

THE CRYPTOPORTICUS AND THE VI “REGIO AUGUSTEA”

The Cryptoporticus, a structure formed by two galleries with archways and colonnade, was discovered and excavated in 1887. Since then, no comprehensive studies have been formulated on the monument and its function, and so it is considered one of the “treasures” of the underground Rome and remains still little-known at present. Recent excavations have made it possible to re-examine the archive documents and begin the study of this exceptionally well-preserved monument. The Cryptoporticus was erected in the Roman period inside the VI Regio Augustea, at the border between the Subura area and the area of the Imperial Forum, on the Viminale hillside.

The Subura valley was the most populated quarters of ancient Rome, a disreputable and dilapidated area due to poorly-constructed small wooden houses, to the extent that the Princeps Augustus built huge walls of stone blocks to isolate his Forum from the frequent fires which periodically destroyed the quarter.

The Cryptoporticus in Ibernese Road

The Forum of Augustus

Trajan's Markets

Adjacent to these more decrepit buildings, concentrated in an unsanitary valley, at the top of the hills surrounding Subura, were rich Patrician residences. In the

neighbourhood of the Cryptoporticus, moreover, along the so-called Argiletum Road (today called, Madonna dei Monti Road) bookshops were built as well as the Horrea Cartaria: paper (scroll) warehouses.

The Stages Of The CRYPTOPORTICUS And The Result Of The EXCAVATIONS

The cryptoporticus is today visible on the ground floor of four contiguous buildings, and it is formed by two galleries covered by barrel vaults and separated by a colonnade. The most external gallery, formed by archways, gave onto an ancient road discovered in 1878 on the corner between Ibernasi Road and Baccina Road, which received natural light directly from the outside.

The most internal gallery, on the contrary, had been built under the lee of the Viminale hill. The back wall, the columns and the vault were decorated with frescos and stuccoes of which some remains are left (to be noticed, particularly, the beautiful architrave above the columns with the stucco decoration). The decorations used for the frescos needed a bright base in order to reflect the light better. Ruins of the vaults' painting remain in the preserved area under the Dominican Conville, early 17th century building (20 Ibernasi Road), and show some panels made with large red stripes on a white base, filled with little flower motifs.

Plasterwork fragments found during the excavation.

The original monument, probably built between 50 B. C. and the 14 A. C.,

had been later modified, possibly for static problems already in the 2nd or the 3rd century A. C. when the colonnade was closed with supporting brick walls.

The new excavation made it possible to study the upper floor of the Cryptoporticus as well. Within the property of "The Inn at the Roman Forum", in fact, the upper galleries are also preserved: The arcade was not on a single floor but rather was developed on at least three floors, possibly even four, reaching the height of the actual garden on the fourth floor.

Reconstructive sketch of the first two floors of the cryptoporticus.

The monumental façade was not standing vertically towards the road but was slightly on a diagonal. It is possible to notice, in fact, that the area visible on the second floor is partly leaning on the back wall of the cryptoporticus' ground floor. Therefore the structure followed the orography of the hill and thus allowed easy passage from the street level to the top of the hill by internal stairs. The imposing door made of tuffaceous blocks standing at the back of the internal gallery on the ground floor, gave access to a staircase which today has disappeared. The area of the excavation stands beyond the block door on the right: probably opened in the Medieval period, excavated inside the natural bank of the hill, used to connect the surrounding rooms to a well (visible on the lefthand side as one enters the room).

The basic layout is quite simple with some arches built to support the flooring on the upper floor, while the rest of the room had no extra finishing and the clay-like soil of the hill was left visible.