

THE IMPERIAL BUILDING COMPLEX OF S. MARIA ANTIQUA IN ROME – AN INCOMPLETE SENATE BUILDING OF DOMITIAN?

EL COMPLEJO CONSTRUCTIVO IMPERIAL DE STA. MARÍA ANTIQUA EN ROMA ¿UN EDIFICIO INCOMPLETO DEL SENADO DE DOMICIANO?

MICHAEL HEINZELMANN
UNIVERSITÄT ZU KÖLN
✉: michael.heinzelmann@uni-koeln.de

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ABSTRACT:

Behind the temple of the Dioscuri lies the extensive imperial building complex of S. Maria Antiqua, which was initiated by Domitian but never completed. Until today it has only been partially investigated and convincing explanations for its original intended function are missing. By analyzing its structural characteristics and spatial relationships with the Palatine and the Forum Romanum a new interpretation of the building complex as a new Curia of the Roman Senate attached to the imperial palaces is proposed.

Keywords: S. Maria Antiqua, imperial building complex, Domitian, Curia, Roman Senate.

RESUMEN:

Detrás del templo de los Dioscuros se sitúa el gran complejo arquitectónico de Santa María Antiqua, iniciado por Domiciano pero nunca completado. Hasta la fecha sólo ha sido investigado parcialmente y carecemos de explicaciones convincentes acerca de la función para la que se diseñó. Mediante el análisis de sus características estructurales y relaciones espaciales con el Palatino y el Foro Romano se propone una novedosa interpretación del complejo como la nueva Curia del Senado Romano anexa a los palacios imperiales.

Palabras clave: Santa María Antiqua, complejo constructivo imperial, Domiciano, Curia, Senado romano.

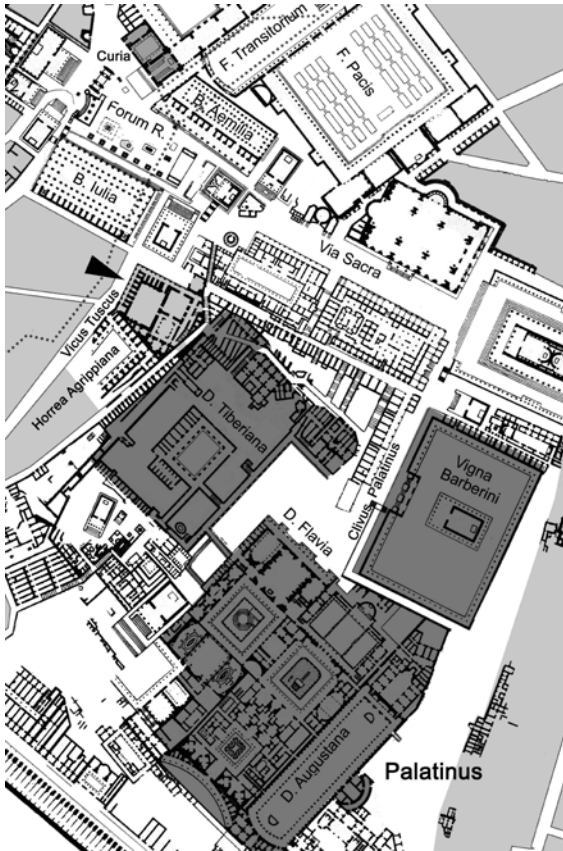


FIG. 1. Rome, plan of Palatine and Forum Romanum (based on Lugli, 1970: pl. 2).

On the northern flank of the Palatine hill, directly behind the temple of the Dioscuri, lies one of the most extensive imperial building complexes in the immediate vicinity of the Forum Romanum (figs. 1-2). Consisting of several monumental individual rooms, amongst them one of the largest extant halls

¹ This study is based on several on-site surveys, for whose permission the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma is thanked. For further advice and discussion the following are also to be thanked: S. Diebner (Rome), H. Hurst (Cambridge), D. Knipp (Rome), C. Krause (Fribourg).

of imperial Rome, its conserved height of 30 m still reaches that of the Domus Tiberiana. Initiated by Domitian in conjunction with the extension of the imperial palaces and connected with these by a ramp access, the building complex stayed unfinished after his death. Structural modifications enabled his successors to assign other functions to it. From the 6th century onwards, under papal involvement, the eponymous church S. Maria Antiqua was constructed within its southern part. Despite its central location and monumentality, the building has to date only been partially investigated; similarly, a convincing explanation for its original intended use is also lacking. Starting with its structural characteristics, functional singularities and the close spatial connection with the Palatine and the Forum Romanum, a new interpretation will be proposed in the following, according to which the building may have been planned by Domitian as a new palace extension for the Curia of the Senate.¹

HISTORY OF THE BUILDING'S PRESERVATION AND RESEARCH

After the end of antiquity, the building complex of S. Maria Antiqua had a turbulent history (inter alii: Osborne 1987; Zanotti 1996; Osborne-Brandt-Morganti, 2004). In the 6th cent AD, the church of S. Maria Antiqua was erected in its eastern part, whereby the originally open atrium was transformed into a closed basilica. However, in the 9th cent, the church had to be abandoned as the Forum gradually turned into marshland. It wasn't until the 13th cent when the new church S.



FIG. 2: Forum Romanum, *looking on northeast corner of the building complex of S. Maria Antiqua (DAI Neg. Nr. Z-NL-RZW-0968).*

Maria Liberatrice was founded over the remains of the early mediaeval church. This modest building was first constructed over the considerably elevated occupation level and was then replaced in 1617 by a larger edifice by Onorio Longhi (Lombardi, 1996: 270). Additionally, from the 17th cent onwards, multi-storeyed houses were built on the inside and on the outside of the hitherto unused western hall. On depictions from the 17th and 18th cent, only the top-most parts of the 30 m high imperial building's walls can still be seen.

In connection with the large-scale unearthing of the Forum Romanum from 1899-1902 the church and the residential housing were firstly dismantled by Giacomo Boni. The building's interior rooms were also excavated down to the original imperial occupation

level. Finally, deep-reaching excavations by G. Boni (1900-1902) and H. Hurst (1983-85) yielded substantial late republican and early imperial structures, which evidentially must have been levelled when the new complex was constructed under Domitian (Hurst, 1986 and 1988). Due to the good preservation and significant interior of the early mediaeval church S. Maria Antiqua, subsequent research has focussed on its post-classical use and not on the actual imperial building complex. To date, Richard Delbrück's essay still counts as the seminal study of the original building (Delbrück, 1921). Despite the profound restoration on the higher wall zones carried out in the post-war years, no systematic documentation has taken place; the following remarks are thus based on Delbrück's partially sketchy plans.

THE DOMITIANIC BUILDING COMPLEX: SITUATION, BUILDING CONSTRUCTION AND DATING

The building complex measures roughly 70 x 70 m and has the shape of an irregular pentagon, which is caused by its positioning within its surroundings as well as its alignment to older building structures (figs. 1, 4). Thus, the eastern side of the complex nestles against the slopes of the Palatine hill, while the south side's alignment is determined by the older *Horrea Agrippiana* (figs. 4, 7). In contrast, both fronts, west and north, follow the orthogonal orientation of the southern part of the Forum. The main entrance of the almost completely destroyed west façade was directed towards the *Vicus Tuscus*, the actual main artery between the Forum Boarium and the Forum Romanum as well as the most important connection between the living quarters in the inner city and the Tiber crossing. The north façade, hidden by the Temple of the Dioscuri, could be reached by a wide access road from the *Vicus Tuscus*, respectively by a smaller passage running between the temple and the *Lacus Iuturnae* (fig. 1).

² Delbrück's room nomenclature has, to a large extent, been adopted (Delbrück, 1921); the research literature is inconsistent as, during its time as a church, this entrance hall was transformed into an open atrium and the previously open courtyard (addressed here as an atrium) was turned into a closed church nave.

³ Along with Augustus and Hadrian, Domitian was the most active constructor in Rome regarding the number and size of the preserved buildings; for a general overview see Blake, 1959: 99-132; Jones, 1992, 79-98; Darwall-Smith, 1996: 101-252; Knell, 2003: 137-167.

Both façades had a 4,5 m deep protruding portico, made of brick buttresses and three-quarter columns. Furthermore, the colonnade was elevated by several steps above street level. The actual main building was subdivided into several rooms which were interconnected by different openings²: a large western hall with a main entrance from the *Vicus Tuscus* as well as a smaller eastern hall, accessible from the north, with an adjoining atrium to the south and rearward three-room. A multi-storey ramp on the eastern side also belongs to the original building structure. Via several turns, the ramp led up to the *Domus Tiberiana*. Its main entrance was positioned on the eastern narrow side of the façade colonnade, where it was flanked by a further room with an apse – named the *Oratorium of the forty martyrs* after a conversion dating to the early medieval period.

Obviously, a homogenous plan underlies the whole building complex. All the walls join in and lie upon uniform cast foundations. The rising walls are constructed of *opus latericium* with a *caementicium* core. According to the around 90 in-situ tile stamps dating between 90 and 96 AD the original building structure can be dated to around the latter years of Domitian's reign (Bloch, 1947: 27-36). The majority of the stamped tiles hail from the manufacturing plants of the *familia caesaris* and can also be found in the later building phases of the palace of Domitian, especially in the garden stadium.

An imperial financing, funding and planning in connection with a renovation of the palace can thus be assumed. At the same time, the building complex forms a further link in Domitian's extensive building programme³. At the time of the emperor's death,



FIG. 3: E. Du Perac (ca. 1560), showing northeast corner of the building complex behind the columns of the Temple of Castor and Pollux.

the complex had been finished up to the eaves of the roof, although there is proof, which shall be discussed, that during its relatively rapid construction, a rescheduling of the plans probably took place: in favour of the originally conceived vault over the west hall, a more simple wooden ceiling was preferred. However, this also stayed incomplete, along with the wall cladding.

The western hall (32.5 x 23.5 m; **figs. 4-9**) forms the largest room of the complex. Its main entrance seems to have been positioned in the west towards the Vicus Tuscus. However, this side of the building has almost completely disappeared. The remaining walls are still preserved to a height of around 28 m. Their only structural elements are a row of wall niches, 3 m above ground level and with an alternating rectangular or segmental arch outline (figs. 5c. 5d. 8. 9).

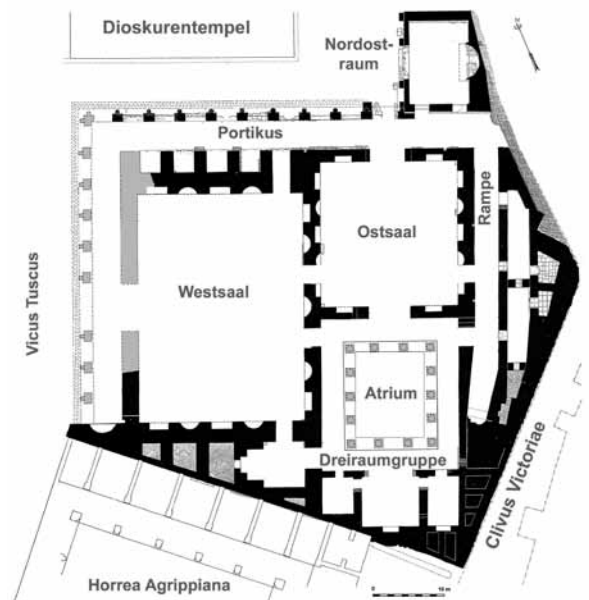


FIG. 4: Building complex of S. Maria Antiqua, ground plan (Delbrück, 1921: pl. 2).

There are four of these niches on the narrow side, respectively seven on the eastern long side and were probably used for erecting statues. Notably, the axial alignment of the hall isn't accentuated. The niche lying directly across from the original entrance isn't larger than the others in any way, but is highlighted only by two flanking low passageways, which in turn lead to the eastern wing (figs. 4, 8).

On both the narrow sides, two further doors stand mirror-symmetrically where they are placed right next to the eastern side of the walls. Their outlines are slightly taller and thus disrupt the rhythm of the wall niches on the narrow sides. The door on the northern side leads to the outer portico, the door on the south side to a small spandrel-shaped room, which in turn connects orthogonally with the three-room group. The wall zones lying above the niches are completely unarticulated. High lying windows on the narrow sides of the building illuminated the hall. These consisted of a group of three, with one large middle window, originally conceived as a thermal window, flanked by smaller rectangular windows. The latter were blocked in the Hadrianic period of the building (figs. 7, 9). Further windows may have been situated in the western façade above the outer colonnade. An especially significant phenomenon of the building's exterior composition are the massive supporting elements on both the narrow sides of the western hall and reaching up to the eaves of the planned roof. On the

northern side, visible from the Forum, they are constructed as six massive buttresses with barrel vaults spaced in-between (figs. 5a, 6). On the southern reverse side, up to the exterior alignment of the Horra Agrippiana, a three-storey hollow chamber system with barrel and tunnel vaults was constructed, which originally had only constructive reasons, but was made accessible during the changes of the Hadrianic period (figs. 5b, 7).

The massiveness of these buttresses led Delbrück to correctly assume that a vaulted roof was part of the original plans. Nonetheless, his reconstruction of a stretched barrel vault resting on the narrow sides of the building is unrealistic (fig 5d, see also Delbrück, 1921: 8).

Its span of 32.5 m and crown height of around 50-52 m would not have been statically executable in Domitianic times. A groin vault is more probable. (fig. 4c, 4d). There are however some indications that during the building process a rescheduling took place: the roof solution with the vault was abandoned and a simple wooden ceiling was preferred. This is why the edifice shows several signs of a horizontal building joint lying just beneath the window frame.⁴

The above-lying windows of the side walls could thus belong to a second building phase, although their alignment near to the inside corners of the hall does not correspond to the plan of a groin vault.

Regardless of this question, the following characteristics can be registered for the western hall: With a surface of 765 square metres in Domitianic times, it is, after the Aula regia and the large banquet hall of the Domus Flavia, the largest hall in Rome (fig.

⁴ On the outside, at the same height, several rain water downspouts end abruptly here. Furthermore, on the eastern wall, a change in brickwork can be observed at this level. The complicated system of semi-circular and jack arches, which is characteristic for the lower part, is also not continued from this point onwards.

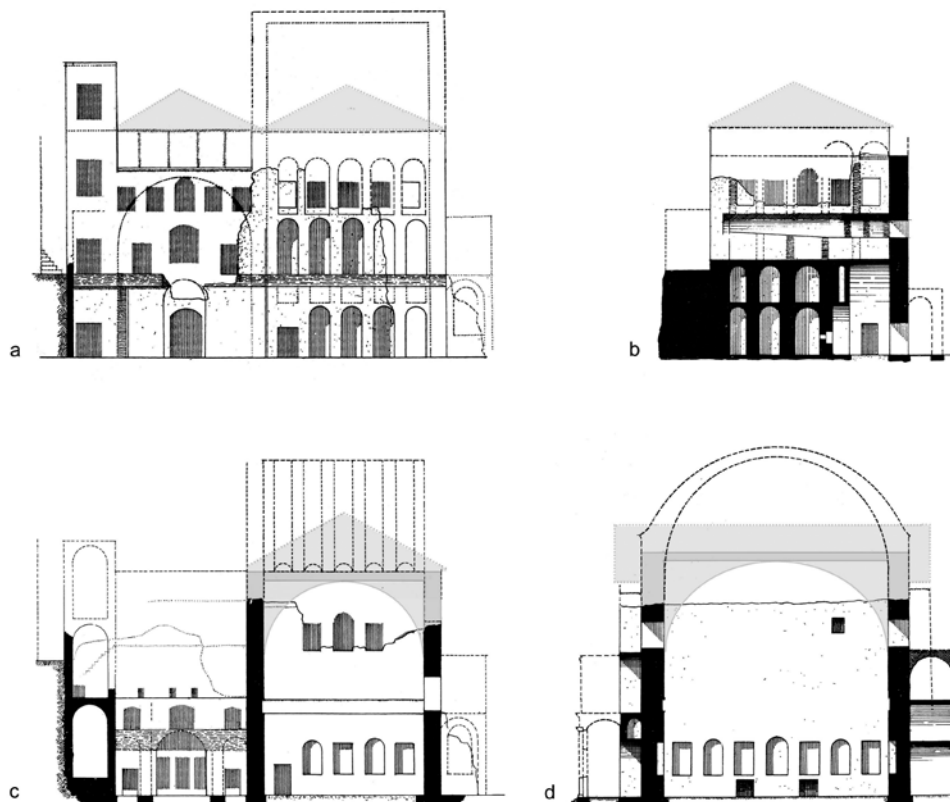


FIG. 5: Reconstructive elevation sketches (Delbrück, 1921: pl. 5a, 5b, 6a, 7a); in grey: alternative proposal for roof. a. North façade, b. South façade, c. East-west section, d. North-south section through western hall.

14). The main entrance was positioned on the cross-axis from the western Vicus Tuscus, although this entrance is not accentuated any further within the room's design. The hall's considerable height was originally supposed to have been crowned by one of the largest vault constructions of the time. The articulation of the walls with a row of uniform niches is comparatively weak. However, the many subordinate doorways are conspicuous, joining the western hall with the eastern wing into one functional unit.

Despite its close connection with the large west hall, the eastern wing of the building complex follows its own laws (figs 4, 5a, 5c, 10). Its main access lies in the north, next to ramp entrance on the Palatine and the room organisation follows this axis. Through a wide portal, one first enters into an almost square-shaped hall (19,2 x 20,35 m). Like its larger counterpart, the walls are accentuated by circumferentially alternating rectangular and segmental arches (fig. 10; also Osborne, 1987: fig. 1). Here, the



FIG. 6: *North façade of western hall (DAI Neg. Nr. 42.897)*

niches, five on the long sides and two on the narrow sides, are somewhat smaller dimensioned. According to the visible ledges on its west wall (**fig. 10**), the outer walls of this room must have reached the same height as

the west hall, thus evoking a strangely over-exaggerated room dimension given its smaller surface area. In the northern façade, at the height of 11 and 20 m, just in front of the party wall to the west hall, the sills of two

window recesses lying above each other are preserved (fig. 5a). Apparently, the room was illuminated by at least two rows of windows in the northern façade. This goes to prove that the original plans foresaw a closed roof.

It seems possible that the roof, either a vault or a wooden ceiling was never finished, as in its later conversion into a church, the hall was used as an entrance atrium. The main portal connecting to the southern atrium, lying opposite to the wide entrance proves that this room was only originally intended as a passage room or antechamber. Low doors on both the long sides lead to the western hall and to the ramp building.

The room partition to the south is organised around an open courtyard, which should have been surrounded on four sides by a colonnade (figs. 4, 5c). However, according to the brick stamps, this wasn't erected until the Hadrianic conversion, (Delbrück, 1921: 23-24). The basic complex, certainly consisted of an impluvium, surrounded on four sides by 0.85 m wide stylobate, and of a vault over the gallery. According to the surface dimensions, a layout of 5 x 4 columns is plausible. To finish with, a three-room group adjoined to the south side of the atrium. An almost square-shaped middle room (8 x 7 m) opening on to the colonnade is situated in building's central axis. The room connects to two subordinate flanking rooms via narrow side doors (Delbrück, 1921: 14). All three originally ended in barrel vaults which protruded over the roof of the atrium colonnade and which were illuminated by high lying clerestories (Obergadenfenster). The round niche, which can nowadays be found on the reverse side of the middle room, can be traced back to the church conversion. Above these rooms

of the south side, a further storey with smaller rooms was situated, accessible by the third bend of the ramp. This southern room group was also connected to the west hall by two passageways: a simple passageway on the northern end of the atrium and a more complex spandrel-shaped room in the southwestern corner. Furthermore, a door connected the atrium to the ramp.

Overall, the eastern wing presents us with a clear, aligned succession of rooms: a monumental antechamber, an atrium-esque courtyard and, as the focal point of the alignment, the rectangular room to the south which can be characterized as a tablinum and what Delbrück termed "exedra". The heights of the respective rooms seem strangely unbalanced: The extremely high entrance room is followed by a low colonnade, which in turn is connected to a high-rising room with clerestory windows – an interplay of varying room heights and illumination, as is known from other areas of Domitianic palace architecture (see below note 7). Finally, the close functional connection of all the rooms with the main western hall as well with the ramp to the Palatine in the east is characteristic.

The large ramp (ca. 50 x 8 m) on the eastern side of the building complex ties in with the complex as a whole and is part of the original plans (figs. 4, 11, 12). Its lower access is situated at the eastern end of the northern façade colonnade (Delbrück 1921: 12 with plat 4; Krause, 1985: 118-119 with figs. 126-127). From here, seven diametrically opposed ramps with 6 bends led up to the 35 m higher lying level of the Domus Tiberiana. From this building, only four ramps have survived up to the height of the Clivus Victoriae. Only a narrow doorway from the



FIG. 7: *South façade (DAI Neg. Nr. 42.900).*

ramp opened onto here, while the main ramp lead over a bridge crossing the *clivus* to the *Domus Tiberiana* (Krause, 1985: 118-119).

The ramps run in narrow yet 11,5 m high vaulted corridors. The vault roofs serve as the floor for the above lying ramps (fig. 12). The ramp corridors are only illuminated by a few windows and are dark. They had no

representative interior fittings; the flooring is made up of simple *opus spicatum*.

As there are steps before the bends, it can be excluded that the ramp complex was meant for wagon traffic. A comparison with the well-preserved ramp complex of the *Villa Iovis* on Capri shows that it evidently intended for the transport of high ranking persons

in litters (Krause, 2003: 63-73). This leads from the main entrance to the living quarters of the five-storey villa, while lower levels can be accessed by a parallel stairwell. The ramp's mosaic floor shows that it was used as a representative entrance for the emperor and guests.

In contrast to this, the analysis of the ramp complex of S. Maria Antiqua reveals, that despite providing access to the main storey of the Domus Tiberiana, it was not representatively designed. It can be thus presumed that it offered the emperor with an easy possibility for fast, incognito and dry-shod access the Palatine from the Forum or to the building

at hand; evidently it shouldn't be understood as a public footpath to the palace.

THE HADRIANIC RENOVATION

In his analysis on the complex of S. Maria Antiqua, Delbrück had already concluded on the basis of the missing indications for any wall claddings, that the building had remained unfinished after Domitian's death and was extensively renovated in the Hadrianic period (Delbrück, 1921: 23-25). It is conspicuous that the concept for the east



FIG. 8: *Western hall, southern wall (DAI Neg. Nr. 42.899).*

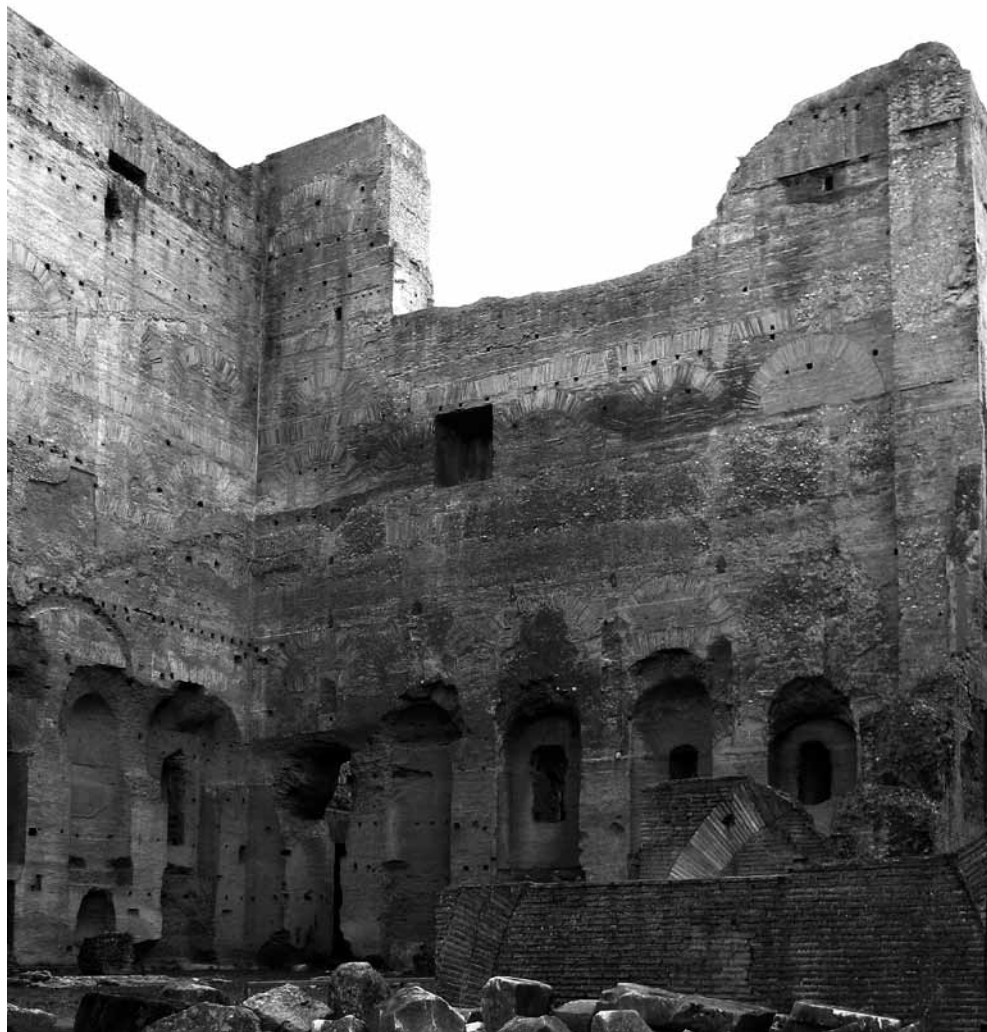


FIG. 9: *Western hall, looking west (author).*

wing remained, but was completed in more simple form; nonetheless, the large west hall experienced a turnaround in function (**fig. 13**).

⁵¹ During the conversion to the church columns replaced the pillars on both the long sides.

In the atrium of the eastern wing a simple pillar colonnade with vaulted galleries was erected upon the stylobate of the colonnade.⁵ Brick stamps date this conversion to the Hadrianic period (Delbrück 1921, 23-24). In the same time span, at the south end of the ramp a latrine with a stairway to the

atrium was added along with a further access to the roof of the portico. Finally, the decoration in the atrium and the three-room group was conspicuously low-key: the floor was done *in opus spicatum* and the walls were decorated with a simple white plaster with line patterns. In the entrance hall, there are no signs for marble decoration either.

The changes to the large west hall were more extensive, even if they have now almost completely disappeared due to the tenements built in the baroque period; various indications however allow a relatively detailed reconstruction. On the eastern longitudinal wall mortar imprints of several later added walls and vaults are preserved. Furthermore H. Hurst's more recent investigations were able to confirm the ground plan of the added structures lying under the modern ground level, as Delbrück had already seen (Hurst, 1986 and 1988). Brick stamps date this conversion to the middle period of Hadrian's reign, around 120 AD (Delbrück 1921, 23-25). This proves that after Domitian's death, the complex of S. Maria Antiqua remained unfinished for around 25 years, before being transformed.

The new building in the interior of the western hall made use of the existing outer walls. Along both of the longitudinal walls, a series of seven uniform chambers was constructed (ca. 5.5 x 3.5 m). A 2.5 m deep piered portico was built in front of each row of chambers. Between these two spatial lines a ca. 5 m broad inner courtyard was positioned. According to the presence of culverts, the courtyard was open top.

As the mortar imprints on the eastern wall document, two further storeys followed above the chambers on the ground floor.

Here, the rooms were the same size, if not somewhat lower. Together, they reached a height of around 25 m. Interestingly, according to the mortar imprints, all the chambers belonging to the top level were covered by vaults; two simple pent-roofs can thus be reconstructed, which drained the rainwater into the courtyard. The chambers in the upper levels must have been accessed by the colonnade, which functioned as a multi-storey gallery. A new stairwell, constructed in the south end of the western outer colonnade, evidently allowed access to these levels. Presumably in the same time span as the construction of these inner chambers, the outer colonnade on to the Vicus Tuscus was also converted. Apart from the stairwell, a series of uniform shops was built. These conversion measures can be traced back to a uniform planning, thus proving a complete turnaround in function and abandoning of the original concept. The new walls were erected at a point when the interior walls of the west hall were not yet decorated with a marble veneer. At the same time, these new constructions covered the statue niches of the walls as well as the side windows in the clerestory of the narrow walls. The new roof conception also underlines the fact that the ceiling of the west hall was not completed at the time of Domitian's death.

The function of the new construction measures in the west hall cannot be completely ascertained. On the ground level, intermediate floors of *opus spicatum* lying on *suspensurae* were observed, leading to the interpretation as a corn *horrea*. However, there are notions, that these floors actually belong to a conversion phase dating to late Antiquity. The high room dimension of the ground floor, the multi-storey nature of the building and the difficult access of the up-



FIG. 10: *Eastern hall, dividing wall with eastern hall (author).*

per rooms do not count in favour of a granary⁶. The construction may have been used as archive storage or as living quarters for guards or other personal. Similarities to the so-called Praetorium of the Villa Hadriana led Delbrück to assume that it may have been used as slave quarters (Delbrück, 1921: 26). For the question at hand, it must be said that the later structures as well as the conversion of the outer colonnade into a row of simple

⁶ In Portus, the warehouses probably used for storing corn were two-storied but these were reached by flat ramps.

shops both document a complete re-planning in regards to the building's functionality. This fundamental change in planning is of even greater consequence, as that the large building complex was almost completed and stayed that way for a long time span. Therefore, one can assume that the original conceived function of the monumental complex was no longer opportune within the new post-Domitianic political constellation. This is why no reasonable use could be found for the giant unfinished building. Therefore the complex must have fulfilled a very specific and politically relevant purpose for Domitian, which led ultimately – like its patron – to the *damnatio memoriae* of the building.

PREVIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

Due to the fact, that the Domitianic building stayed unfinished as well as its loss in significance under his successors, it is not surprising that no written sources or coin mints allude to the building complex. The hitherto proposed interpretations are thus solely based on more or less convincing arguments. Even before its excavation, R. Lanciani suggested the building was the supposed templum Divi Augusti mentioned in the written sources and situated behind the temple of Castor and Pollux (Lanciani, 1897: 121-123). Even after Boni's excavations, Ch. Huelsen still followed this view (Huelsen, 1902: 74-82; Huelsen, 1905: 168-170). Huelsen tried to quash any doubts, which arose in connection with the construction typology, by interpreting the large west hall as the temple's cella and the eastern wing as the *bibliotheca templi divi Augusti* (Jordan-Huelsen, 1907: 82-85). Del-

brück was the first to convincingly reject this interpretation on the base of structural characteristics and chronological arguments (Delbrück 1921, 31-32). Nowadays the general consensus is to locate said temple of divine Augustus behind the Basilica Iulia between the Vicus Tuscus and the Vicus Iugarius, in close proximity of our building (Coarelli, 1993; Coarelli, 2008: 83). Delbrück went on to underline the close functional connection of the building to the Palatine and interpret-

ed the complex as a monumental reception palace, where the emperor was able to hold *salutationes* and feasts (Delbrück, 1921: 21-22; Blake, 1959: 116; Hurst, 1995: 199). However, various reasons count against such a function as a reception hall. A palace wing in the form of the Domus Flavia belonging to the same building plans of Domitian was already in place. With the *aula regia*, the Basilica and the large banquet hall, the so-called *coenatio Iovis*, the Domus Flavia featured

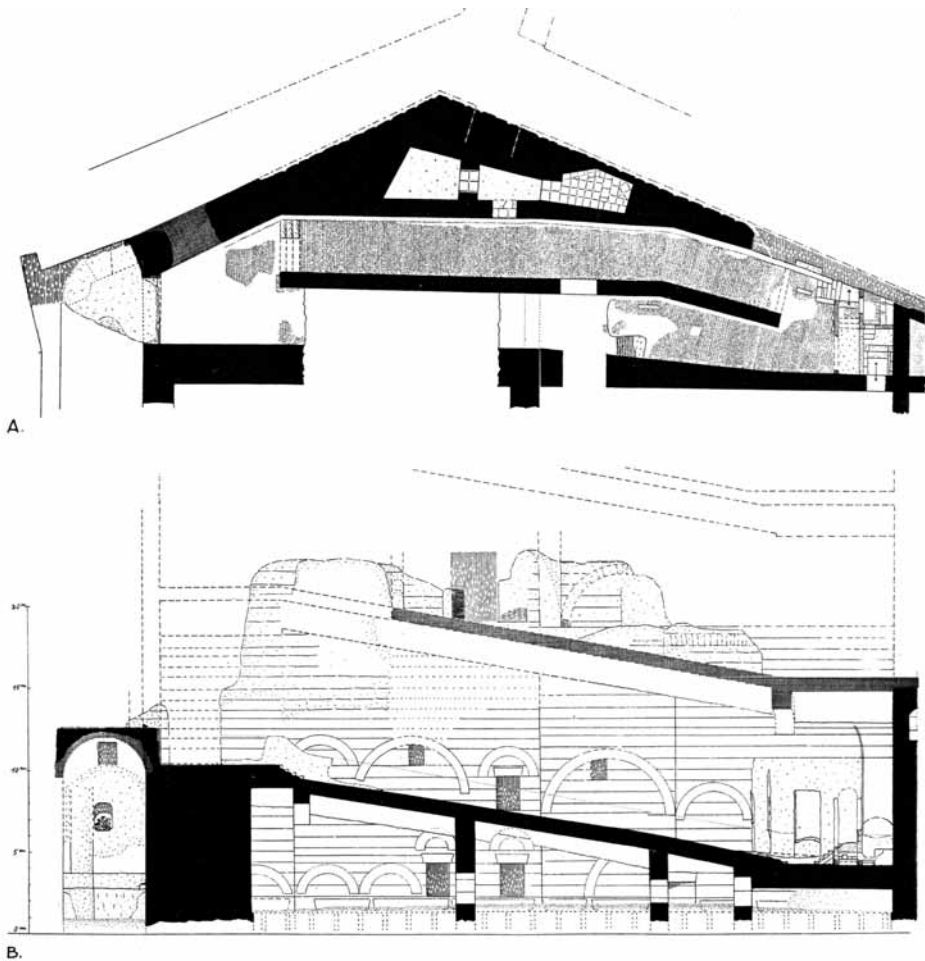


FIG. 11: Ramp building, ground plan and section (Delbrück, 1921: pl. 4).



FIG. 12: Ramp, ground floor looking west
(author).

rooms exclusively for representative receptions, which were, according to the sources, used intensively for *salutationes* and *conviv-*

⁷ For the palace of Domitian Tamm, 1963: 206-216; Wataghin Cantino, 1966; Finsen, 1969; Sasso D'Elia, 1995; Darwall-Smith, 1996: 179-214; Royo, 1999: 303-368; Winterling, 1999: 70-74. 155-160; Tomei, 1999: 273-262; Knell, 2004: 157-167; Zanker, 2006; Coarelli, 2008, 177-188, amongst others.

⁸ Jones, 1992: 82-105; Christ, 2005: 274-284; Royo, 1999: 345-360; Winterling, 1999: 122-138, 155-160; Scheithauer, 2000; Kolb, 2002: 397-398; Zanker, 2006; amongst others.

ia.⁷ On the other hand those reception rooms show important differences: not only are they larger and architecturally more sumptuous, all the rooms where the emperor made an appearance also possess large apses in axial alignment with the entrances portals. The apses constitute a significant innovation in the Domitianic palace architecture and serve evidently to enhance the emperor's appearance, be it either seated on a throne as in the case of the *Aula* or lying on a couch in the *coenatio Iovis*. The notion of Domitian descending down from his residence to the depths of the Forum to host receptions and feasts in a location architecturally unsuitable for highlighting his person is evidently at odds with his concept of power.⁸ A more recent alternative to Delbrück's interpretation sees the building complex acting as a monumental entrance vestibule to the imperial palaces along with quarters for the Praetorian Guard (Tamm, 1963: 79-85; Lugli, 1970: 256-261). However, not only do the above arguments count against this idea, but the traffic routing within the building complex of S. Maria Antiqua is not able of manoeuvring the large crowds of visitors, which must be postulated due to the dimensions of the west hall, in the direction of the imperial palace. The ramp's somewhat sparse execution as well as it terminating behind the *Domus Tiberiana* also count against this interpretation. Furthermore, there are sufficient written sources documenting that the official stream of visitors to the imperial place was directed over the *clivus Palatinus* towards the *Domus Flavia* (Zanker, 2006: 88-89; Casatella, 1993). Finally, these attempts at the building's identification do not take its history into account, in which a complete rupture in purpose between the Domitianic and the

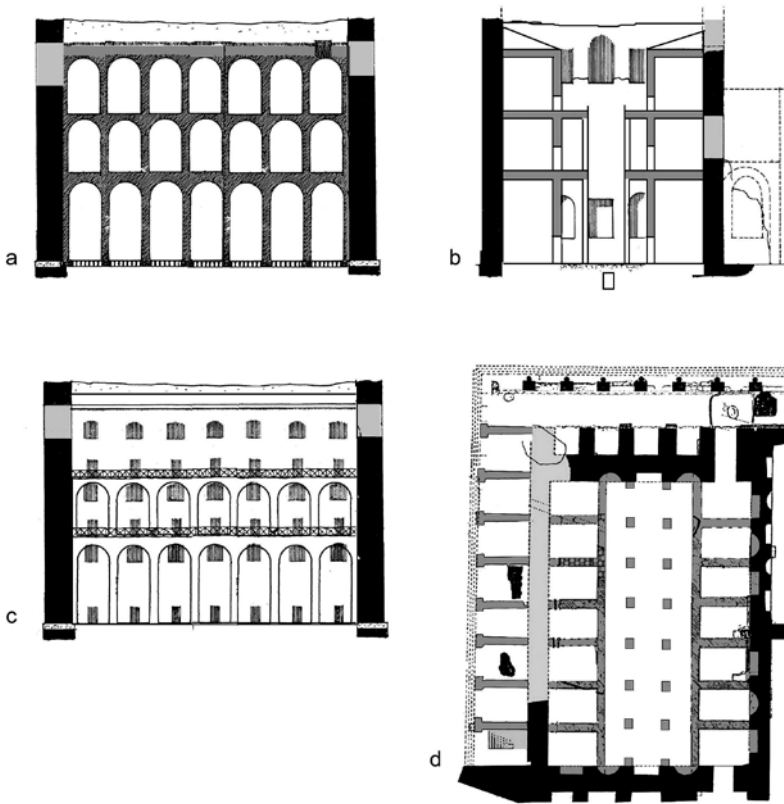


FIG. 13: *Hadrianic alterations of western hall (Delbrück, 1921: pl. 7b).*

Trajanic-Hadrianic phases can be documented. F. Coarelli submitted a completely new proposal by suggesting the building complex of S. Maria Antiqua was the *Atheneaeum*, documented in the written sources; a kind of institution for higher education where also the emperor would have been taught (Hurst, 1995: 198; Coarelli, 1980: 74; Coarelli, 2008: 88-89).⁹ However, his arguments are based on a complicated interlinking of different location descriptions in the vicinity of the temples of Augustus and Dioscuri as well the proposed function for the smaller east hall as a library. Various aspects count against this identification. Not only the fact that the

eastern hall served as a transit room; rather, as Delbrück had already proven that, due to their height and design, the niches were not suitable for archiving scrolls but should be interpreted as niches for statues. This becomes the more so evident when the rooms of S. Maria Antiqua are compared to libraries which are certainly classifiable as such, like those from Trajan's forum.¹⁰

⁹ For the *Atheneaeum* in general: Platner-Ashby, 1965: 56; Coarelli 1993.

¹⁰ As a rule, the wall niches of libraries are wider and deeper and are positioned nearer to the floor. See Blanck, 1992: 160-178; Gros, 1996: 362-375 amongst others; for the libraries of Trajan's forum esp. Meneghini, 2002.

The above observations of the building's chronology also contradict this hypothesis: According to the written sources, the Athenaeum was supposed to have been setup by Hadrian; furthermore it served for special meetings of the Senate and official events, like the enthronement of Septimius Severus. As stated above, in Hadrianic times, the building complex experienced a change in function, which has nothing to do with the concept of this type of representative assembly and education building.

A DOMITIANIC CURIA FOR THE SENATE?

If the previous considerations on the function of the building aren't convincing and the written sources do not lead to further conclusions, then any new insights must come from the building itself. Firstly, the important points must be restated: The building complex of S. Maria Antiqua is a monumental imperial building situated at a prominent location on the Forum Romanum and on one of the most important transit roads, the Vicus Tuscus. It was undoubtedly constructed in connection with Domitian's palace complex, with which it is spatially and functionally connected through the ramp. It should thus be understood as part of the building programme of the Domus Imperatoriae. Even though, at the time of Domitian's death, only the ceiling and wall decoration were left to finish, it still stayed incomplete for 25 years, before being converted and re-used in the context of a less representative building. The significance of this process lies in the fact that other parts of Domitian's palace could continue to be used by the suc-

cessors without any difficulties. Actually, the non-completion, destruction or conversion of large imperial building programmes after the predecessor's death is a rare phenomenon and affects, as was the case with the Domus Aurea, buildings which the public or aristocratic senators took offence to. All this could be an indication that the original intended function for the building complex of S. Maria Antiqua was viewed as problematic - for political or moral reasons. With its layout consisting of a monumental hall on the side of the Vicus Tuscus and the spatial alignment of antechamber, atrium and 'tablinum/exedra' at the back, the building itself reveals a very specific sense of purpose. The west hall can thus be understood as a large assembly hall. The eastern wing must be seen as one continuous line, where a large number of people would first enter into the ante - or waiting chamber and then go on - probably in smaller groups - to the atrium-esque intermediate room and then onto the room group located at the back. This room disposition is reminiscent of an atrium-tablinum sequence and implies the reception of a large number of waiting persons by less people or by one person in the 'tablinum' at the back. The number of doors and passages is striking. The wide entrances enabled a large number of people to easily enter the building from the Vicus Tuscus or from the cross-street running north of the complex. Smaller doorways in turn connect all the rooms among one another, as well as the building with the large ramp leading to the Domus Tiberiana. As stated above, this ramp was not part of an official entrance to the palace area, but should be understood as the emperor's private slip-road to the Forum or to the complex at hand respectively. The ramp's design suggests a mode of trans-

port using litters. The emperor's presence or rather his contact with a large number of people evidently played an important role in the building's original concept. The building however should not be interpreted as the emperor's reception hall, as Delbrück proposed. On one hand there are other considerably more sumptuous premises in the region of the Domus Flavia, notably used by the emperor for receptions (fig. 14). On the other hand, the design of the building complex of S. Maria Antiqua is missing the one crucial architectural form present in all other pal-

ace reception halls for highlighting the emperor: the apse. The decisive observation is that, although the building complex at hand could hold large congregations of people in a representative setting where the emperor's presence was required, he did not preside the assembly. At the time of the Principate, this type of constellation only existed in the institution of the Senate, where the emperors would regularly participate, if not in different degrees of commitment. When the Senate met in the Curia Iulia, then the emperor was known to sit with the other magistrates on

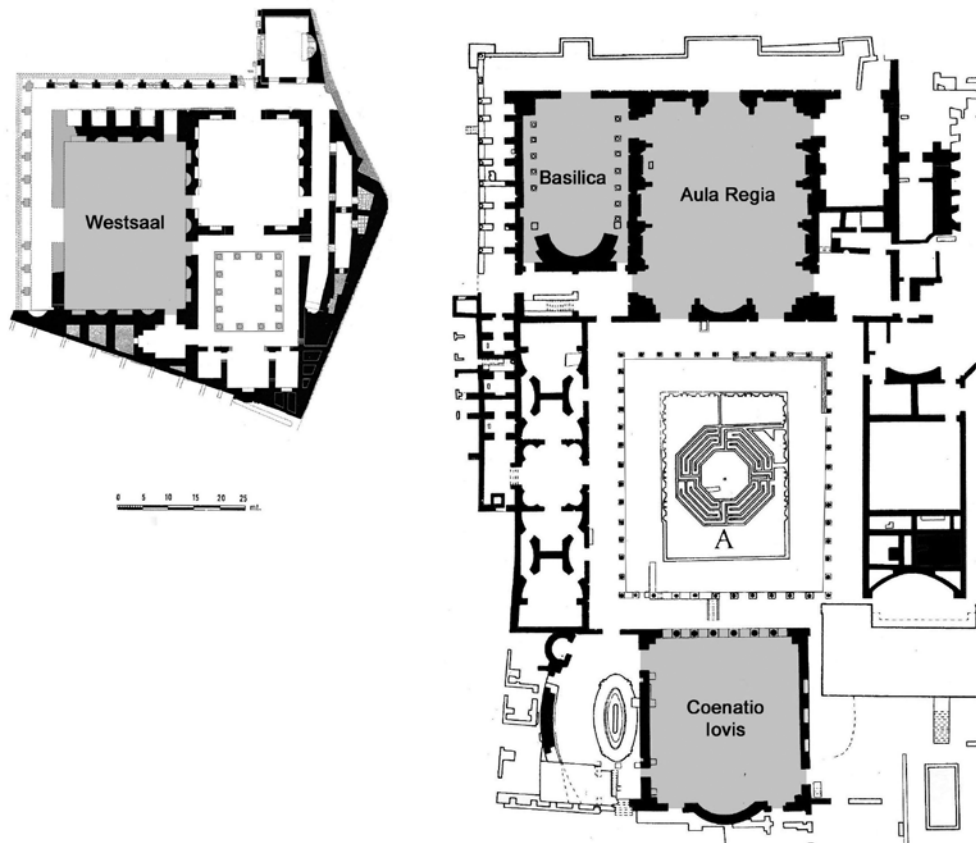


FIG. 14: Comparison of the building complex of S. Maria Antiqua (left) and the Domus Flavia (right), in same scale (based on Delbrück, 1921: pl. 2 and Wataghin Cantino, 1966: pl. 1).

a two-tiered podium in front of the northern rear wall (Bartoli, 1963: Pl. 58.2; Talbert, 1984: 121-127, 163-184). At the front, on the *sellae curules*, the two consuls would sit, one of which was often the emperor himself. Otherwise, the princeps was placed next to both the consuls holding office. The magistrates and the people's tribunes sat behind them on simple wooden benches. This seating plan integrated the emperors as *primus inter pares* within the traditional hierarchy of the Senate. This stood in contrast to their exposed role in official receptions on the Palatine, where the architecture as well as increasingly elaborate court ceremonies gradually widened the gap to the subjects (Alföldi, 1970: 25-118; Jones, 1992: 22-72; Winterling, 1999: 122-169, amongst others). As is widely reported, Domitian had an ambivalent relationship towards the Senate (Weyand, 1909; Jones, 1992: 160-176, 180-192; Christ, 2005: 274-284). In contrast to the biased and negative judgement implied in the written sources and the later imposed *damnatio memoriae*, new research has shown that at least in the former years of his reign, Domitian strived for a good rapport with the Senate. Overall Domitian held the consulate for 17 times, more than any other emperor, even if he usually did resign after a short period of time in favour of other senators. When in Rome, he participated quite often at senate meetings and, as a censor, he attempted to protect the senate's dignity with strict measures. (Weyand, 1909: 2581-2585). It wasn't until the failed coup of Saturninus (89 AD) along with Domitian's increasingly autocratic claim to power that the differences became so severe, that they ultimately led his assassination in 96 AD. Even in these last years of his reign, characterized by ter-

ror and menacing actions against unpleasant members of the Senate aristocracy, there are still no clues that Domitian was interested in completely rewriting the roles of the princeps and the Senate, which had been established since the time of Augustus or even in their abolishment. In fact, the Senate continued to hold meetings and during this time span Domitian himself repeatedly held the office of consul (90, 92, 95 AD).

If the building complex of S. Maria Antiqua is re-evaluated under the premise that the Senate was the only larger assembly where the emperor regularly participated, without holding chair, then the large west hall could be understood as a large assembly (fig. 15). Further arguments can also be put forward. A passage of the late antique chronicle of Eusebius (Hieronymus 273 F VIII), usually seen as reliable, for the year 89/90 AD reports: "*Domitianus [...] multa opera Romae facta, in quis Capitolium, forum transitorium, diuorum porticus, [...], senatus, ludus matutinus, [...]*". Traditionally this description is interpreted as an indication of Domitian's renovation of the Curia Iulia following the large city fires in 64 respectively 80 AD (Tortorici, 1993: 333). However, recent research has shown that no traces of renovation dating to the reign of Domitian can be observed on the Curia; neither on the existing building – which is less surprising due to the massive Diocletianic renovations – nor in the stratigraphy of the foundations, which is more of an argument (Morselli-Tortorici, 1990: 237-248). However, the wording of the chronicle passage does not suggest a renovation, rather the Senate building is listed alongside further newly constructed monuments. Moreover, a restoration of the Curia Iulia many years after the fire disaster wouldn't make much sense,

whereas the date of 90 AD coincides with the beginning of the building complex of S. Maria Antiqua. If one tries to understand the building complex of S. Maria Antiqua as a new version of the Curia for the Senate and then compares it with the Curia Iulia, then various structural similarities become apparent (fig. 15). The Curia Iulia didn't just originally consist of today's preserved senate hall, in fact excavations under SS. Luca e Martina on the west side proved the existence of further annexes, amongst them an open courtyard surrounded by colonnades as well as a smaller oblong hall (Huelsen, 1905: 108 and fig. 51; Morselli-Tortorici, 1990: 13-44). All three building elements were joined by a colonnade facing the forum and made

up a functionally coherent unit. Furthermore, the actual Curia was joined to the entrance building of the Forum Iulium by two doors in its northern rear wall. In fact, the written sources refer to various premises in the environs of the actual Curia building, connected to the senate's activity. A safeguarded *secretarium senatus*, used since Augustan times for administration and as a special court for senators, the *Atrium Minervae*, the *Chalcidicum* and possibly the *Atrium Libertatis*, are all listed. Their exact function and identification with the buildings in the surroundings of the Curia Iulia is still unclear (Bartoli, 1963: 61-70; Balz, 1991: 15-22; Tortorici, 1993; Zevi, 1993a; Zevi, 1993b; Coarelli, 2008, 62-65). Thus, in the building complex of

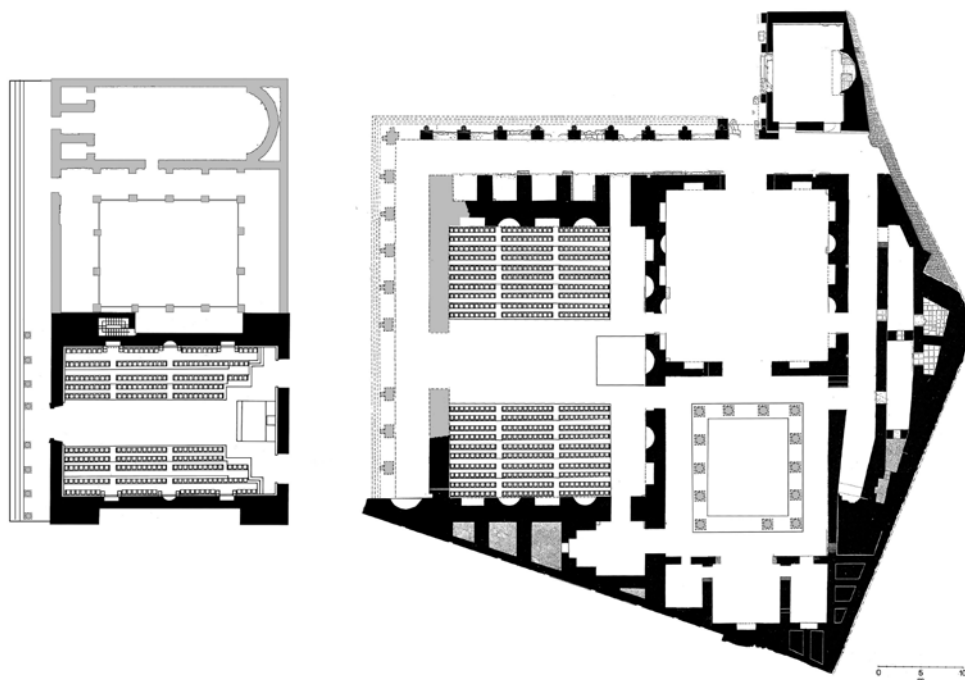


FIG. 15: Comparison of the Curia Iulia (left) and the building complex of S. Maria Antiqua (right) with reconstruction of a possible seating, in same scale (based on Bartoli, 1963: pl. 96 and Huelsen, 1905: fig. 51).

S. Maria Antiqua, the west hall would have been used as the actual assembly hall of the Senate, whereas the functions of the rooms of the eastern wing can be deduced from the annexes of the Curia Iulia; based on the specific room typology, the reception of applicants by consuls and magistrates situated in the tablinum-esque room of the rear part is a possibility. Further similarities can be observed when the west hall is compared to the actual Curia building. In the both cases a plain, superelevated hall can be attested, with only a simple row of statue niches for an interior articulation. As with the Curia Iulia, a pedestal lying in the middle of wall directly opposite the entrance of the large west hall could have been intended for magistrates. Here too, it was also flanked by two side doors on the rear wall. At the same time, the large west hall would have solved the problem of the old Curia building, as it provided enough space for all the senators. Thus the stepped pedestals on the sidewalls of the Curia Iulia (18 x 27 m, 485 sqm) held either 300 senators seated on chairs (Bartoli, 1963: Pl. 96) or 450 on benches (Taylor-Scott, 1969: 542 with fig. 3). Nonetheless, under Caesar, the assembly temporarily counted 900 and since Augustus 600 senators. Their full presence was expected at least for exceptional events (Talbert, 1984: 131-134). On the base of the 1 ½ times larger surface area, the west hall of the building complex of S. Maria Antiqua would have provided the Senate with the adequate amount of space for the first time (fig. 15).

To sum up, the variedly discussed aspects of the room typology, the functionality and building history can be concluded as follows: The complex of S. Maria Antiqua was initiated around 90 AD by Domitian as a

Curia building for the Roman Senate, which was left unfinished after his death. This kind of interpretation can also be explained within the context of Domitian's autocratic rule and would also signal the consequent conclusion of an ongoing development. Since the crisis of the Republic, as the Curia Pompeia and the Curia Iulia prove, flagship politicians attempted to bind the meeting place of the Senate to buildings close to the person who commissioned them. Under the reign of Augustus, numerous senate meetings were summoned in the Temple of Apollo donated by him or in the neighbouring library. This equals a de facto annexation to the private dwelling of Augustus without stirring up any trouble thanks to the public-religious nature of the venue. Under the successive emperors and simultaneously to the gradual expansion of the imperial residence on the whole Palatine, the senate would often convene in the Temple of Apollo and the adjoining library (Talbert, 1984: 117-118), thus establishing an increasingly intense proximity to the imperial house. With its direct spatial and functional incorporation into the Domus Imperatoriae, a relocation of the senate in the building complex of S. Maria Antiqua could have been understood as an act of symbolic subjection under the emperor's primacy – a claim to power which became increasingly louder in the latter years of Domitian's reign and when the building at hand was constructed. The great significance that such a process may have carried goes some way to explain the complete turnaround of Domitian's successors regarding this provocative edifice: Inevitably, the emperor along with the Curia building designed by him for the submission of the Senate, fell subject to the *damnatio memoriae* issued by that very assembly.

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