

If you traveled to Rome today, you would arrive in a modern metropolis sitting on top of the remnants of the Roman city as it existed in the first century when the early Christians came to visit. However, within the region of the Colosseum, the Roman Forum, and the Palatine Hill, much of the built environment from the time of the Roman Empire still survives, making it one of the places on earth where the physical context in which the New Testament books were written can be seen and experienced.

After Emperor Constantine's conversion, the city slowly became infused with Christian iconography within its public and civic spaces, a process that can still be seen and experienced today by the angels in the Capitoline Hill's Plaza and the religious imagery that decorate its government buildings and historic monuments.

In addition to its ancient history and theological legacy, Rome is also famous for its cuisine and you will find yourself with no shortage of choice or quality as you indulge in some of the world's best food. Walking in the footsteps of ancient Romans and dining in restaurants that have been here for centuries creates a visit that is experientially rich but also surprisingly weightless, as if history itself is light enough to lift you up.

The three locations of the Colosseum, Roman Forum, and Palatine Hill were not independent monuments but rather they were closely related spaces that together created a message to the people of Rome about their city's conception of power, history, and future at the heart of the ancient world. In addition, the neighborhood that surrounded these three locations formed the political, religious, social, and symbolic center of ancient Rome. The three places were not only close to one another but together they created a single landscape that represented Roman life, power, and ideology from the Republic to the apogee of the Roman Empire.

The Colosseum (Flavian Amphitheater) is the giant structure at the heart of the imperial complex. It was an engineered assertion of imperial power and popular control. Completed in AD 80 by Titus, the Colosseum was located just east of the Forum, on the reclaimed space of Nero's Domus Aurea, as an act of taking back imperial excess from the emperor and restoring it to the Roman people. Gladiatorial games, animal hunts, and executions for criminals and captives were spectacles of Rome's power over the natural world, the barbarian, and death itself. The Colosseum was political theater, celebrating and renewing the emperor's generosity as a political attempt to remind the attendees and spectators of their place and Rome's power.

To the west is the Roman Forum, which served as the civic and religious center of Rome. It was a long rectangular space surrounded by temples, basilicas, triumphal arches, and public government buildings. The Roman Forum was where laws were debated, verdicts were delivered, triumphs celebrated, and sacrifices offered to the gods. The Forum was defined by the Temple of Saturn, the Basilica Julia, and the Curia (Senate House) and framed a space in which religion, law, and politics could not be separated. For generations, the Forum was the heart of Rome's memory and identity.

To the south of the Forum and towering over it on a hill was the Palatine Hill, the most elite residential space in Rome. The Palatine Hill was traditionally thought to be the place where Rome was founded by Romulus. By the imperial period, the Palatine was the site of enormous palatial complexes built to house the emperors themselves. From Augustus onward, emperors chose to build their residence on the Palatine to express continuity between the city's mythical founding and its imperial present. The word palace itself comes from Palatium and the power embedded in the hill long shaped the political language and practice of power across Europe and the world.

All three of these sites are inextricably connected. The emperor lived on the Palatine, administered his government in the institutions located in the Forum, and maintained popular control with bread and circuses in the Colosseum. Religious, civic, and imperial power and loyalty were constantly reinforced by spatial and visual cues throughout the city. Political processions often moved between these spaces, linking divine favor, political authority, and popular life into a single physical flow.

In the first century when people like the apostle Paul lived and wrote, this location was the visible center and representation of Roman order, power, and worldview. For those who had never visited or seen Rome, the imagery and sense of space related to the Roman Forum, Palatine Hill, and Colosseum would have helped shape their imagination of Rome itself no matter where they lived within the empire. The clash of these two cities, that of Rome and that of God, was at the heart of the early Christian proclamation. As a result, the New Testament's later writings would come to adopt the language, imagery, and symbols of empire that were drawn directly from this Roman world.