Karin Einaudi

The American archaeologist Esther Van Deman spent the greater part of her life in Rome, studying the topography of the Roman Forum, Roman aqueducts, and Roman building techniques. She developed many ideas and methods of research in the field of classical archaeology and actively participated—the first and only woman to do so—in the archaeological debate at the beginning of the century. Van Deman has left an extraordinary documentation, in writing and in photography, of the period in which archaeology moved away from antiquarian practices toward more scientific approaches.

When Esther Boise Van Deman first arrived in Rome in 1903, excavation had been going on in the Forum for exactly 30 years. The work was still under the direction of the Venetian architect Giacomo Boni, director of the excavations since 1898. The decision to initiate archaeological exploration in the Cow-Field (Campus Vaticanus) was the denomination of the Forum in the nineteenth century—had been made by the young Italian government in 1871, a decision whose political and symbolic significance had not escaped its makers. With the exception of smaller digs in the mid-nineteenth century, excavation had not taken place in the center of Rome since the beginning of the
century. Between 1809 and 1814, the French Napoleonic
government of Rome, and
later its papal successors,
had given new birth to the
old idea of the Roman past.
They had begun the
exploration of the city’s
monumental center, thus
materializing an idea that
was to become a remarkable
project of “urban renewal,”
the so-called Embellissement
de la Ville de Rome, a
forerunner of Haussmann
and others. The result of their
initiative was visible to
everyone: the Colosseum had
been partially restored, the
Arch of Titus had been
“liberated” from Medieval
and more recent super-
structures, the Column of
Trajan had been isolated,
and part of the adjacent
Basilica Ulpius had been laid
bare. All these buildings
were connected to memories
of millenniums that
reminded the impoverished
and rather run-down Rome
of an idealized past.

During the period that
preceded the unification of
Italy, however, all urban
programs came to a
standstill. In 1848 the
Kingdom of Italy was
proclaimed, and in 1870
Latrium also became part of
it, with Rome as the capital
of the young nation. The
extraordinary nature of
this event may be understood
best when one considers the
fact that the country had not
enjoyed national unity since
the invasions of Italy in the
sixth century a.d.

The Roman Forum became
the showcase of the new
capital. What stronger
argument for the idea of a
capital could there be, than
the physical discovery of a
place with a millenary role of
“Capital Mundis” — the Center
of the World? Of course,
this argument was the same
one put forward by the
Napoleonic government,
but now the purpose was
different. In the Napoleonic
imperial ambitions, there
had been a clearly expressed
idea of European identity,
but the concept of national
unity had become the
ultimate goal of the Italian
government just 50 years
later. In another 50 years,
the fascist vulgarization of
the same argument was to
have disastrous consequences
for the country.

In the period from 1871 to
1901, thousands of tons of
earth were removed to lay
bare the Roman Forum, the
Basilica Aemilia, the Temple
of Castor and Pollux, and
the Temple of the Divine
Caesar. “The Forum appears
to the casual observer a
tangled mass of walls
superimposed one upon
another without rhyme and
reason.” These are the
opening words of Esther Van
Deman’s article, “The Sultan
Forum.” The Forum’s
appearance, flooded after
a heavy rainstorm in 1902,
is shown in one of her
photographs.

What made the archaeologist
Esther Van Deman from

2

Esther Boise Van Deman:
self-portrait taken on the
steamer Frankfurt, 1901.
Ohio, (born in South Salem in 1862) became involved in the Roman archaeological world. Her self-portrait, taken on the steamer Frankfurt, shows a woman of strong determination, dressed in an unusually masculine manner with a heavy boot and a marine cap. She came to Rome in 1903 to study at the American School of Classical Studies and was soon introduced to leading archaeologists like Giacomo Boni and Christian Friese. At the time she held an assistant professorship in Latin and classical archaeology at Goucher College; she had received her doctorate from the University of Chicago in 1898 and her master's degree from the University of Michigan six years earlier. In between, she had taught Latin at Wellesley and Mount Holyoke colleges.

Van Damme’s interest soon fell on the building that had housed the Vestal Virgins and was situated just east of the Forum, at the foot of the Palatine. Part of the building had been uncovered in 1881; and, more recently, in 1901, demolition of the church S. Maria Liberatrice had revealed its western parts. The history of the building complex dated back to archaic Rome; the precinct of Vesta contained the temple, the house and forecourt—atrium—of the Vestales, the sacred growth—"Lucus Vestae," and later the house of the
3 Atrium Vestae in the snow.
In the background, the round "temple of Romulus" and the Basilica of Maxentius.

4 Excavation in the court of the Atrium Vestae around the third-century water basin that had replaced two smaller basins from the time of the early empire. In the background, the Medieval/Renaissance buildings of the Capitol turn their backs to the Forum and hide the facades of the republican Tabularium, on top of which they are built.

5 Palatine Hill and the structures of the imperial palaces. The Atrium Vestae is situated at the foot of the hill, behind the arches in the foreground, which supported a ramp giving access to the palace.
6 Covered ramp inside the building connecting the upper stories of the imperial palaces with the Forum level.

7 Statue of a Vestal Virgin.
Pontifex Maximus. The complex burned down and was rebuilt many times; it is one of the many achievements of Esther Van Deman to have identified the many and complex phases of its history in her book The Atrium Vestae (Washington, 1909).

Although the physical aspect of the complex changed, the rules of worship changed little during the nearly 900 years it housed the Vestal; and the temple of Vesta was one of the last pagan temples to be closed in the fourth century A.D. The cult of Vesta was domestic, related to the hearth of the house and to family life. But it was also intimately connected to the mythic origins of the city and the state. Aeneas was believed to have brought the eternal fire of Hestia-Vesta from Troy to Lavinium, together with the Penates (household gods) and the Palladium, the image of Pallas Athena, which together came to represent the sacra principia of the Roman state (its most sacred memories). Thus, the importance of the sanctuary—the shrine of the very idea of the State—and of the Vestal—the custodians of its symbols. Each and every Roman magistrate had to sacrifice to Vesta at Lavinium before he entered his office.

In the little temple next to the house of the Vestals, the sacred fire was kept constantly burning, guarded by the six Vestales. These six

8 Arches spanning the street running between the Palatine and the Atrium Vestae, both of which they support.
women were appointed sometime between the ages of 6 and 10 and maintained their demanding office for at least 30 years. They were to live in chastity, with the atrocious penalty of being buried alive in the campus scleratus if found guilty of breaking the law. On the other hand, they enjoyed extraordinary social and juridical privileges, and in times when Rome was densely populated, they shared with the empress the privilege of riding in a carriage inside the city limits.

Statues of the Vestales had been found in 1883, piled up in a corner of the Atrium ready to be reduced to lime in a nearby, probably sixteenth-century kiln. Originally the statues may have been placed along the sides of the court, in front of the portico which in its later stage was two-storied. After the restoration of the Atrium that was promoted by the empress Julia Domna (A.D. 193–217), the building had at least three stories, lavishly outfitted and provided with a heating system. At the same time, the Nova Vies, the street running between the Atrium Vestae and the Palatine, was spanned by arches that supported both the Atrium and the structures on the slopes of the Palatine. Esther Van Deman’s careful investigation included all phases of the building; and from “the scanty remains of the original republican Atrium” she determined that after a major fire—identified as the Neronian fire of A.D. 64—the reconstructed building followed the new orientation of the Forum, abandoning the archaic north-south orientation that had dictated the orientation of all the important republican buildings around the Comitium and the Regia. Van Deman provided a based analysis of the conditions that determined the new levels and changes in orientation of the Forum.

To interpret and date the various phases in a Roman building, Van Deman strove to establish a “canon” or “norm” for building techniques applied to each chronological period, losing her work on comparative studies of all dated buildings available to her. Her two articles, “Methods of determining the date of Roman concrete monuments,” in the American Journal of Archaeology, Vol. 64 (1940), contain the works of a true pioneer; for the first time this complicated subject is treated systematically and with a precise terminology based mainly on that of Vitruvius. In elaborating her data, she proceeded much as one would when constructing a modern data base. In her card catalogue, which contained several thousand cards, she gathered information regarding the materials (measurements, compositions, colors, and so on), techniques of facing, building types, and building parts. These elements were evaluated following four
The late imperial Senate building has doors that are still on the Medieval level corresponding to the period of its transformation into a church. Between the columns of the Temple of Saturn appears the baroque dome of Piazza dell’Orologio’s church S.S. Luca and Martina. This photograph, taken from the steps of the Capitol, offers a visual synthesis of Rome’s urban history.

"points" regarding the architectural, structural, and environmental conditions. In addition to the technical data, she included what she called external and variable evidence, that is, information extracted from literary sources, inscriptions, decorative elements, and brick stamps. In contrast to her sophisticated theoretical methods was her permanent working tool—a simple stammatess’s measuring tape.

Another remarkable tool was her camera, well equipped with a wooden tripod and handled with both professional competence and a true feeling for composition.

Ester Van Dam has been both admired and criticized by her later, specialized followers in archaeology. The results of her research are, however, still valid. The articulation in her system of classification allows for variations that were not considered important by her followers but that permitted her to approach the questions more realistically. Her legacy of over 2,000 photos is now preserved in the archives of the Fototeca Unione at the American Academy in Rome. They convey vividly the character of the Roman Forum in excavation.