# The Curious Tourist’s Guide to Rome: Trajan’s Market

*This week Zoe explores the “World’s First Shopping Mall”, the Markets of Trajan. Through her examination of archaeological and written evidence, Zoe draws parallels to our modern world.. Are our shopping habits similar to those of the Romans? Find out this week!*

## Welcome to the Mercati di Traiano!

Located at the north-western end of the Via dei Fori Imperiali, nestled against the Quirinal Hill (*fig. 1*), stands the Markets of Trajan, a ‘must-see’ when visiting Rome. Just a short walk from Piazza Venezia and the Roman Forum, Trajan’s Market is an extraordinary example of imperial Roman architecture. Designed by Apollodorus of Damascus and commissioned by Emperor Trajan, the complex was built between 100-112AD and accompanied the impressive Forum of Trajan [@Lancaster1: 63].

[Museo dei Fori Imperiali](http://www.mercatiditraiano.it/en)

Situated inside Trajan’s Market, the Imperial Forum Museum provides an interactive experience for visitors, connecting the past to the present. Incorporating archaeological remains as well as models and videos, the exhibitions and guided tours offer visitors a glimpse into the world of classical Rome.

[Planning Your Visit](https://www.rome.net/trajans-market)

* Location: Via IV Novembre 94
* Opening Times: Tuesday-Sunday: 9:00AM – 7:00PM
* Bus: Piazza Venezia, lines: 117, 40, 60, 64, 70, 170
* Metro Stations: Cavour or Colosseo, line B

## The World’s First Shopping Mall

Often referred to as the world’s first shopping centre, the Markets of Trajan consists of 150 rooms across a six-story complex [@Lancaster2: 285]. However, evidence suggests that Trajan’s Market was more than just a mall, but rather a commercial complex, housing *tabernae[[1]](#footnote-1)*, administrative offices and residential apartment blocks [@DAquino: 84]. [@VreelandandVreeland: 33] suggest that the market was organised as follows:

* Level 1: Main entrance hall for the distribution of grain, with other commodities like oils, fruits and vegetables sold across the levels
* Level 3: Terrace and taverns accessed by the *Via Biberatica[[2]](#footnote-2)* (*fig. 2*)
* Level 4: Home to exotic spices and pepper
* Level 5: Administrative offices of Public Assistance
* Level 6: Ponds and fish connected to an aqueduct

This system gives us an idea of how the marketplace would have functioned, serving both commercial and civic purposes. Ancient writers ([Mart. 5.59](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/martial_epigrams_book09.htm)) also describe typical Roman shops, which consisted of wide entrances, small displays out the front and a larger selection of goods inside [@BroekaertandZuiderheok: 322]. Much like our own modern supermarkets, this demonstrates the evolution of the marketplace and may explain how we have come to use our shopping malls today.

## Dating Trajan’s Market

Trajan’s Market was the name given to this multi-story complex during the excavations of the 1920’s and 30’s [@Lancaster1: 25-26]. It has been assumed that the market was an extension of Trajan’s Forum, echoing the semi-circular shape seen in the *exedra[[3]](#footnote-3)* of the forum (*fig. 3*). Although no ancient writers directly refer to the market, they do describe Trajan’s forum. Such references can be viewed in conjunction with archaeological evidence like brick stamps (small impressions on the surface of a brick, often containing a builder or person’s trademark) to help us gain a greater understanding of the historical context of the building.

### Written Evidence

Ancient evidence for the dating of Trajan’s Market is quite ambiguous. On one hand, we have the Roman poet Martial ([Mart. 7.61](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/martial_epigrams_book07.htm)) and Roman historian Aurelius Victor ([Aur. Vict.](http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/victor.caes.html" \l "13.5) *[Caes](http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/victor.caes.html" \l "13.5)*[. 13.5](http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/victor.caes.html" \l "13.5)), who suggest that Emperor Domitian, a predecessor of Trajan, was responsible for the planning and initial construction of the forum. On the other hand we have the Greek geographer Pausanias ([Paus. 5.12.6](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0160%3Abook%3D5%3Achapter%3D12%3Asection%3D6)) and Roman statesmen Cassius Dio ([Cass. Dio 68.16.3](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius_Dio/68*.html#16.3); [69.4.1](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius_Dio/69*.html#4)) who attribute the entire construction to Trajan (*fig. 4*).

### Brick Stamps

The dating of Trajan’s Market is better represented through archaeological evidence. Across the complex you can find brick stamps, which contain symbols and words that offer information about the context of the building. The presence of Domitianic (used during the time of Emperor Domitian) stamps within the complex has caused modern historians to question who built the markets. It has been suggested that the use of Domitianic bricks in the construction of the markets was because of Domitian’s untimely death, which resulted in a stockpile of left over bricks [@Lancaster1: 25-26].

The brick stamp of T. Camudenus Atimetus further assist us with the dating of the markets. Located at the base of the complex, the stamp, as well as other stamps bearing his name, call Atimetus the assistant of Trajan’s wife, Empress Plotina [@Lancaster1: 30-32]. This indicates that Trajan did in fact commission the market, as the location of the stamp at the base of the building and references to Atimetus and Plotina place the complex firmly in the Trajanic period.

## Roman Innovation

Trajan’s Market is one of the best surviving brickfaced monuments from Imperial Rome. The markets are an excellent example of Roman building innovation, using advanced techniques like bonding and concrete vaulting. By looking at how and where these techniques were used, we can gain a greater understanding of how Roman builders and architects managed to construct such large building complexes.

### Bonding

Bonding was a technique used by the Romans to level, stabilize and even decorate walls with brickwork, through specific organisation and placement of bricks. One of the earliest examples of this technique can be found at the Colosseum. Bonding courses of *bipedalis*[[4]](#footnote-4) at Trajan’s Market appear alongside construction features like vaults, arches, windows and floor levels [@Lancaster2: 283-285]. The use of bonding in such places suggests that this method was used to increase the strength and stability of the complex. *Bipedalis* courses that are bonded also appear yellow in colour and are often thicker than the average brick-faced wall, making them stand out. A fine example of this can be seen found on the ground floor of the hemicycle, where you can clearly see where the yellow pattern of courses meets the travertine arches [@Lancaster2: 287] (*fig. 5*).

### Concrete Vaulting

The magnificent *Aula[[5]](#footnote-5)* located on level 4 of the market, demonstrates the success of Roman concrete vaulting. The magnificent two-story hall consists of six groin vaults (the x-shaped intersection of two archways) supported by 14 travertine piers (*fig. 6*), which are further flanked by *tabernae* on either side [@Lancaster3: 772]. The use of groin vaulting appears in the Aula more than anywhere else in the Markets, adding to the significance of the space. Apollodorus revolutionized groin vaulting by swapping solid walls for travertine supports, which maximised the natural light and spaciousness of the complex [@Ressler]. The Aula reflects the technical ingenuity of the Roman people and offers us a unique look into the visual culture of imperial Rome.

## Who’s the Boss?

When it comes to building complex structures like Trajan’s Market, questions arise about how the Romans managed to plan, organize and execute their elaborate constructions. This leads us to the subject of architects and builders, particularly the role of construction teams and the effectiveness of building laws.

### Architect v. Builder

The relationship between architect and builder is an indicator of the success of imperial building programs. Although we do not know exactly who or how the jobs were assigned, Roman author and architect, Vitruvius offers us some clues. Vitruvius designed and supervised his own projects ([Vitr. 5.1.6](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0073%3Abook%3D5%3Achapter%3D1%3Asection%3D6)), however he suggests that in some cases, architects would take the advice of workers ([Vitr. 6.8.10](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0073%3Abook%3D6%3Achapter%3D8%3Asection%3D10)) Whilst this implies that architects were typically the supervisors of a site, it also shows flexibility within the Roman workforce and positive exchanges between builders and architects. In terms of building safety, it was the responsibility of the *redemptor[[6]](#footnote-6)* or the client, not the architect, to make sure a structure was stable [@Lancaster3: 764]. The *probatio[[7]](#footnote-7)* of Trajan’s Market would have been critical a position, as he must be certain that all levels and elements (stairs, vaults, walls) were safe and secure for the public [@Lancaster3: 765].

### Laws

By looking at legal documents, we are able to see how the administration process assisted the development of buildings like Trajan’s Markets. According to ancient sources, building codes regulated the construction of both public and private structures ([Frontin.](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Frontinus/De_Aquis/text*.html" \l "2.119) *[Aq](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Frontinus/De_Aquis/text*.html" \l "2.119)*[. 2.119](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Frontinus/De_Aquis/text*.html" \l "2.119)). The Digest of Justinian, a compendium of writings about Roman law under the Emperor Justinian I, describes the roles of Roman *redemptors*, demonstrating the importance of planning and regulation for buildings in Rome ([*Dig*. 50.8.2.11](https://droitromain.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/Anglica/D50_Scott.htm#VIII); [50.10.2.1](https://droitromain.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/Anglica/D50_Scott.htm#X)). The contracts - [*stipulatio*](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA*/Obligationes.html) and [*locatio* *conductio*](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA*/Locatio.html) were most common during this time, with the former (@Long2: 818] referring to an oral agreement and the latter [@Long1: 710], a more detailed arrangement, which outlined skill, labour and cost. Without these laws, Romans would not have been able to co-ordinate and construct grand-scale projects like, Trajan’s Markets.

### Construction Teams

Both written and archaeological evidence indicates that groups of different builders constructed Trajan’s Market. According to ancient writers ([Stat. *Silv*. 4.3.40-53](https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/StatiusSilvaeBkIV.php#anchor_Toc317239405); [Vitr. 7.1.3](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0073%3Abook%3D7%3Achapter%3D1%3Asection%3D3); [7.3.10](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0073%3Abook%3D7%3Achapter%3D3%3Asection%3D10)), builders generally worked in small groups called *decuri*a [@BroekaertandZuiderhoek: 328]. Trajan’s Market would have required several building teams in order to tackle such a grand space. Fluctuations between the heights of *bipedalis* courses along the hemicycle facade indicate that more than one building team constructed Trajan’s Market. If you look closely at the hemicycle walls, you can find disruptions in the brick bond patterns, suggesting that masons would have worked side by side, regularly bringing the walls back into alignment. Today, masons call these discrepancies ‘pigs,’ an interesting name for an adjusted brick piece [@Lancaster2: 291].

## Are We Romans?

We can find many similarities between ancient Romans and ourselves. From our love of shops, to our strict building codes, it is clear that many of our modern ideas have come from ancient concepts. Trajan’s Market offers the best of imperial architecture, providing us with some of the greatest examples of Roman innovation and design. By examining building techniques along with written evidence, we gain a greater appreciation of Trajan’s Market, as we see how Roman architects overcame the difficulties faced in building a multi-story complex into the side of a hill.

So what do you say?

Come and visit Trajan’s Market today!

1. Shops [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The street that ran from the northern to southern end of the level [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A room with seats, where people would sit and chat. Mostly found in ancient Greek and Roman buildings [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Large Roman bricks [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Central courtyard or great hall [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Contractor [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Person responsible for final inspection of the site [↑](#footnote-ref-7)