area on the side of the church which, though right next to the Basilica of Maxentius, includes an ugly tarmac car park and inhospitable wire fences. With the ecclesiastical rank of a minor basilica like SS. Cosmas and Damian, S. Francesca Romana, combines elements of all major periods from antiquity to the Baroque. Founded in the ninth century, it is one of the most historic, evocative, and appealing buildings in the Forum where its life and richness make it a unique survival in a setting which archaeologists are doing so much to render unattractive and dispiriting. With a classical entrance façade of 1615 below its twelfth-century campanile featuring tiers of arches decorated with majolica, this church is a focal point on rising ground in the Forum.

Originally founded by Saint Leo IV (847-55) in 850 as S. Maria Nova, it was the first major new building in the Forum since classical times. Its name was changed to S. Francesca Romana in 1608 to mark the canonisation in that year of Francesca Buzzi de' Ponzi (1384-1440), a noblewoman who had founded a Sisterhood of Oblates in the church in 1421. On her husband's death, she entered this herself and was rewarded by God with the visible presence of her guardian angel with whom she was reported as conversing familiarly. Regarded as the only native Roman to found a religious order, she was canonised as S. Francesca Romana in 1608 and her name added to that of the church of S. Maria Nova. In 1926, she became, somewhat improbably, the patron saint of motorists, presumably in recognition of her association with care and guardianship. On her feast day, March 9, the street leading up to the church from the Via dei Fori Imperiali is, or was, crowded with cars each year.

### Santa Francesca Romana

Shown in countless paintings and engravings, more beautiful and infinitely better sited than SS. Cosmas and Damian, the church of S. Francesca Romana with its twelfth-century Romanesque campanile is one of the most appealing and dominant buildings in the entire Forum. For nearly twelve hundred years, it has demarcated the Forum's eastern end. It is thus greatly to be regretted that there is no longer any public access to it from the Forum.



Photo: Mason W. Roberts

*San Lorenzo in Miranda Interior*





*Santa Francesca Romana and the Arch of Titus*

Redentore. Though Palladio is probably the most imitated architect in history, especially in Britain and the United States of America, it is most unusual for his work to be echoed at this date in Rome where his Renaissance style would have seemed out of date.

The interior of S. Francesca Romana in the rich and noble form given it by Lambardi glistens with Baroque gilding and polychromatic marbles, restored for Pope Pius XII in 1952 but now in need of cleaning. The wide nave, five bays long with a triumphal arch separating it from the apse, has a carved gilt wood ceiling by Lambardi of 1615. Behind a grille on the south wall of the south transept is one of the most extraordinary objects in the Forum which should certainly not be missed by the curious visitor. It is a stone from the Via Sacra with marks which are traditionally the imprints of the knees of Saint Peter as he prayed for the exposure of the wizardry of Simon Magus who had challenged him, and possibly Saint Paul as well, to a competition in levitation in the Forum. By drawing on magical powers, Magus succeeded in flying up to the sky but was killed as he crashed to earth. The site of his fall, brought about by the prayers of Saint Peter, was in the neighbourhood. The story is a curious echo of the Lacus Curtius where, as we have seen, a knight was supposed to have sacrificed himself by leaping into a chasm which opened in the Forum. On another occasion, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, Simon Magus tried to bribe Saint Peter; hence 'simony', the buying or selling of ecclesiastical preferment, is named after him.

### San Giuseppe dei Falegnami

Often overlooked by visitors, blinded by archaeology through no fault of their own, is an intriguing group of buildings close together at the west end of the Forum. Including what can claim to be the most sophisticated building in the entire Forum, the Baroque church of SS. Martina e Luca, these monuments are vitally important for demarcating the north-western extremity of the Forum area. Here, on the north side of the Tabularium, from the present Via di San Pietro in Carcere a Roman road known as the Clivus Argentarius (bankers' rise) ran between the Capitol and the Quirinal Hills. A surviving section of this road descends to S. Giuseppe dei Falegnami, the church of the Guild of Carpenters who had been settled here since 1540. Their church was built over the 'Carcer', the Mamertine Prison, sometimes also known as the Tullianum, either because of the *tullius*, or spring of water which drained through it, or because it was believed to have been constructed by King Servius Tullius (578-535 BC). It has long been venerated because, according to a legend, Saint Peter and Saint Paul were imprisoned here in the reign of Nero, causing the spring to rise miraculously so that they could baptise their fellow prisoners and gaolers. It is a wonderful example of what we have described as the palimpsests, the multiple layers of Christianity and pagan antiquity which are such a feature of the Forum.

Building of the Carpenters' Guild church of S. Giuseppe dei Falegnami over this cell was begun in 1599 from

designs by the architect and archaeologist, Giovanni Battista Montano (1534-1621), a member of the Guild. His inventive reconstructions of ancient Roman buildings, published by his pupil, Giovanni Battista Soria (1581-1651), influenced Baroque architects such as Borromini. Montano's entrance façade, completed in 1602, includes volutes, aedicules, and two small pediments contained within the larger one. Curiously lacking in carved detail, it looks almost as though it has been refaced in cement. After 1621, Soria continued work on the church which was completed in 1663 by Antonio del Grande (1652-71).

The balustraded double staircase on the façade was mutilated in 1932 to make way for a new and enlarged ground-floor entrance portico in the Mussolini classical style. This was to provide prominent access to what is left of the Mamertine Prison, considered to be of more interest than the church, while at the same time the adjacent houses on the left were unnecessarily demolished.



*San Giuseppe dei Falegnami*

### Saints Luca e Martina

A few feet away from S. Giuseppe dei Falegnami is the church of SS. Luca e Martina, a seventeenth-century Baroque masterpiece by Pietro da Cortona, the most distinguished roofed



building in the Forum. It replaced the Early Christian church of S. Martina which had been built by Pope Honorius I in the early seventh century on the site of the *Secretarium Senatus*, a special court convened to judge senators, built next to the senate house towards the end of the Empire. Depictions of S. Martina are rare but its modest, domestic-looking façade with a tiny bell turret can be seen in an engraving of 1575 by Etienne du Dupérac.

In 1588 the little church of S. Martina was given to the *Accademia di S. Luca*, founded in 1577 as an academy of painters, sculptors, and architects. Since the evangelist Saint Luke was traditionally an artist, he became the patron saint of painters. The long influential *Accademia di S. Luca*, closely allied to the papal court and always a great promoter of interest in antiquity, survives to the present day in the *Palazzo Carpegna*, near the *Fontana di Trevi*. It was moved here as one of the many casualties of the creation of Mussolini's great road, the *Via dei Fori Imperiali* in 1932, but its important collections survive and are open to the public.

To mark its ownership by the *Accademia di S. Luca* the name of S. Luca was added to that of S. Martina in 1589 and a wooden model for a new church on a slightly expanded site was made by Giovanni Battista Montano, then lecturing on architecture at the *Accademia*. No funds were yet available for building, but in 1626 Cardinal Francesco Barberini, nephew of Pope Urban VIII, became protector of the *Accademia* and in 1634 the leading Baroque architect and painter, Pietro da Cortona (1596-1669), was made its *capo* (head). He was given permission to remodel the crypt or lower church to provide a tomb for himself, but the discovery in it of the body of S. Martina during the excavations in 1634 prompted Cardinal Barberini to pay for an ambitious new church to bring pilgrims to venerate her relics.

Cortona's church of SS. Luca e Martina, built slowly from his designs in 1635-73, has a two-storeyed façade with a striking convex form which was the first of the celebrated curved fronts of the Baroque churches of Rome. The columns of its upper storey are in the Composite order which, as we have noted, is a characteristically rich, even indigestible, Roman invention, its capitals crowning the acanthus leaves of



Photo: baldanglebluff, flickr.com

*Ss. Luca e Martina, and the Arch of Septimius Severus*

the Corinthian order with the volutes of the Ionic order. Cortona doubtless chose this order because of the proximity of the Arch of Septimius Severus which is also Composite. Piranesi must have seen this parallel when he included the arch and the church together in his *Vedute di Roma*. In his day, when the arch was almost half buried, its sumptuous capitals would have been much nearer to eye-level. Architects working in the Forum find various ways of relating their buildings to earlier ones, and the dialogue Cortona conducts between his church and the adjacent arch is one of the most brilliant. He was also careful to place the cornice surmounting his ground floor at the same level as the crowning cornice of the more modest but adjacent Curia.

The domed cruciform interior of SS. Luca e Martina has none of the colour we associate with the Baroque but is an emphatically architectural essay in plastic form, dominated by massive unfluted columns in greyish-white travertine. This is in astonishing contrast to the richly coloured lower church, or crypt, which is not normally open but should not be missed. Joseph Connors described romantically in 1982 how, while the upper church 'is executed in white travertine and stucco, rich effects of color are displayed in the crypt ... [where the] complex system of staircases, dark corridors, and small Hadrianic chambers is meant to evoke

the feeling of mystery experienced by seventeenth-century explorers of the crypts and catacombs of early Christian Rome.' Indeed, in the centre of the shallow apse of the inner chapel in the crypt is an Early Christian throne, preserved from the original church.

With its prominent dome and powerful interiors, SS. Luca e Martina is one of the most impressive Baroque churches in Rome, but its impact has been impaired by the processes of archaeology which have insulated it from the urban setting for which it was designed: first by the lowering of the level of the Forum after 1802, and then by the destruction of the adjacent buildings in 1932 to expose the foundations of ancient remains. The removal of the houses which flanked the church emphasised the fact that Cortona had been unable to complete the façade. As Anthony Blunt complained in 1982, 'As it stands now the church is in many ways awkward and naked.'

## Conclusion

We have stressed in this article the gripping way in which the religions of the classical and the Christian world interlock culturally and architecturally at every level in the extraordinarily iconic place, the Roman Forum. Since the visitor who misses this challenge of the relationship of ancient and modern, will miss much of what the Forum has to offer, it is hoped that this essay will achieve something if it helps to rescue the Forum from its ugly and depressing role as an 'archaeological site', and to reinstate it as an evocative place of haunting and resonant beauty. This might confirm the claim of T.S. Eliot who, considering the 'conformity between the old and the new' in his famous essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', observed that we 'will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.'



*David Watkin is an Emeritus Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge, and Professor Emeritus of History of Architecture in the Department of History of Art at the University of Cambridge. He is author of over thirty books including A History of Western Architecture and Morality and Architecture.*