

X.—*A Revised History of the Column of Phocas in the Roman Forum.*

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Read May 16, 1889.

It may be of interest to the Society if I submit to its notice some observations made last year, which render it necessary to re-write the history of one of the best known monuments of Rome.

The monument, which for fifty-six years has been called the Column of Phocas, was formerly, when nothing but the pillar itself was seen above ground, the subject of much curiosity and speculation among the visitors of the Forum. The "nameless column with the buried base"^a was thought by some to be the sole relic of a great temple or other public building. By others it had been conjectured to be part of the famous bridge by which Caligula united his palace on the Palatine with the temple of Capitoline Jupiter. In the early years of the century, among other works of the same kind, it was resolved to clear away the soil and *débris* from the substructure of this column; and on the 13th of March, 1813, the inscription of its pedestal, which had remained for centuries a few feet below the level of the ground, was uncovered, and revealed the fact that it had supported a statue dedicated by the exarch Smaragdus to the honour of a Caesar, whose name had been erased, but who, by other indications, could be no other than Phocas, an emperor of evil reputation, but to whom Rome and the world owe some gratitude for having been instrumental in dedicating the Pantheon to Christian worship, and so preserving from ruin one of the noblest and most original architectural works of antiquity.

As I propose to enter further into the history of the monument, it will be well to give the inscription in full. The want of the emperor's name, and other deficiencies arising from later damage or accident, are supplied within brackets: ^b

^a Byron, *Childe Harold*, canto iv.

^b I copy the restorations from Jordan's *Sylloge of Inscriptions of the Forum* (*Ephemeris Epigraph.* iii. 299); but I believe the words are the same as those restored by Fea in 1818 on the monument itself, the holes being filled up with stucco. Nibby, *Roma Antica*, ii., 151.

OPTIMO CLEMENTISS[IMO PIISSI]MOQVE
 PRINCIPI DOMINO [N. FOCAE IMPERAT]ORI
 PERPETVO A DŌ CORONATO TRIVMPHATORI
 SEMPER AVGVSTO
 SMARAGDVS EX PRAEPOS. SACRI PALATII
 AC PATRICIVS ET EXARCHVS ITALIAE
 DEVOTVS EIVS CLEMENTIAE
 PRO INNVMERABILIBVS PIETATIS EIVS
 BENEFICIIS ET PRO QVIETE
 PROCVRATA ITAL. AC CONSERVATA LIBERTATE
 HANC STA[TVAM MAIESTA]TIS EIVS
 AVRI SPLEND[ORE FVLGE]NTEM HVIC
 SVBLIMI COLV[M]NA[E AD] PERENNEM
 IPSIVS GLORIAM IMPOSVIT AC DEDICAVIT
 DIE PRIMA MENSIS AVGVSTI INDICT. VND.
 PĀ. PIETATIS EIVS ANNO QVINTO

It will be observed that the date furnished by this inscription is the 1st of August in an eleventh indiction, in the fifth year of the *principatus* of an emperor, and during the exarchate of Smaragdus. Smaragdus filled at two different times the office of exarch, first in the years 583 to 588, and afterwards from 602 to 609. The first period was in the reign of Mauricius, and did not comprise either an eleventh indiction or the fifth year of an emperor. The second period included the year 608, when the 1st of August fell in an eleventh indiction and in the fifth year from the consulate of the emperor Phocas.

On the discovery of this inscription the long debate about the origin of the monument was concluded. It was now regarded beyond doubt as a memorial erected in honour of Phocas; and the observation which was at once made, that the column itself, which formed the most ornamental portion of the design, was apparently borrowed from an earlier structure, was thought to harmonise well with the knowledge which had been obtained respecting the origin of the monument.

The archaeologist, Carlo Fea, who had charge of the excavation, appears to have been somewhat surprised to find that the work was to be attributed to so late an epoch. He concludes the announcement of his discovery with the remark that, when the column should be isolated and the entire monument visible from a proportionate distance, it would show that at a time hitherto believed to be

barbarous and destitute of art they had still not only some good sculptors and letter-cutters, but also architects who knew how to carry out the ideas, which were not without grandeur, of those who were in a position to give orders and to supply the means for executing them.^a Nibby, on the other hand, appears to have been more struck with the coarseness and inferiority of the lower part of the work, which appeared to him not unsuitable to the period to which it was now assigned. He characterises it as a pyramid of steps adorned with awkward mouldings, which contrast wonderfully with the style of the column, and show how wretched was the state of the arts at the beginning of the seventh century.^b Bunsen, now that its true character was found out, scarcely deigns to describe "the Phocas column, the painful and pitiful composition of plundered materials which forms the memorial of one of the most execrable tyrants of Byzantium."^c

Since these judgments were passed upon the character of this monument, it has naturally not been thought worth while to spend much time upon it. The sentence has gone forth,

"Non ragionam di lui, ma guarda e passa,"

and it does not appear to have struck any archaeologist since Fea as a matter of wonder that a work of so much grandeur and dignity, unique in its design among Roman monuments, and at the same time thoroughly classic in its form, and presenting withal some difficulty in its construction, should have been erected, amid the decaying ruins of the Forum, in the seventh century.

No one, I think, who for a moment reflects on the improbability to which I have just alluded will be surprised to hear that there is really no evidence at all that the Column of Phocas was erected in honour of that emperor.

As I was looking over the details of this monument in the spring of last year, a careful examination of the inscription convinced me that it was cut upon a surface from which an earlier epigraph had been erased. That a circumstance so

^a Quando questa colonna sarà tutta isolata fino al piano antico e alla proporzionata distanza, saremo persuasi che in quel tempo, già creduto barbaro e senza arti, questi ancora avevano de' buoni scultori e incisori di caratteri, e architetti che sapevano secondare le idee bastamente grandiose di chi poteva comandare e spendere. Fea, *Varietà di Notizie*, 67.

^b Una piramide di gradini, ornati di goffa modinatura, che contrastano mirabilmente collo stile della colonna e mostrano come miserabile fosse lo stato delle arte sul principio del secolo settimo. Nibby, *Roma Antica*, ii., 152.

^c Die Phocas-säule, das mühsam und erbärmlich zusammengeraubte Denkmal eines der fluchwürdigsten Tyrannen von Bysanz. Bunsen, *Beschreibung der Stadt Rom*, iii., 2, 116.

important to the history of the monument should have escaped the attention of the curious from the year 1813 to 1888 may appear to my hearers extremely improbable. The only explanation I can give is this, that the removal of the ancient surface has been executed with some skill, and does not reveal itself even to a practised eye at the first glance. It is a satisfaction to me to be able to add, that before the end of the season I had the good fortune to visit the place in company with Professor Mommsen and another able epigraphist, and I think I may say that, though both these authorities were disposed at first to hesitate in accepting my conclusion, they were convinced before leaving the spot that it was well founded.

The fact so ascertained leads only to a negative result. It relieves us from the necessity under which we supposed ourselves to lie, of believing that the column was erected in the year 608. It is, however, important to observe, that the literal and natural interpretation of the inscription upon which that belief depended does not really make any such inference necessary, since Smaragdus is not stated to have constructed the monument in honour of Phocas, but only to have placed and dedicated a statue to his eternal glory upon this lofty pillar: *hanc statuam . . . huic sublimi columnae ad perennem ipsius gloriam impositit ac dedicavit.*

The conclusion to which we naturally arrive is this, that the exarch did no more than command the subservient authorities of Rome to erase the inscription in honour of the personage to whom the column was originally dedicated, and to substitute that in which his own name and that of his master were recorded. We may suspect that the statue resplendent with gold, which represented to the Romans the person of their unknown sovereign, was also a borrowed work. But the inscription testifies to the figure having been placed on the column by the order of Smaragdus; and it is not improbable that the monument had already been robbed of the statue with which it was originally crowned.

Having found these reasons for rejecting the received opinion concerning the origin of this monument, I have naturally taken some interest in the question which is thus left open, and of which only an approximate solution can be expected; since we have nothing left us to determine its date and history except what may be found in the general character of the design and in an examination of the details of its structure.

The design consisted of a Corinthian column surmounted by a bronze statue, and standing on a rectangular pedestal, which was itself placed upon a truncated pyramid cased with marble steps.

It may be observed in the first place, as bearing on the epoch of its construc-

tion, that this design, while it is simple and noble in effect, is not founded upon any other Roman monument of which we have any knowledge, and is perfectly classical; by which I mean that it has no trace even of the dawn of mediæval invention. It is certainly not a design which, apart from the inscription, we should think of attributing to the seventh century.

In the next place it is manifest, without any minute examination, that some of the most important parts of the structure are better executed than the rest, and have been evidently taken from some building or buildings of an earlier date. The work, therefore, must be ascribed to that degraded period of Roman art when public monuments, even of high pretensions, were built with borrowed materials. This epoch had already begun, as is well known by the example of the arch of Constantine, at the beginning of the fourth century.

To carry further our knowledge of the origin and history of the work, we must examine more minutely the several parts of which it consists.

The column is a Corinthian pillar of white marble, probably of Luna, of a height, including base and capital, of about 48 feet. The capital and base are in separate pieces, and the shaft made up of seven drums. The column is much weathered and shattered, but was not originally of high excellence, and may probably be attributed to the second or third century.

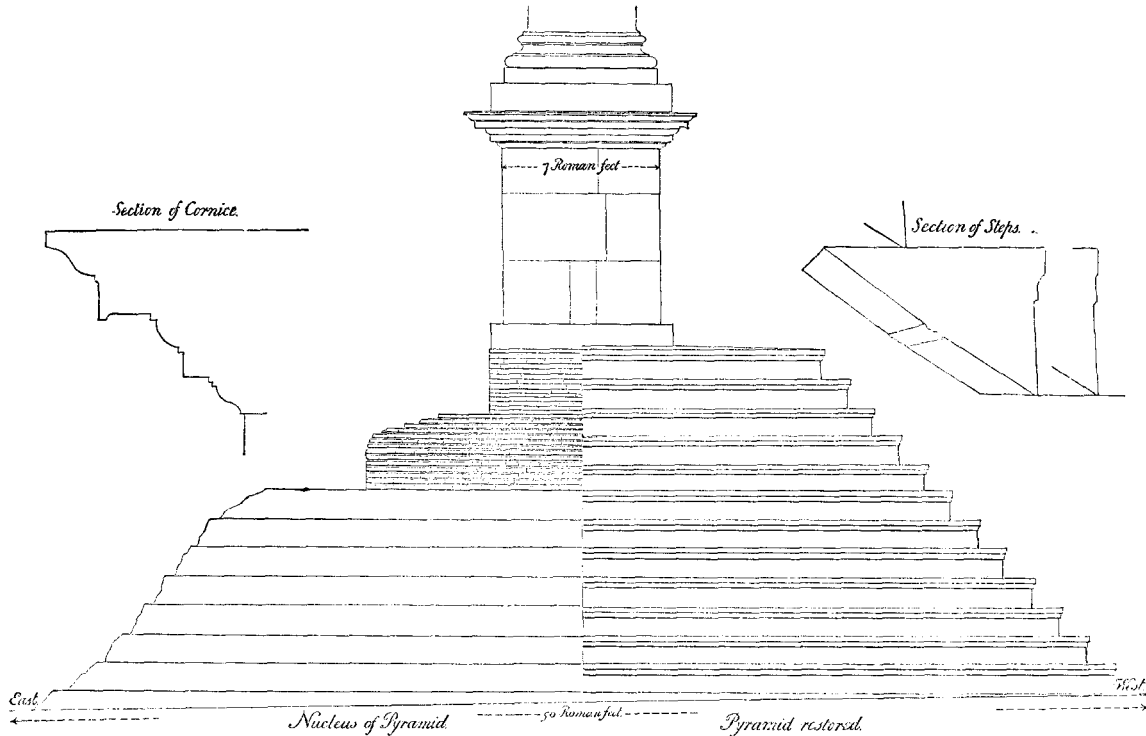
The base is what is called Attic. Its plinth, which is about $6\frac{3}{4}$ feet square, stands upon a sub-plinth composed of a block of marble about 8 feet square and one foot high. This is placed upon the cornice of the pedestal.

It should, however, be observed, that the sub-plinth and the column above it do not stand accurately on the centre of the pedestal, but a little nearer to the east side of it. This deviation can scarcely be due to any later movement, but must, I think, be attributed to a want of care, or skill, in erecting the column in its present situation.

The pedestal consists of cornice, body, and plinth. The cornice, which is much damaged owing to its having been for many years at or near the ground level, is a well-executed work of plain geometrical moulding. The type of its design is one that was not uncommon at a good period, the members being the same and arranged in the same order as in the handsome cornice of the podium of the arch of Titus. A fragment of a cornice with a similar series of mouldings was dug up last year in the ruins of the temple of Julius, to whose podium it may perhaps have belonged.

The cornice is made up of four pieces, with good joints, now a little parted by weather; and the well-executed corners are evidently part of the original work. It was doubtless taken from some earlier building, apparently a pedestal of similar

dimensions to that which it now covers. And I see no reason why it should not have accompanied the column in its former position. This suggestion implies that the column was not taken from the portico of a temple or similar building, but had been before erected upon a pedestal as an isolated monument. It may be



Elevation of the lower part of the Column of Phocas. Scale 1:100.
Scale of details 1:20.

remarked in passing that a distinguished Italian archaeologist, Professor Lanciani, once suggested that this column might perhaps have been taken from the round temple near the Tiber, commonly called the Temple of Vesta, where one Corinthian column is missing. It is curious how the isolation of the column in the Forum appears to lessen the impression of its height. The columns of the so-called Temple of Vesta are about 35 feet high, this column about 48 feet.

The body of the pedestal, which is of a square form, 7 Roman feet in width and 8 high, is built up of several pieces of marble, arranged in three courses. The blocks of marble appear to have been well put together with fairly good joints, now somewhat parted by weather. The surface is much broken by holes,

apparently made by mediæval spoilers in seeking for the metal clasps which were commonly used in buildings of the best time. But whether the depredators were successful in finding such clasps in this pedestal, I have some doubt. The sides have no mouldings or sunk panels, and are, or were, plane well-smoothed surfaces. The inscription, which is on the north side, in the direction of St. Adriano (the ancient Curia) is cut in sixteen lines upon the two lowest courses. The whole of it is upon an erased surface somewhat rougher than the original plane surface, and not very much lowered by the erasure, which does not extend over the upper part, nor as far as the corners of the pedestal. It follows that the earlier inscription, which appears to have been also in several lines, and to have occupied nearly the same space as the later one, was cut in very shallow letters.

It is affirmed by Fea that the whole of the top of the pedestal is inserted within the cornice, made of one piece of marble, as in a sort of sheath: "a curious arrangement," as he says, and "perhaps not seen anywhere else." This curiosity of construction is entirely imaginary. The cornice, as I have already mentioned, is, in fact, in four pieces. And the body of the pedestal, being of later work than the borrowed cornice, is not perfectly fitted to it; but so far from being inserted in it, it has its upper line on the north and south sides, projecting a little in front of the bottom of the cornice, instead of being placed, as it should be, a little behind it. On the two other sides the two lines come more closely together. In fact, the later constructed pedestal is not perfectly square.

Instead of a moulded basement, corresponding in character with the cornice, the pedestal rests on a simple plinth or slab of marble, about 1 foot 2 inches (0·35 metres) in height, and about 8 feet square; the measurement from north to south (2·36 metres) falling short of the measurement in the other direction (2·43 metres) and of 8 English feet by nearly 3 inches.

This marble slab rests on a substructure of brickwork, 8 feet (2·43 metres) square, and about 2 feet 9 inches in height, which rises from the middle of a larger pier, 18 feet (5·50 metres) square, built of hard rubble or concrete, and faced on its four sides with walls of brickwork, of which a height of $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet is visible, but which appears to continue to a further depth, and probably extends down to the foundation of the monument; the lower part of the brickwork being surrounded by the rubble constituting the interior of the pyramid which forms the lowest part of the design. The brickwork of these substructions has the characteristics with which we are familiar in the latest classical buildings of Rome (the bricks especially being of very various dimensions) and is some-

what inferior to that of the seven piers opposite the Basilica Julia, which belong to the time of Diocletian or Constantine.

The base of the pyramid occupies an area 50 Roman feet square. This round measure, *decempedis metata*, like the terrace of the Rostra, 80 feet in width, and the hundred-foot portico of the Temple of Castor, is not without interest. The nucleus of rubble, principally composed of large pieces of tufa with fragments of marble and brick, is placed upon the pavement of the Forum, which does not appear to have been disturbed; but at the west corner (towards the Temple of Saturn) there are visible the remains of an earlier monument, of no great size, which was probably removed with several others to make room for the one we are describing.

The sides of the pyramid were faced with marble steps, $15\frac{1}{2}$ inches (0·39 metres) high, and about 14 inches wide, of which the best remains are on the south side, where the two lowest steps are missing, but the rest are nearly complete to the eighth step. At this level there is now a sort of platform about 30 feet (9·50 metres) square surrounding the brick pier, but there can be little doubt that the pyramid was originally carried to a higher level, probably ending in a smaller platform at the foot of the marble pedestal. This arrangement would require five more steps. Rossini's engraved view, made when the excavation was recent, seems to show some trace of steps above those that are at present in position. On this supposition the pyramid had thirteen steps on the east side, but as the ground rises towards the west, the steps on that side were twelve.

The marble steps appear to have been made for their present use. Each piece (generally the half of a rectangular block, sawn diagonally across) has a roughly executed moulding in front of the tread. Both Nibby and Bunsen observe that some of the materials of the steps are borrowed from other buildings; but all the marble blocks used for this purpose which I have seen appear to be of the same work,^a though some pieces, notably one lying on the north side, have the moulding somewhat more carefully executed. Possibly the missing steps on the principal front, below the inscription, may have been better finished than those on the other side, and for this reason may have been preferred for removal. The form of the steps may be seen in the accompanying drawing, where the two outlines represent the moulding in the more carefully executed and in the rougher form.

^a Of course I speak here of the blocks of marble properly belonging to the monument. The place of the missing steps is now in a great measure filled up with blocks of stone taken from other ruins.

Reviewing the details which we have described, the parts of the monument which we recognise as constructed of original materials are the pyramid, the central pier, and the pedestal with its marble plinth and brick substruction, but without its cornice. The cornice and all above it appear to be borrowed, and were borrowed not improbably from an earlier monument of a similar kind, which may have stood in the Forum itself, the principal alteration introduced into the design being the elevation of the column with its pedestal upon the top of a pyramid; an idea that may have been suggested by some monument in one of the Oriental Greek cities. A pyramid with steps formed, it will be remembered, part of the tomb of Mausolus.

The epoch of the erection of the column, as it now stands, must be determined mainly by the character of the work. We have fixed on the beginning of the fourth century as the time when monuments of importance began to be built in Rome with borrowed materials. We find an example of this in the round temple of Romulus in the Sacra Via, as well as in the arch of Constantine; and in the new parts of both these buildings, and also in details of the Basilica of Constantine, we may see how utterly at that period not only the art of sculpture, but all sense and appreciation of architectural form in its correctness and purity were lost. The mouldings, for example, which had before been usual upon certain pieces of architecture, were either omitted altogether, or rendered in a surprisingly rough and incomplete way. The buildings are wanting in Rome by which we might trace on a large scale the progress or decline of architecture during the fourth century. But some inscribed pedestals lying in the Forum and elsewhere, especially several of Constantius and of Gabinius Vettius, furnish examples both of the mouldings and of the incised letters of this period. Some of the inscriptions are very shallow, and many of them are on erasures. I may observe that I do not think the epigraphists have been careful in observing the latter circumstance. It might well be expected that in many cases, especially in the Forum, where room could scarcely be found for a new monument, or even a new statue, without removing one already existing, it would be found convenient to use an old pedestal rather than replace it by a new one, the execution of which would be inferior to that of its predecessor. It is curious to observe how on one of the large pedestals in the Comitium inscribed to Constantius, which appears to have originally belonged to the Flavian period, the workman has been inspired to imitate in some degree the style of the erased inscription, and the letters are of better form and deeper cut than the other inscriptions of the same date.

It is difficult for any person to realise the depth of degradation to which Roman art and Roman taste in reference to public monuments had fallen at the

end of the fourth century, without being acquainted with the monument erected in honour of the army of Stilicho, which has been, not many years since, disinterred in the Roman Forum. It consists of a rough cubical block of travertine, upon which is set an oblong marble pedestal, which originally sustained an equestrian statue, but which is here placed on one of its ends; and across the side facing the Curia is cut an inscription in honour of the soldiers who had been successfully employed against the Goths. If the Romans of the time of Honorius were contented to place so grotesque a structure in *celeberrimo loco*, close to the Rostra and the Comitium, in a Forum that had not yet been desecrated by the feet of barbarian conquerors, what sort of monument should we expect to be reared in the midst of ruins two centuries later? Side by side with this memorial of the achievements of Stilicho, the monument appropriated to Phocas appears a model of classic dignity and correctness.

The considerations which I have mentioned appear to me to make it extremely improbable that this monument is of a later date than the latter half of the fourth century. The special characteristic of the commencement of that century, which we see so strikingly illustrated by the example of the Basilica of Constantine, is that, while their architects were still capable of designing and constructing a great architectural work on the most stupendous scale, they do not appear to have had an eye to judge, or a hand to execute correctly, the simplest architectural ornament. The same characteristic in a humbler way reappears in the Phocas monument. The general design is sufficiently dignified. The execution of the details is miserable, but not much inferior to what may be seen in the façade of the temple of Romulus; the brickwork is a little worse than that of the time of Constantine, and the shallow cutting of the original inscription finds a parallel in other inscriptions of the fourth century. If the chronographers had mentioned a monument erected before the Rostra in honour of the great Theodosius, we might be content to find it in this. That the person to whom the monument was dedicated was of no less than imperial rank is sufficiently shown by its magnitude, and by its situation in a place which for many centuries had been crowded with memorials of the most distinguished Romans, and from which a multitude of such memorials must have been removed to make room for its erection. It is not improbable that the marble *plutei*, or screens, sculptured in honour of Trajan, which were discovered near the Phocas column, were removed at this time to the place where they were found and where they now stand. The rough and unequal travertine bases on which they were found show that they have undergone removal, and on the other hand the subjects of their bas-reliefs make it probable that their original position had some relation to the Rostra.

The conclusion at which we thus arrive respecting the origin of this monument, in the absence of all documentary evidence, is necessarily vague. Its date however (in the second half of the fourth century) may, I think, be regarded as approximately ascertained. The effigy of gilded bronze with which it may be assumed that it was originally crowned, was probably removed in one of those devastations to which Rome was subjected in the fifth and sixth centuries.

Of its later history one chapter is recorded in the inscription of Smaragdus. The name of Phocas was probably erased soon after his death. And if the gilded statue with which it was again adorned was not thrown down on the same occasion, it may have contributed its weight of bronze to the spoils which Constans II. carried away from Rome in the year 663. It would be a curious coincidence if the image of Phocas was shipped as part of the same cargo with the gilded bronze tiles of the Pantheon, the preservation of which up to that time was in some measure due to his munificence.

The supposed *erection* of this monument in honour of Phocas has suggested an inference of some importance concerning the history of the decadence of the Forum, the pavement of which, it was concluded, must have remained at its ancient level in the seventh century. This inference no longer holds, since it is obvious that the inscription might have been altered after the level had considerably risen. It is interesting in this connection to remember that the neighbouring Curia, now the church of S. Adriano, was consecrated for Christian worship in the same century.

The monument itself bears upon its surface some striking indications of the successive changes of the level of the ground. The most curious of these consists of some holes near the bottom of the marble pedestal, which can only, as far as I can guess, have been useful to attach a light chain or rope for the tethering of horses or cattle, when the level of the ground was at the top of the pyramid. Of these holes, about $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches square, there is one pierced through each corner of the pedestal.

There is also evidence in the weathering about half way up the pedestal, especially seen on the south side, that the ground level remained at that height for some time. In this condition of the ground one or two lines of the inscription would be visible above it.

Another mark on the column itself is worth notice, as it seems to indicate that the monument was at one time attached to, or included in, some mediæval building. This is a square hole, at about two-thirds of the height of the column on the south side (towards the Basilica Julia), which looks like the resting-place

of a beam or rafter. It is certain, however, that no building of any weight could have been made to lean against the column without affecting its stability.

Of documentary evidence relating to the history of the column in the middle age there is scarcely any. Only in a bull of pope Innocent III. (1199) relating to the property of the neighbouring church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus, there is mention of "two tofts by the Perfect Pillar" (*duo casalina iuxta columnam perfectissimam*)^a which may not improbably refer to this isolated column. The expression *casalina* probably implies that there had been some buildings on the ground, which had been removed.

The inscription of this monument is not comprised in the collection of inscriptions in the *Itinerary* of Einsiedeln, made apparently in the ninth century. Neither was it copied by the epigraphists of the early Renaissance. We may infer, that at the latter period it was almost, if not entirely, beneath the ground. There seems to be some evidence to show that the highest line was still visible in the beginning of the sixteenth century.

The condition of the monument from that time to the present is illustrated by a succession of drawings and engravings. The well-known prints of Piranesi and Vasi show it as it stood in the last century, isolated, but with buildings near it, with the ground-level just at the base of the column.

The excavation begun in 1813, which revealed the inscription, was left unfinished for some time. In 1815–16, at the expense of the Duchess of Devonshire, the base of the monument was laid open.^b The work was continued by the Pontifical Government, and in 1819 the excavated space was inclosed with a sustaining wall.

In 1834–5 the enclosure surrounding this column was united by a passage with that made in 1802–3 around the arch of Severus; and in 1851–2 it was thrown open on the south side in the new excavations by which the Basilica Julia was uncovered. Since that time the ancient area of the Forum has been gradually extended in all directions around the column.

The one thing that is really remarkable in the history of this monument, since the discovery of the pedestal and pyramid, is the facility with which archaeologists have accepted without a suggestion of doubt the hastily assumed inference respecting the date of its construction.

^a See this bull in the English translation of the *Mirabilia, Marvels of Rome*, p. 181.

^b I hear from M. Grueber, that there is a small medal of Elizabeth, Duchess of Devonshire, upon which the Column of Phocas is represented, with the inscription, COL. FOC. MONUMENTA. DETECTA.