

# *The ancient* HELLENISTIC *world*

‘“Then verily, having crossed the narrow strait of the Hellespont,  
The devastating host of the Gauls shall pipe; and lawlessly  
They shall ravage Asia; and much worse shall God do  
To those who dwell by the shores of the sea  
For a short while. For right soon the son of Cronos  
Shall raise them a helper, the dear son of a bull reared by Zeus,  
Who on all the Gauls shall bring a day of destruction.”

By the son of a bull she meant Attalus, king of Pergamon...’

Pausanias, 2nd century AD, commenting on an oracular prediction concerning Attalus, whose dynasty glorified itself through the defeat of the Celtic tribes (Gauls) who had invaded Asia Minor



# Historical overview

The uniqueness of ancient Egypt came partly from its unusual setting. Rainfall was virtually unknown so the fertility of the land depended entirely on the river. As the snows melted in the mountains of Ethiopia each year, the silt was swept down the Nile valley, whose narrow strip was made three or four times more fertile than land watered by rain alone. Yet beyond the valley was desert, and the contrast between the dark richness of the valley soil and the redness of the barren sand beyond haunted the Egyptian imagination. Any land above the floodline was bone dry and this is why we have so many preserved goods, including a mass of papyrus documents that would have mouldered away in any wetter climate.

Egypt was relatively isolated from the other cultures of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East. There was little contact with the Mediterranean before Alexander the Great founded the port of Alexandria in 332. Until the rise of the Assyrian empire in the 8th century BC, there was no state strong enough in the Near East to challenge Egypt. This meant that a vigorous Egyptian ruler could achieve and sustain control over an environment rich in resources. The wealth that resulted was poured into vast building projects and exquisite craftsmanship.



Above: The annual flooding of the Nile valley makes for a dramatic contrast between fertile land and the desert beyond. Far back in history there had been rain in Egypt, but its frequency decreased and the early settlers were driven closer and closer to the Nile. By 4000 BC agriculture had developed, and as yields grew, settlements were formed along the river. The First Cataract, pictured above, was the last point where the flow of the Nile northwards was broken, by boulders in the stream.

Previous page: Head of Akhenaten, the heretical pharaoh (see p. 34).

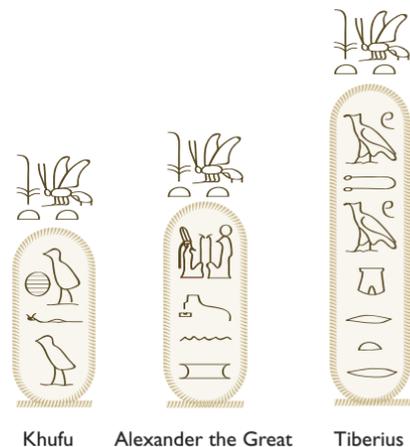
## THE FIRST DYNASTIES

In about 280 BC Manetho, an Egyptian priest, went through the records of 3,000 years of Egyptian history and drew up a list of the pharaohs. He arranged them into 31 dynasties which—though archaeological evidence does not always confirm the list—still provides the framework within which scholars work. It was during the first three dynasties that the most important features of Egyptian kingship were developed. They included tight control of all officials, an efficient bureaucracy and the gathering of surplus goods from the peasants who worked the land between the floods.

The earliest pharaohs were buried at Abydos but then a new burial ground was developed at Saqqara, near to Memphis. It was here, about 2650, that king Djoser of the Third Dynasty broke through convention to build a stepped pyramid over his burial chamber. The Pyramid Age had begun.

## THE CONTINUITY OF HIEROGLYPHICS

When the lands of the Nile delta and those bordering the river running south were first united into one kingdom in about 3100 BC, Narmer, the ruler who brought unification, was shown in reliefs with a threatening mace in his right hand. Nearly 3,000 years later, Alexander the Great, who prised Egypt out of the Persian empire, is shown in much the same way. So are the Roman emperors when Egypt became a province of the empire in 30 BC. The continuity of ancient Egyptian civilisation is extraordinary and the ways it represented itself and its rulers were sustained unchanged over many centuries. Opposite are three sets of hieroglyphs, one for Khufu (26th century BC), one for Alexander the Great (4th century BC) and one for the Roman emperor Tiberius (1st century AD). Hieroglyphs were a formal script used mainly for carving sacred texts on stone. Most were pictograms representing an object, a syllable in a word or even an abstract concept. A papyrus roll stands for writing. The names of rulers were enclosed in cartouches, above which appeared the symbols of Upper Egypt (a sedge plant) and Lower Egypt (a bee).



## ANCIENT EGYPT

Map showing the principal sites of the ancient and Ptolemaic periods. Cities and natural features that did not exist in ancient times are marked in brackets or with dotted lines. The floodplain of the Nile, showing the fertile area, is plainly shown.

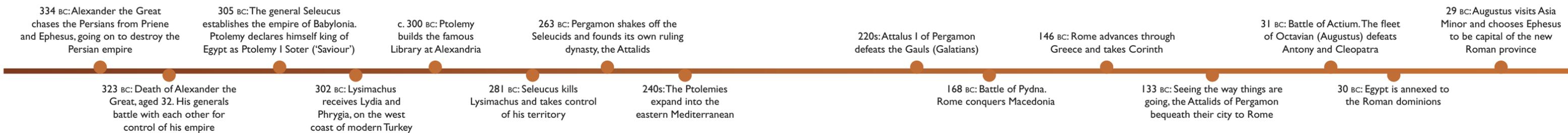


Compared to sculptors of the Classical period, those of the Hellenistic Age thrust their onlookers into drama. For the frieze of the Pergamon altar (c. AD 160) they may have adopted the idea of a narrative from the Parthenon and other Classical buildings but the narrative they show is a cosmic battle between gods and giants which goes well beyond any calm Classical equivalent (in total there are 34 goddesses, 20 gods, 59 giants and 28 animals shown). The whole has been planned by a single mind but the mythology is intricate. The ruler, Eumenes II, was advertising his knowledge of Greek culture. Here the goddess Athena is shown seizing a winged giant by the hair. His mother, Gaia, the earth, representing the original, untamed forces of creation, pleads for his life.

The borders of the Hellenistic kingdoms were always fluid. The Seleucids steadily lost territory to the Ptolemies, while at Pergamon the Attalid dynasty carved out its own independent realm. But by the late 2nd century all these kingdoms faced the growing power of Rome. Macedonia was the first to succumb, at the Battle of Pydna in 168 BC. The cities of the Greek mainland vainly sought refuge in confederations but these were easily outmanoeuvred by the Romans. In 146, the wealthy trading city of Corinth was brutally sacked to show the others the futility of resistance, and 50,000 men, women and children were sold into slavery. The Attalids wisely bequeathed their territory to Rome in 133 BC.

The Ptolemies held out. The last of their queens, Cleopatra, attempted to manipulate Roman alliances to her advantage but her relationship with the Roman general Mark Antony ended in disaster when Octavian destroyed their combined fleets at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC and Egypt became a province of Rome.

### KEY DATES IN HELLENISTIC GREEK HISTORY



### STOICS, SCEPTICS & EPICUREANS: PHILOSOPHY OF THE HELLENISTIC AGE

Stoicism was born in Athens in the late 4th century BC, when the philosopher Zeno created his own school of followers who walked and talked in the colonnade of the Painted Stoa. The most important follower of Zeno is Chrysippus, who arrived in Athens c. 260. He appears to have been a powerful mind, and he may be the true founder of Stoicism as we know it today. There is a record of one scholar having a library of 700 papyrus rolls of Chrysippus' works, but no single complete text survives today.

The Stoics believed that the material world is moving providentially forward in a series of cycles, each of which will eventually end in a conflagration and then a rebirth. There is an underlying force, the *logos*, which underpins its movement. The world is a material whole, each part dependent on others, a point continually stressed in the famous *Meditations* of the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius in the 2nd century AD. It is important for the Stoic to live in harmony with a world to whose movements he is subject, not to try and see it for his own use.

Nevertheless, the Stoics thought deeply about what human beings are capable of. They deplored emotion, believing that one should learn to bring one's feelings under control in a world where one's influence is limited. The understanding and following of virtue is in itself sufficient for happiness. Stoics applauded reason as it allowed human beings to operate with some degree of free will. One could and should involve oneself in public affairs and serve others with honesty and sober judgment. Much Stoic writing is about the means by which one can transcend the bustle of everyday life without turning one's back on it. Yet dignity must be maintained. Another famous Stoic, Seneca, committed suicide in AD 65 when he felt no longer able to serve the dictatorial Nero as a minister.

The Stoics would resist the Christian idea that humanity has been given a privileged place by God, above and apart from the rest. Nevertheless, Stoic values did persist into the Christian era, for many other Stoic precepts proved attractive to the new religion: the stress on sober living, for example, and the readiness to face death unflinchingly in the name of virtue.

Stoicism faced two challenges from rival schools. The first of these were the Sceptics, who saw themselves as the heirs of Socrates in that they delighted in questioning all conventional knowledge. They were rooted in Plato's Academy and from the 3rd century engaged in a passionate and often highly erudite debate with the Stoics, particularly over whether anything of certainty can be said about the natural world. The arguments and counter-arguments of this enduring dialogue (it can be traced over 200 years) go right to the core of philosophical enquiry and are still alive in discussions on the nature of reality today.

The other great school, the Epicureans, drew their inspiration from Epicurus, a native of Samos, who came to Athens as a young man and remained there until his death in 270 BC. Epicurus was a materialist, believing essentially that what we see is what there is. He was prepared to accept that there might be gods, but they had no impact on human life and could safely be disregarded except in so far as their idealised lives could provide a model for those seeking eternal peace. What mattered above all was the cultivation of the mind as a route to happiness. 'We say that pleasure is the beginning and end of living happily.' Although often accused of simply being a pleasure-seeker, Epicurus in fact believed that the search for true happiness was a serious intellectual task and he and his followers were fully aware that happiness is not necessarily consequent on the mere fulfilment of desire.

Many despised the Epicureans, often in the belief that their lives were pure hedonism (they welcomed women and slaves into their entourage and it appears that the women were shared among them). They challenged the Stoic ideal that a man should be involved in public life as a matter of duty (it was, they said, far too stressful). For Christians their views were abhorrent. The great Christian philosopher-theologian Origen, who was ordinarily very open-minded in his reading of the pagan Classics, excluded the Epicureans. Yet there remains something of value in the more austere forms of Epicureanism: withdrawal from the world for philosophical contemplation on the nature of peaceful living is not without its attractions.

## PLAN OF ANCIENT EPHEBUS

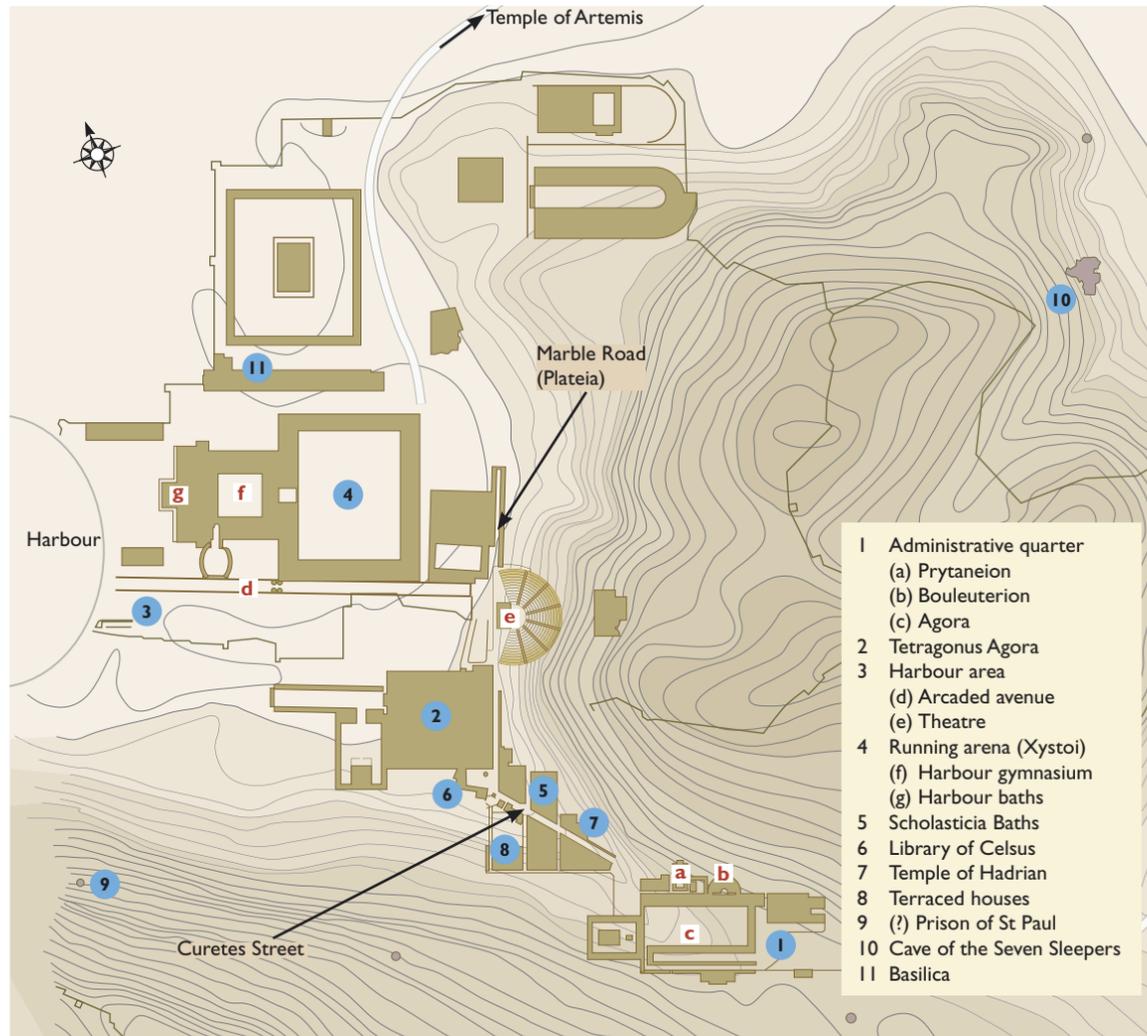
**(1)** The administrative quarter, commissioned by Augustus on higher ground in the southern part of the city, included the Prytaneion **(a)**, the seat of the city's administration which also housed the sacred fire of the city, and the city's council chamber, the Bouleuterion **(b)**, in the shape of an odeon, or small theatre. The colonnaded agora **(c)** had a temple in honour of Rome and Julius Caesar (Augustus' adoptive father) in the centre. Ephesus certainly benefited from imperial Roman patronage, though the cost of building was financed largely by wealthy local citizens, many of whom were freedmen.

**(2)** Between the administrative quarter and the harbour stood a second agora, the so-called Tetragonus Agora. Originally part of Lysimachus' Hellenistic city, it was rebuilt by the Romans in a much grander form. This was a commercial rather than an official space and its colonnades were occupied by shops.

**(3)** Just as the administrative area had been set out on a grid system, so an attempt was made to impose the same order on the old city around the harbour. A tree-lined arcade **(d)** led from the harbour to the theatre **(e)** so that the building provided a focal point for visitors arriving by sea. From the theatre a street known as the Plateia (today's Marble Road) ran north towards the temple of Artemis and south to meet Curetes Street.

**(4)** The beginning of Ephesus' most opulent age came in the 80s AD, when the city was awarded the honour of dedicating a large new temple to the Roman emperors. With this honour went the right to hold games, and the city responded in style. There was a large open space down by the harbour and this was made into an arena, the Xystoi, for the running races. West of it were built a new gymnasium **(f)** and baths **(g)** dedicated to the imperial cult.

**(5)** Augustus had ordered two aqueducts to be built and there were two more by the early 2nd century AD. This meant that there were extravagant supplies of water. In the square at the top of Curetes Street, a large decorated fountain was erected at the end of the 1st century. Water also allowed for a number of bath houses, always a symbol of a civilised and prosperous city. The Scholastica baths, named after the patron who restored them in the 5th century, are off Curetes Street.



**(8)** The terraced houses at Ephesus, with their mosaics and painted walls, reveal the high standard of living of well-to-do Ephesians. When restoration is complete they will be among the finest surviving examples of Roman domestic architecture.

**(7)** Like many Greek cities, Ephesus reached its peak in the mid-2nd century AD, partly thanks to the patronage of the Hellenophile emperor Hadrian. The era is marked by a temple erected in honour of Hadrian and the divinities of the city.

**(6)** The celebrated Library of Celsus stands at the bottom of Curetes Street. It was erected by a consul, Gaius Julius Aquila, as a memorial to his father, Celsus, a former governor of the provinces, who was buried in the complex. He must have enjoyed exceptional popularity and respect to deserve this honour. The columns and statues on the library façade represent the peak of Graeco-Roman architecture of the period (c. AD 135). It is estimated that the library held some 12,000 scrolls. The square which the library dominates is given even greater opulence by the gate which fronts the adjoining agora.

Facing page: View of the Library of Celsus through the archway from the Tetragonus Agora.



## THE ROMAN FORUM AND IMPERIAL FORA

The Roman Forum served two purposes: as a market and as a gathering place for political and legal activities, especially after the founding of the Republic in the late 6th century BC, when the citizen assemblies became closely involved in electing the consuls and city magistrates. The Curia (senate house) was here (1), as were the law courts and the Comitium (2), the assembly place for citizens. However, as the city expanded and the spoils of war poured in, temples began to be built as well.

One of the oldest was to Saturn (3), the god identified with bringing a golden age to Rome and commemorated each year in the festival of the Saturnalia. Another, in the centre of the then open space, was the temple to Vesta (4), which enclosed a symbolic sacred hearth whose fire was kept burning by the Vestal Virgins, who had their own enclosed house nearby.

The booty pouring in from the conquest of southern Italy and Sicily, and later of the Carthaginian empire, in the 2nd and 3rd centuries BC, saw the building of the first great basilicas, the all-purpose meeting halls. After his successful return from civil war in the 40s BC, Julius Caesar created the large Basilica Julia (5). Accepting that the area had now become so cluttered with buildings that it needed an extension, he also created the first of the

so-called Imperial Fora, which extended the Forum to the north. Caesar's forum was dominated by a new temple to Venus (6), honoured as the founder of his own family. It was probably here that he summoned the senate to attend him instead of going himself to the senate house, thereby arousing suspicions that he was transforming himself into a king. His assassination in the name of *libertas*, the ancient republican liberties of the state, followed in 44 BC. Caesar's adopted son Octavian, the future emperor Augustus, dedicated the Temple of Divus Julius (7) in honour of the now deified Caesar, in the original Forum on the spot where Caesar's body had been cremated.

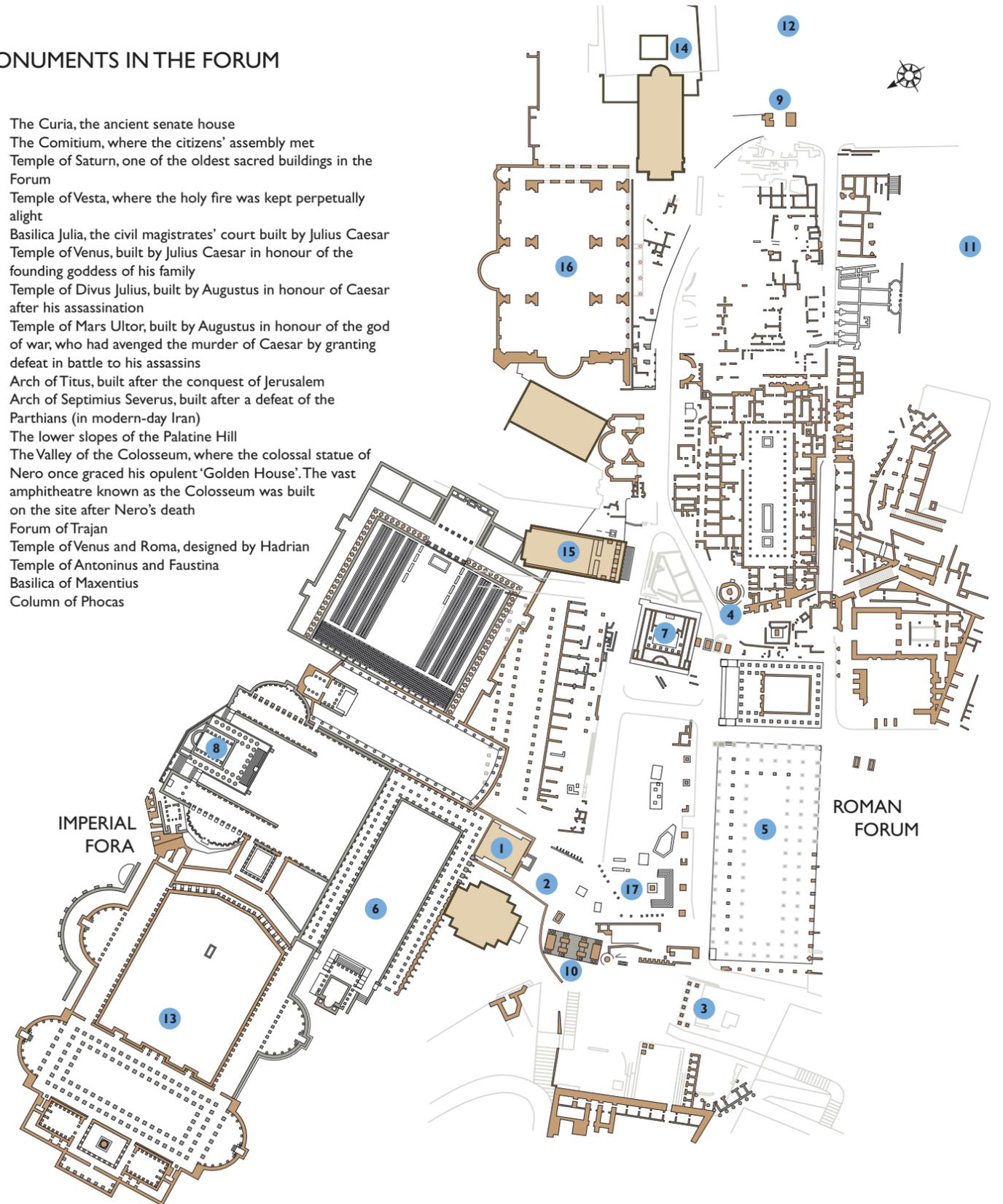
Augustus followed Caesar in buying up land to the north of the Forum for his own. Here he built a temple to Mars Ultor (8), Mars in his role of avenger of the murder of Caesar, after the assassins Brutus and Cassius had been defeated. Augustus also began another tradition. In Republican days the Triumph marked the end of a general's career: now Augustus commemorated his in a permanent form, the triumphal arch (see p. 142). One of his arches celebrated the victory at Actium (over Antony and Cleopatra), another a defeat of the Parthians. Both have disappeared but two later triumphal arches still stand within the Forum, one erected by the emperor Titus (9) to commemorate his victory over the Jews and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70, and the other built by Septimius Severus in AD 203 (10) to celebrate another victory over the Parthians.



Scene of an emperor riding into Rome in triumph with his quadriga through a triumphal arch (see p. 142), as seen through the eyes of two French artists, Jacques Grasset de St-Saveur and L.F. Labrousse (1796).

## MONUMENTS IN THE FORUM

- 1 The Curia, the ancient senate house
- 2 The Comitium, where the citizens' assembly met
- 3 Temple of Saturn, one of the oldest sacred buildings in the Forum
- 4 Temple of Vesta, where the holy fire was kept perpetually alight
- 5 Basilica Julia, the civil magistrates' court built by Julius Caesar
- 6 Temple of Venus, built by Julius Caesar in honour of the founding goddess of his family
- 7 Temple of Divus Julius, built by Augustus in honour of Caesar after his assassination
- 8 Temple of Mars Ultor, built by Augustus in honour of the god of war, who had avenged the murder of Caesar by granting defeat in battle to his assassins
- 9 Arch of Titus, built after the conquest of Jerusalem
- 10 Arch of Septimius Severus, built after a defeat of the Parthians (in modern-day Iran)
- 11 The lower slopes of the Palatine Hill
- 12 The Valley of the Colosseum, where the colossal statue of Nero once graced his opulent 'Golden House'. The vast amphitheatre known as the Colosseum was built on the site after Nero's death
- 13 Forum of Trajan
- 14 Temple of Venus and Roma, designed by Hadrian
- 15 Temple of Antoninus and Faustina
- 16 Basilica of Maxentius
- 17 Column of Phocas



## THE RAVENNA BASILICAS

The basilicas in Ravenna follow the classic model (see p. 217), whether they were built by the Arian Theodoric (Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, 490s) or by the Byzantines (Sant'Apollinare in Classe, 6th century). Sant'Apollinare Nuovo has an extraordinary sequence of mosaics including 26 panels showing the miracles and passion of Christ (example pictured below). Beneath these are windows with male figures facing frontally between them and then another superb set of processions of saints and martyrs. These end alongside a mosaic of the palace of Theodoric on one side and the town of Classis, the port of Ravenna, on the other. Despite some reordering and replacements of the sequence in the 6th century (mainly to remove any hint of Theodoric and his Arian

Below: The miracle of the loaves and fishes, from the late 5th-century Arian mosaic cycle in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo. Christ is depicted in Roman purple, but there is an attempt at naturalism in the scene: the figures appear as real people, not as hieratic and numinous manifestations of the godhead.



Facing page: The apse of Sant'Apollinare in Classe, at the port of Ravenna. Here the humanity of the Arian Christ (as seen in the mosaic illustrated right) has been replaced by more symbolic representations. In the apse mosaic (c. 550) the hand of God is shown hovering above a jewelled cross which has a tiny depiction of Christ at its centre. Christ is flanked by Moses and Elijah, so this may be a representation of the Transfiguration, with the three lambs looking up from below symbolising the apostles Peter, James and John, who witnessed the event. The central figure of St Apollinaris is set within a luxuriant landscape and is surrounded by twelve lambs, symbols of his flock. We are a long way from the graphic and detailed miracle stories of Christ in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo and these two churches make the contrast in approach very clear. In the spaces between the windows, four bishops of Ravenna are shown in their vestments. In the 9th century the triumphal arch above the domed apse was also covered in mosaics. There is a central figure of Christ with symbols of the Evangelists on either side: the Eagle (John), a Man (Matthew), the Lion (Mark) and the Bull (Luke). Immediately below this are representations of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Six lambs process out of each city gate towards the central Christ.

views), these remain essentially a work of the late 5th century.

The later Sant'Apollinare in Classe is known for its apse mosaic (illustrated opposite), the harmonious whole showing how sophisticated the use of symbols and their relationship to a Christian context had now become in Christian art.

After Ravenna, basilicas begin to disappear in the West. They were designed for cities with large populations and immense resources, but Rome's population, for instance, may have dropped to only 60,000. Churches became much smaller while resources were also directed towards abbeys, with the spread of monasticism (for more on monasticism, see Sinai, p. 227).

### CHRISTIANITY AS A MYSTERY RELIGION

Christianity was not the first 'mystery' religion centred on truths that are inexplicable. There were many, some promising a kind of redemption and renewal (Mithraism; see p. 155), some offering hope of an afterlife (the cult of Demeter; see p. 101), others requiring a kind of initiation or 'birth' into new life (the worship of Isis; see p. 178), still others requiring initiates to give themselves up entirely to the god (the cult of Dionysus; see p. 178). Of all these cults, it was Christianity that triumphed; by the 4th century AD it was the only mystery religion that was officially allowed.

The Christians adopted their rite of baptism from Jewish purification ceremonies, but it too became a ceremony of initiation. Catechumens, those seeking conversion, might have to undergo instruction for as much as three years before they were considered ready. Then there was the ceremony itself, normally tied to Easter and thus to the process of rebirth. Baptism was followed by admission to the Eucharist, a ritual meal in its own right with the consumption of bread and wine in memory of the Last Supper. Some accounts suggest that Christians believed that the symbolic consumption of the body and blood of Christ gave them a transformed body. The secrecy of Christian worship added to the mystery. One opponent, writing about AD 200, described Christians as 'a crowd that lurks in hiding places, shunning the light; they are speechless in public but gabble away in corners'. There were even rumours of cannibalism and free love.

