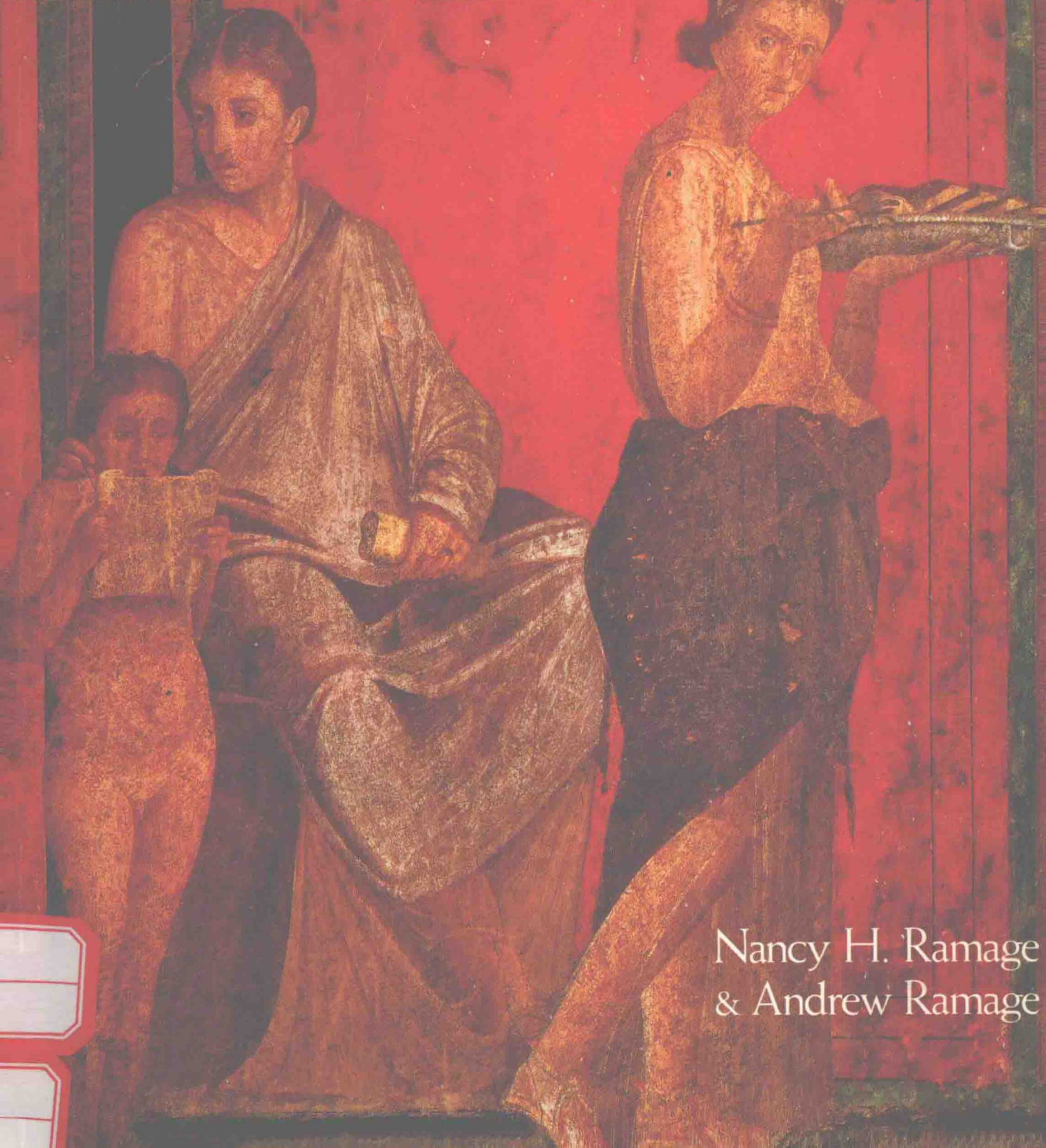


ROMAN ART

ROMULUS TO CONSTANTINE



Nancy H. Ramage
& Andrew Ramage





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Nancy H. Ramage
& Andrew Ramage

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In Memoriam

Paul Michael Hirschland and John Ramage



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Front cover Detail of a ritual scene in the Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii. Mid-first century BC. Wall painting.
Scala Fotografico, Florence

Back cover Crowning of Augustus (above) and the erection of a trophy (below), on the Gemma Augustea. Early first century AD. Double-layered onyx cameo. Height 7½ ins; width 9 ins (19×23cm). Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Half-title Antinous in the guise of Spring. AD 130-138. Marble relief from the Villa of Hadrian, found in 1735. Villa Albani, Rome

Frontispiece A mosaic with fish, octopus, and other sea creatures, from Pompeii. c. 100 BC, re-used in the early empire. c. 3×3ft (90×90cm). Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples

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Preface

This book grows from three roots: first, our teaching, which, time and again, has proven to be a rich field for learning, and for thinking of ways to explain a problem in as straightforward a manner as possible; secondly, our first-hand experience working at Roman sites, primarily in England, Italy, and Turkey; and thirdly, the frequent discussions we hold about Roman affairs – at the bottom of a trench, or over the dinner table. Nancy Ramage's participation in the work of the British School at Rome enabled her to live, so to speak, with the art and the ruins; and our joint work at Sardis, Turkey, has given us the opportunity to participate in an on-going excavation, and to see the results of a group effort unfold over many years.

The book is intended first and foremost for students and readers who are launching into the study of Roman art perhaps for the first time. We assume intelligent readers, but we have tried to explain what may not be obvious in terms of background, be it linguistic, historical, or religious. With a view to showing something of the long study of Roman monuments, we have chosen some of the illustrations from older photographs, engravings, and drawings, which seem to capture the spirit better than modern ones. The architectural remains have been cited and illustrated as their importance requires, but we have tried to illustrate sculpture or

painting from collections in the United States, where possible, so that American students will have a better chance of looking at some of the originals.

Of the many scholars who taught us about Roman art, we would especially like to share our warm appreciation here for the inspiration of several mentors who are no longer living: Doris Taylor Bishop, George M. A. Hanfmann, A. H. McDonald, and John B. Ward-Perkins. For specific ideas, we gratefully acknowledge assistance from Elizabeth J. Sherman, Ellen, Roger, and Edward Hirschland; David Castriota, J. Stephens Crawford, Caroline Houser, Barbara McLaughlin, Andrew Stewart, Susan Woodford, and the anonymous readers for the press, who made many valuable suggestions. We are also grateful to Norwell E. Therien, Jr., at Prentice-Hall, and to Rosemary Bradley and Ursula Sadie at John Calmann and King, London, for their outstanding assistance. Our children, Joan and Michael, have been most patient and supportive. We also thank our friends and colleagues with whom we have discussed problems of Roman art – but do not saddle them with responsibility for the positions taken here. And finally, we dedicate this book to the memory of our respective fathers, *optimis patribus*, each of whom set us upon the Roman road.

Introduction

In Western cultures, we live by Roman institutions and laws. Our buildings, plays, and philosophy owe debts – unacknowledged or patent – to the breadth and power of that long-gone empire. Yet the fact remains that many, living this legacy daily, are unaware of our classical forebears, of the leavings of history – texts in Greek and Latin, and productions in clay, bronze, and stone.

The testimony of art and architecture is mute, and therefore difficult to interpret without some background in how it works and to what it relates. Yet it is no less eloquent than written texts as a source of history. This book is intended to be accessible and informative to those with little prior knowledge of the classical world, and is meant to lead the reader through the tangled skein of evidence produced over many centuries, by peoples of many languages and cultures.

Defining Roman art is a fascinating challenge because an apparently simple question requires a complicated answer. As we shall see, it is not sufficient to say that the Romans produced it: often they did not. They regularly employed artists and architects from the lands they had absorbed into their empire (fig. 0.1) and willingly allowed them credit for preeminence in the fine arts. Yet we find, in all but the most slavish copies of Greek masterpieces, qualities of subject or approach that mark these monuments as Roman and



0.1 The Roman world in the second century AD



their totality as Roman art. "Roman" and "Romans" have to be defined more broadly than the city of Rome or even the inhabitants of Italy as we know it today. Roman art changed as new groups of people were incorporated and new institutions were required to carry out changing administrative needs. The art of the Romans is the primary focus of this book, be it sculpture, architecture, or painting, but, in our efforts to understand the Roman contribution, we shall not ignore history or politics or literature.

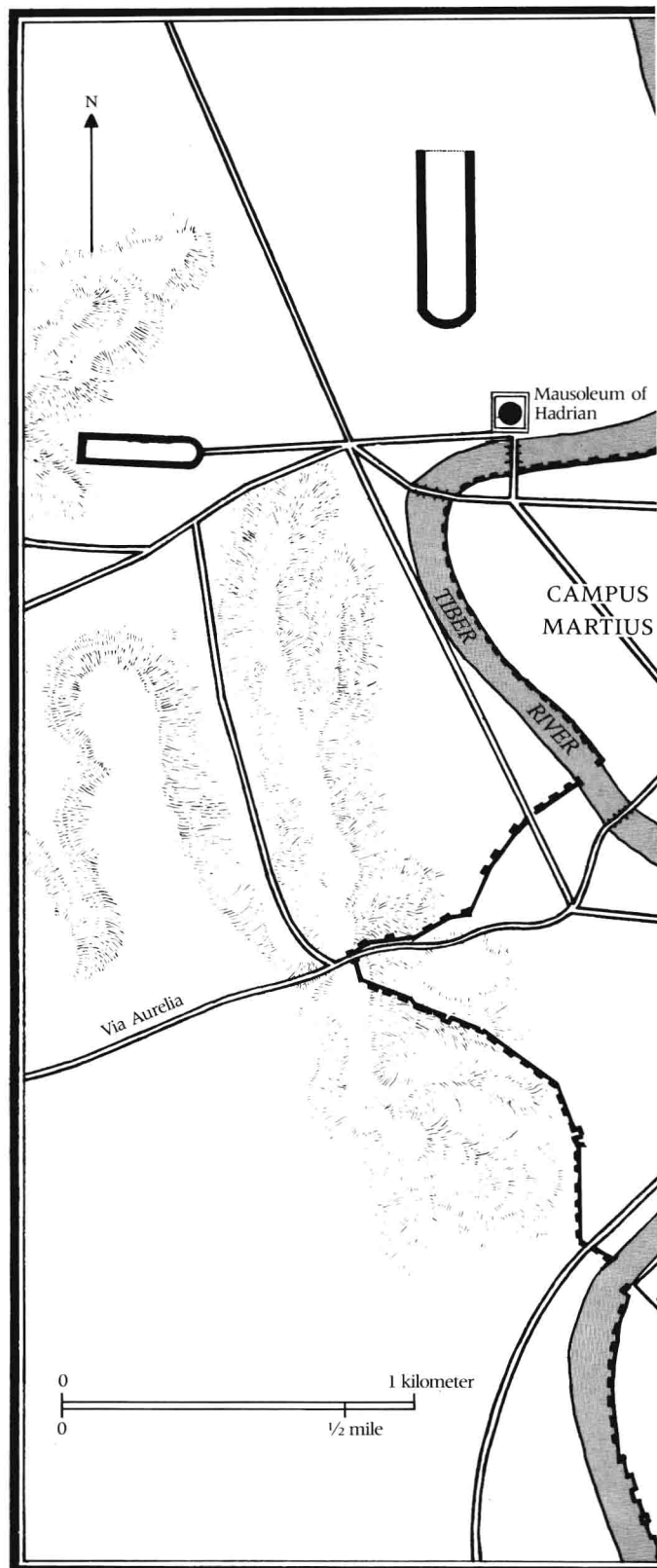
The land

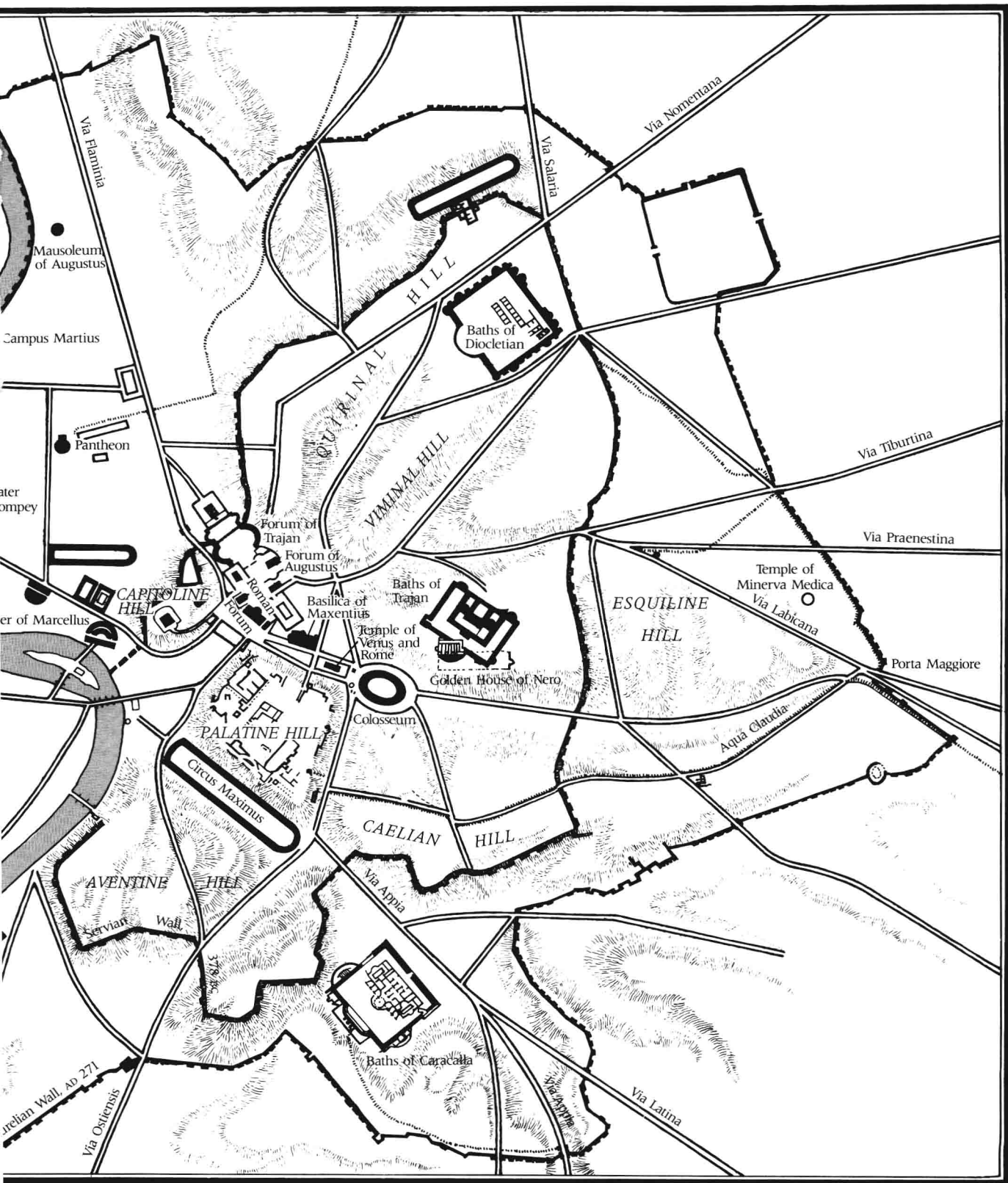
The peninsula of Italy projects far into the Mediterranean, bordered by water on all sides except in the north, where the Alps wall it in (fig. 0.2). The land is rich and fertile in many parts,

0.2 Topographical map of Italy



0.3 City of Rome, plan





and had supported an agricultural way of life from the sixth millennium BC. There was active exploitation of copper deposits from the first half of the second millennium BC, in the coastal hills to the northwest of Rome, even as far as Elba, an island rich in minerals. Then iron was mined from early in the first millennium. As often in the history of the world, the search for rare or useful metals stimulated intense economic activity and cultural change. This goes far to explain the beginnings of urban culture in this part of Italy.

A rugged chain of mountains, the Apennines, runs down most of the length of Italy like a spine, and acts as a barrier between east and west; even today, passage over these mountains is a challenge, especially in winter. Those towns to the west of the mountains looked to the Tyrrhenian Sea for their trade routes, while those to the east looked to the Adriatic. The rivers played their part in the development of Italic culture and economy, providing the possibility of a network of water transportation in their lower reaches.

Easy access to the sea was to play an important role in acceptance of the foreign influences that had such an effect on the development of the art of Rome and her ancestors. The importance of trade by sea can be seen from the numerous cities that rose to prominence either because they were located on the coast or because they had easy access to the sea by inland waterways. Rome itself had several advantages. Its seven hills (fig. 0.3) rendered it unusually defensible, and its strategic position at a river crossing was useful for inland travel in several directions. Its advantageous location in the center of an agricultural region bounded by hills, and its position somewhat away from the sea, but on a navigable river, are also undoubtedly important reasons why it became such a major city.

Chronology

We shall discuss the monuments chronologically in this book, in the belief that this is the most convenient and enlightening way to begin studying the material. For the earlier eras the conventional division into cultural and historical periods seems appropriate, but later it is more meaningful to

organize the material by emperor or groups of emperors in the same family, because the rulers seem to have had such an important effect upon taste and patronage throughout the Roman empire.

Our beginning point is not a fixed date, but it falls somewhere about 1000 BC, so that we may set the scene in Italy before the Romans had established themselves as a presence. In those early days, Rome itself was no more than a group of small hamlets that would have looked much like the other villages that dotted many parts of central Italy. From that humble beginning we shall trace the art of Rome, while looking at the same time at the political and historic background that helps to explain the emergence of the city itself.

Roman art, from Romulus to Constantine, covers a period of well over 1,000 years. In fact, we cannot call all of this truly "Roman," for the early centuries belong to ancestors or rivals, whose material culture Romans may have shared but did not create. The heritage of these groups can be thought of as forming a common Italic background to Roman institutions. The earliest groups are known as the Villanovans, who lived from the tenth century BC to about 700 BC. Subsequently, one group known as the Etruscans created a distinct and more prosperous culture through much of central Italy that lasted from about 700 BC to roughly the first century BC, when their culture was absorbed by the Romans. Many characteristics of Roman art will be found to have their roots in Etruscan art and architecture, and it is therefore important to look back at Etruscan culture (see below, chapter 1).

We end our study with the death of the emperor Constantine the Great in AD 337; however, as there is no real agreement on when Roman art ends, we shall also include a few later objects to illustrate the development of trends that Constantine's policies set in motion.

0.4 The emperor Trajan addresses his troops (*adlocutio*), scene 42 from the Column of Trajan, Rome. AD 113. Marble relief. Height of frieze c. 3ft 6ins (1.1m)



The political framework

THE REPUBLIC

The Roman era itself is divided politically into two periods. The first of these is the Republican period which began, according to tradition, in 509 BC, after the expulsion of king Tarquinius Superbus. The citizens were either patricians (belonging to the upper classes, the aristocrats based mainly in the countryside) or plebeians (those who belonged to the general urban populace of citizens, later associated with the lower classes). In the early Republican period there was a sharp distinction between the two groups, and much tension. The plebeians were grudgingly accorded more and more rights of sharing in the government, and eventually the distinction made little sense except to separate the rich and the poor, or the élite and the masses.

Under the Republic, the people were governed by a set of magistrates with different administrative functions, who were elected annually. Of these, the two consuls, who originally took over the functions of the ousted king, Tarquinius Superbus, were the most important, and they were responsible to the people through the Senate, the supreme council of the Roman state. This system broke down in the late second and first century BC, after several generals who had wielded absolute power as *dictators*, legally appointed to deal with an emergency, were unwilling to give up their positions after the crisis was over. Civil wars resulted from the ensuing power struggles, between about 100 and 42 BC, but they were brought to an end in 31 BC by the victory of Octavian (later called Augustus) over Mark Antony at the Battle of Actium.

THE EMPIRE

The result of this battle was to leave Octavian sole ruler of the Roman world, but this time with no serious rivals. During his rule the constitution was reorganized a number of times but the crucial change was in 27 BC, when he was given the title of Augustus, “the revered one,” and several important honors bestowed by the Senate. Thus the empire began. Members of his own or his wife’s family – although none of them were direct descendants – ruled until AD 68, and the period is called the

Julio-Claudian era, after the family names: the Julii and the Claudii. After Augustus, emperors claimed power by virtue of family lineage, adoption, or military power, remembering, however, to pay lip service to the Senate.

Groups of succeeding rulers are often categorized in dynastic terms, although a few, like Trajan and Hadrian, do not fit into long-established families, and others are categorized in political terms and grouped by such names as “the soldier emperors” or the “Tetrarchs.” The first term refers to the fact that most of them came to power as the result of a military coup; and the second refers to membership in the tetrarchic system, a new constitutional scheme whereby there were four rulers of the Roman empire, each with his own area of responsibility: two *Augusti* (senior partners) and two *Caesares* (junior partners and heirs apparent). The emperor Constantine was the last survivor of the tetrarchic system, and he let it lapse after gaining sole rule, although he shared some authority with his sons. His rule marks the end of an era, for no longer was the empire ruled from Rome. This was the beginning of the triumph of Christianity at Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), the new capital created on the ancient site of Byzantium, at the junction of Europe and Asia.

Art in the service of the state

For the Romans, art and politics were intimately connected. Monuments that recognized public service, and buildings that met public needs, form the core of early Roman art. Many of them must be reconstituted from fragments put together with patient care from innumerable excavations, or imagined from sketchy descriptions of historians or commentators. Additional help in gauging what styles were fashionable at one time or another can be gained from close attention to the examples of the art of private patrons, and from utilitarian objects that were commonly decorated with motifs comparable to those on public monuments.

Civic leaders were well aware of the potential of art as a means of promoting their own ends, during

both the Republican period and the imperial age. The Senate and emperors would erect statues and install commemorative reliefs in public squares, and they sponsored new public buildings or repaired old ones. The sponsorship was almost always explicitly spelled out in an accompanying inscription, prominently displayed. Honorific statues were normally voted by the Senate, and obvious self-promotion was not started until the early first century BC when Sulla, and then Pompey, used propaganda techniques for their own aggrandizement. Julius Caesar was a master at this, and the practice was continued under most of the emperors. Whenever we consider a piece of Roman statuary, or a painting or building, we must consider the circumstances that brought it into being, the meaning it expresses, and the intentions of the patron. Although many formal characteristics were shared with Greek art, as we shall see, the meaning for the Roman patron was often different.

In imperial times the display of relief sculpture on the walls of public monuments became popular. Particular emperors or members of their families were shown in imposing positions, commanding the army, or giving out food to the poor. Many of these images were repeated often, almost like a formula, and were thus easily recognizable. For instance, a subject frequently found in Roman art is an emperor addressing a crowd (fig. 0.4). In this motif, called *adlocutio* in Latin, the emperor can always be picked out because of his prominent position, either raised above the others or standing in front of a large group. We find it often on sculptural reliefs, and also on coins, because it draws attention to one of the primary functions of the imperial office.

The Romans like to emphasize the “here and now,” that is, to depict the details of actual events. Thus, on the breastplate of the emperor Augustus (fig. 0.5), a Roman soldier, who really represents the whole Roman army or the Roman people, receives a Roman military standard from a man from Parthia in Mesopotamia, also representing the whole nation. The message is clear because the



0.5 Augustus of Prima Porta, detail of head and breastplate. Early first century AD, after a bronze of c.20 BC. Marble. Musei Vaticani, Rome