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Ideological Biases in the Urban Archaeology of Rome: a quantitative approach

by Giovanni Ricci & Nicola Terrenato

Introduction

This paper intends to take stock of the situation of urban archaeology in Rome. It is based on a comparatively detailed review (enabled by a new systematisation of the evidence through the means of a Geographical Information System (GIS)) of all the stratigraphic excavations carried out in the city in the last century or so, within the perimeter of the Aurelian walls. The data collection includes quantitative parameters such as the volume of excavated deposits, the number of contexts and the periods represented. This work allows us to assess reliably for the first time the situation after two of decades of intensive work in the city. Recent strategies and tendencies can now be understood in the light provided by a retrospective review of the origins and development of urban archaeology in Rome. What is clearly emerging is the existence of strong theoretical standpoints that characterise various periods and 'schools'; standpoints which, as usual in Italian classical archaeology, are very seldom made explicit. These hidden agendas have strongly influenced the planning and conduct of excavations, and ideological biases in favour of certain periods, type of remains, and even taboos, will become apparent.

The evolution of urban archaeology in Rome, which obviously represents a central theme for Roman archaeology, has not yet been studied in detail, especially within English-speaking scholarship. Yet the case of Rome holds great potential, both in substantive terms and as one of the most complex examples of the questions posed by the study of Roman urbanism. To begin illustrating this case-study, archaeological fieldwork conducted in the city over the last century must be synthesized. As a tool to facilitate the processing of such a massive amount of data, a rough typology of excavations has been defined. These four types will be described below, deriving from a comprehensive review of methods and strategies in the urban archaeology of Rome (Table 1). The same types will also be used for the graphs presented in this paper.

Excavations have been conducted in Rome ever since the Renaissance, and they have had a particular intensity and scale in the last century or so. During the first decade of this century some effort was devoted, mainly by Rodolfo Lanciani, to retracing the main phases of earlier field work in the city (Lanciani 1989). Since then, however, no further historiographical attempt has been made to analyse the developments of this century, so that, paradoxically, less is known about what was happening in the 1930s than in the 1600s. Further, when compared with other large urban centres, the situation in Rome appears to be rather peculiar, without doubt leaving much room for improvement. The present paper will attempt to take some initial steps towards filling in this gap in the literature, beginning with a brief retrospective review of the main events and trends in the urban archaeology of Rome over the last hundred years. This is connected with the recent collection of a database of the main excavations carried out in this period, the new *Forma Urbis Romae*. This high-sounding name (derived from that of a map of ancient Rome published by Lanciani in 1901) will designate a new and massive GIS archive for the archaeology of Rome, which has been promoted by the Comune di Roma [1]. Building on this new information a series of quantitative assessments has been derived, and some of the most relevant will be presented here, as an interim report on ongoing work.

A retrospective review

Before examining the actual body of data collected, it is worthwhile to review briefly the development of urban archaeology in Rome; a good starting point is provided by the

introduction of large scale excavation and the massive intensification of archaeological work brought about by the incorporation, in 1870, of the Eternal City into the recently created Kingdom of Italy. Papal archaeology had been mainly concerned with just a few of the most striking monuments (such as the Colosseum or the Arch of Titus). Much attention was also paid, for obvious reasons, to early Christian archaeology – catacombs, churches and early cult places (Barbanera 1998:7–9). The new capital became the seat of both King and government, and as a result underwent enormous expansion. This led to the reurbanization of large areas of the ancient city, which had been unoccupied since the late Roman period. Not surprisingly, a vast quantity of new archaeological remains was brought to light in the process, mainly through rescue work. In addition, large scale excavations were undertaken in some central areas of the ancient city, such as in the Roman Forum and on the Palatine Hill, with the aim of unearthing the glory of the ancient city (Barbanera 1998:82–92). The general attitude, throughout this period, was indeed that of emphasising the imperial Roman past in contrast with the Christian and Medieval periods. Churches such as Saint Hadrian were entirely demolished to reveal the underlying Roman monuments (in this case, the *Curia Senatus*, Tortorici 1993).

At the turn of the century, the Positivist trend briefly exerted some influence over the archaeology of Rome. As a consequence, the excavation procedures, which had beforehand been purely directed at bringing to light as much Roman masonry as possible, became rather more systematic, and began to include some recording of the stratigraphy encountered (Manacorda 1982: 89–90). In some cases, such as at the Comitium or at the Forum, deep soundings into the republican and archaic levels were carried out below the imperial horizon (Ammerman 1990, 1996); the latter had been, as a matter of fact, the final objective of the digging in almost every case. Detailed written documentation (and even photographs) of each layer, together with stratigraphic sections, illustrate the impact of these new methods on this work, representing the earliest example of what is defined here as a type C excavation (see Table 1). Their author, the Venetian architect Giacomo Boni, is rightfully considered the father of Italian archaeological stratigraphy (he even wrote a short methodological essay on the subject, Boni 1901).

Type	Period	Description
A1	1980–present	large-scale sites with up to date Barker/Harris methodology
A2	1975–present	small-scale modern sites with a stratigraphic approach
B	1950–1975	rescue excavations and other mid-century Soprintendenza digs
C	1900–1960	early stratigraphic excavations

Table 1. Typology of urban excavations adopted for the quantitative assessments.

With the advent of Fascism in the 20s and 30s, the nationalist stance of the late nineteenth century found new strength and influenced archaeological agendas to an unparalleled extent. The imperial past was now an essential ideological ingredient in the propaganda of the regime. Through massive destruction of entire quarters of the medieval and Renaissance centre, space was made for new grandiose Fascist architecture (Manacorda & Tamassia 1985; Quatermaine 1995). Roman monuments were often incorporated in new projects, as in the case of the decontextualised Ara Pacis and Mausoleum of Augustus complex, where Mussolini himself had planned apparently to be buried. In this context, archaeology reverted to recording nothing but Roman imperial monuments. For instance, both medieval and late Roman structures were mercilessly destroyed without trace. Even the imperial topography was distorted to serve the vision of the architects of the regime. The Via dell'Impero, flanked by Trajan's column and statues of the emperors, was cut across the Imperial Fora and through the hill of the Velia, forever confusing the original morphology (Terrenato 1992).

After the Second World War, even if the imperialist overtones were abandoned, the quality of the few excavations carried out by the Italian *Soprintendenza* did not improve significantly. It was mainly through foreign practitioners working in Rome that new approaches were

introduced to the field. Again, the best stratigraphical investigation seemed to concentrate on the earlier periods: the Swede Einar Gjerstad and the American Frank Brown directed crucial excavations on archaic Rome in the Forum and at the Regia during the 50s and 60s (Brown 1974–75; Gjerstad 1953–73). Although still small in area, these sites were the first in the city to be excavated with modern methods. Contemporary Italian excavations adopted only in part these new techniques, more so in the case of the exploration of archaic deposits, such as that of Sant'Omobono (Pisani Sartorio 1989). At most other sites, which constitute our type B, only rudimentary stratigraphic information was recorded.

The appointment of Adriano La Regina as Superintendent in the early 80s, led to radical changes to the practice of archaeology in Rome: several massive large scale excavations were opened in the centre of the city, in which the Barker/Harris methods were largely employed. These include the Crypta Balbi (directed by D. Manacorda since 1981), the Northern Slope of the Palatine (A. Carandini, since 1985), the Meta Sudans (C. Panella, since 1986), those at Piazza Celimontana (C. Pavolini, since 1984), at Via della Consolazione (G. Maetzke, since 1980) and at the Temple of Magna Mater (P. Pensabene, since 1977). Sites of this type, which we call A1, witnessed the participation of university staff, students and the slow emergence of a group of professional urban diggers (Terrenato 1998:180). Besides these sites, the tradition of small scale excavations has continued, mostly for rescue purposes, and represents our type A2 (see Table 1). This new phase of activity, which has declined somewhat over the last five years, can only be compared in terms of size and effort to two earlier periods: that at the beginning of the century and the Fascist one.

The data collection

The current collection of data on the urban archaeology of Rome is concerned with the range of work reviewed above. Some attention has been paid to the implementation of elementary quantitative assessments for a better understanding of the development of this fieldwork. A database of sites has been gathered, containing records for all the excavations within the Aurelian walls whose published reports include some stratigraphic information. To these, all the unpublished data that was reasonably accessible was added, producing a total of 87 sites. For each of these the following information was collected: a) the dates of activity, b) the surface-area investigated, c) the number of stratigraphic contexts for which records were accessible, d) the number of those published, e) the main chronological horizons exposed, f) their levels, g) the relevant bibliographic and archival references. It can be reckoned that this represents only a sample of the total number of excavations in Rome. An unknown number of rescue sites, investigated by the *Soprintendenza*, and of which little or no stratigraphic records exist or are accessible must be acknowledged; but while their number may be fairly high, their contribution to the present analysis, even if they could be included, would not be particularly significant. Their potential for a reconstruction of urban history is in fact severely limited by their small size, the quality of the records and the difficulty of piecing together composite plans. This problem, by the way, may be rectified in the future by the planned creation of a general GIS archive [1].

Referring to Figure 1, the first interesting trend concerns the spatial distribution of sites within the Aurelian walls. Rescue sites (open circles) are the only ones to be spread almost uniformly across the city, while the large-scale sites (diamonds) are strongly concentrated in the Roman Forum and Palatine areas. This bias in favour of the monumental centre of the city is also brought out when the data are broken down by region. Figure 2 shows the totals of excavated sites for each of the wards in to which Augustus subdivided the city. The central regions, even if they are smaller, contain by far the majority of sites, while the south-western part of the city is still virtually untouched. When the investigated surface-areas of excavations are taken into consideration (Figure 3), some regions appear to contain particularly large sites; the Palatine, for instance, has an average of almost a thousand square metres per excavation; the average figure is only around half this.

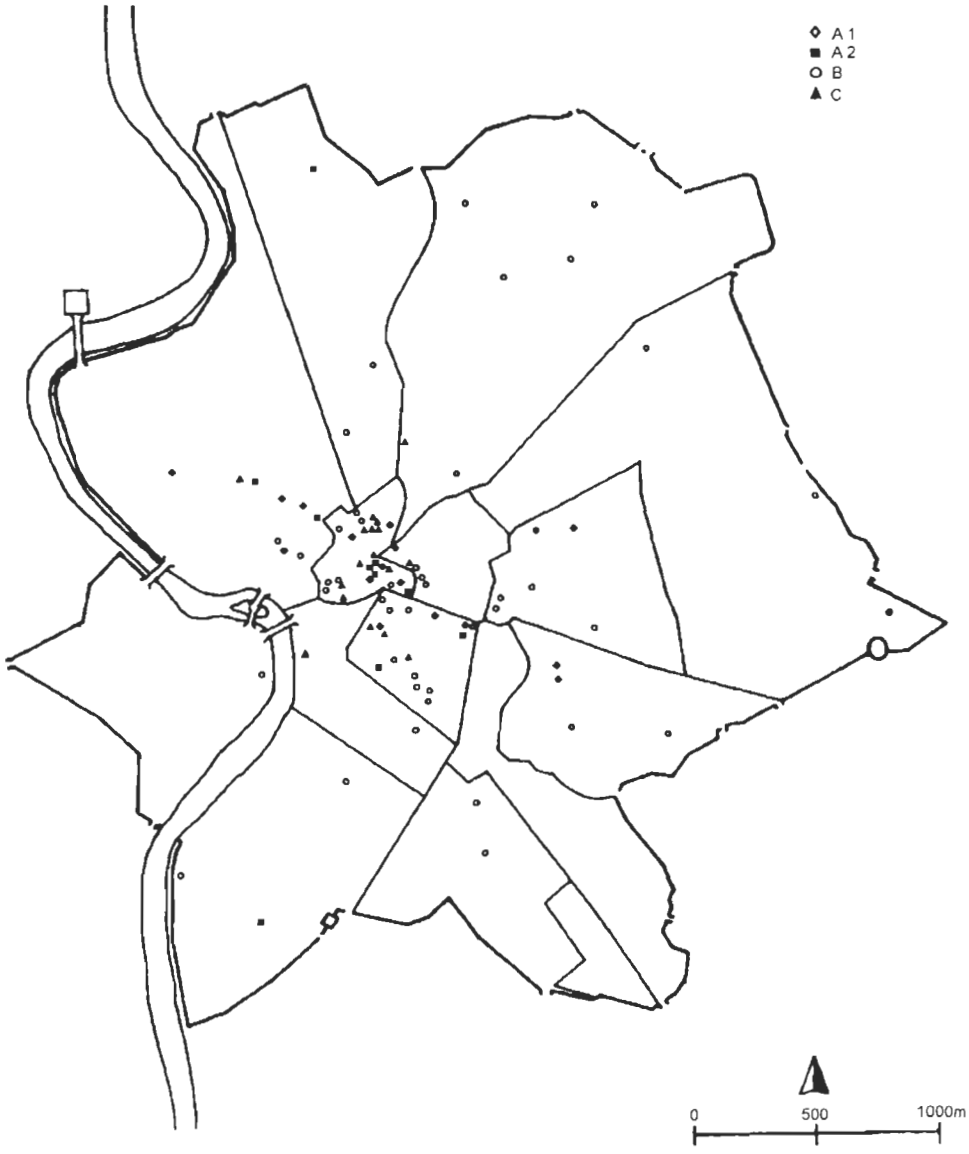

Figure 1 Map of Rome within the Aurelian Walls (thick line), showing the fourteen Augustan regions (thin lines) and the location of the urban excavations discussed in the paper. The symbols correspond to the types of site identified (see Table 1).

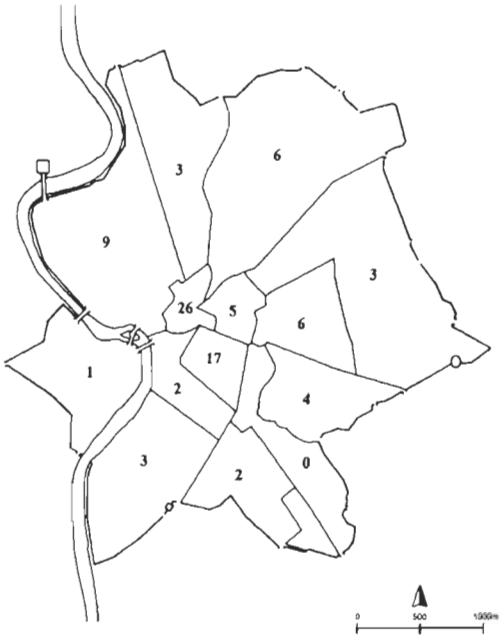

Figure 2 Map of Rome showing the number of sites for each of the Augustan regions.

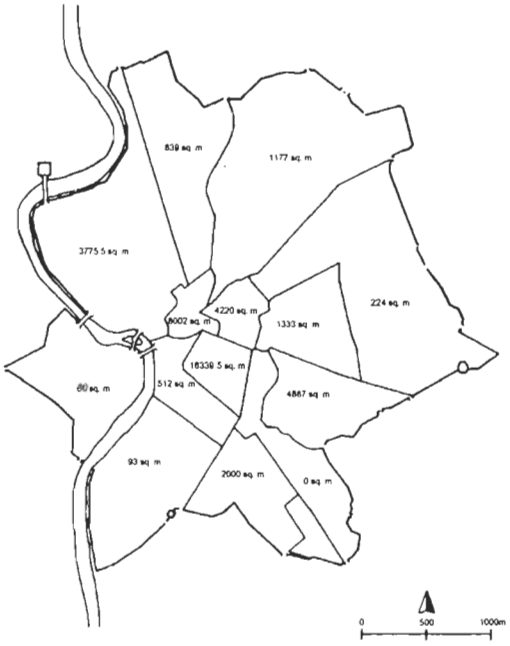

Figure 3 Map of Rome showing the surface-area investigated for each of the Augustan regions

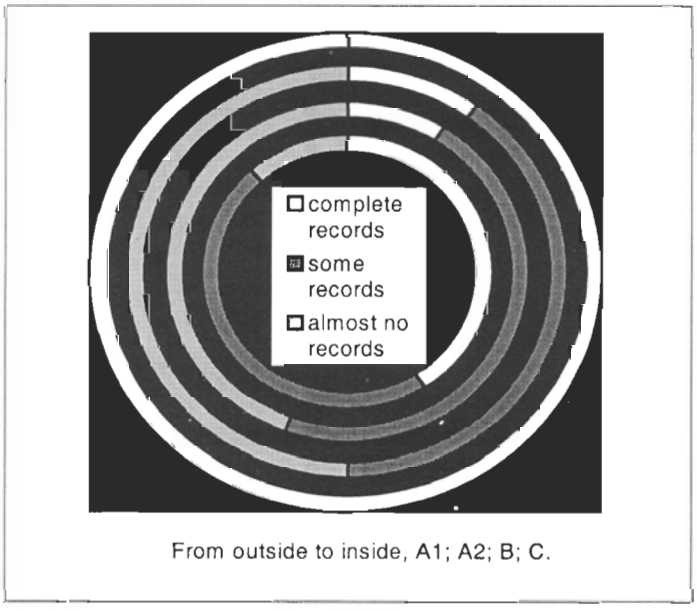

Figure 4 Histogram showing the proportion of well-documented sites for each of the excavation types in Table 1.

There are also marked differences, concerning the quality of the excavation records; as indicated above, the sites have been divided into four types (see Table 1). Figure 4 shows a breakdown of sites for each type on the basis of the existing information. For type A1, all the contexts have complete, accessible records. For type A2, however, only around half of the sites have context records, but only one is completely accessible. For the remaining half, some records have been collected, but they are no longer existent or accessible. Similar proportions exist for type B, while for type C the proportion is significantly closer to type A1. When we look at the number of contexts documented for each of the four types (Figure 5), it is clear that the vast majority of them have been identified at the large-scale A1 sites. Also of significance is that the sites of type C, even if they are chronologically the oldest, have a higher average of known contexts per site than many later small-scale excavations of type A2. In conclusion, these numbers strongly suggest that the best quality in the recording and dissemination of stratigraphic data was obtained during the positivist movement at the beginning of the century and, after that, only since the 1980s. The intervening decades witnessed instead an entirely unsatisfactory level of stratigraphic analysis.

Finally, useful observations can be made when the chronological horizons reached by the excavations are taken into consideration. We have defined a horizon as being reached when a sizeable stretch of its surface had been exposed, dated stratigraphically to a given century and documented with levels. Figure 6 shows the number of instances in which this has happened for the bedrock and for the centuries from the eighth BC through to the seventh AD. It is immediately obvious that most of our information concerns the period between the first century BC and the second AD. This can be easily explained when the ideological biases against the preceding and following phases are recalled. The later Republic and early Empire were considered the golden age of Rome and nothing else was considered worth exposing and preserving. Late Roman and Medieval remains were dug away without record, as disturbing material correlates of a period of decadence that was best forgotten. Even the third and fourth centuries AD were apparently perceived as already demonstrating the decline of the great city. Pre-first century BC horizons, on the other hand, were simply not reached, because the exploration of a site was deemed finished when the imperial floor-levels were brought to light. It must be kept in mind that taking the investigation further would have involved the destruction of the cherished imperial remains. While it was perfectly acceptable to destroy whole medieval towers (sometimes even with the use of dynamite), it was sacrilege to remove a few imperial stone floor slabs to reach the earlier sequences beneath them.

When the same graph is considered in terms of type of excavation, the results are even more striking. This chronological bias characterises not only types A2 and B, as may be expected, but notably type A1 as well, that is, those results which are supposed to derive from the most methodologically advanced excavations. It is fair to say that, in proportion, there seems to be a slight trend towards correcting this bias, but there is still a long way to go before the imbalance is completely redressed. It must be said that when A1 sites are located in areas already excavated in the last century, the post-imperial levels have often been irretrievably lost. It is significant that rescue sites (B) have produced more evidence for these periods, as they are often opened in previously unexcavated areas. As far as the archaic phases are concerned, it must be noted that the high water-table prevailing in Rome since the modern channelling of the Tiber often makes the early horizons much harder to reach (Ammerman 1990:n. 64). In this respect, however, it is still striking that the majority of information comes from type C, showing clearly the serious attempts made at the beginning of the century to throw light on the origins of Rome.

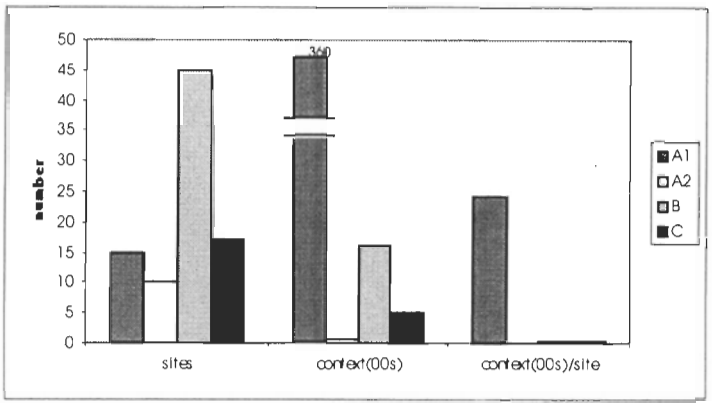

Figure 5 Histogram showing the number of sites (left), the aggregate number of well-documented contexts (in hundreds, centre), the average of well-documented contexts (in hundreds) per site (right) for each of the excavation types in Table 1.

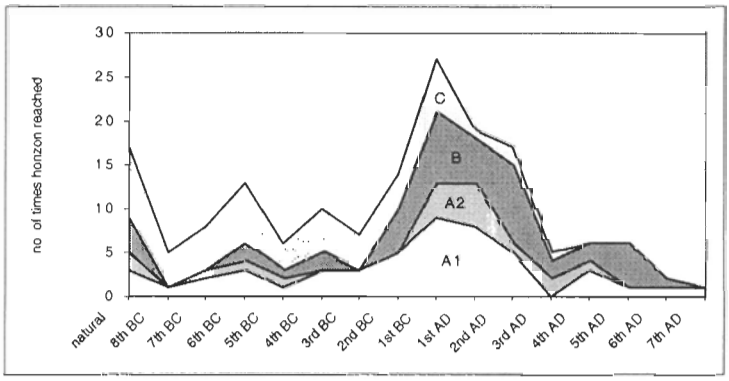

Figure 6 Histogram showing the number of times a horizon dating to each century was reached and documented for each of the excavation types in Table 1.

Conclusions

This new review of the situation makes it possible to draw some conclusions about the state of the art as far as urban archaeology in Rome is concerned. There appears to be a tension between the influence of the traditional approaches and the new methodological developments stimulated by wider debates on the issue. Old-fashioned preconceptions have been mentioned in the previous discussion: heavy biases have affected the collection of data for most of the century; they have favoured the central part of the city, where most of the public architecture is concentrated, and the periods in which these monuments were built – the early Empire. These biases are also evident in the taboo placed on the destruction of masonry of a certain type and date and in the unevenness of the stratigraphical recording. Most of the urban archaeology carried out in Rome has been guided by agendas explicitly or implicitly based on these preconceptions. Against this set of beliefs, which have been successfully challenged in the past only by scholars like Boni, a structured reaction has been developing ever since the 1980s. Theorists working within a Marxist framework, such as Daniele Manacorda and Andrea Carandini have advocated the introduction of standard stratigraphic procedures for all phases, open area excavations and exhaustive study of all finds (Carandini 1981; Manacorda 1983). This new approach has met with heavy criticism and resistance, and has only partially

succeeded in bringing about a moderate amount of change (Terrenato 1998). As the diagrams suggest, even the most up-to-date projects (A1) are still influenced by old biases and preconceptions, to an extent that is sometimes even greater than the brave new projects of the beginning of the century. The deeply rooted idealist and nationalist framework, in which the heyday of Rome is assigned priority over all the other periods, is still hampering the renovation of urban archaeology in Rome.

When this picture is compared with what is happening elsewhere, the peculiarity, and in this perspective the shortcomings, of the situation in Rome become evident. There are nowadays many approaches that are ordinarily applied in many European contexts, but are still virtually non-existent in Italy. It is enough to mention a few aspects that are completely lacking in the study of Rome: the definition of clear and pragmatic research agendas at a city level, which has been recently advocated by Martin Carver (1990); the connected issue of the urban deposit model, which has been guiding urban excavation in many British and French cases (Carver 1987); the computerisation of stratigraphic data, which is a standard procedure at MOLAS and many other urban units; the systematic collection and processing of environmental samples, which is now standard almost everywhere, from Exeter (Maltby 1979) to Saint Petersburg; advanced conservation and analysis of artefacts of the kind that has been carried out in Genoa and elsewhere (Mannoni & Giannichedda 1996); adequate logistic and accounting techniques to efficiently operate archaeological excavations, as exemplified by the case of Milan (Caporusso 1991); creative ways of presenting the remains, integrating them within new architectural layouts, as has been done brilliantly in Paris (at the Cour Carrée of the Louvre). The list could go on and on with many other minor points. What seems to be radically missing, is a central structure that can ensure a steady accumulation of information, experience and procedures; from the high level of research questions and updated databases, down to the creation of reference collections, skilled expertise and administrative tools; in other words, there is not enough permanent build-up of local knowledge (in the sense of Geertz 1983).

This tirade may sound a bit out of tune to British ears at a time when theorists like Martin Carver (1993:100) are predicting 'that urban archaeologists will be forced to abandon their large municipal units and work in small partnerships'. While flexibility and research-oriented structures certainly present major advantages, it must be kept in mind that in Britain they can build on the firm basis of a generation or more of systematic centralised action. In Rome, on the other hand, no sustained attempt has ever been made to integrate strategies, methods, archives and presentation to the public. Even when large-scale project have been undertaken, they have largely relied on *ad hoc* solutions and ephemeral co-operations. Rather than venturing into deregulation right now, Rome first needs, for the next few years at least, a focused attempt to develop a modern urban archaeology. One in which the distortions introduced by biases and taboos of the nationalist past are finally corrected, and updated methods consistently adopted; one in which a solid body of experience and knowledge of the entire material past of the city is organised in an integrated and accessible way; one in which the rich heritage of the city is finally allowed to express its full potential as an object for innovative research, as a component of social memory, and as a productive and renewable resource.

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Endnote

[1] The present reflexive work has been spurred on by the active involvement of the authors in the project, still in its preliminary phase, and directed by Eugenio La Rocca, Adriano La Regina, Andrea Carandini and Paolo Sommella. It aims at collecting all the information relevant to the ancient topography of the city, from structures and finds to inscriptions and literary and iconographic sources. The stratigraphic information has been reviewed as part of the preliminary work in order to obtain an estimate of the resources needed to store it within the archive. Similar work has been carried out for the other types of data, and the results are now contained in an unpublished internal document entitled 'La nuova *Forma Urbis Romae*'. The actual work will take into account the guidelines contained in it.

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