

Tra Roma e Venezia, la cultura dell'antico nell'Italia dell'Unità. Giacomo Boni e i contesti.

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Boni's Work and Ideas on the Origins of the Forum in Rome

Abstract

In 1903 and 1904, Boni made a deep sounding down to the natural soil in the center of the Forum in Rome. While he published a few pages on what he took to be the foundations of the equestrian monument of the emperor Domitian in 1904, Boni never published a report on the results of the deeper excavation. In addition, there is apparently no unpublished report on his work there in the archives in Rome and Milan, although the former does have good visual documentation of the fieldwork.

In light of the importance of the deep sounding in subsequent interpretations of the origins of the Forum (see, for example, Gjerstad 1953 and Ammerman 1990), it is of considerable interest to find out more about what Boni himself may have had in mind. In particular, he had ideas about the relationship between the early burials at the adjacent Sepulcretum and the early Forum. To place his work on the deep sounding in context, we need to review the key years of the excavations that Boni undertook in the Forum: that is, from October of 1898 through 1904. This will be done on a year-by-year basis with a few examples from the Regia and the Sepulcretum given to highlight the strengths and the limitations of the innovations that Boni now brought to the archaeology of the Forum. By 1903, Boni, in effect, had become over-extended by the excavations he had conducted at so many different sites in the Forum as well by as the five months that he spent in Venice working on the collapse of the Campanile (July through December of 1902). The second half of the paper will attempt to compare and contrast what Boni thought he was finding below the so-called Equus Domitiani with the observations and interpretations put forward in the more recent literature. Many of us would now see the origins of the Forum -- a public space of fair size with a series of gravel pavements -- as the consequence of a project of landscape transformation, which was carried out, for the most part, in the second half of the seventh century B.C. The specific dates of the project -- whose aim was to turn the seasonally wet Forum basin into a new and drier civic center -- are still not well established for reasons discussed in the paper. Looking back in retrospect, it is entirely possible that Boni may never have viewed the Forum itself as a monument: that is, as a public space purposefully created by human thought and action. For Boni, a monument took the form of a building, as he had learned from Ruskin and others during his early years in Venice.