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Monte Testaccio (Rome, Italy)



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Definition

Monte Testaccio is located next to the Tiber River, near the Porta San Paolo and the well-known pyramid-shaped tomb of Gaius Cestius, within what was the warehouse district, *horrea*, of ancient Rome (Fig. 1). An artificial hill with a perimeter of almost 1 km and a height of 50 m, Monte Testaccio was formed from the remains of fragments of millions of amphorae deposited there during the first three centuries CE. It is common to find stamped inscriptions on many of these amphorae. The toponym *Mons Testaceus* (Monte Testaccio in Italian) derives from the Latin word *testa*, meaning a fragment of pottery, hence the popular alternate name of “Monte dei Cocci.” This hill stands out in the middle of the plain below the Aventine Hill and constitutes a singular element in the topography of ancient Rome (Aguilera Martín 2002) (Fig. 2). Although we do not have any ancient literary testimony of this hill, its enormous bulk was always evident both to the inhabitants of the city and to its visitors.

Historical Background

The first historical record we know of comes from an inscription dated to the eighth century CE that is preserved at the entrance of the Church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, wherein the donation to the church of a portion of land that is in Testaccio is recorded. Over the centuries, theories were put forward that tried to explain its origins. For some the Testaccio had been formed because of the stacking of the remains of the fire of Rome in 64 CE during the reign of Nero. For others it had been formed from the waste of the pottery workshops located in its vicinity over the centuries. Some believed that it had been formed from the remains of cinerary urns from pagan cemeteries looted by Christians. As early as the Middle Ages, the idea that Monte Testaccio had been formed out of the remains of the vessels that arrived in Rome containing the payment of tribute from the provinces to the capital of the empire was spread; for this reason it was called *mons omnium terrarum*. In the Middle Ages, the area was uninhabited, and the place became the center of the Roman carnival. Carts with steers and pigs were thrown from the top of the hill, which the young men, paladins of every region of the city, then had to spear and carry a piece of meat home to their loved ones. In the middle of the sixteenth century, this festival was moved to the current Via del Corso. Also, in the middle of the sixteenth century, the Vatican artillery conducted target practice against the