



Martinengo Palace

Historic Buildings
on the Roman Forum Square

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I am pleased to introduce you to this new publishing initiative featuring a guide to two major historic attractions in the city of Brescia: the archaeological trail at Martinengo-Cesaresco Palace, property of the Province of Brescia, where the Culture and Tourist Offices are currently hosted, and St George's Church, which is finally open to the public after thirty years of decay and more than ten years of restoration. This publication is intended to enhance the knowledge of our city, which is rich in art, history and archaeological treasures, so that tourists and visitors will fully appreciate its cultural heritage and attractions. Cooperation among institutions aiming at the same target is always fundamental in order to achieve an ambitious goal, that is the reason why the Province of Brescia cooperated with the Italian Touring Club on the project "Aperti per voi" (Open for You). Thus, it is thanks to the work of the voluntary members of the Italian Touring Club for Cultural Heritage that two of Brescia's landmarks have now been reopened to the public. Welcome!

Silvia Razzi

Councillor for Culture and Tourism of the Province of Brescia

Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali

Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici
della Lombardia

Excavations at Martinengo Palace

Palazzo Martinengo
Via Musei, 30
25121 Brescia

The archaeological trail is open to the
public, entrance is free of charge.
Opening times: Mon-Fri 9am-1pm.

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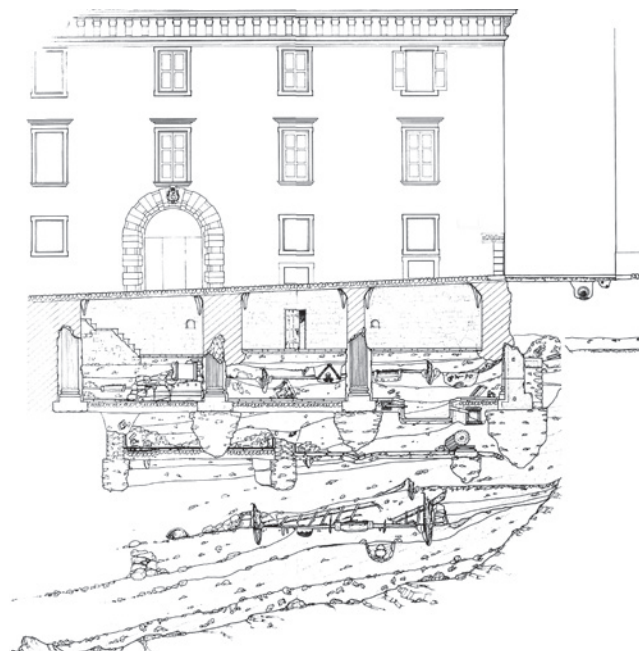
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Front cover:
Monumental fountain in the courtyard of
Martinengo Palace; statue of Earl Cesare
Martinengo, founder of the Palace, in the
fountain niche

Le città nella città (Many Cities within the City) is the name of the archaeological trail at Martinengo Palace. The Palace is an imposing historic building, home to the noble family Martinengo Cesaresco since the 16th century, located on the corner between Via Musei (the ancient Roman road *Decumanus Maximus*), and Piazza del Foro (the Roman Forum Square). The austere façade was designed in the 17th century in a typical 16th century style which also characterizes some interior details of the building. The Palace extends underground, encompassing layers of construction of different ages which bear witness to the long history of this 16th century edifice. In fact, Martinengo Palace was built on the site of preceding structures dating from the Iron Age to the Middle Ages, its surrounding urban area has also undergone many changes over the centuries. Nowhere else in Brescia will you find such a striking comprehensive archaeological site, showing how many different construction layers have been overlaid during the development of the city. Step back in time and discover 3,000 year old remains in the basement of Martinengo Palace through an archaeological trail which extends under the Roman Forum Square. As different construction layers have been overlaid over many centuries, fragmented ruins are the only evidence of ancient glorious buildings. Sightseeing may be puzzling, if we aim to reconstruct the entire original structures built on this site. Nonetheless, the archaeological trail at Martinengo Palace is a fascinating experience which reserves a few surprises: consider the vertical development of these remains, ruins of ancient settlements, enticing the visitor

Cross section of
archaeological
layers belonging to
different ages under
Martinengo Palace.
(by P. Dander)



to decipher them in order to get an idea of imposing pattern of construction; you will then discover at a glance how many different cities have been built in the city of Brescia during the millennia.

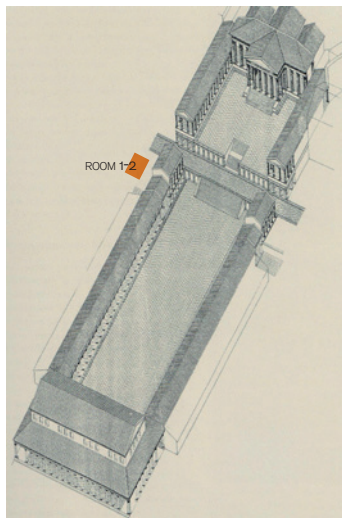
Palazzo Martinengo Cesaresco, now home to the Assessorato alla Cultura e al Turismo (Culture and Tourism Department) of the Province of Brescia and an exhibition space, is located in an area of the city which was at the heart of the ancient city. Since the foundation of Brescia, this site was the centre of public activities, from religious services to trade and politics. During restoration work between 1989 and 1997, excavations unexpectedly led to the discovery of historic remains of extraordinary interest in the basement of the palace. Studying these remains, archaeologists have carefully reconstructed the phases of the historic development of Brescia. Urban changes took place in the area between Via Musei and the Forum Square include a long historic period, from Iron Age settlements (8th-5th century BC) to the construction of buildings designed in the Renaissance style (16th-17th century AD) such as Martinengo Cesaresco Palace. The area between Via Musei and the Roman Forum Square is set at the foot of the Cidneo hill, an ancient sacred area where an old mountain path stretching from west to east, from Bergamo to Verona, crosses the route which leads south to the city of Cremona, and it was renowned as an important representative and symbolic city centre. Historic remains preserved in the basement of the palace display the archaeological layers of the urban development dating from between the 8th century BC and the 16th-17th century AD; construction layers have been overlaid over the centuries, gradually reaching the present height of the city pavement.

Area on the *Decumanus Maximum* Room 1 and 2; entrance on Piazza del Foro 6

Part of this archaeological area was originally outside the Roman Forum, it covers the space between the western side of the building and the *Decumanus Maximum*, the main road stretching from east to west in Roman Brescia and corresponding to the current Via Musei.

Iron Age Finds

The most ancient remains ever found on this site date back to the early Iron Age (9th-5th century BC). These include the remains of houses made of wood or clay; pavements and a few remains of walls are on display. Early Iron Age huts had pavements made of either clay covered with pebbles or clay which was pressed or re-baked, that is made stronger by heating it on the surface.



Pavements often had small lined pits, which were used as post holes to hold the wooden piles that supported the hut's walls and roofs made of hay or other vegetable fibres. Iron Age people built their houses (timber wattle huts) twisting intertwined reeds around supporting piles and covering them with pressed clay; walls were sometimes plastered and decorated with simple embossed decorations. There are also remains of a wall built with large stone blocks, which was



Base of a fluted column in the pool, (Room 2).
On the left page: design showing the position of Room 1 and 2 compared to the ancient Roman Forum (by S. Kasprzyśiak).

probably the base of a wooden partition separating one room from another.

Many finds, such as pottery and other ancient domestic objects, indicate that livestock farming, agriculture, clay and textile manufacturing were the main activities during the Iron Age period.

Under one of the huts' pavements, a burial site has been found: the ashes of a cremated baby and his funeral articles were preserved in a clay urn which was covered with a bowl and buried in a small pit

faced with cobblestones. Small clay pots and a green stone axe formed the funeral articles which belong to a Celtic culture, namely during the so-called historic period of Golasecca IIIA (early 5th century BC).

Roman Finds

All Roman structures, along with other old structures, were moved from this area between the 16th and 17th century to build the basement of Martinengo Palace. Nonetheless, some Roman finds dating back to the Last Roman Republican-Augustan Age (1st century BC-early 1st century AD), and to the Flavian Age (69-96 AD).

A long wall stretching north to south and its perpendicular partition are the oldest Roman finds, as they were part of an imposing building overlooking the *Decumanus Maximus* during the Last

Roman Republican-Augustan Age. This stately building was partly destroyed during the construction of a large brick lined pool with architectural decoration; the western part of the pool is still on display in Room 2.

During the Augustan Age, Roman Brescia (called *Brixia*) expanded its monumental city centre with the construction of the *Forum*, which was built at the heart of the city and became home to the main activities, from politics and religion to trade and “services”. The western part of the square was converted into a residential area; there are only a few remains of Roman stately houses (the *domus*), as they were later pulled down in order to build impressive public edifices which were grouped in the area of the *Forum* according to the will of Emperor Vespasian (69-79 AD).

The eastern site includes a thick wall of squared stones bordering a small room plastered with a black and white grid decoration, and it dates back to the earliest Roman presence in Brescia during the second half of the 1st century BC. The function of this old edifice has not been fully understood, since its original structure was partially destroyed during the construction of a pool installed in its ruins; evidence of the pool with fine architectural decorations is an existing fluted column base. The opus signinum paved floor was originally covered with a mosaic pavement or marble slabs, while walls were made of polychrome marble with a frame moulding.



Wall with fresco remains (Augustan Age); in close up: pool installed during the Flavian Age (Room 1). Below: marble covering of the pool (Room 1).



A square base sticking out of the middle of the wall was probably the support for a column or a statue. This room was built during the Flavian Age, it is therefore contemporary to the gorgeous Roman baths of the *Forum* – namely it could even be a part of it – and it was in use until the 4th century AD.

Fragments of frescoes on a wall built in the Augustan Age (Room 1); in the display case: protohistoric finds from the archaeological site.

Below: design showing the location of Room 3, 4 and 5 compared to the ancient *Forum* (by S. Kasprzyśiak).

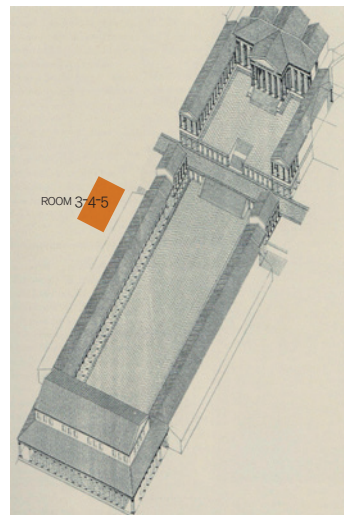
Area on the Roman Forum

Room 3, 4, and 5; entrance in Via Musei 30

This part of the archaeological site covers the area west to the Roman Forum, including stately homes and public edifices linked to it.

Room 3 and 4. The Augustan Domus and the Flavian Baths.

The remains of a Roman stately home (*domus*) built during the Augustan Age (27 BC - 14 AD) are preserved on this archaeological site; the southern perimeter wall of the *domus* and fragments of mosaics on the pavement are still on display. Later, in the Flavian Age (69-96 AD), imposing structures were installed on the ruins of the original *domus* and linked to a bath complex, which was probably a public bath house and had its entrance from the *Forum*.





Mosaic dating back to the Augustan Age removed from the Flavian Age hypocaust (Room 3). In background: ruins of a Late Middle Ages tower. Below: part of the Flavian Age calidarium and ducts of later time (Room 4).

Part of the hypocaust (ancient underfloor warm air heating system), including the praefurnium where air was heated is well preserved over the Augustan mosaic. Proceeding south (Room 4), you will also see parts of a pool and a duct belonging to the water system of the calidarium (a series of hot plunge pools).

West of the *Forum*, ending north with the *Decumanus Maximus*, there was a residential area where stately homes (the *domus*) were built in the Augustan Age; the domus were made of bricks,

mosaics and frescoes decorated their pavements and walls. This kind of private house was first built in Brescia during the Late Republican Age (early 1st century BC), and spread until the 4th century, undergoing many changes, as their construction and restoration were always made according to the latest trend in urban style, thus witnessing the development of the city.

Construction techniques are documented by the partially preserved mosaic pavement, along with the walls which enclose it. Mosaics decorated with fine light coloured pattern mirror the typical taste

of the Augustan Age: as regards the pavement, geometric patterns on a white background are framed by a double black line, the central pattern is an emblem representing polychrome animals and flowers in a series of small squares within a larger geometric frame.

During the Flavian Age, restoration works of the *Forum* caused the



Decoration pattern of the central mosaic dating back to the Augustan Age (Room 3).

destruction of the private buildings which were next to it, these were replaced by monumental public edifices, such as a bath complex located west of the arcades on the square. Two architectural elements of the bath complex are still on display:

the *calidarium* and a hypocaust. The latter was an empty space, where hot air passed through in order to heat the floor which was raised above the ground by small pillars called *suspensurae* supporting the mosaic pavement; walls were heated by hot air passing in clay ducts (the *tubuli*). The *calidarium* had an *opus signinum* (fine Roman concrete) pavement. Namely, *opus signinum* was an insulating building material made of broken up tiles and clay mixed with mortar, an *opus signinum* layer also fastened marble slabs to the walls of the calidarium. The pool had a short flight of steps and was linked to a duct where water flowed. Decorations were used to mirror the function of the bath rooms: wall frescoes represented sea landscapes and sea animals.

The bath complex had been in use until the 4th century AD, though there are evidence of succeeding architectural changes and restoration works. On the pavement of the Roman hypocausts (Room 3), you will notice the southwest corner of the base of a square tower built in the Late Middle Ages.

Iron Age Finds

Room 5. Here, archaeological finds show that huts dating back to the Early Iron Age (9th-5th century BC) had clay pavements covering a bed of pebbles and stone splinters; small pits were often dug in pavements as post holes to hold the piles supporting the walls made of wood, reeds and



Survey showing protohistoric structures and a Medieval wall including roman architectural features at the rear of Room 5.

pressed clay (wattle walls). Traces of fireplaces have been found on the pavement where darker clay or ashes and coal layers were left. In this site, fireplaces have their own structure made of raw clay bricks on a square base which is made of pebbles covered with clay; archaeologists argued that this kind of fireplaces was used not only for cooking foods but also as a small kiln for handicraft activities.

In the Early Iron Age (9th-5th century BC), peoples living in the northwest area of the present city settled in villages of huts made of wood and clay, such as the ones found in this site. Since the 5th century BC, the ancient peoples living in villages had gradually been replaced by a civilization which lived in city-like settlements. This new population had an economic system based not only on farming, agriculture and textile production but they also developed a thriving trade between different cultures thanks to the favourable location of their border town.

Monumental Finds of the Roman Forum

Ancient stately homes were built on the western side of the Roman Forum Square during the Augustan Age (second half of the 1st century BC), as witnessed by remains in this site. Three walls made of mortared squared stone blocks are on display, being the ruins of an Augustan building which is contemporary to the mosaic pavements in Room 3.

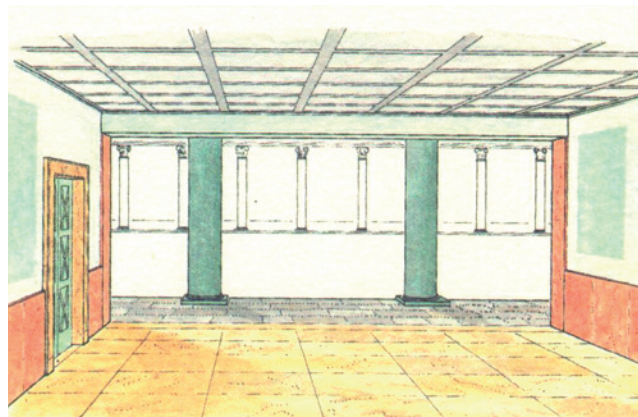
These stately homes were removed in the Flavian Age (69-96 AD), and replaced with a monumental complex including arcades lined with *tabernae* (typical ancient Roman pub and room shop), and public offices on the longer sides of the square. The supporting walls of the arcades were designed to stand on a continuous kerb made of Botticino marble.



In this room, you will see the lower parts of brick walls and the opus signinum pavement, both of them were covered with marble slabs, these are the remains of a large room, probably the entrance hall of the next bath complex. Behind this ancient room, a narrow passage leads to two manholes, following the thick wall delimiting the passage one can distinguish the original elevation of the 17th century palace.

Further architectural decorations were added to the *Forum* area in the Flavian Age: arcades had a coffered ceiling and marble columns, and plinths were made of large squared Botticino marble blocks. This ambitious construction project was closely linked to the restoration of the *Capitolium*, the temple on the northern side of the square, which was opened in 73 AD. Restoration of the *Capitolium* affected the whole Roman *Forum* area, causing a gentle

Above: architectural elements from the Roman Forum reused in a Medieval wall.
Below: drawing reconstructing the Forum area in the Roman Age (by A. Perin).



elevation of the paving surface by adding layers of mortared stones as ballast. The remains of the new paving surface built in the Flavian Age only include a bed of pebbles covered with a layer of mortared stones. Waste water from the whole complex was drained through an efficient underground hydraulic system.

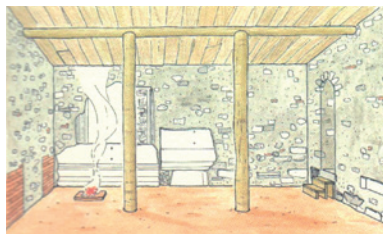
The structures built during the Flavian Age were used until the 4th century AD, though there are traces of succeeding restoration work.

Medieval Buildings

Many walls on display in Room 5 were built between the 5th century AD and the end of the 7th century AD, they are an example of architectural elements which were massively removed from Roman ruins in order to be reused, as was usual in the Middle Ages. Roman building material belongs in this case to the Roman Forum and its bath complex.

Roman buildings had gradually been abandoned between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, during Gothic and Lombard domination the eastern part of the city centre fell into a gradual decline. Since there was no upkeep of Roman edifices and facilities, ruins and municipal waste gradually accumulated, determining a new elevation of the paved surface. The decline of this area was caused by a relocation of political and religious institutions in the western side of the city, where new edifices were built such as the *Palatium*, centre for secular

Drawing
reconstructing an
edifice of the Roman
Forum area converted
into a Medieval house
(by A. Perin).



power located in what is now Piazza Vittoria, and the Episcopal complex in Piazza del Duomo, where the religious power was based. Reusing architectural elements, structures and decoration removed from the ruins of Roman

buildings was typical in the Middle Ages; Medieval architecture includes Roman ruins embedded in the façades and interiors of new imposing buildings, along with the construction of small structures made of wood and clay with ragged pavements pitted with fireplaces, drains, and post holes.

Traces of inhumation show that this area was briefly used as a burial site, and was later converted into a residential area and craft centre. Medieval remains include a rectangular structure built reusing Roman walls in the northern and western side of the room, while elements from the arcades of the Roman Forum have been embedded in the eastern and southern walls. This Medieval house was divided by a wooden partition and had a mortared pavement with fireplaces.