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Mundus. Fundus**The pit that connects the subterranean and the celestial**

Abstract

The paper analyses the form of the mundus as a foundation pit of the Roman city and, at the same time, as an architectural dimension capable of establishing a connection between the underworld of the dead and the overworld of the living. The deep cavity with its circular section is the formal translation of both the act of urban creation that transforms chaos into cosmos and the necessary union between earth and sky.

By attempting to unify the two pits, which are in any case responsible for the transition from the vain to the concrete, and by describing the ancient rituals of propitiation connected to them, the book aims to argue that through Architecture, and therefore through the manifestation of form, human life can aspire to eternity.

Keywords

Mundus — Underground — Celestial

Mundo nomen impositum est ab eo mundo qui supra nos est: forma enim eius est, ut ex his qui intravere cognoscere potui, adsimilis illae¹.

Catone, *Commentaria iuris civilis*.

The world below and the world above, corresponding to the two dimensions of the subterranean and the celestial, of the same form, one the mirror of the other – as argued by Cato in his *Commentaria iuris civilis* and later reported by Festus in *De verborum significatu* (2nd century AD, L. 44, 14-21) – are connected through the cavity, in the sense of a passage, of the *mundus*.

The word, in spite of its much debated etymology², corresponds, therefore, to the element capable of connecting the two spheres of darkness and light, and of allowing the crossing from one to the other space. In this sense, we support the thesis of the Italian glottologist Vittore Pisani, who, taking up the aforementioned definition of Cato, argues that the underground *mundus* and the *mundus* above our heads, besides having the same form, are indicated by the same word. The lemma *mundus* does not split into two homophonic voices, one indicating the earth and the other the vault of heaven, but corresponds to a single word that signifies the two opposites of earth and sky, and is embodied in the element that connects them.

The word *mundus* actually represents the passage from the subterranean to the celestial and vice versa, i.e. the vertical connection between the two dimensions of below and above. Therefore, the *mundus* can lead to the underworld and, at the same time, thought of as upside down, correspond to the opening that turns towards the vault of heaven. In other words, there is a reciprocal relationship between the two dimensions: the *mundus* from

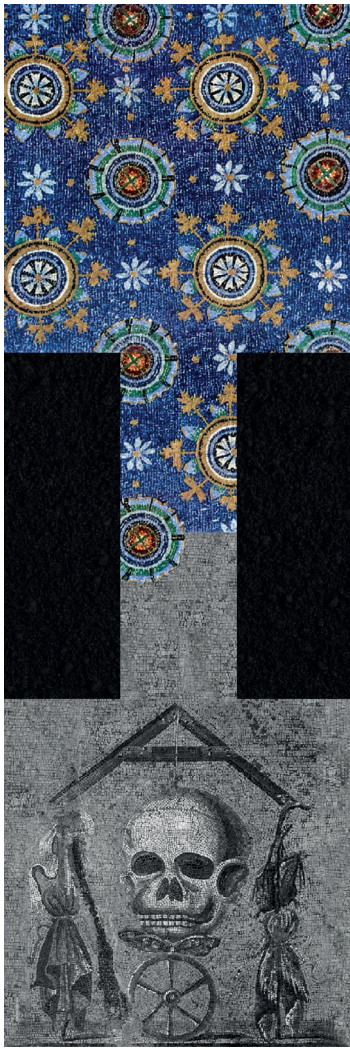


Fig. 1

Collage. Mosaic from the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna + Memento Mori mosaic found in Pompeii and housed in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples.

the depths leads to the world of the living and, conversely, from the light it leads to the darkness of the abyss (Georgescu 2019, pp. 206-223).

The form that materialises this connection corresponds to that of the pit. The French linguist Joseph Vendryes related the word *mundus* to the word *fundus*, “bottom, earth” (1914, pp. 305-310).

This pit has an elongated section, and on the side of the earth’s bottom its construction reaches *ad solidum*, that is to the layer of rock under the layer of soil, while on the side towards the sky, it has the possibility of opening or closing through the stone called *manalis lapis*. Its section, given the removable stone cover, must have been rather small, probably no larger than the mouth of a well.

However, ancient sources distinguish two different *mundus*: the city’s foundation pit and the *Mundus Cereris* pit, which connects the world of the dead with that of the living and which is not necessarily dug during the urban construction ritual.

The two cavities have often been confused and, consequently, homologated. The misunderstanding arose from the geographical location of the foundation pit of the city of Rome. Plutarch (1st century AD, L. 11, 1), probably believing that the Rome of the Tarquins was the Rome of the origins, assimilates the *Mundus Cereris* located in the Comitium inside the Roman Forum to the foundation pit dug by Romulus on the Palatine Hill, as reported by Ovid (9 AD, L. 4, 810-24).

The circular pit mentioned by Plutarch, consecrated to the Mani and excavated in the sanctuary of Ceres, *in the place that is now called Comitium*, is overlooked by a brick construction – still visible today – 2 metres high and 4.45 metres in diameter, which, through a small entrance, gives access to an underground area that was once embellished with polychrome marble. The trench, most likely dating back to the Severan period because it was located between the Rostra and the Arch of Septimius Severus, was, as Plutarch again pointed out, considered to be the centre of the *pomerium*, that is the sacred furrow constituting the city’s boundary, drawn with a plough pulled by an ox and a cow.

According to Ovid, however, the city of Rome originated on the Palatine Hill, so the foundation *mundus* must have been located there. This theory is, moreover, confirmed by archaeologist Andrea Carandini’s discovery of a wall dating back to the eighth century B.C. at the foot of the hill, which has reopened the debate on the dating of Rome’s foundation, giving new strength to the ancient vulgate that indicates 21 April 753 B.C. as the birth of the city. Carandini (2006) believes that on the *Cermalus*, the area in front of the later Temple of Victory, was therefore positioned the foundation pit of the city of Rome, corresponding to a tomb on which stood an altar.

The *mundus*, as a foundation pit, was dug in the centre of the new city after the urban boundary (*pomerium*) had been marked out and at the intersection of the two main axes of the decumanus and the cardo, which divided the settlement area into four. The excavation operation was part of a ritual sequence that inaugurated the new place of habitation by imitating, to a certain extent, the primordial act of the creation of the world. As Mircea Eliade argues, «when one takes possession of a given territory, that is, *when one begins to explore it, one performs rituals that symbolically repeat the act of creation*; the uncultivated area is first of all “cosmized”, then inhabited» (1968, p. 23). In other words, the excavation for the *mundus* repeats the cosmogonic act, since «every construction is an absolute beginning, that is, it tends to restore

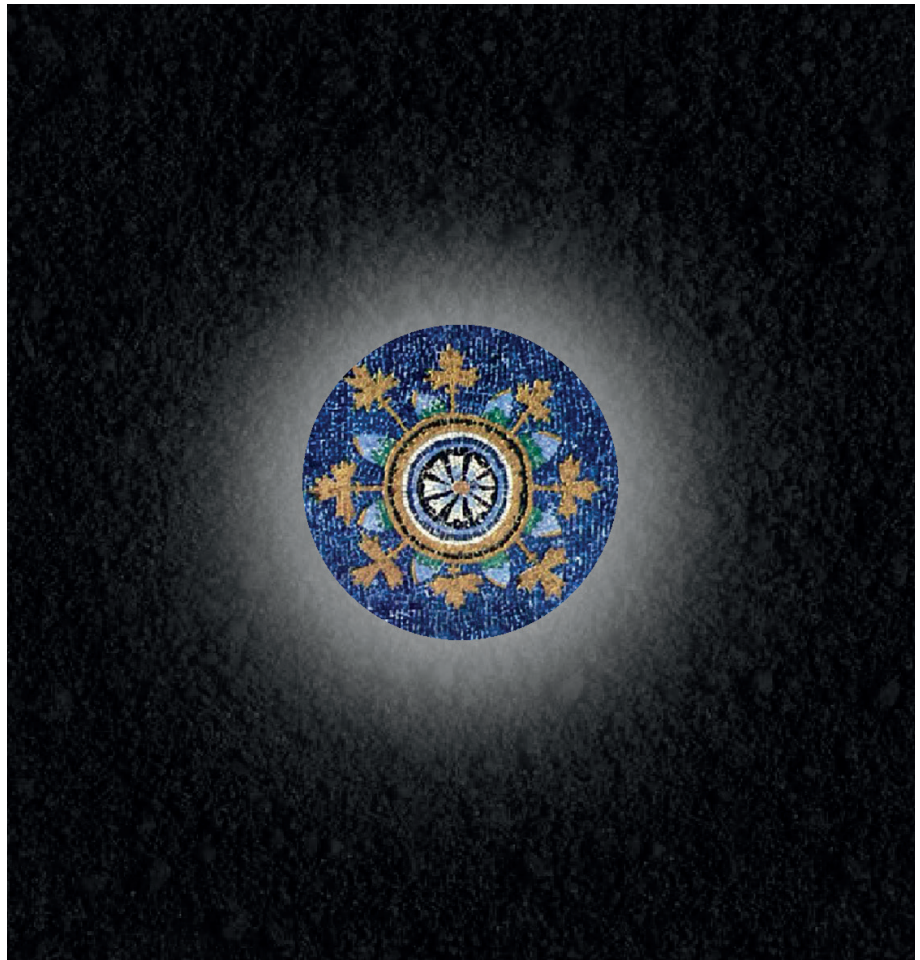


Fig. 2
Collage. Section of the *mundus*
towards the sky.

the initial instant, the fullness of the present that contains no trace of history. A construction is a new organisation of the world and of life» (Eliade, 1968, p. 23). Ordering a territory by tracing its boundaries and structure achieves the transition from the unmanifested to the manifest or, to put it in cosmological terms, from chaos to cosmos. The ritual of urban construction gives the territory a form that makes it real. In this scenario, the act of creation takes place at the precise central urban point. The pit, as *Umbilicus Urbis*, is placed in the centre of the city, which is the zone of the sacred par excellence, and access to this nucleus is equivalent to a consecration, an initiation. It is on and around the *mundus* that the city is founded.

In contrast, another ritual was linked to the *mundus* as the connecting pit between the world below and the world above. In *Simboli della tradizione occidentale*, Julius Evola (1977), taking up Mircea Eliade's studies, refers to the *mundus* as *Mundus Cereris*, that is the pit that separates and at the same time connects the world of the dead and the world of the living. The *Mundus Cereris*, covered by *manalis lapis*, "stone of the Mani", was uncovered three days a year when it was said that *mundus patet*, "the world is open". During those days the secrets of the religion of the Mani, the gods of death, were brought to light and all public activities had to be suspended. As reported by Ateio Capitone (5 AD, L. 7), the three opening days of the *mundus* corresponded to August 24 (the day following the Volcanalia festival of August 23 and preceding the Opiconsivia agricultural festival of August 25, linked to the end of the harvest and, consequently, to the deity Ceres), October 5 (three days before the Nine of October, linked to the *Ieiunium Cereris*, "the fast of Ceres") and, finally, November 8 (six days before the Ides of November and possibly associated with *triticum*, a variety of spelt sown in November).

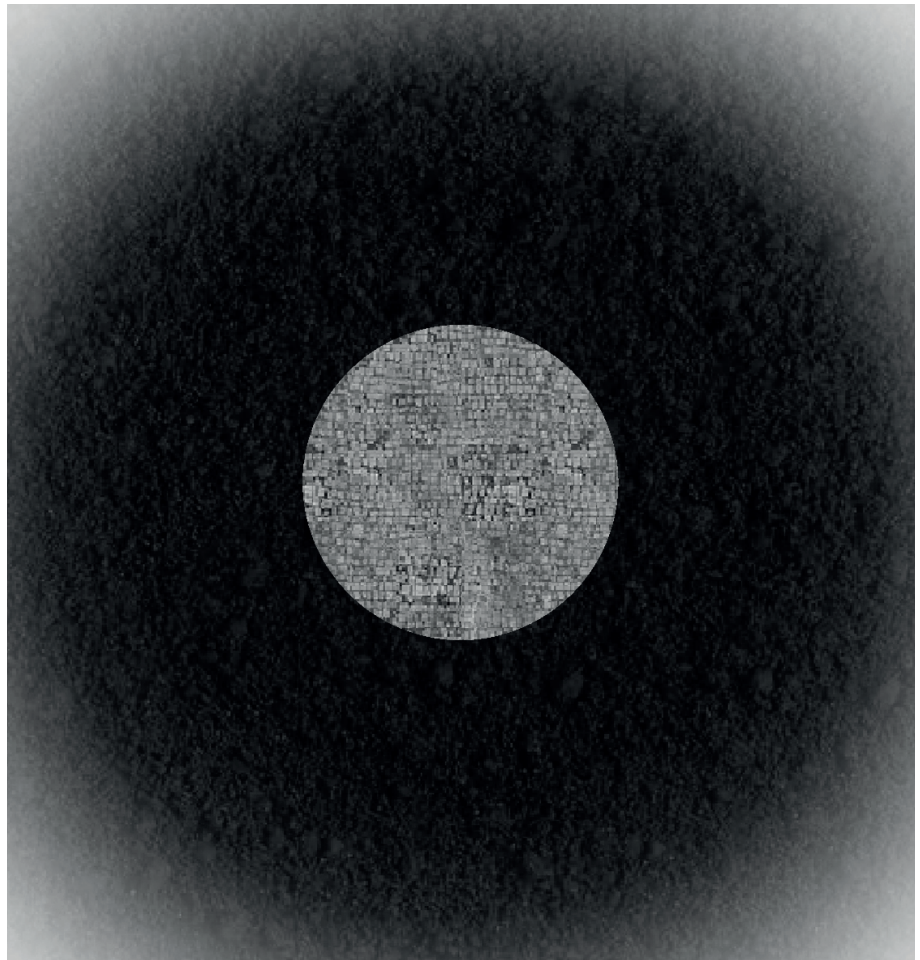


Fig. 3
Collage. Section of the *mundus*
towards the earth.

The *mundus* has, in this case, the capacity to unite the two worlds of below and above only when the stone covering it is moved. The “cover”, as Giorgio Agamben argues in *Quando la casa brucia* (2020a), gives the *mundus* the role of a door that, unlike the door-site corresponding to a constantly open passageway, thus a threshold of passage, can open and close separating one space from another. The two dimensions of earth and sky are therefore able to be independent, except for the three days a year when the barriers between the dead and the living are broken and primordial chaos is re-enacted. At that precise moment, time is suspended, its law is annulled, a coexistence of past and present is realised.

The rite, certainly chthonic in character, clearly also has agricultural values that strongly recall the original meaning of Ceres as the Great Mother.

The ritual has also often been compared to the operation of digging and invoking the dead performed by Ulysses in the 11th book of the *Odyssey* (Vinci 1995). The mythical hero, who goes to Hades to question Tiresias, the Theban vate holding the golden sceptre, digs a pit, pours wine, honey, water and white flour into it, prays to the souls of the dead and slaughters sacrificial victims, causing their blood to drip into the cavity. The gesture makes the screaming souls of the dead emerge from the dark depths and crowd around the pit, just as they do during the three days of *mundus patet*, during which the souls of the dead can return to the world of the living.

In this specific case, the tendency is to homologate the two pits. The excavation, whatever its function, with its form achieves the transition from the vain to the concrete. «In the centre is manifested the passage from the profane to the sacred, from the ephemeral and the illusory to reality and eternity, from death to life, from man to divinity» (Eliade, 1968, p. 36).

Moreover, in the writings of Plutarch and Ovid we learn that, once the pit had been dug, some first fruits were thrown into it – actually Ovid claims that the pit was filled in again and an altar representing a *novus focus* was erected over it, while Plutarch writes about a completely empty underground space. The act of casting suggests a connection, and perhaps a unification, between the city's foundation pit and the pit dedicated to Ceres (*Mundus Cereris*), which connects the two worlds of the subterranean and the celestial. The first fruits are related to Ceres who, before being associated with the Greek Demeter, is, as Varro reports, the Goddess of growth who is identified with the mother earth – «Nec sine causa Terram eandem appellabant (maiores nostri) matrem et Cererem» (37 BC, L. 3, 1-5). It seems possible, therefore, to hypothesise the existence of a link between Ceres and the construction of a new foundation and with the world of the dead, whether we think of her in her more ancient guise as the Goddess of growth or, with a Greek interpretation, in the guise of Demeter, the Goddess of death and the Underworld.

Many ancient sources do not pose the problem of distinguishing the foundation pit from the pit of Ceres, making the *mundus* correspond synthetically to the totality of the dimensions. For Festus *mundus appellatur coelum, terra, mare et aer*, for Varro, quoted by Macrobius (430, L. 1, 16-18), *mundus cum patet, deorum tristium atque inferum quasi ianua patet*, and again, for Pliny the Elder the *kòsmos* of the Greeks *nos eum a perfecta absolutaque elegantia mundum* (77-78 AD, L. 2, 1.3-1.4).

The unification of the two pits can also be found in more recent studies. According to Mircea Eliade (1968, p. 31), the Roman *mundus*, which was traced around the place where a city was to be founded, constitutes the meeting point between the underworld and the earthly world. Or, as Ludovico Quaroni observes in *La Torre di Babele*, Roman cities were «square and divided into four by two main roads, the *cardo* and the *decumanus maximus*, laid out straight and at right angles to each other between the four gates, or rather between the only four points where the sacred boundary line, the *pomerium*, was interrupted. At the intersection of the *cardo* and the *decumanus* was the heart of the city, materialised by the *mundus*, an opening in the ground into which the founders poetically threw samples of the products of their homeland and which was reopened every year with propitiatory rites» (1967, p. 152).

Openness, as Agamben argues again this time in *Gaia e Ctonia* (2020b), a work dedicated to the two representations of the earth, the supernal and the infernal, unites «the present and the past and it is through the relationship between these two worlds that it becomes possible to direct actions and find inspiration for the future». In other words, the two divinities need to coexist. Therefore, civilisation, in order not to end up at the mercy of fear, cannot remove the concept of death, since the terror of the end «can only be cured by those who rediscover the memory of their dual abode, who remember that human is only that life in which Gaia and Chthonia remain inseparable and united».

The necessary marriage between earth and sky can only be expressed through architecture. In this sense, the connection between the dimension of the dead and the dimension of the living is expressed in the architectural form of the elongated trench with a circular section. The *mundus*, whose form seems appropriate because it seems to represent the uninterrupted thread that connects the two worlds below and above, is created by excavating, that is subtracting material from the solid earth to generate a void.

The technique, rather than a construction method, is equivalent to the representation of architecture as the essence of form and volume.

The pit, through the purity of its form, gives concreteness to the passage from the world of the underworld to the earthly world, and vice versa, allowing the present world to find inspiration for the future. The form of the *mundus*, not useful but necessary, is able to stage the coexistence of death and life, and to demonstrate that through Architecture human life can aspire to eternity.

Notes

¹ English translation: «The *mundus* has been given this name because of that *mundus* which is above us: for its form, as I have learned from those who have entered it, is similar to that [of the heavenly *mundus*].»

² The Ernout-Meillet Etymological Dictionary of the Latin Language, while reporting a number of hypotheses concerning the origin and meaning of the lemma, maintains that the etymology of *mundus non liquet*.

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