

# INTRODUCTION

[A] city, however perfect its initial shape, is never complete, never at rest. Thousands of witting and unwitting acts every day alter its lines in ways that are perceptible only over a certain stretch of time.

Spiro Kostof, *The City Shaped – Urban Patterns and Meanings through History* (1991)

From the time that a permanent settlement was established in the late second and early first millennium BCE, Rome has been influenced in its development by its physical environment.<sup>1</sup> Certain natural topographical features were obvious contributors to the city's pattern of growth, such as the proximity of the Tiber's flow that was both fordable and navigable and that connected both sea and road traffic to the city's walls.<sup>2</sup> The individual hilltop villages were defensible, and gradually they coalesced into a unified community.<sup>3</sup> The marshy ground nestled between the rises of the Capitoline, Palatine, and Viminal Hills proved perfect for creating a political, religious, and commercial center, ultimately the Roman Forum, where the first Senate house was built in the early sixth century BCE.<sup>4</sup> Volcanic lakes and streams in the Alban Hills, shaped by pyroclastic flows millennia earlier, provided a source for drinking water that could be carried at an acceptable gradient for many miles to the cisterns and fountains that have served the city to the present.<sup>5</sup> Even the wide

<sup>1</sup> Benevolo 1980, 139–40.      <sup>2</sup> Brock 2016, 2–3.      <sup>3</sup> See Kostof 1991, 60; Carter 1983, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Cornell 1995, 94.      <sup>5</sup> Long 2018, 64.

floodplain north of the Capitoline that was challenged for centuries by annual inundations from the Tiber and malaria-carrying mosquitoes proved eventually suitable for enormous imperial entertainment venues and the shops and apartments found there today.

The Romans followed, in the words of Spiro Kostof, the “widespread tendency in city-making to *amend* the natural landscape as . . . to work with it.”<sup>6</sup> Through a long uninterrupted occupation, Rome’s urban environment has presented continuous opportunities to employ engineering skills to alter geographic features to meet perceived needs. Hills were lowered, much of the floodplain raised, and the Tiber walled off to make the city more acceptable to the rulers and residents of each age. Even diversion of the river was contemplated on more than one occasion. Rome’s lengthy development evinces a constant interaction between its terrain, with its natural byproducts such as flooding, and the man-made structures erected upon it.

As Romans have transformed their urban space, the former physical features have often left their mark on the landscape in both grand and subtle ways. Ruined remains of ancient structures were sometimes left standing in isolation, while in other cases they were incorporated into, but differentiated from, a newer edifice. Occasionally, only the incised inscriptions on building façades provided an indicator of an earlier use. Where a structure has been razed, its outline might indelibly impress upon the turns of the streets or plazas that once contended with its form. Even when physical evidence of a feature’s existence has been wiped clean, it nevertheless may live on in a toponym recorded in a street name or district identifier. Long ramps and steps descending from present street level to ancient pavement disclose the impact of alluvial fill and human intervention over centuries. In these ways, the past seeps through Rome’s later urban fabric and often guides future patterns of development. These “depositories of memory” of the city’s earlier lives influence attempts to reclaim and incorporate a glorious past into the modern city, or occasionally, to hide an embarrassing one.<sup>7</sup> The issues become complex as particular layers beneath the city’s streets are difficult to exhume without obscuring the memory of one that postdates it.

This book considers physical alterations to a slice of an urban landscape and how the memory of those changes is preserved, sometimes lost, and, on occasion, recovered. Using a small section of Rome as a case study, the area just north of the Tiber Island, three issues are explored: (i) how location and

<sup>6</sup> Kostof 1991, 53, 55. Emphasis in original.

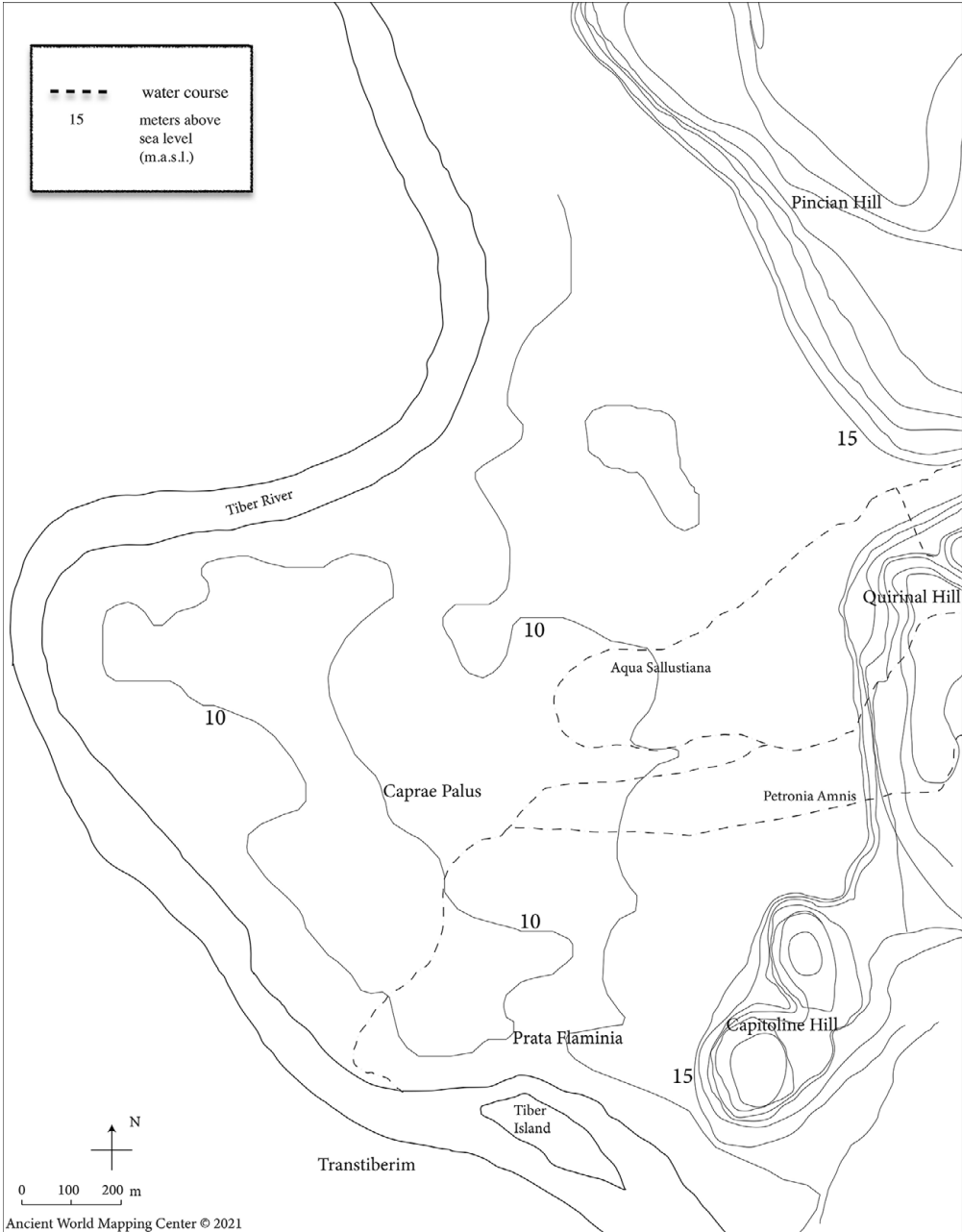
<sup>7</sup> Martina Seifert, “Constructing Memories between Identity and Socio-Political Pluralism in Ancient Western Asia Minor,” in Mortensen and Poulsen 2017, 4. See also discussion in Russell 2014, 480, regarding the spatial mapping of memory in Rome through architectural style, toponyms, etc.

topography (both natural and manmade) influence development over time; (ii) how existing development attracts still further alterations to the landscape and its impact on the memory of the past topographical features; and (iii) the ways in which earlier development may be imprinted upon the landscape or otherwise preserved to influence future changes. The focus of the study is geographically narrow, 40-plus acres, and temporally deep, twenty-five centuries, in order to view relatively small changes and the imprint of topographical memory of those changes over a long timeframe.

Few cities offer a laboratory equal to Rome for observing the lengthy confrontation of humans with an urban environment, and few areas in Rome match the uninterrupted manner in which the urban process unfolds in the area just southwest of the Capitoline Hill that runs today from the Via delle Botteghe Oscure on the north to the Tiber on the south and from Via Arenula on the west to the Via del Teatro di Marcello on the east. About 80 percent of this space became in later centuries Rome's smallest governmental division, the Sant'Angelo *rione* (Plate I).<sup>8</sup> During the imperial Roman period, it incorporated the Theater of Balbus and its appended portico, the Crypta Balbi, the Theater of Marcellus, and most of the porticoes and temples along the perimeter of the Circus Flaminius. While the area of emphasis has notable landmarks that have remained visible for centuries and guided later development, the borders were never sharply delineated and melded into surrounding structures and spaces.

The earliest known topographic feature was a meadow of uncertain dimensions, called later the *prata Flaminia*, that was within a much bigger floodplain north of the capital known as the Campus Martius or Field of Mars (Plan 1). The precise length of the Circus Flaminius carved out of the meadow in the third century BCE remains unknown as do many of the structures on its western and southern sides. The borders of the medieval administrative district, the Sant'Angelo *rione*, that occupied the heart of this ancient space did not remain static and there was little differentiation between the houses on one side of the *rione* line versus the other. Even the clearest of all borders, the Tiber River, undulated with floods and erosion that caused developable space to emerge and then later to disappear. Accordingly, while this portion of Rome's *centro storico*, or historic center, is presented as a "case study" for the issues raised, it cannot be viewed in isolation from the streets and structures that are in its proximity. Indeed, it is precisely because of the area's organic

<sup>8</sup> The Sant'Angelo *rione* was one of fourteen city subdivisions for administrative purposes. They are now simply topographical artifacts as all have been combined into a larger unit known as Municipio I. The red-dashed line on Plate I outlines the *rione* as it was until the early twentieth-century when 1.25 acres were added on the eastern side. At its largest, Sant'Angelo enclosed 137,563 square meters or 33.99 acres. Carpaneto et al. 2000, 726.



PLAN I Topographic map of the Campus Martius. Ancient World Mapping Center © 2021.

connectedness to the larger urban environment that the trajectory of its development was set.

The book progresses chronologically with each chapter covering a major phase of development or redevelopment and considers how, if at all, the prior phases left their mark on the succeeding layers of topography. Chapter 1

introduces the base line for topographical changes exploring the role played by location just outside the city limits and at the junction of two roads – an important commercial pathway from the Tiber docks to the Capitoline and another through the Campus Martius to points north – in the earliest known uses of the bucolic *prata Flaminia* in the mid-fifth century BCE. It was at this crossroads that the two earliest temples in the Campus Martius were constructed. The few clues about the meadow's shape, size, and name provided by Roman writers many centuries after it disappeared into marbled structures are considered although some were likely false leads. The last section of the chapter examines the plausible reasons that Gaius Flaminius cleared and graded the *prata Flaminia* in the third century BCE, creating a multipurpose but poorly defined plaza known for hundreds of years to follow as the Circus Flaminius.

Chapter 2 carries the story from the death of Gaius Flaminius to the death of Julius Caesar. During these two centuries, battlefield successes placed enormous riches in the hands of self-aggrandizing generals who found the cleared meadow along the triumphal parade route and near the city gates a perfect location to display their piety and munificence with highly individualized and, in some cases, architecturally daring structures. Over time, the temples and porticoes built along the plaza's perimeter altered a somewhat amorphous rural space into a sharply defined and well-recognized urban center that attracted both daily commercial traffic as well as more formal festival events.

Chapter 3 focuses on the seventy years from the death of Caesar to that of Augustus when the Circus Flaminius was transformed from a site that preserved the memory of disparate republican heroes to a cohesive monument to the first emperor and his family. The logistical challenges presented by topography and existing structures to the realization of Augustus' vision will be analyzed. In particular, the chapter explores the decision to constrict the eastern end of the circus by the construction of the massive Theater of Marcellus and its long-lasting implications for pedestrian movement, triumphal parades, and later development.

The circus during the half millennium from the death of Augustus to the Gothic War is the subject of Chapter 4. During this period, the open plaza shrank further with the addition of new buildings and monuments and the line of the plaza's northern colonnade was finally settled, leaving its imprint for the future on the area's major corridor. Damage from several devastating fires in and around the circus presented opportunities for later dynasties to follow Augustus' example and impress their mark on the space. The implications for movement of triumphal parades through the Circus Flaminius as the plaza is reduced are discussed. Threaded throughout this study is the role played by the *Forma Urbis Romae*, the enormous marble map created during the Severan period, in identifying the component structures that once ringed the circus and ultimately in locating accurately the circus itself. As the chapter turns to the late

empire, the impacts of the closure of temples and entertainment venues on traffic, uses of the space, and physical infrastructure are analyzed. It was during this period that the road west out of the Circus Flaminius was connected by a lengthy colonnade, the Porticus Maximae, to the Tiber crossing leading to the Vatican. Christian pilgrims and papal processions now traveled through an area once the province of imperial and pagan religious festivals, merchandise hawkers, and theater-goers.

The next five hundred years in the development of the area of the circus are the focus of Chapter 5. This was a transitional period when the bustling Circus Flaminius of the imperial era had faded. A few houses were beginning to fill the interstices among the abandoned antique structures, but the residential and commercial neighborhoods of the Sant'Angelo *rione* had not developed. Rome, severely impacted by earthquakes, floods, invasions, and loss of external political support, suffered depopulation and disruption of its infrastructure for food and water. Most of the remaining population retreated to village-like settings scattered among the ruins within the ancient walls. Just to the east and north of the former circus, a system of church-sponsored social welfare centers known as *diaconiae* developed and were utilized to distribute grain to the poor. In the mid-eighth century the area's first church and *diaconia*, Sant'Angelo, was constructed behind the remaining front porch or *propylaeum* of the ancient portico on the circus' northern edge. The colonnade itself had become a link along an important medieval commercial corridor and pilgrimage route, connected to monasteries and workshops by meandering pathways through the former portico courtyards. The chapter follows this pilgrimage road west to east employing the touchstones in the most well-known guidebook of its day, the *Einsiedeln Itinerary*.

The period from the early eleventh century to the mid-fourteenth, the subject of Chapter 6, will witness an influx of population to the Tiber bend generally and to the streets in the vicinity of the Church of Sant'Angelo in particular, attracted by the Tiber's more reliable water supply for drinking and industry. The *propylaeum* was not only the entrance to a church but now sheltered Rome's largest fish market with slabs of marble from ancient building façades used for displays of the daily catch. Tanning and milling operations lined the river bank. The open spaces of the once circus plaza and portico courtyards began to fill with row houses and fortified tower homes along narrow streets punctuated by market plazas, hiding the remains of the imperial era. With the disappearance of the ancient structures that created the Circus Flaminius, the area was subdivided into new administrative regions or *rioni* that followed medieval pathways. The heart of the ancient circus became the Sant'Angelo *rione*. Noble families such as the Pierleoni and Frangipane – and later the Savelli, Orsini, and others – vied for control of the area businesses and real estate, turning remains of abandoned ancient monuments into fortified

palaces. Toponyms such as *pescaria*, *mole*, and *giudea* were appended to churches and plazas and echoed the commercial and demographic changes to the area, particularly the growth of Jewish migration from Trastevere that will figure prominently in the area's development in succeeding centuries. Despite the changes there was a persistent memory of ancient toponyms including the long-gone "Circus Flaminius," that were recalled in a twelfth-century processional route and guide book. How the memory of the meadow that preceded the circus, the *prata Flaminia*, was invoked in the fourteenth century by the self-appointed republican tribune Cola di Rienzo (1313–54) as part of his ill-fated march to power rounds out the chapter.

Chapter 7 takes us from the time of Cola di Rienzo when the popes were still in Avignon, to their early fifteenth-century return that stimulated tremendous investments into public and private development in the city and finally to the eve of the Ghetto's establishment in 1555 in the once circus plaza. During this approximately two hundred-year period, the area around Sant'Angelo at first witnessed growth as the roadway created out of the colonnade on the circus' northern side continued to draw commercial traffic along its length and through the demographically diverse neighborhoods. However, development of new bridge crossings and roads to the west in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries shifted markets and commercial activity, and by the mid-sixteenth century, the area around Sant'Angelo was showing evidence of decline. The flicker of memory of the location of the ancient circus still maintained at the time of Cola was now extinguished as the once open plaza was filled with multi-story residences along narrow streets. Antiquarians looked elsewhere for the Circus Flaminius including the site of Balbus' theater, now a complex of palaces for the wealthy Mattei family.

With the confinement of Rome's Jewish population in the streets between the Church of Sant'Angelo and the river in 1555, the *rione* split into two distinct sections. Chapter 8 delves into the reasons that the area selected for the Ghetto satisfied Pope Paul IV's requirements to separate Jews from the remaining population and how the two parts of the *rione* had very different developmental trajectories. The Ghetto was taken to the river's edge and even beyond with the constant perils of flooding while to the north and west grand palaces that faced away from the Jewish enclave were constructed or refurbished. Reflecting the growing interest of collectors and tourists in maps, prints, and guidebooks of the Eternal City in the late sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, the chapter considers the manner in which the Ghetto and the streets around it as well as the area's imagined ancient past were presented to the outside world.

Despite decades of false starts beginning with French occupation of Rome in the late eighteenth century, Jewish confinement in the Ghetto finally ended in 1870. This led to inevitable arguments as to redevelopment of the space and

where, if at all, to relocate the city's Jewish population. As Chapter 9 discusses, the largest driving force was the need for flood control along both sides of the Tiber's embankment, an issue that had vexed the city since its founding. The settled solution was a high flood wall and roadway whose route swallowed much of the space the Ghetto had occupied. Ultimately, the entire 7-acre tract was wiped clean and with it the toponyms that had identified the space for centuries. A wave of nostalgia for Rome's soon-to-be-lost medieval streets led to an influx of artists and photographers rushing to the Ghetto area and surrounding streets to attempt to preserve its memory before it became a cleared "meadow," once again. Although plans were drawn to plow wide roads through the area north of the *propylaeum*, they were never realized. Hemmed by the line of the circus' northern side, the hulking remains of the theater and the former Cenci family compound on the west, the modern structures built followed the rough outline of the former Ghetto and kept the *rione* in two distinct sections.

Chapter 10 turns to the *rione*'s next major phase of urban alterations in the 1920s and 1930s as the Fascists sought to liberate ancient Rome from its medieval and later accretions and to showcase its imperial monuments from newly constructed roadways. This resulted in the destruction of the buildings around the Theater of Marcellus. The Piazza Montanara, which for centuries had served as a lively market, was completely razed. The chapter examines the impact of the excavations that cleared out neighborhoods and lowered the ground level several meters below the surrounding streets to create an isolated archaeological park. The *rione* was now in three distinct sections. Chapter 10 also discusses the preservation in the topography of the memory of a more recent historical event, the collection in the former circus of Rome's Jews by the Nazis in 1943 and their deportation to death camps. Finally, the discovery of the true location of the Circus Flaminius in 1960 and its implications for signage, museums, and further archaeological work in the area are considered.

The tension between the past, present, and future of the transformed meadow continues in the Epilogue: a snapshot of a day in October 2019 when a street renaming ceremony was observed where once the circus plaza and later the Ghetto stood. The process of toponymic reidentification is ongoing in the *rione*. Yet the past alterations to the landscape fail to fade, their imprint firmly guiding the modern visitor and resident.