

### The town and the museum ❷

The ancient town was surrounded by a boundary wall made of square limestone blocks, built between the 3rd and 2nd century B.C., of which just a few remnants survive. The most noteworthy can be seen in the area between Palazzo Fiumi-Roncalli, inside which is the only surviving town gate, Via Sant' Apollinare, the church of Santa Maria Maggiore and Via Sant' Agnese.

The town is laid out on a series of terraces and at the heart of it is the large square on which the so-called temple of Minerva ❶ stands. Sometimes taken to be the forum, this area is in actual fact a large sanctuary.

The highest terrace ❷ coincides with the area of the cathedral of San Rufino, inside which, at the base of the bell-tower, is a cistern dating back to the second half of the 2nd century B.C. Outside, along the north side, is a large terracing wall. The theatre ❸, of which just a few remains survive between Via del Torrione and Vicolo Bovi, also stood here.

A short distance away, the plan of the amphitheatre ❹ (early 1st century A.D.) is retraced by the conformation of the houses by Piazza Matteotti.

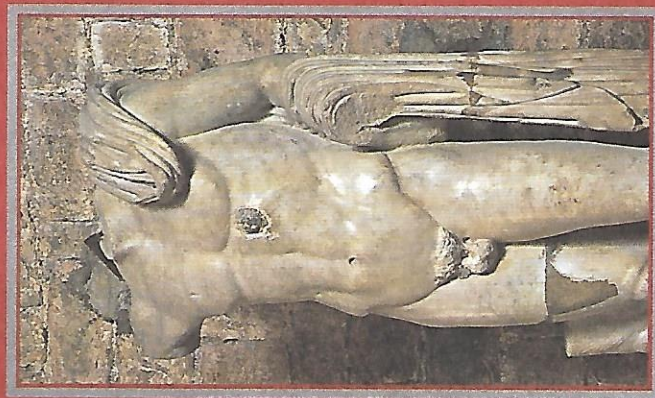
In the cathedral garden there is a concrete ruin in the shape of a tower: it is the nucleus of a funeral monument ❺ from the early 1st century A.D., inside which is a burial chamber with a barrel vault.

Under the apse of the church of Santa Maria Maggiore are several rooms ❻ with mosaic floors and walls covered with a refined pictorial decoration of coloured bands embellished with ornamental motifs. Nowadays it is only possible to make out two small scenes: Apollo's chariot drawn by griffins and the Cyclops Polyphemus in love with the nymph Galatea. There is also a wealth of graffiti on the walls, both in Greek and in Latin. A tempting suggestion has been made that these structures are the remains of the house of Propertius. In actual fact this building is datable to the early years of the 1st century A.D., about twenty years after the poet died.

# Museums in Umbria

Museo archeologico e Foro Romano

Assisi



REGIONE DELL'UMBRIA

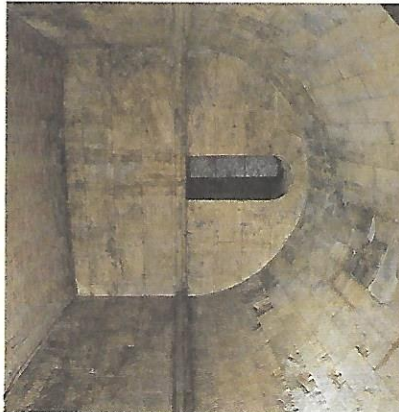


## History of the town

Perched on a spur of Mount Subasio, in a commanding position over the Umbrian valley, Assisi was a flourishing centre in ancient Umbria, which, in the administrative division of Italy imposed by Augustus at the end of the 1st century B.C., corresponded to region VI. This region, bounded to the west by the river Tiber and extending eastwards as far as the Adriatic, also occupied the northern part of present-day Marche. Its population was differentiated in terms of language and culture from the neighbouring Etruscans, who were settled on the west of the Tiber, with whom, however, it was on close terms, particularly as far as trade relations were concerned.

The town must have been established as early as the 6th century B.C. From the early 3rd century B.C. it was probably linked to

*San Rafino cistern*



Rome by a treaty that committed it to supplying military forces and in 90 B.C. it became a municipium. Shortly after 41 B.C. part of its territory was confiscated and handed over to neighbouring Spello, which had just been raised to the rank of colony. In the same period, one of the greatest Latin poets, Propertius, was born in Assisi. In the late ancient age, between the 5th and 6th century A.D., it was occupied by the Goths, first by Theodoric and then, after an interval of several years, during which it fell into Byzantine hands, by Totila. At the end of the 6th century it became part of the Longobard Duchy of Spoleto. In the 12th century it established itself as a free Commune and engaged in continuous wars against Perugia. In the following century, with continued changing fortunes, it entered the sphere of papal dominion.

*Funerary monument*



## Details on the collection

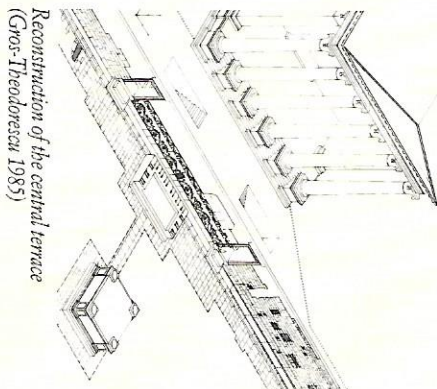
The archaeological collection is housed in the crypt of the former church of San Nicolò, dating back to the 11th century, and in the area deriving from the excavations of the central terrace. The first nucleus of the collection dates back to the period between 1790 and 1794, when some forty Roman inscriptions from the town were exhibited inside the colonnade of the temple "of Minerva".

Further acquisitions were made in the course of the 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th century thanks to the Propertian Academy and, above all, to private donors. This increase in size made it necessary to move some of the artefacts to other premises in the Commune, until in 1890 the entire collection was housed in the convent of Sant'Antonio di Padova. The establishment of a proper civic museum, which was particularly strongly advocated by the Propertian Academy,

*Museum interior*

dates back to 1904. In 1934 the collection was moved from the convent of Sant'Antonio to the crypt of San Nicolò, which for this express purpose had been entirely rearranged and linked up to the archaeological area below the Piazza del Comune.

The collection includes most of the inscriptions found in the ancient town and in the surrounding district. Other examples, now in the museum in Perugia or still located in their original context, are represented in the form of casts. The lapidarium also contains a large number of locally-made cinerary urns and several large-scale statues that were part of the decoration of the town's principal public buildings: unfortunately, the lack of information relating to their discovery makes it impossible to specify their original location and function.



*Reconstruction of the central terrace (Gros-Theodoresca 1885)*





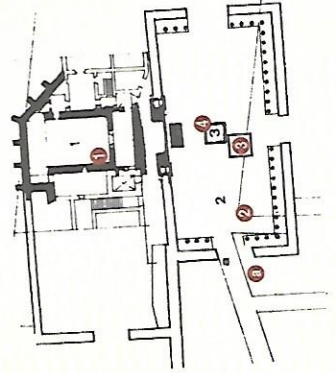
Temple "of Minerva"

### The central terrace

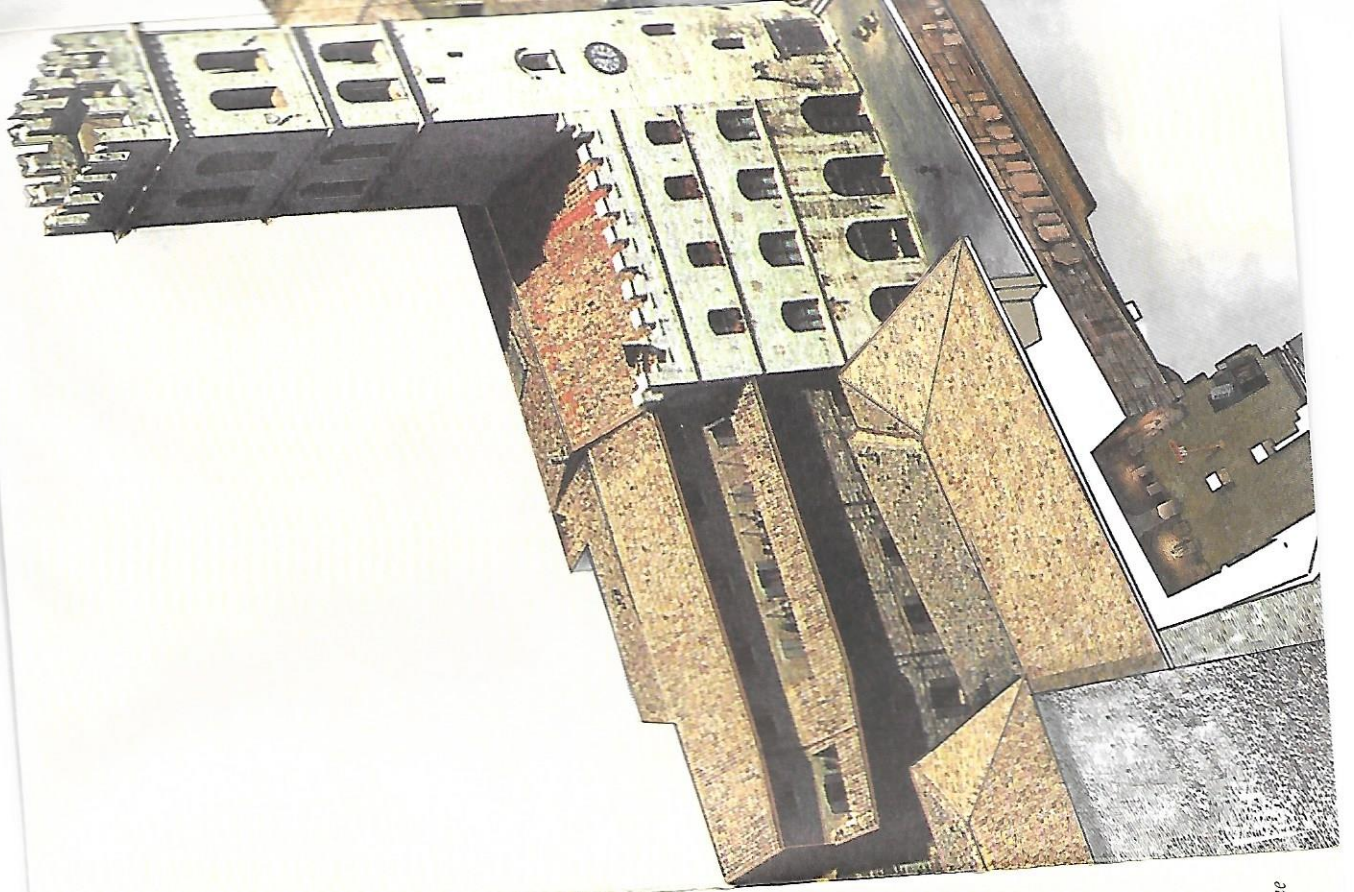
The best-preserved ancient monument in Assisi, the so-called temple of Minerva, dominates the north side of Piazza del Comune. With the front elevation wholly preserved, it is one of the most intact examples of Roman sacred architecture. It has six Corinthian columns at the front and these rest directly on the entrance steps: this highly unusual solution was adopted due to lack of space. The architrave shows signs of the holes that held the bronze letters of a monumental inscription bearing the names of the men who built it: Gnaeus Caesius Tiro and Titus Caesius Priscus, supreme magistrates of the municipium (*quattuorviri quinquennales*) around 30 B.C. The temple stands on a terrace supported by a wall almost six metres high to which, as the numerous holes indicate, a sumptuous bronze decoration was originally fixed. A long inscription records the names of those who supervised the works: the supreme town magistrates (*quattuorviri*) and the

members of the sacerdotal college (*quinqueviri*) which officiated in the temple itself. Built into the wall are the two symmetrical staircases that linked the temple to the square in front, which was surrounded by columns and entirely covered in limestone slabs, on which an inscription in bronze letters recorded those responsible for the paving (first half of the 1st century B.C.). On an axis with the temple, close to the terracing wall, there was a platform with seats, probably reserved for the use of the *quattuorviri* and the *quinqueviri*, who may have occupied them on the occasion of special celebrations. Opposite the platform, in the centre of the square, stands a plinth with an inscription. It once served to support, between four columns placed at the corners, statues of the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux (early 1st century A.D.), the sons of Jove. The entire sacred complex may have been dedicated to these gods.

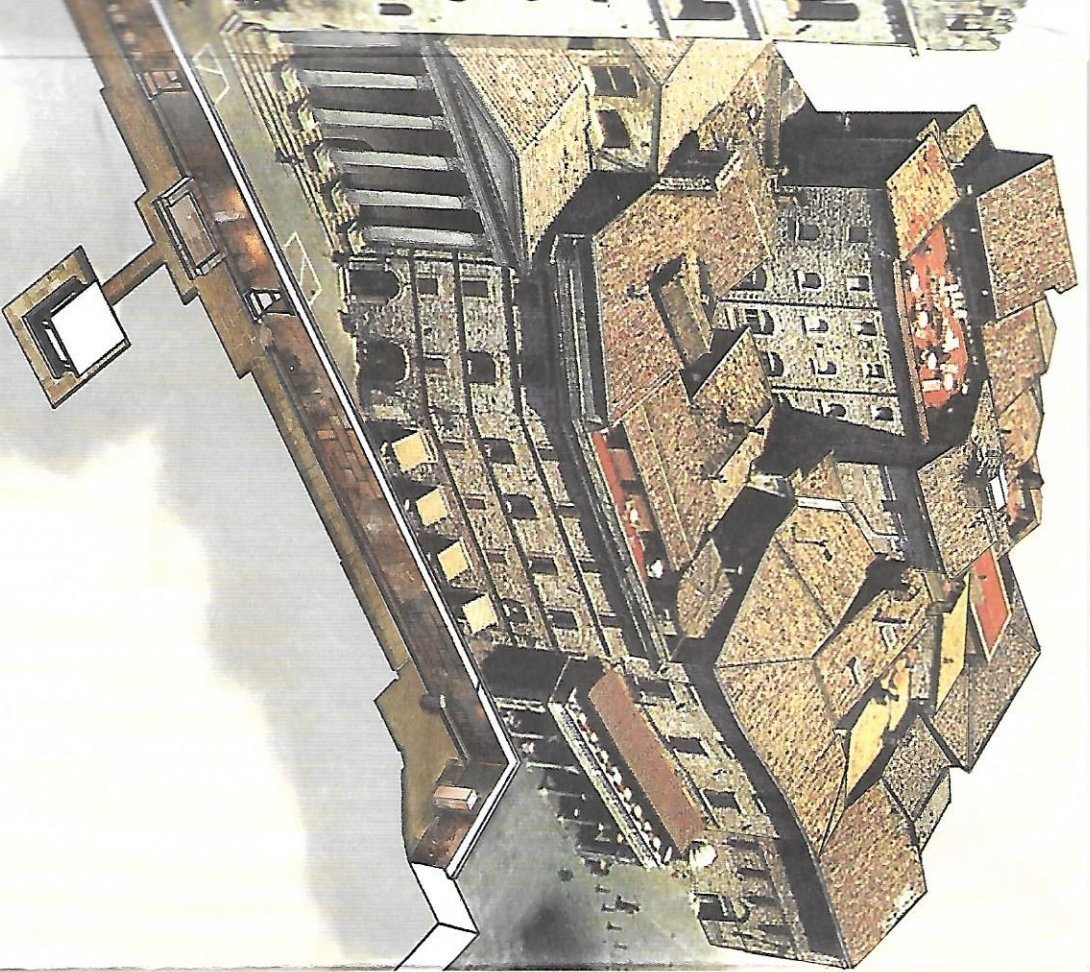
- 1 Temple "of Minerva"
- 2 Colonnaded Terrace
- 3 Plinth of the Dioscuri
- 4 Platform
- 5 Museum Entrance



Plan of the excavations beneath Piazza del Comune







## Propertius

Many Umbrian towns lay claim to the credit of having been the birthplace of the Latin poet Propertius, but that honour should almost certainly go to Assisi. In fact the largest number of testimonies relating to the *Propertii* family have been found in this town. Moreover, there is an explicit reference to Assisi in the poet's own verses, making him the first writer to mention the town: "on the hill, / the walls made much more famous by your great genius".

Propertius was probably born around 50 B.C. into a family of undisputed significance, whose members filled important public offices in the town from the late 2nd century B.C.

When he was still a child, his father lost much of the family's land and, following the confiscations made shortly after 41 B.C., these estates became part of the territory of the colony of Spello, which had been established shortly before to

resettle the veterans of the civil wars.

This setback, although considerable, could not have been altogether ruinous, since Propertius, like many other young men from the most important Italic families, arrived in Rome around 29 B.C. to take up a political career. However, his love for poetry distracted him from this scheme. Shortly after 28 B.C., having published his first book of poetry, he came into contact with Maecenas, an eminent figure who was a trusted adviser of the Emperor Augustus, under whose protection an important literary circle had gathered, where he met the greatest poets of the day including Horace, Virgil and Ovid. The exact date of his death is unknown. It probably occurred shortly after 16 B.C., when the poet was little more than thirty years old.

Propertius left four books containing about a hundred poems, most of which were inspired by his troubled love for Cynthia, a dissolute woman and lover of the arts who died shortly before the poet.



"House of Propertius", fresco, detail