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Gardens of the Temple of Elagabalus

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Gardens of the Temple of Elagabalus

Contributor : Françoise Villedieu

Province

Italia
Italia (Pleiades)
Italia, Regio I (Pleiades)

Location

Rome
Roma (Pleiades)

Sublocation

Palatine
Mons Palatinus (Pleiades)

Garden

Garden of the Temple of Elagabalus, Palatine

Keywords

- allée
- altar (religious fixture)
- amphora (storage vessel)
- brick (construction material)
- canal (waterway)
- flower garden
- flowerpot
- fountain
- marble (decorative element)
- porticoes
- standards (religious artifact)
- temple (building)

- Pliny the Elder

Garden Description

The building of a religious complex, identified by scholars as the *Elagabulum* (*Heliogabulum*), later dedicated to **Jupiter** (*Iupiter Ultor*), was the final transformation in antiquity of the northwestern terrace (Fig. 1). This enormous west-facing **peripteral temple** was enclosed by three **porticoes** on the west (with a monumental entrance), north and south, and by a closed gallery at the east. Its plan, proportions, and part of the ornament have been reconstructed based on field observations and on the study of the remains of the architectural decoration. Construction may have started as early as the great fire of 191/192 CE, but the buildings took shape only later in two successive periods; the first ending around

210/218 CE, the second at least by the years 218/220 CE. By the end of the construction works, the terrace had been adjusted to the north and east, while, on the southern side, a wall was constructed to separate it from the Imperial Palace (Figs. 2-3). However, a door was placed in this wall, providing a direct link between the monument and the *Domus Augustana*.

Two garden areas were identified within the precinct, to the south of the **temple**; one measuring 17 x 20.5 meters, the other of the same width, but with a length of at least 24 meters (Fig. 1). The two areas were separated by a wide paved path running north-south that led to a secondary doorway at the south, giving access to the imperial palace complex (Figs. 2, 4). Thus the larger garden (not fully excavated) may have extended uninterrupted for a length of some 42 meters. These two gardens are separated by an *allée* of white **marble** slabs, laid on the axis of the door linking the *Heliogabalium* to the **Imperial Palace**. Two additional gardens of the same kind can be envisioned on the north side of the temple based on the results of recent excavations.

The two gardens brought to light show the same pattern: three **planting beds** oriented along the east-west axis are separated by two paths paved with **clay** (Fig. 4). The middle planting beds are slightly wider than the others, and the vegetation covers a broader area. Part of this vegetation is arranged along the central axis of each planting bed, attested by the placement of halved **amphorae** used as **flowerpots** set into pits (Figs. 5-6). The purpose of these pots was to maintain humidity at the roots (particularly important for an artificial **terrace**), and perhaps to limit the growth of the plants. Large amphorae alternate, along this central alignment, with smaller amphorae in the southern and northern flowerbeds. The pattern is slightly different in the flowerbed laid in the inner part of the garden: along the median axis the large amphorae stand alone, while the small ones are found tightly aligned all along the outer border. The narrower beds held large amphorae alternating with smaller ones. The wider, middle beds had large amphorae defining the median axis, and smaller amphorae, tightly aligned, along the border.

All of the pots (dating from the middle of the second to the early 3rd century) appear to have been buried at the same time, suggesting they represent the original garden design for this early third century complex. No plant remains have been identified, however **dwarf cypress** or **plane trees** could have been planted in the larger pots and the small amphorae along the border of the middle beds may have been for **box hedges** (Fig. 6).

The amphorae are of two main kinds, both of African origin. The small ones were used to ship wine from **Tripolitania**; samples found in **Ostia** have been dated from the early 3rd century. Among the medium size amphorae, the most frequent originate from **Tunisia**, and were used to ship oil as of the middle of the 2nd century, while few of them originated from Italy or **Spain** (Fig. 5).

The excavation suggests that these pots were buried during the installation of the garden, in the early years of the 3rd century, and were never moved nor replaced afterwards. Their presence within the garden bed maintained humidity at the bottom of the plants, thus slowing down the absorption of water from rainwater and irrigation (the absorption process being particularly swift on the Vigna Barberini site,

owing to the presence of the deep debris layers that formed the construction fills of the terrace).

Constrained by the amphorae, the plant growth would have been reduced. This could have been the process deliberately used to limit the growth of some plants, according to a fashion of the Roman times described by **Pliny the Elder** in his *Naturalis Historia* (XII, 6), in which he alludes to dwarf cypress and plane trees. Possibly, these two species might have been among the trees and shrubs featured along the axes of our wider planting beds. Along the external edge, the small amphorae laid side by side might have hosted plants of box to create a low hedge.

Inside the *Heliogabalium*, the planting design extended beyond the frame of the planting beds, with plants set into the marble-paved areas. Two solutions were adopted to set plants into the pavement. In front of the southern portico, the plants are placed in circular holes carved into the marble slabs and the underlying layers of soil. Those planting holes are laid along two alignments, about 3 meters from one another (Fig. 6). Their diameter is approximately 0.50 meter at the top, and so is their overall depth. Black earth [dark soil] was found filling them all, mixed with metallic scraps used to enrich it.

On the *allée* situated along the axis of the door linking the terrace with the *Domus Augustana*, on the north-south axis of the monument, similar planting holds are installed in the pavement, reaching into underground **canals** filled with earth at the time of the Severan construction (Fig. 6). A network of such canals thus extends beneath the floor, with a north-south axial branch cut by three **transversal**, shorter branches. At the end of the latter, an opening allowed irrigation, while excessive water was drained through a connection to the **sewer** of the nearby portico (Figs. 6-7). The canals have been filled with fine soil, alternating with layers of materials meant to facilitate drainage (**marble shards** and stones). They were then topped by **bipedales** (a type of Roman brick), covered by a layer of **mortar** and then by the marble slabs. The planting holes, carved after the floor was laid, are set in a regular pattern, recalling that of the other plantings found in front of the southern portico and in the garden planting beds. The plants must have conveyed the impression that they were springing from the inert marble, as nothing hinted of the existence of those life-giving canals, except the small openings located at the extreme end of the transversal branches.

Next to the plants were various **fountains** and other decorative and religious elements, such as **statues**, **altars** and perhaps even **standards**, which, according to eastern custom, would have depicted divinities associated with the god to whom the sanctuary was dedicated.

Though we cannot be certain about the plant species chosen, we can nevertheless safely state that there would not have been plants with uncontrolled foliage. We must therefore imagine a rather manicured garden whose scale enhanced the monumental character of the buildings without ever eclipsing them.

Figures

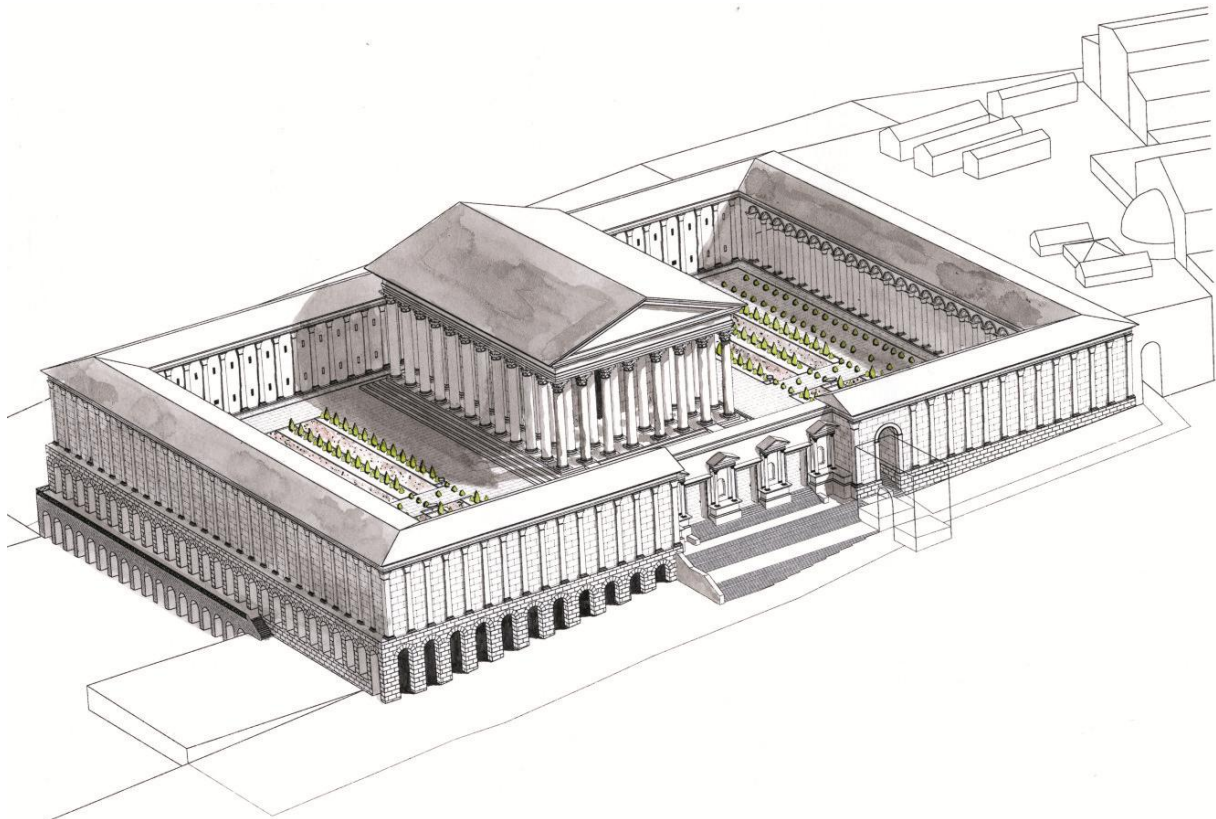


Fig. 1. Reconstruction of the late monumental complex (©. P. Veltri, EFR).

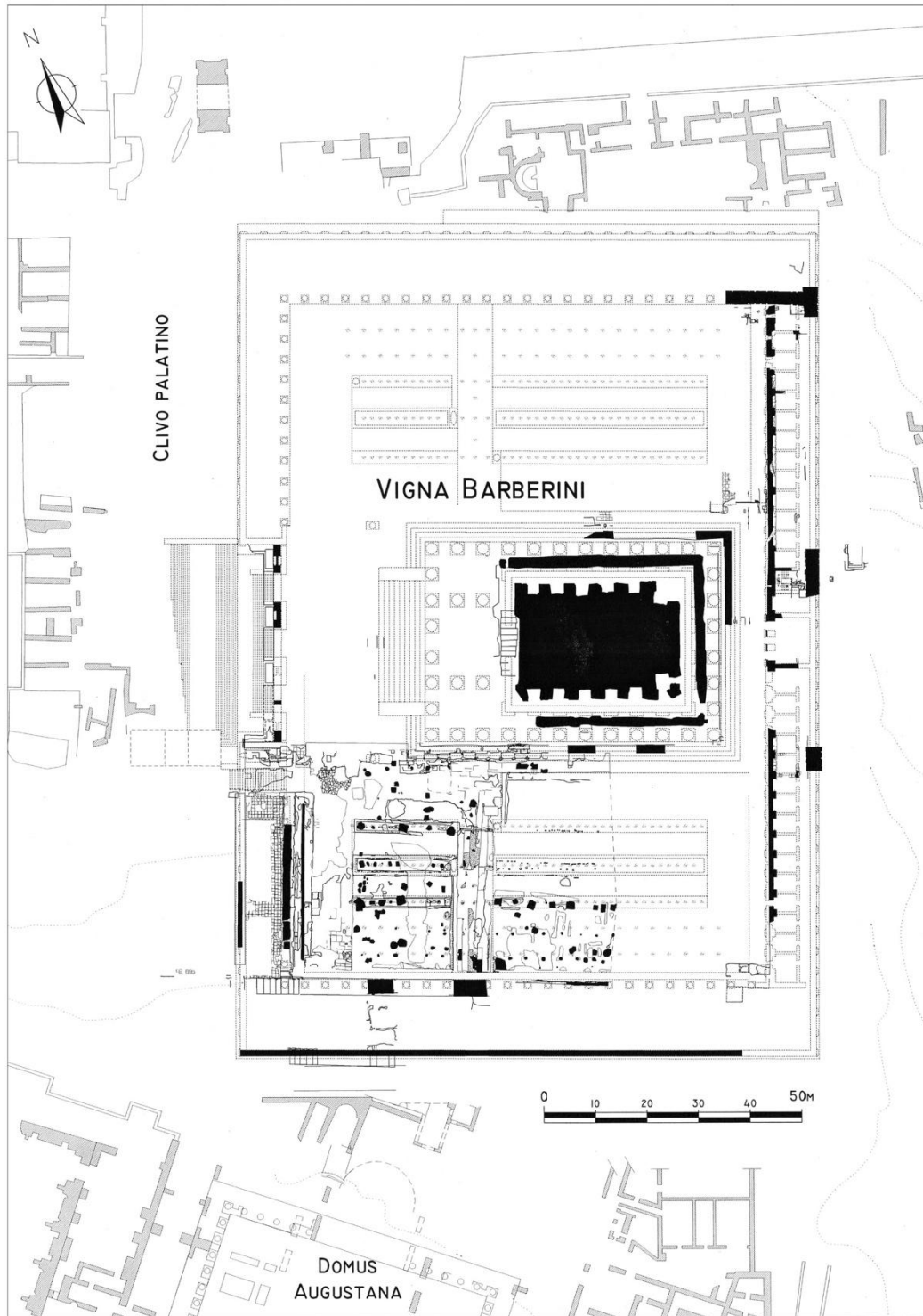


Fig. 2. Reconstruction of the late monumental complex (©. P. Veltri, EFR)..



Fig. 3. View of the southern wall, which separated the Heliogabalium from the Domus Augustana (© Ch. Durand, AMU-CNRS, CCJ).

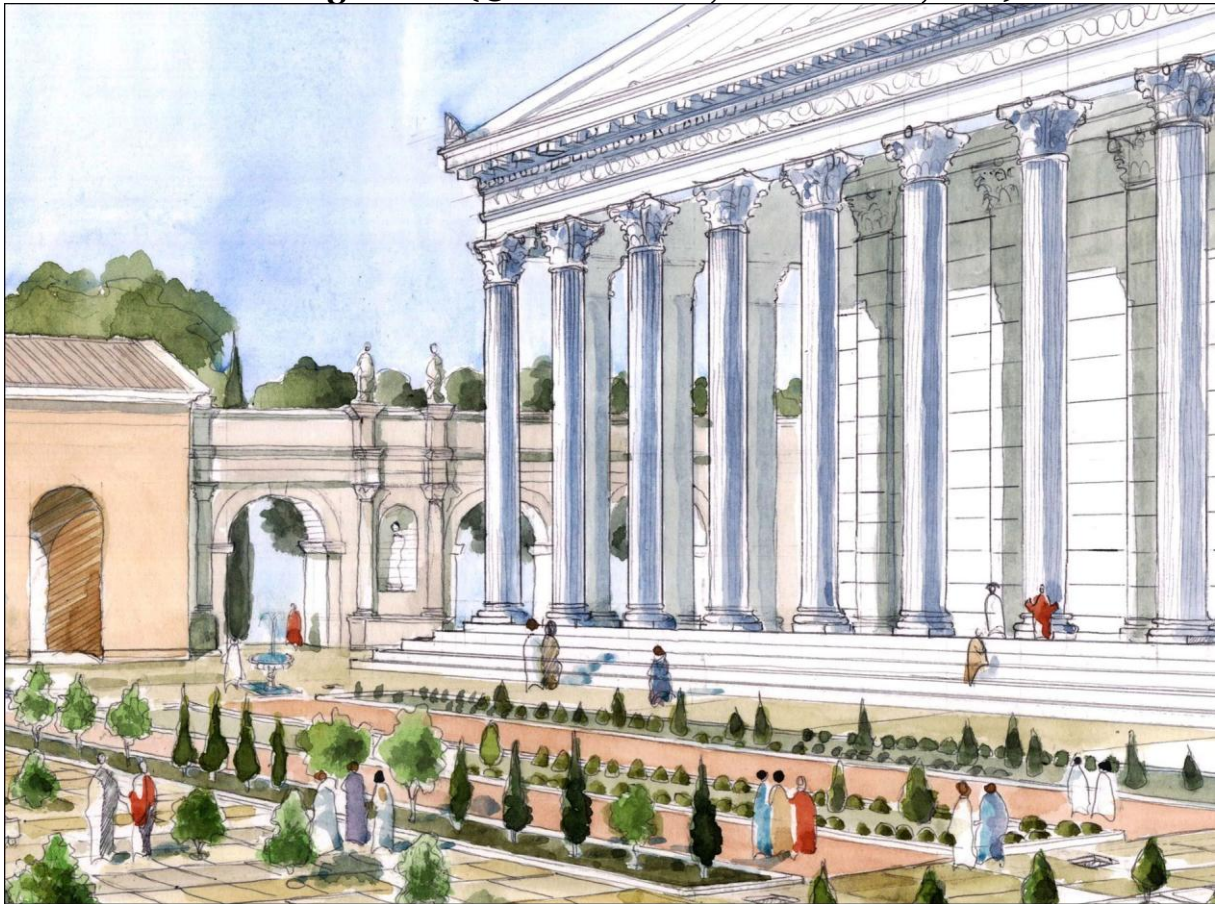


Fig. 4. Reconstruction of the temple garden (© J.-M. Gassend, AMU-CNRS, IRAA & P. Veltri, EFR).



Fig. 5. Halved amphorae used as flowerpots in the Severan gardens (© Ch. Durand, AMU-CNRS, CCJ).

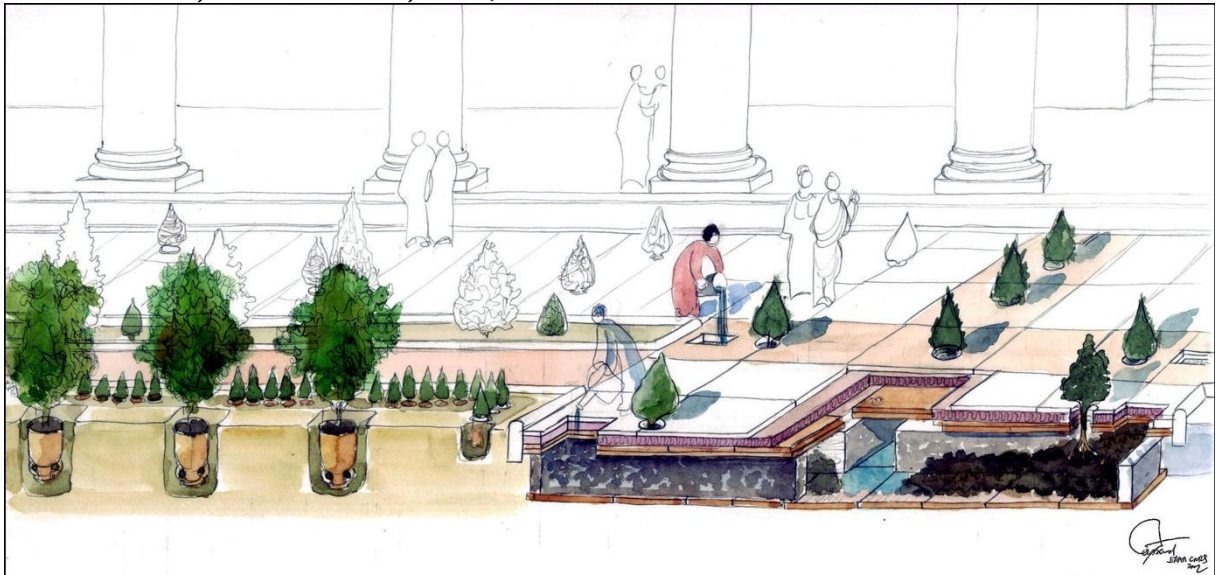


Fig. 6. Reconstruction of part of the temple garden (© J.-M. Gassend, AMU-CNRS, IRAA & P. Veltri, EFR).



Fig. 7. Reconstruction of a tree and planting bed in the temple garden (© J.-M. Gassend, AMU-CNRS, IRAA).

Dates

c. 190- 240 CE

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