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Comitato di redazione: Giusy Belfiore, Helena Catania, Federico Cosentino, Claudia Devoto, Giulia Raimondi, Martina Anna Sapienza.

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Cronache di Archeologia
Scavi e ricerche 3

Edizioni Quasar

The *Capitolium* and the northern sector of the Forum of Pompeii. New data from stratigraphic investigations

Luigi M. Calìò, Lavinia M.S. Fallea, Gian Michele Gerogiannis, Vittorio Mirto

The excavation at the *Capitolium*

The excavations at the *Capitolium* of Pompeii are part of an agreement between the University of Catania and the Archaeological Park of Pompeii initiated in 2020, aimed at investigating the area facing the sacred building, in continuation of the research begun by Enzo Lippolis in 2017. Over the course of three excavation campaigns, spanning from September 2020 to July 2022, a comprehensive investigation has been undertaken. Alongside the University of Catania, scholars from the University of Molise, led by Marilena Cozzolino, conducted geophysical surveys across the Forum area in September 2020¹. Additionally, the Polytechnic University of Bari², under the guidance of Antonello Fino, in analysing the architectural features of the sanctuary complex and its surroundings. The participation of students from Catania further enriches this interdisciplinary endeavour.

The primary objective of the investigations was to uncover and examine the altar, initially identified by A. Maiuri in the 1940s³ and situated a few meters south of the *Capitolium*. The focus was on studying its architectural features, stratigraphy, and its interplay with the adjacent temple structure. However, as the excavations progressed, revealing different stratified archaeological structures spanning through various epochs, the scope of the inquiry expanded. It became imperative to extend the

investigations to encompass a significant portion of the northern sector of the Forum. This broader undertaking aimed to elucidate the organization and evolution of the entire square and its structures across different historical phases. This comprehensive approach involved a meticulous analysis of the stratigraphy and of the materials unearthed during the excavation process.

L.M.C.

Stratigraphic investigations

The three excavation campaigns focused on two specific areas: the northeast sector, located in the northeastern corner of the Forum, and the central area, immediately south of the *Capitolium*. The first sector was chosen due to the preservation of the stylobate of the portico, the sidewalk, and part of the pavement, allowing for a comprehensive investigation of the Forum's architecture in connection with its stratigraphy (fig. 1).

On the other hand, the central investigation saw a gradual expansion of the excavated area towards the south and west, starting from the temple's *podium*, extending to both cases to the slab pavement, partly modern and partly ancient. To the east, the boundary of the investigated area roughly corresponds to the eastern staircase of the *Capitolium's podium* (figs. 1-2).

Overall, it should be noted that the research revealed a complex stratigraphic situation due to numerous previous excavation interventions, attributable

1 CALIÒ *et alii* 2021 (Cozzolino), pp. 156-157.

2 ROCCO, LIVADIOTTI 2018.

3 MAIURI 1973, p. 115; GASPARINI 2009, pp. 32-35; LIPPOLIS 2017, pp. 130, 133.



POMPEI, CAPITOLIUM

Prof. Luigi Maria Calìo

Rilievo scala 1:50 (settembre2020), su base Politecnico di Bari 2016
Arch. A. Fino

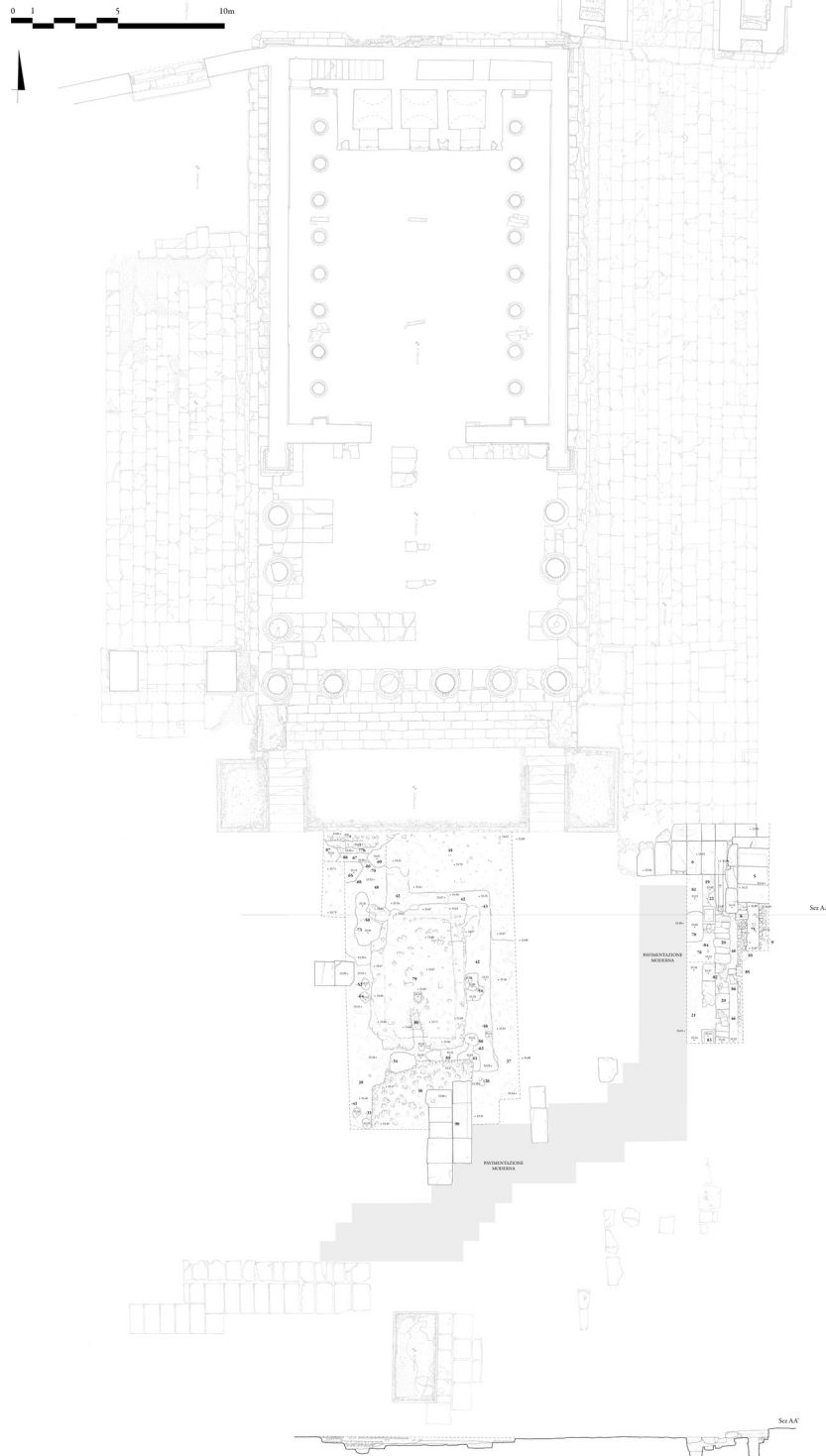


Fig. 1 - Planimetry of the areas investigated in the 2020 excavation campaign (by A. Fino).

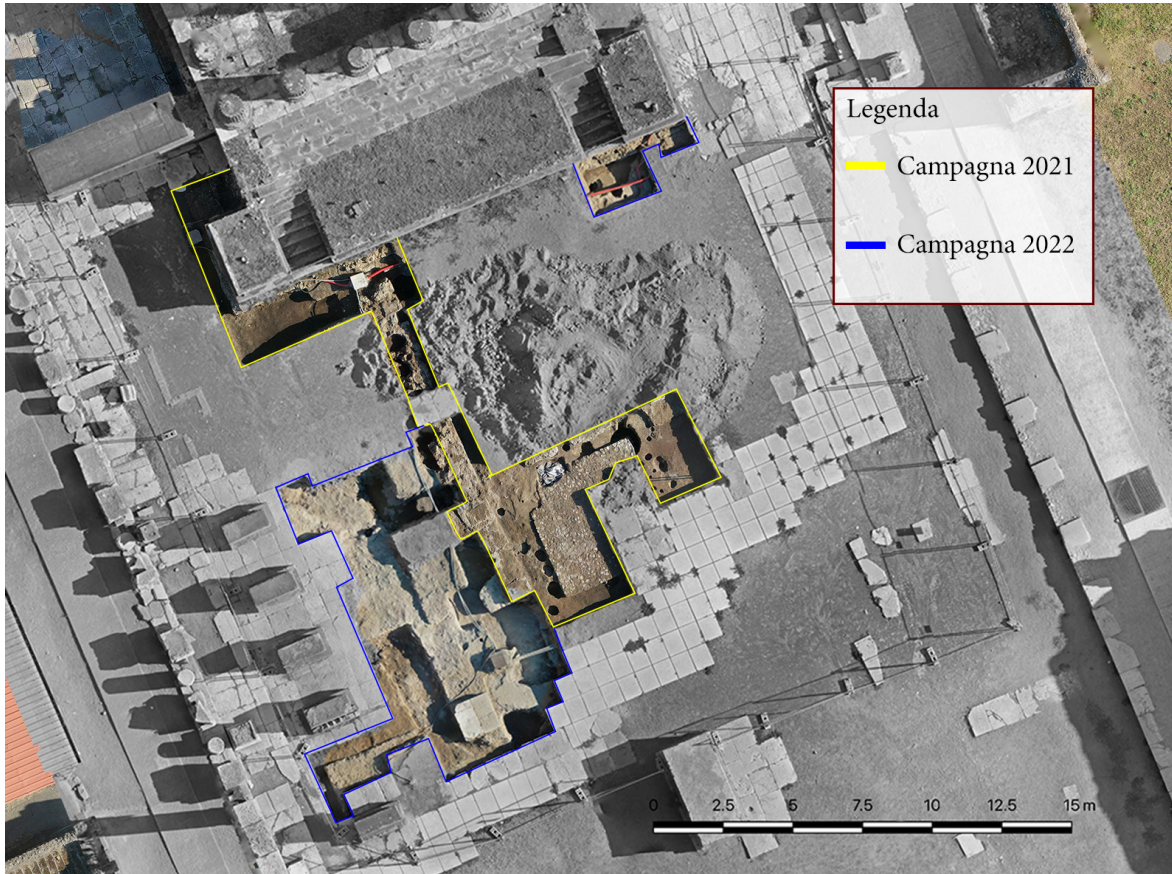


Fig. 2 - Orthophotos showing areas investigated in 2021 and 2022 respectively (by V. Mirto).

to both to ancient and modern times, including the excavations by A. Maiuri⁴ and P. Arthur for the electrical network⁵, to the west and behind the temple.

The elevation of the pavement level in this part of the Forum appears to have changed of more or less 10 cm over an extended period, at least until the installation of the slab paving. Prior to this level, which corresponds to the current one, two layers of compacted earth, ranging from 5 to 10 cm in thickness, were identified. These layers served as the foundation for various structures belonging to different construction phases⁶.

Beginning with the excavation of the northeastern sector, which yielded a less disturbed stratigraphy,

it was possible to identify two phases of the portico, one constructed of tuff and the other of limestone, as previously noted in Maiuri's excavations⁷. Beneath the sewage system of the later stages of the Forum's life, consisting of a north-south conduit running along the limestone stylobate foundation (fig. 3), two rows of tuff slabs were discovered, constructed atop a foundation of Sarno limestone blocks. The western row still retains a central gutter, running longitudinally, likely intended for rainwater drainage. Along this row, two basins (84 x 56.5 cm) made of tuff blocks with rectangular internal recesses (56 x 40 cm) were identified at a distance of 4.90 m. On the eastern row, it is probable that the second step enabling access to the tuff portico stylobate rested. Concerning the levels of use during this initial arrangement of the area, a compacted surface

⁴ MAIURI 1973.

⁵ ARTHUR 1986, pp. 29-30.

⁶ Calò *et alii* 2021 (Gerogiannis), p. 162.

⁷ MAIURI 1973, pp. 67-68; RESCIGNO 2017, p. 47.



Fig. 3 - Sewer canal along the eastern stylobate, from the north.

made of numerous ceramic fragments and bricks corresponds (figs. 4-5).

Summarizing the stratigraphic sequences found in this sector, two overlapping layers of compacted earth associated with the construction and use of the tuff portico were identified. The layers resting on it testify a significant increase in the usage level, leading to the application of a layer rich in limestone chips, likely interpreted as preparation for the slab paving, which also represents the last known level⁸. During this phase, the tuff portico was replaced by one made of limestone.

In order to verify the stratigraphy of the older portico on the western side of the Forum, a test excavation was conducted in 2022 at the only feasible point, where the slab paving is incomplete. It was observed that the tuff rows on this side were not preserved. However, the cut of the tuff slab striping, along with a compacted earth layer at a level

corresponding to that found in the northeast sector, were identified.

Moving on to the central area, it presents a more complex stratigraphy due to being more extensively impacted by substantial interventions that profoundly altered the context.

One of the most significant revelations during the investigations is a substantial wall running north-south (USM 155), located in the western part of the Forum, identified over a length of 13 meters (figs. 6-7). This wall continues beneath the foundations of the temple *podium*. At present, hypotheses regarding its function cannot be advanced; however, this structure, preserved only at the foundation level, appears to divide two distinct zones: an eastern one where evidence of sacred area use is found, and a western one, as will be discussed later, consisting of a large pit relevant to the city's final phases.

Starting from the eastern zone, from north to south, investigations revealed two steps beneath the temple *podium*, interpreted as part of the first construction phase of the religious building, which presumably had a staircase on its façade⁹. A few meters from this area lies the altar previously unearthed by Maiuri in 1942 and by E. Lippolis in 2017. Two construction phases have been postulated for the altar: an initial phase indicated solely by a poorly known cement core visible only in a small fragment, and a second phase when the altar assumed its final form, albeit preserved only at the foundation level. The rectangular structure (4.60 x 6.86 m) consists of a base of Sarno limestone mixed with lava debris and tuff fragments, laid in cement, with traces of blocks that likely framed the construction, possibly composing at least two steps¹⁰ (fig. 1).

In the southwestern corner of the altar, the so-called *pozzetto votivo* was identified, partially excavated and documented by A. Maiuri, which yielded the remnants of approximately another 80 miniature vessels (fig. 8)¹¹. Additionally, about 50 cm south of

⁸ This level was also identified and described by A. Maiuri (MAIURI 1973, p. 65).

⁹ CALIÒ *et alii* 2021 (Fino), pp. 162-163.

¹⁰ CALIÒ *et alii* 2021 (Fino), p. 162.

¹¹ The pit had already been almost completely emptied by A. Maiuri (MAIURI 1973, pp. 116-119), but in 2020 it was possible to excavate the remaining fill.



Fig. 4 - North-eastern area seen from the south-west.



Fig. 5 - North section of the north-eastern area, seen from the south.



Fig. 6 - North-south wall (USM 155), seen from the north.

the altar, another structure emerged, comprised of small stone blocks laid in a dense layer of earth and mortar, forming a flat-surfaced base, nearly square in shape (approximately 4.70 m on each side). This structure is identifiable as the “massicciata composta di materiali di calcare, di lava, di cruma e di pezzi di cotto cementati con abbondante calce” identified by Maiuri in 1942¹² (fig. 7).

Regarding the usage levels, two overlapping compacted layers were identified in the area surrounding the altar and the southeastern sector. Their elevations correspond to those found in the northeastern sector.

An interesting aspect is the presence of circular cuttings of various sizes found across the excavation area, with a particular concentration in the southern-eastern half of the central area. These cuttings are all filled with loose soil, layers of ash, and very few ceramic fragments (fig. 9). Some of them also had limestone flakes lining their walls, possibly serving as covers. Presently, hypotheses regarding their purpose cannot be proposed, but their location within the Forum, particularly in the vicinity of the *Capitolium*, suggests a connection to the sacred use of the sanctuary.

In the area west of the wall, during the last two excavation campaigns, a significantly large pit (approximately 18x7 m) was uncovered. It covered the enti-

12 MAIURI 1973, p. 116.



Fig. 7 - Central assay seen from the south. On the left is the north-south wall (USM 155), on the right the so-called *platea* (US 38); in the centre, part of the cut pertaining to the large pit, eastern side, is visible.



Fig. 8 - Pottery found in the so-called *pozzetto votivo*.



Fig. 9 - Circular holes found in the south-eastern area of the excavation, east of the so-called *platea*.

re western strip of the wall. This cutting extended to the temple *podium* in the north, terminated near the north-south wall, and reached the slab pavement to the south and west (fig. 1). This pit, likely dating to the second half of the 1st century AD, completely disrupted the area. It penetrated the oldest levels, reaching a depth of about 2 m into the geological soil, which is relatively elevated in this part of the Forum¹³. Regarding the earth filling it, it predominantly comprised fragments of plaster, which crumbled and formed the base matrix of the layer, along with numerous amphora fragments, concentrated mainly around the podium's vicinity.

Although the materials uncovered during the excavation are still under study, it's possible to outline a sequence of evidence from various macrophases:

- the earliest phases include the substantial north-south wall, the votive well, and perhaps an initial sacred structure beneath the temple altar.
- In the second phase, the construction of the temple with its staircase is situated, along with the altar and the compacted surface found across the area. This phase likely also includes the construction of the initial tuff portico, which aligns with the same elevations.
- The third phase encompasses the complete reorganization of the area, resulting in the obliteration of the altar, construction of the *podium* replacing the staircase, and the raising of the square's usage level, coinciding with the construction of the limestone portico. The so-called platform ("massicciata"), discovered immediately

13 Cfr. GILETTI, AMATO 2022, pp. 139-142; AMATO 2023.

south of the altar, likely belongs to this new layout, interpretable as the foundation of a previously unknown monument¹⁴.

- Finally, the last phase involves the creation of the large pit and its subsequent fill.

In terms of absolute chronology, it's currently challenging to pinpoint specific phases and structures due to ongoing material analysis. However, the evidence spans from the late 3rd century BC, marked by the votive well, at least according to Maiuri's published data¹⁵ (unfortunately, the materials found in the 1940s have been lost), to the city's final phases, evidenced by the large pit discovered along the western excavation sector.

A systematic and comprehensive interpretation of each stage is deferred to another publication. However, it's worth highlighting how recent investigations have shed light on the city's final moments: the large pit, along with the preservation status of certain structures such as the platform south of the altar or the incomplete slab pavement in numerous expansive sectors, seems to indicate ongoing construction activities, possibly in response to the damages caused by the earthquake of 62 AD¹⁶.

G.M.G.

The Great Pit

As previously mentioned, the excavation campaigns of 2021 and 2022 uncovered the substantial wall structure referred to as USM 155 (fig. 2). This structure comprises a north-south-oriented wall constructed of irregularly-sized fragments of tuff and limestone, bound with mortar and earth, with a thickness of approximately 1.60 meters and a noticeable length of around 13 meters (figs. 6-7). The wall appears to be in poor condition, having been compromised at multiple points by subsequent renovations, and possibly stripped of its facing stones. At its northernmost section, it is intersected by the temple's foundations (fig. 6), while at the southern end, near the base of the altar, it terminates abruptly, continuing westward for less than a meter at a

right angle before its traces disappear (fig. 7). The function of this wall remains unclear.

In addition to the wall, the two excavation campaigns also investigated the fill of the large pit, which appears to extend along the entire western half of the excavation area and reaches the undisturbed ground at a depth of approximately 2 meters below the current floor level. The fill layers yielded a significant quantity of artifacts, including numerous fragments of Greek-Italic (MGS III-IV) and Punic amphorae, as well as Roman amphorae of the Dressel 1 type in variants A and C, some with traces of pitch, and many containing a mixture of ash and burnt animal bones. Construction materials were also abundant, including numerous roof tiles, fragments of *opus signinum* flooring, architectural fragments, and various pieces of polychrome plaster.

Observing the fill layers in section reveals a succession of material deposits, sloping gently from west to east, leaning against USM 155 (fig. 10). This alternating layering, despite its relatively thin profile, may have been designed to stabilize the ground, mitigating differential settlement due to the presence of the pit and potential variations in the fill layers.

The quantity and type of artifacts found within these fill layers, particularly the abundance of construction materials, likely suggest a traumatic event that left behind numerous debris. In this regard, the discovery of 13 lithic ballista projectiles within the same context is particularly significant (fig. 11). These projectiles vary in diameter and hint at the occurrence of a significant event, possibly an earthquake. Further study of the stratigraphic contexts and artifacts will be necessary to clarify the chronological placement and nature of the event that produced the debris, allowing for a more precise determination of its temporal limits.

V.M.

Materials from the western sector: preliminary data

The excavation in the area in front of the *Capitolium* has yielded a large quantity of ceramic material. For the sake of brevity, we have chosen to present here the finds discovered in the western portion of the trench conducted in the southwest corner of the *po-*

14 Cfr. GEROGIANIS c.d.s., with bibliography.

15 MAIURI 1973, pp. 116-118.

16 On these aspects see GEROGIANIS c.d.s.



Fig. 10 - Pit fill levels, viewed from the north-west.



Fig. 11 - Lithic ballista bullets found in the pit fill levels.

dium, mainly due to the significant amount of pottery, especially amphora containers, primarily from the UUSS 149, 154, and 190 units, all relevant to the filling of the large pit.

Specifically, US 149 yielded, among diagnostic amphora fragments, 78 rims, 26 bases, and 178 handles, mostly attributable to specimens of Greek-Italic, Punic, and Roman types (especially Dressel 1C). Alongside these, the excavation uncovered a Tripolitan II amphora: a container typically used for transporting and trading olive oil, as evidenced by pictorial inscriptions from Pompeian examples. Generally, the circulation of these containers dates between the late 1st century AD and the 3rd century AD¹⁷.

A substantial presence of amphorae also characterizes US 190, from which 34 rims, 23 bases, and 47 handles emerged. Alongside these, a significant quantity of black-glazed pottery, common pottery, and fire pottery were found, as well as large fragments of pottery *louteria*, architectural fragments,

¹⁷ Cfr. *Ostia III*, p. 564.

and plaster. Additionally, various items related to the female world were unearthed, including a pendant earring with vague gold plating, a comb with close-set teeth made of bone, in use in the 1st century AD, and a bone hairpin, dating to the same period (fig. 12).

US 154, finally, yielded black-glazed pottery, unguentaria, miniature vessels, common pottery, fire pottery, and amphorae.

Overall, the black glaze from various stratigraphic units is mainly attributable to Campanian production, with a presence of many plates; the proportion of terra sigillata is lower but still represented by a fair number of specimens; the same applies to grey paste. Common pottery is present in a wide range of forms for both tableware and storage, with a variety of pastes ranging from perfectly refined to less refined. Preparation forms, basins, and mortars are also present, some decorated with festoon motifs. Thin-walled pottery, represented by a fair sample, with various pastes and forms, is also present. Fire pottery, finally, was found in large quantities and in different variants, including containers with internal red glaze coating: mostly shallow, carinated pans with an outward-flaring, slightly pendulous rounded rim, but also with a rounded or vertical rim.

Worthy of mention in US 154 is the presence of a *kalathos* attributed to Iberian production (*sombreros de copa*) (fig. 13), widely spread in the western Mediterranean, often found in Sicily, not only in Agrigento but also on the Campanian coast. It is easily identifiable by its shape, characterized by a flat rim and straight walls painted in the style of Elche-Archena, with one or two friezes, separated by horizontal bands, with decorative motifs of concentric semicircles and vertical undulating lines. The edges are decorated with parallel dashes. It is worth noting that geometric motifs appear in the decoration of Iberian pottery from the 3rd century BC, while imports to coastal Mediterranean sites are attested during the 2nd and 1st centuries BC¹⁸. In Pompeii, Iberian production pottery has been found in various contexts: specifically, the specimen in question finds a precise comparison in a



Fig. 12 - Comb and bone pin found in the pit fill levels.

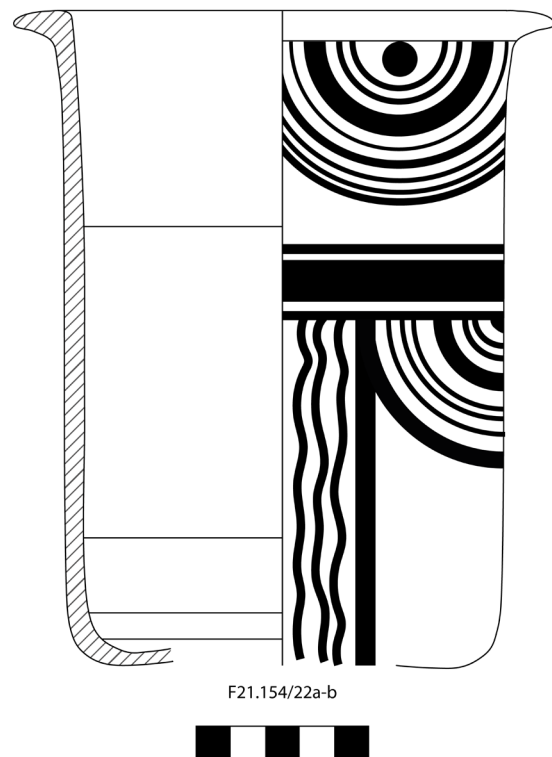


Fig. 13 - *Kalathos* found in US 154 (by L.M.S. Fallea).

kalathos from sector B of trench 3 of the house of Marcus Fabius Rufus¹⁹.

Apart from the two reassemblable fragments from US 154, other fragments of the *kalathos* were found respectively in the UUSS 149, 190, and 230 units, all relevant to the pit filling levels.

L.M.S.F.

¹⁸ CONDE 2005, pp. 44-46.

¹⁹ Russo 2015, pp. 216-218.

Final Remarks

In conclusion, the new excavation investigations have revealed significant data that help clarify the organization of this important urban sector in its various phases of use, from evidence related to sacred practices to urban planning processes that affected the northern sector of the Forum.

This is not the venue to delve into the details of the stratigraphic sequences, as their analysis is ongoing alongside the study of the numerous unearthed materials, for which a specific monograph is planned. It suffices to highlight here that the data appear to bring new insights into the different construction phases of the *Capitolium* – and the associated occupation levels – as well as the final arrangement of the square with the limestone portico and its related pavement slabs.

The discovery of the impressive north-south wall, which extends under the temple's foundations, also seems to outline a previously unknown arrangement of this part of the Forum, predating the construction of the temple building. This wall may constitute the foundation of a *stoa* or an impressive building, as yet unidentified, that would have occupied the western slope of the square. Beyond its exact identification and interpretation, this certainly defined a boundary to the east where sacred activities took place, as evidenced by the votive well, the numerous circular pits found throughout the area, and, subsequently, the altar and the southern platform.

Regarding absolute chronology, one of the most intriguing findings is the excavation of the large pit along the western edge of the investigated area, with the materials found in its filling suggesting that the infilling action occurred around the second half of the 1st century AD. Perhaps this action is related to a traumatic event in the city, especially considering that the filling layers consist of a vast quantity of heterogeneous building materials, including abundant plaster and roofing elements. Furthermore, in this extensive sector, the paving slabs are missing. Therefore, it is worth considering whether the area could have been a large construction site still active

at the time of the eruption, possibly involving the square's refurbishment, perhaps in response to the damage caused by the earthquake of 62 AD.

Indeed, similar arguments, which are also leading to a reassessment of the traditional chronologies of some public and sacred buildings, are emerging in other fundamental areas of the city, such as the Triangular Forum²⁰.

L.M.C.

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²⁰ OSANNA, GILETTI 2020, pp. 16-18; OSANNA, GEROGIANNIS, GILETTI 2021.

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SUMMARY - This paper presents the latest findings from recent excavation campaigns carried out at the Capitolium of Pompeii. It describes, in preliminary form, the archaeological evidence unearthed during these excavations, some of which was previously unknown. Through a concise analysis of the stratigraphy and materials, particularly ceramics, discovered at the site, it offers a chronological overview of the main phases identified in this area of the Forum.

RIASSUNTO - Nel presente contributo vengono delineate le novità emerse in seguito alle ultime campagne di scavo condotte presso il *Capitolium* di Pompei. In forma preliminare vengono descritte le evidenze archeologiche venute alla luce, alcune sconosciute prima dell'avvio degli scavi, e, tramite una sintetica analisi delle stratigrafie e del materiale, specialmente ceramico, rinvenuto viene offerta una scansione cronologica delle principali fasi individuate in quest'area del foro.

Keywords: Pompeii, Forum, stratigraphy, pottery, chronology.

Parole chiave: Pompei, foro, stratigrafia, ceramica, cronologia.

