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# Esther Van Deman and the Roman Forum

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## I The flooded valley of the Roman Forum, 1902.

All photographs by E. Van  
Deman, courtesy of Fototeca  
Unione

The American archaeologist Esther Van Deman spent the greater part of her life in Rome, studying the topography of the Roman Forum, Roman aqueducts, and Roman building techniques. She developed many ideas and methods of research in the field of classical archaeology and actively participated—the first and only woman to do so—in the archaeological debate at the beginning of the century. Van Deman has left an extraordinary documentation, in writing and in photography, of the period in which archaeology moved away from antiquarian practices toward more scientific approaches.

When Esther Boise Van Deman first arrived in Rome in 1901, excavation had been going on in the Forum for exactly 30 years. The work was still under the direction of the Venetian architect Giacomo Boni, director of the excavations since 1898. The decision to initiate archaeological exploration in the Cow-Field—Campo Vaccino was the denomination of the Forum in the nineteenth century—had been made by the young Italian government in 1871, a decision whose political and symbolic significance had not escaped its makers. With the exception of smaller digs in the mid-nineteenth century, excavation had not taken place in the center of Rome since the beginning of the

century. Between 1809 and 1814, the French Napoleonic government of Rome, and later its papal successors, had given new birth to the old idea of the Roman past. They had begun the exploration of the city's monumental center, thus materializing an idea that was to become a remarkable project of "urban renewal," the so-called *Embellissement de la Ville de Rome*, a forerunner of Hausmann and others. The result of their initiative was visible to everyone: the Colosseum had been partially restored, the Arch of Titus had been "liberated" from Medieval and more recent super-structures, the Column of Trajan had been isolated, and part of the adjacent Basilica Ulpia had been laid bare. All these buildings were connected to memories of millenniums that reminded the impoverished and rather run-down Rome of an idealized past.

During the period that preceded the unification of Italy, however, all urban programs came to a standstill. In 1860 the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed, and in 1870 Latium also became part of it, with Rome as the capital of the young nation. The extraordinariness of this event may be understood best when one considers the fact that the country had not enjoyed national unity since the invasions of Italy in the sixth century A.D.

The Roman Forum became the showcase of the new capital: What stronger argument for the idea of a capital could there be, than the physical discovery of a place with a millenary role of "Caput Mundi"—the Center of the World? Of course, this argument was the same one put forward by the Napoleonic government, but now the purpose was different. In the Napoleonic imperial ambitions, there had been a clearly expressed idea of European identity, but the concept of national unity had become the ultimate goal of the Italian government just 50 years later. In another 50 years, the fascist vulgarization of the same argument was to have disastrous consequences for the country.

In the period from 1871 to 1901, thousands of tons of earth were removed to lay bare the Roman Forum, the Basilica Aemilia, the Temple of Castor and Pollux, and the Temple of the Divine Caesar. "The Forum appears to the casual observer a tangled mass of walls superimposed one upon another without rhyme and reason." These are the opening words of Esther Van Deman's article, "The Sullan Forum." The Forum's appearance, flooded after a heavy rainstorm in 1902, is shown in one of her photographs.

What made the archaeologist Esther Van Deman from



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**2 Esther Boise Van Deman:** self-portrait taken on the steamer *Frankfurt*, 1901.



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Ohio, (born in South Salem in 1862) become involved in the Roman archaeological world? Her self-portrait, taken on the steamer *Frankfurt*, shows a woman of strong determination, dressed in an unusually masculine manner with heavy boots and a marine cap. She came to Rome in 1901 to study at the American School of Classical Studies and was soon introduced to leading archaeologists like Giacomo Boni and Christian Huelsen. At the time she held an assistant professorship in Latin and classical archaeology at Goucher College; she had received her doctorate from the University of Chicago in 1898 and her master's degree from the University of Michigan six years earlier. In between, she had taught Latin at Wellesley and Mount Holyoke colleges.

Van Deman's interest soon fell on the building that had housed the Vestal Virgins and was situated just east of the Forum, at the foot of the Palatine. Part of the building had been uncovered in 1883; and, more recently, in 1901, demolition of the church S. Maria Liberatrice had revealed its western parts. The history of the building complex dated back to archaic Rome; the precinct of Vesta contained the temple, the house and forecourt—atrium—of the Vestales, the sacred growth—"Lucus Vestae," and later the house of the



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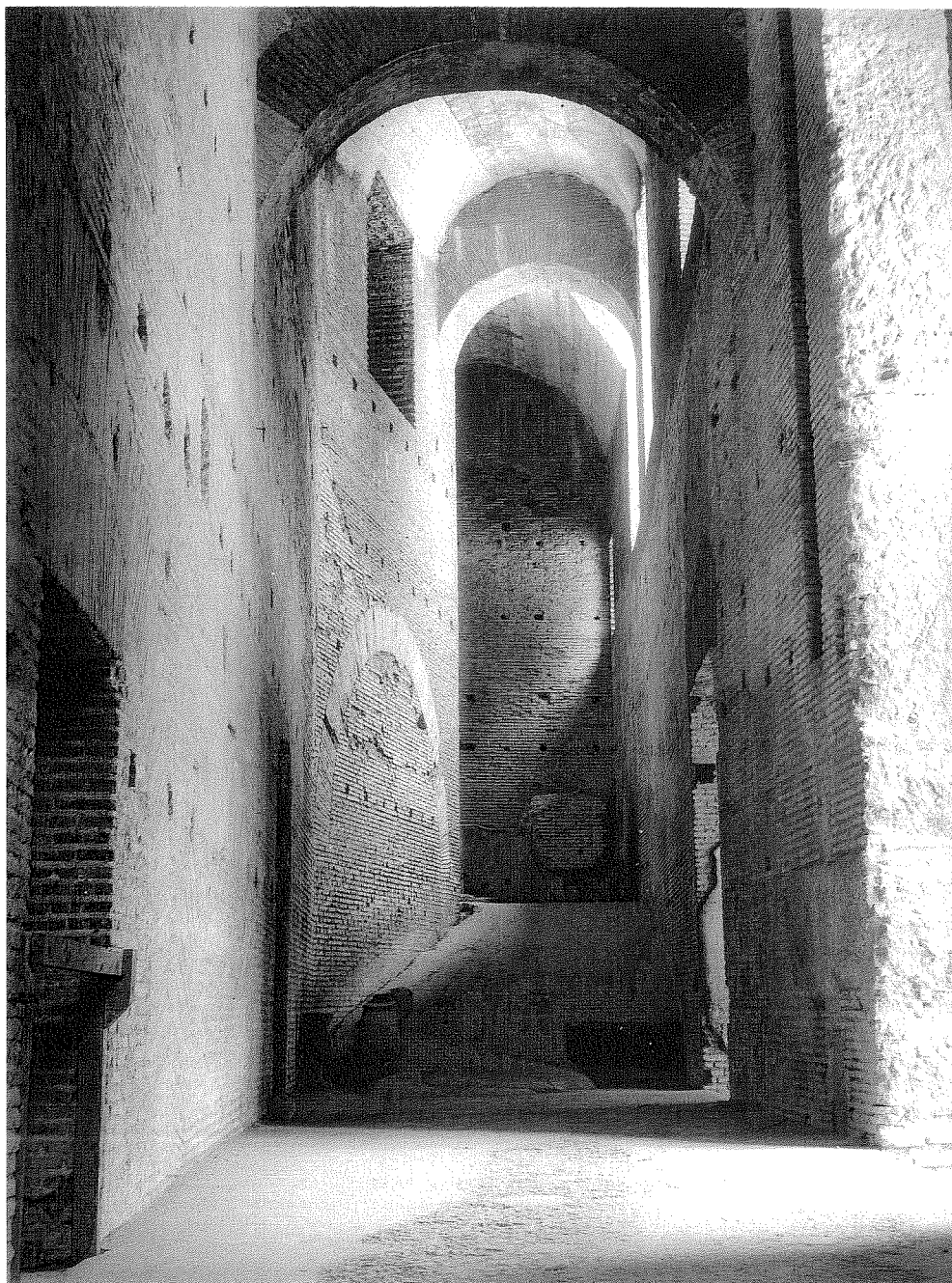
**3 Atrium Vestae in the snow.**

In the background, the round “temple of Romulus” and the Basilica of Maxentius.

**4 Excavation in the court of the Atrium Vestae** around the third-century water basin that had replaced two smaller basins from the time of the early empire. In the background, the Medieval/Renaissance buildings of the Capitol turn their backs to the Forum and hide the facade of the republican Tabularium, on top of which they are built.

**5 Palatine Hill** and the structures of the imperial palaces. The Atrium Vestae is situated at the foot of the hill, behind the arches in the foreground, which supported a ramp giving access to the palace.

5



**6 Covered ramp** inside the building connecting the upper stories of the imperial palaces with the Forum level.

6

**7 Statue of a Vestal Virgin.**





8

**8 Arches spanning the street** running between the Palatine and the Atrium Vestae, both of which they support.

Pontifex Maximus. The complex burned down and was rebuilt many times; it is one of the many achievements of Esther Van Deman to have identified the many and complex phases of its history in her book *The Atrium Vestae*, (Washington, 1909).

Although the physical aspect of the complex changed, the rules of worship changed little during the nearly 900 years it housed the Vestales; and the temple of Vesta was one of the last pagan temples to be closed in the fourth century A.D. The cult of Vesta was domestic, related to the hearth of the house and to family life. But it was also intimately connected to the mythic origins of the city and the state. Aeneas was believed to have brought the eternal fire of Hestia-Vesta from Troy to Lavinium, together with the Penates (household gods) and the Palladium, the image of Pallas Athena, which together came to represent the *sacra principia* of the Roman state (its most sacred memories). Thus, the importance of the sanctuary—the shrine of the very idea of the State—and of the Vestales—the custodians of its symbols. Each and every Roman magistrate had to sacrifice to Vesta at Lavinium before he entered his office.

In the little temple next to the house of the Vestales, the sacred fire was kept constantly burning, guarded by the six Vestales. These six

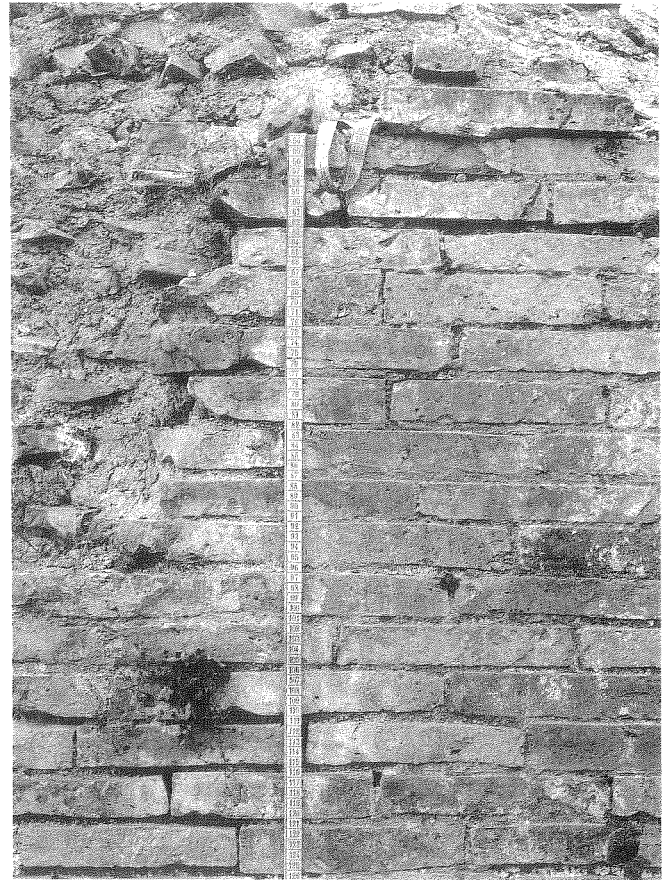


women were appointed sometime between the ages of 6 and 10 and maintained their demanding office for at least 30 years. They were to live in chastity, with the atrocious penalty of being buried alive in the *campus sceleratus* if found guilty of breaking the law. On the other hand, they enjoyed extraordinary social and juridical privileges; and in times when Rome was densely populated, they shared with the empress the privilege of riding in a carriage inside the city limits.

Statues of the Vestales had been found in 1883, piled up in a corner of the Atrium ready to be reduced to lime in a nearby, probably sixteenth-century kiln. Originally the statues may have been placed along the sides of the court, in front of the portico which in its later stage was two-storied. After the restoration of the Atrium that was promoted by the empress Iulia Domna (A.D. 193–217), the building had at least three stories, lavishly outfitted and provided with a heating system. At the same time, the Nova Via, the street running between the Atrium Vestae and the Palatine, was spanned by arches that supported both the Atrium and the structures on the slopes of the Palatine. Esther Van Deman’s careful investigation included all phases of the building; and from “the scanty remains of the original republican Atrium” she determined that after a major fire—identified

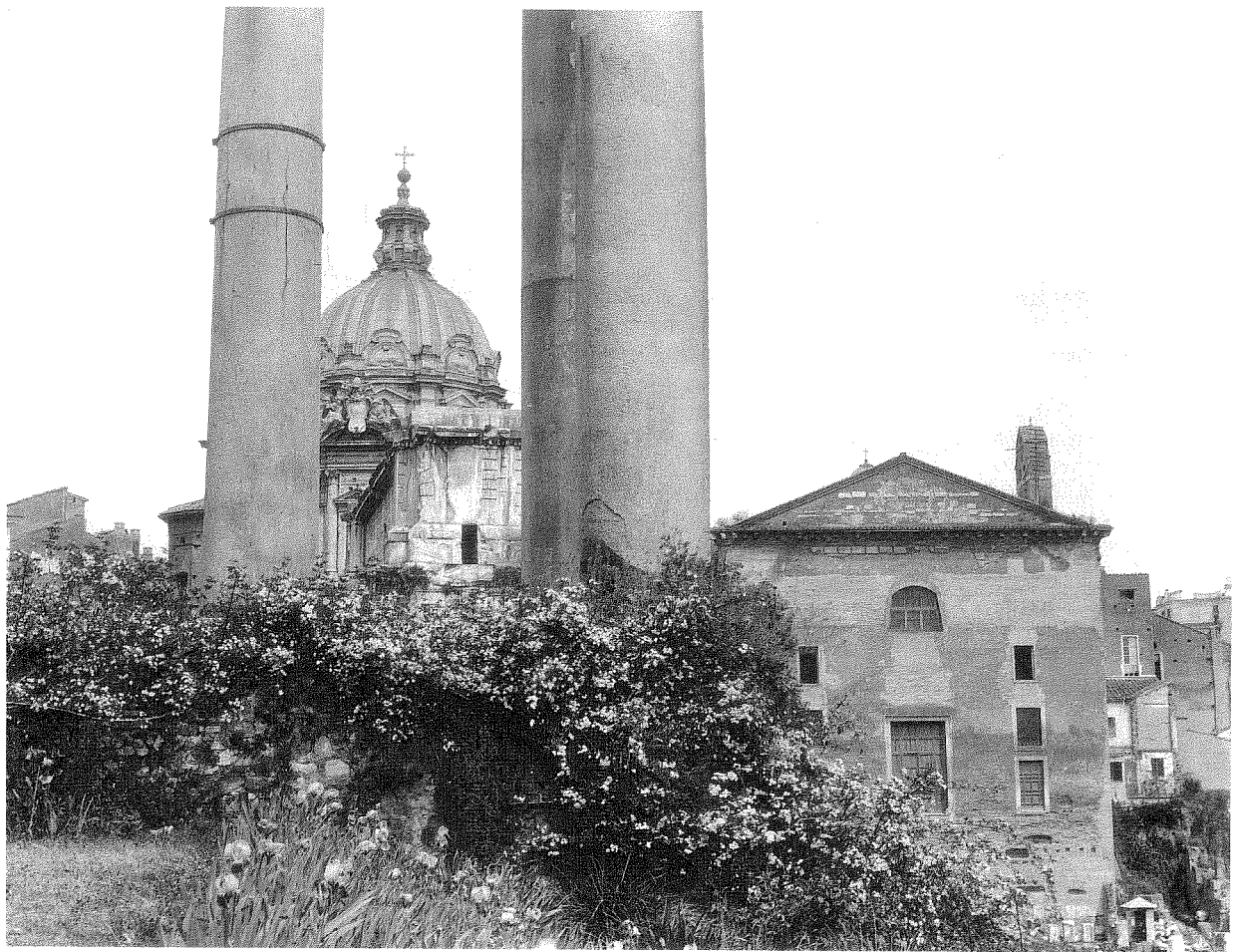
as the Neronian fire of A.D. 64—the reconstructed building followed the new orientation of the Forum, abandoning the archaic north–south orientation that had dictated the orientation of all the important republican buildings around the Comitium and the Regia. Van Deman provided a lucid analysis of the conditions that determined the new levels and changes in orientation of the Forum.

To interpret and date the various phases in a Roman building, Van Deman strove to establish a “canon” or “norm” for building techniques applied to each chronological period, basing her work on comparative studies of all dated buildings available to her. Her two articles, “Methods of determining the date of Roman concrete monuments,” in the *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. XVI (1912) are the works of a true pioneer: for the first time this complicated subject is treated systematically and with a precise terminology based mainly on that of Vitruvius. In elaborating her data, she proceeded much as one would when constructing a modern data base. In her card catalogue, which contained several thousand cards, she gathered information regarding the materials (measurements, compositions, colors, and so on), techniques of facing, building types, and building parts. These elements were evaluated following four



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**9 Measurements of bricks and mortar beds and the relationship between them are criteria for dating the brick-faced, concrete wall.**



**10 The late imperial Senate building** has doors that are still on the Medieval level corresponding to the period of its transformation into a church. Between the columns of the Temple of Saturn appears the baroque dome of Pietro da Cortona's church SS. Luca and Martina. This photograph, taken from the slope of the Capitol, offers a visual synthesis of Rome's urban history.

“points” regarding the architectural, structural, and environmental conditions. In addition to the technical data, she included what she called external and variable evidence, that is, information extracted from literary sources, inscriptions, decorative elements, and brick stamps. In contrast to her sophisticated theoretical methods was her permanent working tool—a simple seamstress’s measuring tape.

Another remarkable tool was her camera, well equipped with a wooden tripod and handled with both professional competence and a true feeling for composition.

Esther Van Deman has been both admired and criticized by her later, specialized followers in archaeology. The results of her research are, however, still valid. The articulation in her system of classification allows for

variations that were not considered important by her followers but that permitted her to approach the questions more realistically. Her legacy of over 2,000 photos is now preserved in the archives of the Fototeca Unione at the American Academy in Rome. They convey vividly the character of the Roman Forum in excavation.