

Rome metro diggers plot a route through history

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Virginia Raggi, left, mayor of Rome, visits the metro C Line extension site
STEFANO MONTESI/GETTY IMAGES

On a traffic island in the middle of the busy Piazza Venezia, engineers and archeologists have been drilling to bring up core samples of earth from 20 metres below Rome. They are the advance guard for the city's [new subway C Line](#) which is snaking through the world's densest concentration of buried Roman ruins.

The drilling is the crucial moment when it becomes clear if the line is about to hit an ancient villa or imperial palace.

The cylindrical samples, a mix of black volcanic material, sand and silt with their depth indicated, were laid out in cases as they emerged from the ground. Amid the crumbling earth a chunk of ancient-looking stone caught the eye. At eight metres the drill had also cut through a slab of travertine. "Probably Roman," said one of the archeologists.

The C Line is arriving thanks to two massive boring machines toiling 25 metres under ground which drilled past the Colosseum last year in the direction of Piazza Venezia, the heart of Rome's historic centre, where a train station is urgently needed to alleviate the traffic choking the city.

Digging the tunnel has been the easy part since it travels below any ancient remains. The trouble is building stations, with one along the line already requiring an additional museum to house 40,000 artefacts unearthed at the site, while another was built around an ancient Roman barracks.

A further obstacle came when cash ran out last year, [leaving the drills marooned under the Roman Forum](#), 200 metres short of Piazza Venezia, until cheques were hurriedly signed by the town hall. The drills should now arrive in May. Engineers know they could stumble on to priceless artefacts at any moment. During preliminary excavations in Piazza Venezia a decade ago, a massive auditorium built by the emperor Hadrian for poetry readings came to light, albeit conveniently situated to one side of the Piazza, meaning the new station could be fitted around it.

“In 2014 heritage authorities gave final approval for the station, otherwise we would not be here,” said Andrea Sciotti, the head of the project.

The spot where the travertine and cement was found can be carefully excavated, he said, with any Roman remains discovered — probably including a stretch of the ancient Flaminian Way — removed for inclusion in the museum display cases planned for the station. This week, drilling for core samples was also taking place at opposite ends of the piazza where new plans call for the addition of extra station exits leading directly into two museums.

Engineers who had removed cobblestones from the street to insert their drill next to Palazzo Venezia were bringing up clay and silt.

Scouring the samples, Mr Sciotti saw no sign of Roman marble or masonry. Smiling, he said: “That’s one up for the engineers.”

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/rome-metro-diggers-plot-a-route-through-history-w6v3j2phr>