

THE HISTORY

The Quirinal Hill in antiquity

The Quirinale Palace stands on a location that, thanks to its lofty and particularly salubrious position, has hosted residential compounds, public buildings and places of worship ever since antiquity.

On the Quirinal Hill, in the 4th Century B.C., stood the temples dedicated to the God Quirinus, who lent his name to the hill, and to the goddess of Health, where propitiatory rites were celebrated to assure the well-being of the State. The most imposing complexes present on the Hill were unarguably the Baths of Constantine and the Temple of Serapis, built by Caracalla in 217 A.D. The sculptural group of the [Dioscuri](#), originally from the ancient Roman temple, stood on the Quirinal Hill for such a long time that it was called *Monte Cavallo* (Horse Mountain, from the horses of Castor and Pollux).

Ancient Topography

The Quirinal is one of the Roman Hills and consists of a hilly massif divided from the Pincio, in the north, by the *Valle Sallustiana* and, in the south, from the Viminale, by the *Valle di Quirino*, later known as *S. Vitale*. The hill's north-western and southern slopes were originally steep with impervious accesses and different altitudes, now difficult to perceive in the modern urban layout, which were deeply modified especially with the construction of the papal palaces.

In antiquity, the Quirinal Hill was the *collis* par excellence and its different visible peaks were also called *colles*. However, the name "Quirinal" ultimately referred to the whole hill although it was divided into four different altitudes: *collis Latiaris*, *collis Mucialis* or *Sanqualis*, *collis Salutaris* and [collis Quirinalis](#).

The *collis Quirinalis* acquired a great strategic importance and was soundly fortified ever since antiquity. It was later enclosed within the Servian walls that were built around the city in the 4th Century B.C.

According to archaeological and documentary data the *collis Quirinalis* would now correspond to the area between Porta Collina, along the Servian Walls, and Via delle Quattro Fontane (where the Porta *Quirinalis* was located); the *collis Salutaris* would lie between Via delle Quattro Fontane and Via della Dataria

(which corresponded to the *Porta Salutaris*); the *collis Mucialis* would now lie between Via della Dataria and Largo Magnanapoli (where the *Porta Sanqualis* was located); the *collis Latiaris* would now be located between Largo Magnanapoli and the saddle pass between the Quirinal and Capitol Hills, which was later cut by Emperor Trajan to make room for the construction of the Forum.

The Hill's main road network consisted of a hilltop road called *Alta Semita* (the modern-day Via del Quirinale – via XX Settembre) that connected *Porta Salutaris* to *Porta Collina* and ran in an easterly direction towards the Sabine territory.

The Hill also housed important places of worship, starting with the temples dedicated to the deities Quirinus, Salus and Semo Sancus in antiquity or, more recently, the temple that Emperor Domitian had erected on the location of his birthplace and the even grander Temple of Serapis that Emperor Caracalla had erected in the 3rd Century A.D.

In the territorial administrative division during the reign of Augustus, the Quirinal Hill was included in Region VI (*Alta Semita*). During the Roman Empire, the regional boundaries were moved after the building of the new Aurelian Wall in 3rd Century A.D., incorporating areas like *Castra Praetoria* and the *Horti Sallustiani*, which were previously suburban.

The Hill became the ideal place of residence for the aristocracy from the period of the Roman Republic and through the Empire, hosting many luxurious dwellings, including those of Titus Pomponius Atticus, a friend of Cicero's, or of the *Gens Flavia* and *Claudia*, of Gaius Fulvius Plautianus and Marcus Valerius Martialis, a Roman poet known as Martial.

The Dioscuri

The two male statues on Piazza del Quirinale represent the Dioscuri holding rampant horses by the bridles, representing a rare iconography that first appeared during the Severan period (3rd Century A.D.).

The sculptures, probably from the so-called Temple of Serapis, were relocated on the Quirinal Hill in the Baths of Constantine, during the reconstruction work that followed the earthquake of 443 A.D. Interest for the two sculptural groups was rekindled in the 15th Century, when Pope Paul II ordered the first partial restoration of the two statues between 1469 and 1470. However, it was not until the 16th Century that the two statues were included in a programme

launched by Sixtus V to enlarge and embellish the square and were completely restored in 1585. They were subsequently placed at the sides of a marble fountain serving as the monumental perspective background to the road from Porta Pia.

Finally, the sculptural group was placed in its present position next to the obelisk that was taken from the Mausoleum of Augustus by Pius VI in 1786 while in 1818 Pius VII had the original fountain replaced with a granite basin from the Roman Forum.

The Quirinal Hill between the 15th and 16th Centuries

In the Middle Ages, the Hill became crowded with churches, aristocratic palaces and towers while the ancient buildings fell into ruin and their marbles were reused in new constructions.

In the 15th Century and through to the early 16th Century, palazzos and villas of nobles and high-ranking prelates were erected around the Piazza and along the ancient Via Alta Semita (now Via del Quirinale). These comprised the villa of Cardinal Oliviero Carafa, which included the vineyard on which the Quirinale Palace now stands. In 1550 Villa Carafa was rented by Cardinal Ippolito d'Este, who also owned Villa d'Este in Tivoli and who transformed the vineyard into an extremely sophisticated garden decorated with fountains, water tricks and ancient sculptures.

The beauty and amenity of Cardinal d'Este's vineyard prompted Pope Gregory XIII (1572–85) to have the small villa enlarged at his own expense, entrusting the construction of the new building to architect Ottaviano Mascarino. The architect constructed an elegant villa between 1583 and 1585, featuring a two-storeyed façade with a portico and a loggia, internally connected by a magnificent spiral staircase. Mascarino's project included the so-called "turret," the panoramic viewpoint that crowns the building.

After the death of Pope Gregory XIII, his successor Sixtus V (1585–90) purchased Villa Monte Cavallo from the Carafa family in 1587, turning it into the summer seat of his pontificate. However, the small villa designed by Mascarino was not sufficiently large to accommodate the papal court and its official activities and therefore Sixtus V commissioned architect Domenico Fontana to expand the building with a long wing facing the Piazza and a second building along Via del Quirinale, thus creating a large inner courtyard. Sixtus V also refurbished the Piazza by restoring the sculptural group of the

Dioscuri and enriching it with a fountain. Sixtus V died at the Quirinale Palace and his restoration project was completed by his successors.

Of particular significance was the intervention of Clement VIII (1592–1605), who concentrated his attention on the garden and commissioned the construction of the monumental Organ Fountain, richly decorated with mosaics, stuccos and statues and enlivened by the sound of a water organ.

The Palace under Paul V

The present-day architectural design of the Palace was completed during the pontificate of the Borghese Pope, Paul V (1605–21). Architect Flaminio Ponzio designed the wing that extended towards the garden and that included, among other things, the Staircase of Honour, the Grand Consistory Hall (now called the Grand Ballroom) and the little Chapel of the Annunciation, frescoed by Guido Reni and some of his assistants.

After Ponzio's death (1613), the building project was taken over by Carlo Maderno, who designed the entire wing stretching along Via del Quirinale (which in the meantime had been renamed Via Pia). In this part of the Palace, Maderno placed several important halls like the Royal Hall (*Sala Regia*, now the Great Hall of the Cuirassiers), the Pauline Chapel and the papal apartments. Pope Paul V wanted these halls to be adequately decorated and therefore commissioned a team of painters and stucco artists who, in some cases, achieved works of great artistic value, such as the frescoes of the Royal Hall or the stuccos on the vaulted ceiling of the Pauline Chapel.

The 17th Century

Once the architecture of the Palace was completed under the pontificate of Pope Paul V, during the 17th Century work on the Quirinale Palace continued with the definition of the boundaries and the fortification of the whole complex, after the grounds were almost extended to the Quattro Fontane road crossing.

Urban VIII, born Maffeo Barberini (1623–44), had a wall built around the perimeter of the gardens, commissioned the enlargement of the quarters of the Swiss Guards (which made up the first block of the Long Wing – *Manica Lunga* – which stretches along Via del Quirinale) and lastly assured the security of the Palace by ordering the construction of a short tower on the façade. In addition to upgrading the Palace from a defensive viewpoint, Urban VIII also re-arranged the gardens, extending and embellishing them with new

fountains. He also commissioned Gianlorenzo Bernini to design the Loggia of Blessings (1638) on top of the [main entrance gate](#) on the façade of the Palace.

The 17th Century also witnessed one of the most ambitious projects to decorate the interior of the Palace, when in 1656 the Chigi Pope, Alexander VII (1655–67), commissioned a frescoed frieze with scenes from the Old and New Testament to be made along the gallery that ran along the lengthy wing facing the Piazza. The frieze was made under the direction of Pietro da Cortona by a group of painters that included Carlo Maratta and Pier Francesco Mola, and that can now be seen in the three halls (Yellow, Augustus and Ambassadors) into which Alexander VII's gallery was split in 1812.

The 18th Century

The last important interventions on the architecture of the Quirinale Palace complex and on its surroundings were concluded before the middle of the 18th Century. Between 1721 and 1730 Alessandro Specchi and subsequently Ferdinando Fuga built the papal Stables facing the Piazza, at the top of Via della Dataria.

Ferdinando Fuga also completed the [Manica Lunga – Long Wing](#) of the Palace and, at the end of the building, the small palazzo of the *Segretario della Cifra*, the assistant of the Pope in charge of ciphering his secret letters, which was first to become the residence of the Royal Family of Italy and later of the President of the Republic. Ferdinando Fuga also designed the Coffee House (1741), located in the Palace gardens, and the Palazzo della Consulta on the Piazza, which was destined to host a number of offices and the quarters of the Swiss Guards.

The Napoleonic Period

At the beginning of the 19th Century, the history of the Quirinale Palace underwent a turning point that would importantly affect the Palace's artistic evolution. In 1809 Napoleonic troops occupied Rome and captured Pope Pius VII (1800–1823), deporting him to France. The Quirinale Palace was selected by Napoleon's government to be the residence of the Emperor.

In preparation for Napoleon's permanence in Rome – which never actually took place – the Quirinale Palace was adapted to the needs and tastes of the Neoclassical period. In order to hastily bring about the necessary changes, architect Raffaele Stern, who was in charge of the restoration works, coordinated a large group of renowned artists among which stood out

important painters such as Felice Giani and Jacques Dominique Ingres, and the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen. During this period, an ambitious project to rearrange the Piazza was designed although it was never implemented.

The Palace between 1814 and 1870

In May of 1814, Pope Pius VII returned to Rome and regained possession of the Quirinale Palace, where he immediately got to work in an effort to erase all possible traces of the Napoleonic occupation although he continued to avail himself of the services of architect Stern. Among some of the most important interventions of this time, mention should be made of the austere frescoes of the Pauline Chapel and the final arrangement of the [Fountain of the Dioscuri](#).

The last pope to reside in the Quirinale Palace was Pius IX (1846–78), who left as the legacy of his pontificate the vaulted ceilings painted in the rooms which had been part of the apartment of Pope Paul V and commissioned Tommaso Minardi to paint [The Mission of the Apostles \(1848\)](#), an ambitious mural painting that decorated the Hall of the Ambassadors.

The Savoy reign

In 1870, with the capture of Rome and its annexation to the Kingdom of Italy, the Quirinale Palace became the residence of the Royal Family. In order to transform the ancient papal palace into a Royal Residence, several rooms – especially in the wing overlooking the garden – were completely renovated and mostly decorated in the lavish French vogue of Louis XV.

This particular neo-Rococo style is well represented by the 18th Century furniture that was brought to the Quirinale Palace from all the royal palaces of Italy at the end of the 19th Century. Some of this furniture included extremely valuable pieces, such as the *commode* crafted by Bernard Vanrisanburg, from the Ducal Palace of Colorno, or the library made by the Piedmontese wood carver Pietro Piffetti, which was brought to the Quirinale Palace from the Castle of Moncalieri.

The Quirinale Palace also received important paintings and series of tapestries from royal palaces around Italy: from Florence, Victor Emmanuel II brought to the Quirinale Palace ten of the twenty 16th Century tapestries made from cartoons of Bronzino, Pontormo and Salviati; from Parma, he brought two 18th Century series made in the Beauvais Manufactory from cartoons of Francois Boucher, while the six paintings by Corrado Giaquinto depicting *The Stories of Aeneas* were brought from Moncalieri.

The furniture, paintings, tapestries and the miscellaneous furnishings from the royal palaces around Italy constitute the largest part of the decorations now in the Palace while the only things left from the papal period are the large collection of oriental vases, the console tables from between the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th Century, several paintings (*the Child Saint John the Baptist* previously attributed to Giulio Romano, *Chastity Flogging Cupid* by Francesco Mancini, the two paintings from the school of Pietro da Cortona hanging in the Balcony Room and a few more) and tapestries (the four Gobelins hangings with the *Stories of the New Testament* which Napoleon gave to Pius VII in 1805).

The Republic

Since 1946 the architectural structure and the interior decorations of the Quirinale Palace complex have essentially remained unchanged. The main criteria applied under the administration of the office of the Secretary General of the President of the Republic have been based on the conservation and valorisation of the great artistic and cultural heritage accumulated in the Quirinale Palace in 400 years of history. For example, a restoration laboratory has been recently opened to repair tapestries and recover the original travertine colour of the ancient stuccoed walls of the [Courtyard of Honour](#) and of the [principal façade](#) of the Palace.