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Archaeology and the Roman Forum

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The excavation of the Roman Forum at the turn of the last century and during the early decades of the current one is inseparably linked with the name of Giacomo Boni (1859–1925). From the area of his monument in the restored Farnese Gardens atop the Palatine Hill, a visitor to the city in the 1980s may conveniently view new work going on in places Boni had disinterred—sometimes with remarkable speed—from 1899 to 1905.

It is important to distinguish the archaeological current from others that operated in the city in Boni's day. These can all be summed up by the same title, *Roma Capitale*, under which the current debate over the future of the modern city and the monuments of its extraordinary past continues. Boni cannot be dismissed simply as a precursor of the archaeologists and planners of the fascist era. Their goal was to set new (and ephemeral) imperial Rome side by side with the old, while at the same time dispersing politically undesirable concentrations of the populace from the historic center.

The results of these later enterprises are still evident. The ambitious project begun by the archaeological superintendency of Rome in 1981 to reimplement the century-old design for the city's archaeological park may be read both as an act of exorcism of this aspect of fascist activity and as a determined challenge to the latest in the series of assaults that have been made on the fabric of Rome since Italian unification.

Boni's work, intentions, and results should be viewed in the context of the development of Umbertine Rome. At this time there was much debate regarding what was necessary to make Rome a proper capital city of a modern European country and what place the architectural and artistic patrimony from the city's previous centuries would have in the new design. The parties to the debate were many, famous, and energetic. Capital was sought in these same years for the industrial base that would in turn support and to some extent condition the development of the new capital city. Unfortunately, it came from speculation in urban real estate—which rapidly became the only game in town, at great cost to the aforesaid patrimony.

In 1885 the great historian of ancient Rome, Theodore Mommsen, openly rebuked Prince Ludovisi Boncompagni for acquiescing to the abusive development of the area from Porta Pinciana to Porta Salaria. Development there meant the destruction, not only of Villa Ludovisi with its magnificent gardens, but also of inestimable archaeological materials. Ten years later, D'Annunzio, in *Le Vergini delle Rocce*, gave a vivid description of the old city enveloped by the malignant tumor of unregulated development. But, even though land speculation led to the destruction of many historic areas, in Rome of the 1880s and 1890s, debate about development was sharp and intelligent as it never was in the fascist period; nor was Boni indifferent to it when he set to work in the

Forum. The legislation relating to the definition and financing of the archaeological park of Rome—the Baccelli “package” of 1887, 1897, and 1907—gave him his great opportunity, for he was after all an architect by training.

Boni was director of excavations in the Forum from 1899 until 1922 and was responsible for its present shape, except for some significant losses that occurred in the fascist period. His intent seems to have been to give the visitor a historical profile (the archaeologist might favor “horizontal stratigraphy”) in three dimensions of the Forum and Palatine from the most remote antiquity onward. The Forum and its monuments were set against a Medieval frame to the north and east, a combined Ancient-through-Renaissance prospect toward the Capitoline on the west. On the Palatine to the south, there was a combined prospect based on elements of the imperial palaces and memories of the Farnese Gardens of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which had effectively been removed by the archaeologists immediately preceding Boni—Pietro Rosa and Rodolfo Lanciani.

Movement through the historical sequence always started on the streets and levels of the Augustan period. The records of earlier or later remains were plotted, respectively, above or below this reference point. For example, the archaic monuments under the *lapis niger* and the *sepulcretum* were shown below the Augustan reference, and the House of the Vestals and the

Temple of Antoninus and Faustina were shown above it. The choice of an Augustan bench mark was not casual: the general sense of renewal associated with Augustus seemed appropriate, if obvious, for the time. And it also had a particular urban reference, for it was Augustus who began the practice of supplementing the old Forum with newly created grand forums regularly disposed along the streets converging on it.

Exploration of the grand forums and the large bath complexes, which by their location eventually served to make imperial Rome a city of quarters, was also part of the Baccelli plan. It is easy to see in Boni's overall scheme a clear reference to the contemporary urban debate and perhaps even a model in miniature for planners' consideration. But his incomplete and, where extant, often obtuse written record (in striking contrast to the clarity of the renderings from the excavations) permits no firm conclusions and has left him open to present day criticism as an unscientific archaeologist, at the least and at the worst as too close in time to the fascists.

Thus, his legacy in Italy has been controversial. The physical recovery and presentation of the Roman Forum and Palatine is an impressive achievement that anticipates the rise of urban archaeology. But his field work remains essentially unpublished. Even though few would now reject his presentation, the study and analysis of the development of the heart of ancient

Rome is far from complete. The Boni model must be considered both the chief incentive and not infrequently a major obstacle to the process.

Recently, with the encouragement of the archaeological superintendent for Rome, Professor Adriano La Regina, Italian and foreign archaeologists have returned to areas where Boni worked in search of evidence of the changing shape of the city and its institutions in the period of the kings and the transition from them to the early Republic, the sixth and early fifth centuries B.C.: Professor Andrea Carandini of the University of Pisa is working on the northeastern slopes of the Palatine, Professor Margareta Steinby of the Finnish Institute in Rome on the *lacus Iuturnae*, and the American Academy on the Regia and the old precinct of Vesta. There are a number of reasons for these choices, such as the current strong scholarly interest in the early history of Rome and the continuing strength of Italian topographical studies. But it will be obvious from my preceding discussion that the most important goal is to resolve discrepancies between the relatively abundant ancient literary *testimonia*, which locate in these areas important early buildings and cult places that had long-lasting effects on the organization of the Forum, and the inadequate archaeological records of them left by Boni.

The difficulties of going back over ground already broken by another are considerable and the risk of disappointment high, even when

one is armed with an adequate map. They are the more so when, as in these instances, so little documentation survives from the earlier work. But one has still to reckon with the fact that Giacomo Boni produced a remarkable evocation of the evolution of the heart of ancient Rome through a multitude of centuries that the archaeologists of today must seek to challenge, interpret, and expand according to their best lights.

*Nec omnia apud priores meliora:
sed nostra quoque aetas multa
laudis et artium imitanda posteris
tulit. verum haec nobis in
maiores certamina ex honesto
maneant* (Tacitus, *Ann.*3.55).

[Nor was everything better in the past, but our own age too has produced many specimens of excellence and culture for posterity to imitate. May we still keep up with our ancestors a rivalry in all that is honourable!]

The Annals of Tacitus
(Church and Brodribb, trans.)
MacMillan & Co., London, 1888