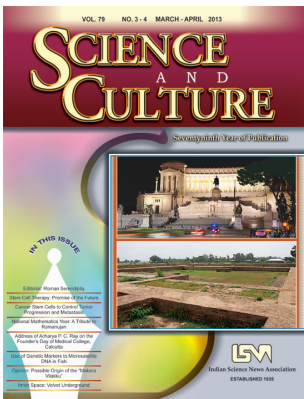


# SCIENCE AND CULTURE

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EDITORIAL

## ROMAN SERENDIPITY



arguably the busiest roundabout in Rome, and one that I have crisscrossed innumerable times in order to board buses and taxis towards various destinations. Archaeologists believe that this structure, labelled Athenaeum, was built in 123 CE during the period of Emperor Hadrian as a school for the promotion of literary and scientific studies.

Hadrian was born in 76 CE and was considered by Machiavelli as one of the “Five Good Emperors” (others bestowed with this honour are Nerva, Trajan, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius). Edward Gibson in his book ‘*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*’ opined that world civilization peaked between the period

98 CE and 180 CE, bookended by Trajan’s accession to the throne and the death of Marcus Aurelius. Hadrian, who succeeded Trajan in 117 CE and ruled until his death in 138 CE, was interred in Castel Sant’Angelo, later used as a Papal fortress and known to many because of its central role in Dan Brown’s “Angels and Demons”.

While not considered the cradle of civilization, Roman civilization is in many ways the epitome of human history, borrowing and contributing elements to cultures and civilizations it came in contact with. Relics and artifacts seen in Italian museums remind us of the Greek influence on the Roman Empire. Romans conquered Eretria in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE and they were influenced by

Greek ideas, culture and spirit. It has been noted that the Romans adopted Greek gods as their own and renamed Zeus as Jupiter, Athena as Minerva and Artemis as Diana. Roman (or Latin) letters that are still in use today were adopted from the Greek Cumaean alphabet with changes to many letter shapes. Romans were influenced by Greek literature, philosophy and even went on to adopt Greek lifestyle at some point.

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Romans built Spartan steel weapons and armours, modified Greek ideas and built arches suitable for monumental structures to be used in

aqueducts, basilicas and bridges. But what I admire most is their skill in building roadways. Romans were not only efficient in building roads (they built thousands of miles of roads by first century CE), but also proficient enough to assure their durability. The road *via Appia*, built by Appius Claudius in 312 BCE, was the first major road connecting Rome to Naples and Brindisi and has been in continuous use for more than twenty centuries; in fact we were fortunate enough to travel by bus on this road during our recent visit to Rome. Roads built by Romans were not only durable, but required little maintenance. It is said that the Romans dug deep, filled the trench with sand, gravel, and crushed stone for drainage, and then faced the crown of the road with cut stone blocks so well fitted that they did not move under the feet of men, horses or the wheels of wagons.

Rome is really a treasure hunt. The last excavation in Rome that created a similar level of excitement was that of the Roman Forum, which was built around the seventh century BCE at a time when Romulus founded Rome. As the story goes, Rhea Silvia, daughter of Numitor, the Albium king of Latium, was seduced by the God Mars and bore twin sons Romulus and Remus, who were thrown into the river Tiber by the new king after Numitor. However, they were miraculously saved and were reared by a she-wolf until they were discovered by the king's shepherd who brought them up. However, conflict grew between the two brothers culminating in Romulus killing Remus and building the city of Rome after his name. The Roman Forum is a rectangular plaza (forum) that was used as a venue for politics, celebrations and entertainment—from election campaigns to victory processions, from public lectures to commercial affairs, similar to Eden Gardens and Dalhousie Square in Kolkata. Interestingly, the Roman Forum is within walking distance from Piazza Venezia and therefore from the newly discovered Arts Centre.

*Piazza Venezia* is a square located at the centre of Rome with busy intersections of many thoroughfares and has many historic buildings around the area with an iconic center piece, the *Il Vittoriano*, a monument dedicated to King Victor Emmanuel II, the first king of Italy. While

visible from most parts of the city, the conspicuous structure is treated as somewhat of a white elephant as it does not seem to serve any purpose beyond its pompous grandiosity. The *Piazza Venezia* is named after the city of Venice (*Venezia* in Italian), after the Venetian Cardinal, Pietro Barbo (later known as Pope Paul II) built the palace *Palazzo Venezia* in that area.

Hadrian is most famous for building the Hadrian wall marking the northern limit of Roman Britain, and this discovery adds a new feather to the cap of the Roman emperor. Although the construction of the Rome Metro C Line started in 2009, it is only last week that details of the Arts Center, 18ft below the *Piazza Venezia*, were made publicly available. It was found to be consisting of three massive halls with colossal brick walls with grey and yellow marble flooring. This is believed to have been the venue for poetry reading, public lectures and other art performances for the Roman public. With the discovery of the Arts Centre it may be imagined that many more associated complexes may be unearthed, and tourists visiting Rome will now have one more attraction to look forward to.

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*It is therefore important to be watchful and careful while digging, be it for the Metro rail or any other projects. As Gillian Hovel in his book Visiting the Past reminded us to remember that archaeological discovery is not only visiting the past but brings yesterday's stories into our lives today.*

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Several excavations in recent years that led to important archaeological discoveries in different parts of West Bengal gave an impression that this region could also offer a treasure hunt. The most recent discovery has been at Jagjivanpur in Malda, which yielded a Copper Plate Charter revealing the name of a hitherto unknown ruler *Mahendrapala*, scion of

the Imperial Pala dynasty, who ruled over Bengal and Bihar during circa 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. King *Mahendrapala*, who is described as the son and successor of *Devapala*, granted a piece of land in Nanda-dirghik-odranga in favour of *Mahasenapati Vajradeva* to the cause of building a monastery.

I personally visited the site last year, which is at present under the care of the Directorate of Archaeology and Museum, Govt. of West Bengal. Inside we found a huge structural complex constructed of bricks set in mud mortar. It is believed to have been a monastery, as was mentioned in the copper plate, with its essential components

like sanctum, toilets, steps, complex, well, courtyard, entrance gate etc.

The monastery bears a resemblance to the so-called *Vikramsila Mahavira* at Antichack (Bihar). A large number of antiquities, like a metal image of Buddhist goddess *Marichi*, terracotta seals and sealing, myriads of exquisite terracotta plaques, beads of terracotta and semi-precious stones, terracotta balls, lamps, iron objects and objects of daily use were recovered after the excavation. Legends on the terracotta seals helped to identify the monastery as *Nandadirghi Vihar*. Following the Copper Plate Charter, explorations have been made and five major mounds *Tulabhita, Akhridanga, Nimdanga, Maibhita* were identified having antiquarian remains. I understand that excavations are not yet complete and further explorations are on the table.

Another discovery closer to home is the discovery of a mound near Dum Dum. Excavations conducted at the site during 2000-2003 have yielded materials of two cultural periods, viz. from the 2nd Century BCE to the

11th-12th Century CE, and again from the 15th-16<sup>th</sup> century CE to more modern times. Structural remains in the form of successive floors have been discovered. The antiquities include terracotta objects, mainly human and animal figurines of *Sunga-Kushan* and Gupta period, cast copper and punch marked coins, plaques, beads, ear studs, seals and sealing, medallion, hopscotch, sling balls, terracotta beads, decorated medallion of the Kushan-Gupta assemblages. A stone plaque depicting *Mahisamardini* datable to circa 11th century CE is one of the important findings. The pottery assemblage includes red ware, dull red ware, grey ware, black and red ware and porcelain ware.

It is therefore important to be watchful and careful while digging, be it for the Metro rail or any other projects. As Gillian Hovel in his book *Visiting the Past* reminded us to remember that archaeological discovery is not only visiting the past but brings yesterday's stories into our lives today. □

**S. C. Roy**

