



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The topography of Ancient Rome: the archaeological map as a teaching aid

Flohr, M.; Storms, M.

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1825 — The topography of Ancient Rome

The archaeological map as a teaching aid

This unique map of the heart of Ancient Rome seems at first glance odd and outdated. The map was made before the major excavations of the Roman Forum at the end of the nineteenth century. There are only a few places, indicated in black ink, where the remains of Roman architecture are still visible. The rest is a reconstruction in thin lines. The Roman Forum is similar to the reconstruction that Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778) made in 1756 for his map *Antichità Romane*. Both maps suffer from the same problem: based on written sources, the artists assumed a much larger and more monumental space than the one that was eventually excavated. The map is a telling illustration of the pedestal on which the Romans were placed in the nineteenth century and the associated overestimation of their achievements. However, it is not the topography depicted in the map, once owned by the Leiden professor Caspar Reuvens (1793–1835), that makes it interesting. Its main significance is as a material object, giving us an insight into the early days of archaeology as an academic discipline.



Portrait of Caspar Reuvens as a professor, by Louis Moritz (Icones 230).

Caspar Reuvens was the first professor of archaeology anywhere in the world. To a certain extent, his chair was an academic accident: when the Dutch University of Harderwijk was closed in 1818, three professors there needed to find a new post with other Dutch universities. That was a problem for Reuvens, a talented young Harderwijk professor of classical literature, because all the relevant professorial chairs were already occupied. The solution was found by hurriedly setting up a new professorship in Leiden in a related area that the young scholar was also interested in. Reuvens, aged only twenty-five, accepted this appointment as professor of archaeology on 24 October 1818 with his now famous speech in praise of archaeology. In it, he made the case for the study of the ancient past using what we would call material culture.

As an archaeologist, Reuvens performed pioneering work on several fronts. With the support of the Dutch king William I and Anton Reinhard Falck (1777–1843), the minister of education, industry and the colonies, he amassed a large collection of Greek, Roman, Egyptian and even Javanese antiquities for the university’s Archaeological Cabinet (which later became the National Museum of Antiquities). He also carried out significant and groundbreaking excavations of the Roman town of Forum Hadriani near Voorburg in the Netherlands. The site was on the grounds of the country estate of Arentsburgh, purchased by the Dutch state for this purpose. At the same time, Reuvens had



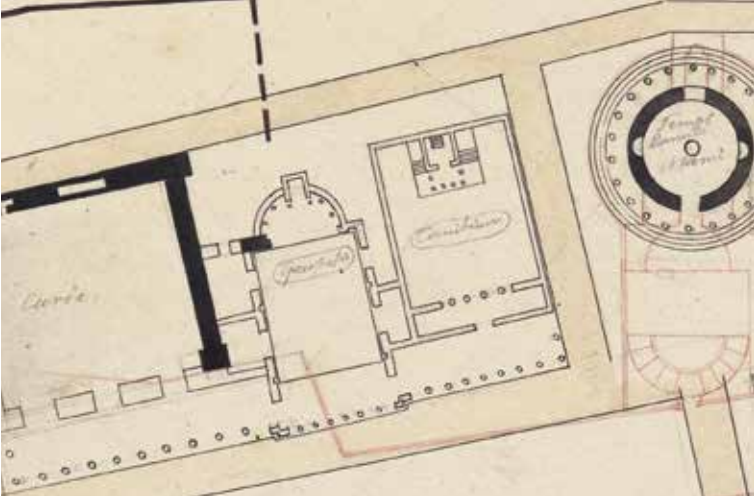
Reuvens at work during excavations on the Arentsburgh country estate in Voorburg (Leiden, National Museum of Antiquities).

substantial teaching duties at the university. At first, his focus was on the Archaeological Cabinet collection, but from 1825 onwards Reuvens also gave a series of lectures on ‘Roman antiquities’, a compulsory course for literature and law students. In these lectures, he taught the students about Roman history and government, as well as covering an archaeological topic, namely the topography of the city of Rome.

As a new element in the curriculum, this topography presented Reuvens with a practical challenge: there were no teaching materials available and the city’s topography was not something you could easily convey using the collection in the Archaeological Cabinet. To resolve this problem, Reuvens had a large number of maps made that he could then use in his lectures. The ground plan shown here was drawn by hand on two large sheets of cardboard measuring 103 by 65 centimetres each. One sheet shows the Roman Forum; the other sheet gives the imperial palace on the Palatine Hill and parts of the Colosseum and Circus Maximus. The size of the map – 130 centimetres in height and 103 centimetres in width – means it was large enough to show to groups of students in the relatively small lecture room Reuvens was using.

It is uncertain how exactly the map was created. The map is not signed and there is no date on it. A note on the back states that it was used during Reuvens’ lectures on Roman topography, but that was probably written after Reuvens’ death when an inventory was compiled of his extensive collection. The map was probably made in or shortly after 1825. Perhaps Reuvens made use of the services of the draughtsmen who helped him from 1827 with his excavations in Arentsburgh, but it is equally possible that he drew the map himself. At any rate, the map clearly reveals the methodical approach taken by the maker: first a grid of lines was drawn in pencil and then the map was filled in step by step. That was done first in pencil, then in pen using two colours. Black indicated the antique structures, pink the modern buildings that were at the time still preventing the discovery of what had stood there before.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the map are the handwritten notes. Presumably it was Reuvens himself who scribbled



Detail showing Reuvens’ notes in the ground plan.

down the names of the most important buildings – in pencil in small letters. Sometimes a question mark has been added to indicate uncertainty about an identification. Several possible options are listed in certain places. For example, Reuvens wrote that the building now known as the Temple of Castor and Pollux could also be the *comitium* – an important site for meetings – or the Temple of Jupiter Stator. Reuvens was also not sure whether the building now called Curia Julia was the Basilica Aemilia or Aerarium Saturni. The captions show how the map was used as a teaching aid. The pencilled scribbles could not be read from a distance, for example by a student attending a lecture, only from close by. They could therefore have served as a reminder for Reuvens while he was teaching. At the same time, the annotations tell us something about the message Reuvens wanted to get across. He did not simply explain to students what the Roman Forum looked like in Antiquity, he also told them that the interpretation of ancient remains could be subject to doubt. Reuvens’ topographical lessons were about the method as well as about the contents.

After Reuvens’ early death in 1835, this map was never again used for its intended purpose. Excavations a few decades later meant its information was obsolete and it could no longer be used as a teaching aid. However, as an object, the map sheds unique light on how the very first professor of archaeology instructed his students, as a true pioneer, in the finer points of the topography of Ancient Rome. (MF)

MADE BY Caspar Jacob Christiaan Reuvens (draughtsman) **TITLE** [Forum Romanum. Mons Aventinus, Capitalinus] **PLACE OF ISSUE** [Leiden] **DATE** c. 1825 **TECHNIQUE** Manuscript on paper **DIMENSIONS** 103 x 130 cm **SCALE** c. 1:750 **ORIENTATION** North at the top right **SIGNATURE** Bodel Nijenhuis collection, COLLBN Port 200 N 96a-b