

Untold Italy Episode 101 - The Pantheon

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 101.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

Katy

Ciao! Hi everyone. Welcome to another episode of Untold Italy and one that has been a very long time coming. Today we're paying a visit to the incomparable Pantheon, one of my favorite buildings not only in Rome but the whole world!

I always like to spend some time inside there and in the Piazza della Rotonda outside when I am in Rome. There's always something new and interesting to learn, even though the Pantheon is almost 2000 years old.

But first, we made the huge announcement that we have launched our Untold Italy small group tours last week. I'm so excited about them and we have had dozens of inquiries already so giving you a little recap in case you missed it

Our incredible small group tours will take you to parts of Italy you've dreamed of but might not have been sure how to make the most of your experience due to transport, language or other issues.

But, most importantly, they are full of all those special moments that are almost impossible to create on your own.

Each tour includes guided olive oil and wine tastings, meeting local artisans with generations of experience, visits to dairies where you'll discover life-changing cheeses and of course long lunches in incredible locations. Where possible we've also included local festivals, which if you've been listening for a long while are some of the most immersive ways to discover Italian regional culture.

Along the way we've chosen 4 star plus accommodation so our guests will be super comfortable and of course we're accompanied by local guides who can tell, with passion, the stories and history of their region

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These are not your standard bus tours, that's for sure. And, in fact, even with decades of experience traveling independently in Italy and all over the world, I'm quite sure you cannot create itineraries like this if you're traveling on your own - they are very special curated experiences created with deep local knowledge.

So if you'd like to know more head over to untolditaly.com/tours where you'll find the locations, itineraries and dates.

Ok, onto today's show. Where we're headed to the very heart of Rome with private tour guide and architectural historian Agnes Crawford who can be found online at Understanding Rome. Agnes is a long time resident of Rome and leads groups on many different aspects of the Eternal City but today I'm talking to her about the Pantheon, a building that never fails to make my heart skip a beat

Katy

Benvenuta, Agnes. Ciao and welcome to the Untold Italy Podcast.

Agnes

Hello. Thanks for having me.

Katy

Oh, you're very welcome. I'm so thrilled to have you on the show today, and I'm just wondering, how is everything in Rome at the moment?

Agnes

Wet. It's pretty damp at the moment. So we've got a pretty - November is perhaps the wettest month of the year, and it's reasonably busy. There are people traveling from the areas of the world where people can travel from. And I think there's a sort of pent up desire for travel at the moment. So it's not super crowded, but there are people around, restrictions, masks inside, vaccine passports and things like that. But generally speaking, it's working pretty well at the moment. Fingers crossed, Touchwood.

Katy

Oh, it's so good to hear everything is returning back to normal. It's been a long, long time to have visitors coming back to Rome. And it must be so exciting to have everyone there now. And this you're a long time resident of Rome, and you've explored so many of its corners. Can you tell our listeners your story how you came to be in Rome and how you came to be sharing its history with visitors?

Agnes

I'm from London originally, as you can tell, this isn't a very Italian accent. And I went to University in Edinburgh, and I studied for a Masters in architectural history. And there is a lot of architecture and a lot of history in Rome. So I finished University. I was 22. I didn't know what to do. I thought I'd go to Rome for six months, and one thing led to another. And 21 years later, I'm still here. And I've been giving tours in the city for 20 years now.

Katy

That's amazing. And I think with such a strong background in both architecture and history, you've got an amazing perspective on all these different buildings and themes around you. I'm sure you've studied all that when you're at University and Rome's just got such an incredible way of drawing you in. And I completely understand why you never left. Now, whenever I'm in Rome, the first place I try to go to is the Pantheon. And this building is just so awe-inspiring to me. And I wanted our listeners to hear all about it from an expert like yourself. What makes it so special?

Agnes

So I quite agree with you. The Pantheon is probably my favorite building in the world. It's the best preserved Roman building anywhere. It doesn't require the imagination - quite often walking around the ruins in the city and elsewhere and archaeological sites, one has to use quite a lot of imagination. The Pantheon it's all done for you. It survives in incredibly good shape. It's got the largest unreinforced concrete Dome anywhere in the world. And it was built 1900 years ago, and it's got a large hole in the ceiling. So if on a day like today, it's pouring with rain, it also looks pretty impressive.

Katy

It really does. Maybe we can just describe it for people who have never seen the Pantheon, even though when you do describe it and when you do see it, you realize that a lot of buildings have drawn a lot of inspiration from it.

Agnes

Absolutely. So the entrance to the Pantheon is the classic Greek temple front. That is to say, you've got columns, and then on top of it, you've got the triangular pediment. So in that element of the design, it dates to the 2nd century. To be honest, when in doubt, things tend to date to the 2nd century. It's the high period of the Roman Empire. It's when things were going particularly well. And it's when they build the most buildings and make the most statues. So when in doubt, 2nd century is always a good guess. And the entrance to the Pantheon takes its cue from ancient Greek architecture, architecture that was ancient, even for the Romans. So, for example, the Parthenon in Athens is 700 years old, almost when the Pantheon is constructed. However, when you go inside the entrance to the Pantheon, that

traditional Greek temple front becomes something completely different. It's the cutting edge of modern Roman architecture of the 2nd century. It's not inspired by earlier, for example, Greek civilization, but rather is a circular structure with a vast hemispherical dome. It's built in brick. It makes use of arch technology in the reinforcement of the structure. It makes use of concrete in its dome and as such, brick arches, concrete the great Roman building technologies. So it's a fabulous building because it's got 1ft rooted in the archaic past of the Greek world - ancient, even for the Romans, and the other foot is firmly rooted in the modern world. So it's the cutting edge of modern architecture of the 2nd century.

Katy

I'm really glad you told us about the second century. So if I ever have to do a history exam, I'm really going to remember that it's really great. It's a great tip the 2nd century, but it's so impressive. And even like if it was a modern building, it would be impressive. But the fact that it stood for almost 2000 years, it's just kind of mind blowing to me because it's basically intact. Almost. It's had some renovations, hasn't it? But it still stood there for 1900 years away than it had for centuries. And not much has changed.

Agnes

Absolutely. The reason why it survives in such great condition is because it became a church. And this is generally another rule of thumb in Rome. If an ancient building survives at all, it probably became at some point either a fortress or a church. So consider that when the Pantheon is constructed early 2nd century, the Emperor's ruling during the early 2nd century, the first Emperor of the 2nd century is Trajan. His distant cousin, Hadrian, would succeed him. Hadrian is usually credited, possibly even with the design of the pantheon. And he was rebuilding a temple to all of the gods "pan" "theos", which already stood on that spot, and he builds it in this fabulously modern manner. And when Hadrian is ruling, the city has a population of over a million people. 350 years later, there isn't a Roman Emperor anymore, and the city's population would plummet. The Western Empire collapses, the city, the reason for being ceases to be and the population diminishes dramatically. The emperors are replaced by the Popes. The city of the Emperors becomes the city of the Popes. But ultimately, the population of the Imperial city would not be reached again until the 20th century. So, for example, in the moment when the Pantheon is built, one and a half million people are living in Rome. In the year 1000 (500 years after the fall of the Roman Empire) perhaps 20,000 people were living in the city. And if you're one of 20,000 people living in Rome, less than 2% of what once had been the largest urban area in the world, if you're one of those 20,000, you need a fortress. So a number of buildings, for example, the Colosseum get turned into fortifications, and therefore, buildings that get turned into something else tend not to be torn apart in quite the same way. Otherwise, ancient buildings are recycled. The stone is taken from them, the metal is taken from them, and they are used to build other things. The Pantheon's survival comes because 130 years after the last Emperor was deposed, it was consecrated as a Church. So it's been a Church for far longer than it was a temple. And it's the Church of St. Mary and all Martyrs. And as such, because it was a Church, it was pretty much

left alone. So as you say, there have been restorations, particularly in the 18th century. But the basic structure is original. The dome is original, and absolutely you walk in and stand under the dome and it looks like it was built yesterday. .

Katy

It's amazing! Do you think there would have been other churches or other temples built that were just as impressive back in those times? Or is that something completely unique?

Agnes

Undoubtedly, the Pantheon was a sort of one-off. I mean, there were very grand temples in Rome, but it was the only temple of that scale to make use of concrete in the city again, on that vast scale, I mean, the dome has a diameter of 43 meters. The height of the building is 43 meters. Were the dome to be reflected, a perfect sphere would just fit within the building. So it was undoubtedly notable and extremely impressive even during the time of the Empire. And in fact, the fact that it was then converted into a Church was because it was such an important temple. It was such a grand structure. There were, for example, other vast temples, the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Palatine Hill, which was much more ancient and which was the most important temple of the Roman world that didn't get turned into a church. If you know where to look, there are bits of rubble here and there, but very little of that survives. So undoubtedly the Pantheon's grandeur is one of the reasons why it was turned into a church. Just as, for example, in the 15th century, after Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Empire, the Hagia Sophia was converted to the use of a mosque. It's a sort of way of demonstrating regime change, I suppose. So the city of the emperors had fallen, the city of the Popes had risen in its place. And the Christian city cements its place in Rome by adopting one of the most dramatic temples of the Roman world.

Katy

And you mentioned that it was - the temple originally was devoted to many different gods. How was it decorated inside? Was it similar to what it is today, or has it changed a little bit?

Agnes

So the interior would be absolutely pretty much as you see it today. There have been again, some restorations in the 18th century, consolidating some of the missing bits of marble, because the building is basically brick. The walls at the thickest point are 24ft, sort of 8 meters thick, and that would then be clad on the interior as much of it is still today with marble veneers so veneers of colored stone, which means that when one first enters the pantheon, it can be quite a surprise. I still remember the first time I saw it. It's quite a bling sort of building. The Romans were quite bling sort of people. And in the niches, right the way around where now you see statues of Saints and paintings of the Virgin and child, here would originally been statues of Juno and Jupiter and Mars and Minerva. And the Roman religion has this multiplicity of deities. So they have ancient gods Juno, Jupiter, Saturn, Mars. You didn't

bump into them when you went to the shops, but they also had imported foreign gods, Apollo, Castor and Pollux, the twin horsemen, sons of Zeus, for example. And then they have sort of brand new gods who you might well have had lunch with, for example, emperors when they die. If they're not too dreadful become gods. Hadrian whose ruling when the pantheon is completed, he became a God after his death. In fact, the next square over, you can see what's left of the temple of the Divine Hadrian. So there is this ever-expanding number of venerated gods. And the Pantheon is a sort of one stop shop, which gods were represented, in which niches have been the subject of much discussion, and undoubtedly over time, that probably would have changed. So there would have been great big gilded bronze statues or painted marble statues, multicolored and extremely dramatic in their decoration. And it would have impressed not just the Romans who lived in Rome, but of course, people coming through Rome from other parts of the Roman Empire would find themselves entering this extremely grand building. So from a multiplicity of gods. The Roman Church would adopt a multiplicity of Saints, and in fact, the Church is dedicated to St. Mary and all Martyrs. The religious beliefs between the Roman religion and Christianity are completely different. But some elements of continuity exist, and that continuity in the organization and the hierarchy of the religion is reflected in, for example, a city of temples that becomes a city of churches. The title currently of Pope Francis is the Pontifex Maximus. That was a title held by the Emperor Augustus. The religion changes, the name of the guy in charge remains the same. And the roman-ness of the Roman Catholic Church can be seen absolutely in the adoption of ancient temples in the service of the new religion of state.

Katy

It's so fascinating. I love this theme of continuity, and I guess it's a really important theme when you talk about Rome as well. Now, I'm wondering just on that the rituals around how people would have attended the pantheon back in ancient times, what were they like? And have we taken anything from that into our future practices?

Agnes

Roman temples are different to churches in the sense they don't require everybody being in the same place at the same time. So there would be a more personal relationship, perhaps with the temple. And of course, people aren't always going about pious activity. People are also having a conversation about the weather that undoubtedly would have been part of the day to day life of the Roman world. I mean, the Roman religion was a fundamental part of Roman life, and the city itself had been founded by Romulus, the son of Mars. Mars was the God of war. The emperors, or at least some of them claimed direct dissent from the gods. So there was this inextricable connection with the Roman religion, and the temples are both grand public buildings which act as a sort of great flex of Imperial power as well as ritual spaces. Sacrifices on occasion would be offered to the gods - high days and holidays. And very often such sacrifices would be offered not within the temple but outside. When, for example, last year, during the early days of the lockdown in Italy, Pope Francis gave a blessing in front of St. Peter's Basilica to an empty square in the sort of gloomy, rainy evening of March 2020.

And he stood in front of the Church with images of, for example, the icon of the Virgin who protects the health of the Roman people, an icon that goes back to the 6th century. The image of the Pontifex Maximus standing in front of St. Peter's Basilica is a very archaic image. It is a very atavistic image, deeply rooted in Rome's ancient parts. So, for example, when the Pope gives in normal circumstances the Easter Sunday Mass, he does so in front of the Church of St. Peter's. More people can attend it. But that is a very Roman idea, in fact. So again, just elements sort of filter through because, of course, not everything changes overnight. And again, the Roman-ness of the Roman Catholic Church is very strong in its formal arrangement. The Cardinals form part of the Curia. The Curia was the Senate house, the senators. Therefore, you have that kind of continuum which comes through and also the colors which decorate the pantheon. For example, inside the floor has great discs of Porphyry, a purple stone that came from the Eastern deserts of Egypt. Purple was the color of the Empress. Well it becomes the color of the Church, bishops wear purple. The robes worn by a Cardinal were red, but in Italian they are called La Porpora. And that's again, this idea of purple is a royal color which is seen in the decoration inside the Pantheon as well.

Katy

Oh, my gosh. It's so fascinating. I just love all of those little bits that just keep permeating through society. You keep getting all these different layers. And that's why I think maybe the Romans are so confident and proud and sure of themselves because they have all of this history to fall back on. And I guess coming from a country where we've had white settlement for a very short amount of time, and we're only just starting to recognize our Indigenous past and the history and the elements that come through from that. It's just so special to see how these little elements coming through all the time. I love it. It's so fascinating.

Agnes

And it's entirely sort of unconscious, I think. I mean, very often it's unconscious. It just is part of, for example, when a Pope or a priest indeed holds Mass, he holds his hands up during the service, which is the position of prayer of the Roman religion. And that's something that Roman priests would have done in front of the pantheon, as they do. The Pantheon is a national monument, but it's also a Church. 10.30 on a Sunday morning Mass is there every week open to anybody who's prepared to sit all the way through it. And exactly the same position is held by the priest today. So absolutely - there is this almost unconscious continuity that one finds in every element of the city.

Katy

It's amazing. All right. So should we talk a little bit about the architecture in a bit more detail? We've got this amazing dome, which is was it 43 meters?

Agnes

That's right. Yeah.

Katy

And then you've got the Oculus, the eye in the middle. So to actually create something like that, I don't even know if we could do that today. Would it be even possible? And how did they even do it?

Agnes

Well, the great sort of Roman invention, as far as architectural materials are concerned, is concrete because concrete enables you to build things that aren't possible with great big hunks of stone or indeed, bricks. Rome is surrounded north and south by quiescent but not extinct volcanoes. The ones to the south last erupted about 5000 years ago, which is geologically quite recently. And the upshot of this exclusive volcanic activity were a number of useful byproducts, one of which is lava, which was used to pave the Appian way. The first section of the first paved Roman road runs along the lava flow. The hills are full of natural Springs harnessed. Those natural Springs would provide the water for the first of the aqueducts, and another byproduct is a local sandy soil called pozzolana and pozzolana when mixed with quick lime, which is extracted from another local material, east of the city, there are limestone mountains. If you heat the limestone, it releases quick lime. And at some point, somebody, presumably by accident, worked out that if you mixed pozzolana and quick lime and slicked it with water, you created a liquid which would harden and become very hard indeed. Now, that means that you can build bolts, domes and as we're saying, things you can't build with great big hunks of stone. So, for example, the Colosseum. If you go into the Colosseum, you walk in through the entrance archways and over your head, you have covered barrel vaults linking together the concentric rings. So many of the buildings that we think of as fundamentally Roman could not have been built without this Roman technology. So as we mentioned at the Pantheon, you've got this nod to the Greek tradition. They're acknowledging the architectural tradition of the Greek world. The Romans have, I always think they have a little bit of a chip on their shoulder. Rome was the sort of new kids on the block of the Mediterranean civilizations. The Greeks and the Egyptians were much more ancient, and as a result, there is both this superiority and inferiority complex at play. So the Romans, as I think, the Roman poet Horace says, to paraphrase, he says the Romans conquer the Greeks. But really, it's the Greeks who conquer the Romans because so much of Greek culture would be absorbed into the Roman world. And so much of Greek art would be considered to be fundamental in the Roman world. The best sculptors, for example, were Greek sculptors. And in the Pantheon, you see a fabulous fusion of this nod to the Greek past, but also the use of a contemporary technology - concrete, which is exploited to its maximum degree. Now, of course, if you go to the Pantheon and you walk in and you look up at this incredible dome, which looks like it was made yesterday, 43 meters across and a perfect hemisphere, and you think, oh, gosh, how did they do that? They didn't wake up one day and build that. I mean, the first surviving example of a significant concrete structure near Rome is in a place called Palestrina, east of Rome, and it dates to 350 years before the building of the Pantheon. So this is the product of practice. The concrete was poured on a wooden frame. Exactly how it

was carried out is uncertain. But if you look up at the dome, in the dome, you can see what are called coffers, which are these square openings kind of inset. And those would have been where the wooden structure was, but also they serve the purpose of relieving weight. It means it's less heavy. The base of the dome is as thick as the thickest wall. So 8 meters as we were saying. And as you go up towards the top, the dome gets thinner, so on the inside it's a perfect hemisphere. But if you get a view over the roofs of Rome from the outside, it looks like a sort of upturned soup dish. So it's sort of a shallower curve on the outside because it gets thinner up to the top. Now there was cleaning work, which took place, probably time flies, wasn't it? Probably already ten years ago now. And the cleaning work, they used sonar technology to measure the density of the concrete. And the concrete was found, as had been suspected to have a lighter density towards the top, because as is a known sort of technique of Roman building, it was mixed with pumice, another material found on the Italian well, in not on the Italian Peninsula between Italy and Sicily, of the northeast coast of Sicily, the Aeolian Islands of volcanic Islands. And there's a lot of pumice there. And pumice was used as a kind of aggregate in the concrete because it relieves the weight. It's less heavy, so it gets thinner and it gets lighter as it gets up towards the top.

Katy

Ingenious. I always say this on the podcast. We always think we're so smart now, but I mean, really, they had a lot of things sorted out 1900 years ago, even before that, really it's just incredible. And what you were saying about the coffers and the indents in the interior. That was something I'd never heard of. I actually just thought it was decoration, so it was actually there for a purpose, but it actually looks rather nice, doesn't it? With the pattern that goes all the way around?

Agnes

Absolutely. It does both. It does both. Absolutely. I mean, for example, the great architects of the 20th century of the modern movement, for example, of the Bauhaus architects like Mies Van Der Rohe and Walter Gropius, or, for example, Le_Corbusier. Le_Corbusier would, along with these other architects, study Roman buildings and the modern movement, would be built on the idea that form was a product of function. And that's what you see in those streamlined white buildings of the early 20th century. Well, they are absolutely in the same tradition as the Pantheon. And before the Pantheon is built, there is an architect called Vitruvius. Now, Vitruvius is probably the most influential architects ever to have lived. He was the architect of the Emperor Augustus. He's around, therefore, round about the year zero. He is responsible for a book called The Ten Books of Architecture, which has never been out of print. And in it he talks about how you build stuff. And he gives us all this useful information about how the Romans mixed concrete and how all kinds of things are done, how they built drains, how they built aqueducts, et cetera. But he also talks about the sort of ideas behind building. And he says that the ideal building should follow the ideal proportions of the human body. That is to say, the height of a person is proportional to the length of an arm, is proportional to the length of a leg, et cetera, et cetera. Vitruvian man would be drawn by Leonardo Da Vinci in

the early 15 hundreds. The man with the square in the circle with his arms outstretched. And that is basically a drawing which takes the proportions that Vitruvius says are the ideal proportions of a building. And he says, you can't make the columns as tall or as short as you like. They have to be in proportion to the structure, because even if looking at that building, somebody isn't an engineer, you don't know that that is the correct proportion. But looking at because it is correct, it looks correct in a way. It's connected to the sort of mathematics of nature which is innate in our brains. And Vitruvius says something else - he says that the buildings - that any building to be perfect should have three characteristics: *Fermitas*, it has to stand up, *Utilitas*, it has to do whatever it's supposed to do properly. And only then do you have *Venustas* (from Venus), the goddess of beauty. So beauty is a product of the fact that it stands up and it does its job properly. Decoration is not extra, but it is a product of a building doing what it's supposed to do. And that is something which comes right the way through into some of the most influential architects of certainly the 20th century and onwards. So the idea of the coffers, as you say, absolutely. They're very attractive, and they provide this nice kind of rhythmic, otherwise it would be rather bald if it was just this massive, unbroken structure. But they also have a structural purpose that presumably connected with the system that enabled the pouring of the concrete in the first place. And they enable the relieving of the weight of the dome so it doesn't collapse under its own weight.

Katy

I guess you don't see that level of detail, or maybe we don't study it. I don't know what the answer is in modern buildings, but it just seems to me that there was a lot more thought that went into it, and you can see that process. I don't know. Do you think that's true? Or is it just we don't study the modern buildings like we do these ancient ones?

Agnes

Well, it depends on the building. There are extremely interesting modern buildings, and there are less interesting ones. And undoubtedly, when it was constructed, the Pantheon was at the interesting end of the spectrum at Vitruvius would be spinning in his grave if he went to see a business park or a hotel or something that has a little triangle just stuck over the front of the doorway, kind of pediment, looking a bit Roman that serves no purpose because the point of the pediment was to reinforce the structure as a whole. So the idea of Vitruvius and the idea of any great architect in any period is that you start from first principles. You don't build a box and then stick decoration on the outside of it, but rather the decoration is an implicit part of the structure and of the function of the building which is constructed. And if you do that, it's probably going to be quite a good building whenever you do it.

Katy

One of the most intriguing things about the Pantheon is actually the Oculus or the eye that is in the center of the dome. Could you tell us a little bit about what its purpose is and why did they build a building with a big hole in the middle of it?

Agnes

That's a very good question. So first of all, very simply - it lets light in if you go to the Pantheon nowadays there is a bit of electric light in the side chapels, but effectively still. Today, the vast majority of the light is natural, and it comes through the doorway, which is very big, and the Oculus, which is 8 meters across and lets in quite a lot of light as well. The other idea is the Oculus. The word means 'eye' is there to commune with the gods. It offers a connection directly with the heavens. And in the most archaic tradition, the idea of an opening in the center enables sacrificial offerings, smoke to be let out in the center. There's no evidence that that was particularly taking place in the Pantheon, but it's referring back to an archaic tradition. Also, the way that the dome is conceived, it functions as structurally a series of rings, one on top of the other, which press downwards. So the opening is possible because instead of having a plug in the center that holds the forces in place, they are basically directed almost vertically downwards. They're contained by these vast walls on either side, and that enables the possibility of having this opening. It would be very dark if it didn't. So it's a very practical reason. If we jump forward into the Renaissance because, of course, the Pantheon, as you mentioned earlier, is incredibly influential. I mean, anytime you see a building with a dome one way or another, it's been influenced by the Pantheon and in Rome, of course, the great building influenced by the Pantheon is St. Peter's Basilica, the great Dome of St. Peter's, built by Michelangelo and Michelangelo's structural solutions for the dome of St. Peter's come from the study of the cathedral in his hometown of Florence, which had been built in the 15th century by Brunelleschi and Brunelleschi solves the problem of how to build the dome by looking at the Pantheon and the dome that Brunelleschi builds in Florence is quite different. It's not hemispherical, it's sort of pointed. It has buttressing. It is actually very, very different. But the solution comes from his observation of the dome of the Pantheon and thinking about how the forces worked at the Pantheon and how in a structurally different sort of, in engineering terms, a descendant of the Pantheon, he could solve the problem of how to build the vast stone of the cathedral in Florence. So there is a direct connection. In fact, when St. Peter's was built in the Vatican, Michelangelo deliberately made the dome have a diameter of a meter less than the dome of the Pantheon because he didn't want to steal the record of the ancients. So there is an allusion to the ancient building, but also a kind of - he's tipping his hat to it and acknowledging its sort of triumphant engineering achievement.

Katy

My goodness, does the light sort of change throughout the seasons? Is there a different time of year where the different light patterns occur?

Agnes

Absolutely enough. In fact, one of the theories about the pantheon, which is much discussed and there are various theories and no one knows for sure. But undoubtedly the light is very significant. Was it intended as a sort of giant sun dial, so to speak? Certainly, for example, at midday on the 21 April, which is the birthday of Rome, the rays of light from the Oculus hit a

grill directly above the entrance doorway, funneling light in this sort of dramatic beam out into the entrance portico. And the theory is that this was not an accident and well, I think I mean when you think of it's very probable that there was something deliberate there, particularly because the Romans are very keen on light before the Pantheon was built in the form that we see it now, 120 years or so earlier, the Emperor Augustus had built a giant Sundial not far from where the Pantheon stands. And that giant Sundial, which had an obelisk brought from Egypt as its gnomon - as its needle, and that had a number of characteristics. For example, it would cast its shadow on the 19th September, the birthday of the Emperor Augustus onto his altar of Augustine peace. So undoubtedly, this idea of the importance of the Sun. Apollo, God of the sun, who is one of those imported foreign gods, one of the earliest of the imported foreign gods in the Roman religion was seen as the protector of the first dynasty of emperors - of the Julio Claudians because he was the protector of the city or a protector of the doomed city of Troy from which the Romans claimed ancestry. So undoubtedly this idea, this connection with the sun is an ideological collection as well as then, one that is employed in the case of Augustus Sundial in modern technology, is the pantheon a continuation of that very probably. Light in the Field of Mars, the area where the Pantheon is found was associated with divinity and Imperial power already by that point for over 100 years. So it's very plausible that the fact that the light streams through a grill above the doorway exactly on the birthday of Rome at midday probably isn't an accident.

Katy

I love that symbolism. It's drama as well, isn't it? If you've seen that photo, it's just incredibly dramatic and quite moving, actually. I'll see if I can find one to share with our listeners on the front, because it's a stunning photo, actually.

Agnes

Yeah. It's an extraordinary sight. And drama is what it's all about. Absolutely. Because of course, the emperors rely a great deal on drama, just as monarchies always have. And indeed, sort of emperors, monarchies, et cetera, rely on pomp and circumstance, because obviously the Emperor can't be seen as just a regular guy. He's got to be seen as somebody who is sort of divinely connected. And the use of light for that purpose in the Roman Empire is a common thread.

Katy

Yeah. And that was also adopted by the Christians, wasn't it? Because there's a very special ceremony that happens in June or around June, isn't it? With the Pantheon, which just sounds amazing and very spectacular. And it's around the Pentecost, isn't it?

Agnes

That's right. Yes. Pentecost, so 50 days after Easter. And of course, Easter is a movable feast. So as you say, sometimes it's in June, sometimes it's in May. And the tradition on Pentecost,

which unfortunately the last couple of years hasn't taken place is the firemen of the city of Rome climb up on the outside of the dome and drop rose petals at the culmination of the Mass through the Oculus, and the rose petals fall down into the church. Sort of the tongues of fire of the languages which reach the Apostles. So it's an illusion. Yes, to the drama of the Pentecost.

Katy

I mean, I think that's very definitely one for locals, right? Because you wouldn't be able to just go and turn up and hopefully see that.

Agnes

I've lived in Rome for 21 years. Certainly. Yes. Since the advent of Instagram, more people know about it. You can't really just turn up for it now.

Katy

No, I'm sure not now. We didn't actually cover - and I want to understand this. Have we credited an actual architect for the building of the Pantheon, or is it a collective of people? Or who can we say, was the genius behind it?

Agnes

Roman architects. They're not as many celebrated architects as one might imagine. We've mentioned the Vitruvius, for example, the architect of both Trajan and Hadrian for a period, Apollodorus of Damascus is very celebrated. We know the names of architects of Nero's Golden House, for example. But there aren't terribly many. So we don't know the name of the architect of the Colosseum. Was there one architect, or is this a sort of body of civil servants? What we can say, though, is that Vitruvius in his ten books of architecture - he sort of codifies he's not making them up, but he codifies the rules about Roman building, so he writes them down and his book becomes a handbook. He undoubtedly is also very influential in introducing new elements into earlier traditions. So it's always with 1ft in the tradition and one in the sort of shifting sands of modernity. And the Vitruvius ten books of architecture would be very influential indeed. So in some ways we can say that Vitruvius is the architect of the Pantheon, even though he was dead before it was constructed. Hadrian, who as Emperor, is very interested in architecture. He traveled to every part of the Roman Empire, to every province. He traveled to Egypt twice. He visits Athens at length and is particularly interested in the study of architecture of the Greek world. But also he's very interested in the Egyptian world, in the great temples of the wider Greece in Asia Minor, for example. And so he takes a great deal from his travels and digests that and is sometimes also attributed with an element, at least of the design of the Pantheon. But yes, it is very curious. You have the best preserved building of any ancient civilization which we don't know the name of the person who designed it.

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Katy

There is a name on the front, though, isn't it, or the side? It's Marcus Agrippa or M Agrippa. And what do we know about this guy?

Agnes

So on the front there's the inscription. So the area of the field of Mars, as it's called the Campus Martius, which is where the Pantheon is found, was outside the city limits until Augustus became Emperor, when Augustus became the first of the emperors, shortly before the believed days of the birth of Christ. So it's sort of just before the year zero. If there were such a thing as the year zero and Augustus sets about reorganizing the city limits, and he incorporates this area previously used for military training exercises. Hence the dedication to Mars, God of war. He incorporates the Field of Mars into the city limits, and he has his right hand man (who was his son-in-law) oversee building work in this new district in which he begins to build some monumental structures, including the Great Sundial, to consolidate his reign. And he has Marcus Agrippa build a temple to all of the gods. Now it didn't look like the temple we see now. It was smaller, rectangular, the traditional Greek temple. And on the temple there would have been a dedication when that temple was damaged by fire and rebuilt in its current form. Hadrian is a Jolly good egg. Doesn't write his own name on the front, because that wouldn't be quite right. He writes the name of the man who had built the first temple, because what's more important is the consecration of the space rather than the physical structure of the building. So the inscription, you're quite right on the front there's the name of M. Agrippa. Marcus Agrippa. L. F. (son of Lucius) COS. TERTIUM. FECIT Consort for the third time, built this. Except he didn't. He built the first one. Then it was rebuilt, but they wrote his name on it, which confused everybody for quite a long time. There are people who are experts in studying brick stamps and the study of brick stamps, in particular identifies which factories which will be privately owned. If you wanted to invest money in the first and second centuries, brick factories were the way to go, and the brick stamps identify which factories the bricks were made in, and people know which factories are working during which periods of the Empire. So that's how it was identified. But you're quite right. It bears this inscription of the man who didn't design it, but who was responsible for commissioning the First Temple son-in-law right hand man Agrippa of Augustus.

Katy

Yes, I love this attribution. He wasn't greedy. He was like to share the glory around a bit. I think that's rather nice, actually, in this day, where people try and grab things for their own. Think it's really a lovely gesture. Okay, now, if we want to go visit the Pantheon ourselves, it's actually quite an easy thing to do. But do you have any tips or suggestions for people when they should go? What's a good time to visit.

Agnes

So generally I would suggest going from 09:00 in the morning until 07:00 in the evening. Usually it's always worth a Google to double check. Public holidays, avoid. Sometimes it's closed on public holidays, and even if it's not to be quite a lot of people around, it's free to visit because it is both a church and a national monument, so there's no ticket at present. With the current restrictions, they do require either a clean covid test or a vaccination certificate, which means that at the moment there can be a little bit of a queue. My recommendation I was there with people just yesterday morning is go at 09:00 on a Monday morning, which is when it opens. And generally speaking, you might wait ten minutes, but otherwise you can wander straight in. In normal circumstances, pre Covid one just walked straight in. Of course, there were no limits to numbers and they didn't have to do temperature checks and all of this sort of thing before people went in. But you're quite right. It's a pretty easy thing to do. It doesn't take very long as well. You can pop in, have a spin around, pop out again. But I would really, really, absolutely urge people to do it because it gives such an idea of the scale and the decoration of imperial buildings. But again, like I was saying earlier, you don't need to use a lot of imagination for and it's sometimes quite nice after looking at all those ruins to have something that's still standing and intact and gives a really great sense of the opulence of decoration of the Roman Empire. So I would certainly say, yes, midweek is always best. That's a general rule of thumb for everything. And either soon after it opens or shortly before it closes would be my advice. But generally speaking, in normal circumstances, if those will be returned to at some point, you just pretty much wander in. Yeah.

Katy

And it's really in the heart of Rome, where you can walk pretty much anywhere from the Pantheon you can get to everywhere you want to go on foot, I think. And I always kind of recommend people stay around that area because of that reason because it's just easy to get to everything. And it's quite a pretty piazza too, isn't it?

Agnes

Absolutely. It's a pretty piazza. It's got a fabulous fountain in the center with a great big Egyptian obelisk, (one of the smaller ones, but it's quite large) Egyptian obelisk. And it's a beautiful piazza. And as you say, it's bang in the middle of the medieval Renaissance Baroque area of the city. So you've got all these narrow, higgledy piggledy cobbled streets and then boom, the Pantheon is just sitting there. And once it was surrounded by all sorts of other ancient buildings which are under the apartments and shops and palaces that are all around because they didn't become churches.

Katy

It's so fascinating. Agnes - that was amazing. I didn't think it was possible, but I do think now that I love the Pantheon even more now that I've heard all those little tidbits and information

and perspective from you, how can our listen to stay in touch with you and perhaps join one of your tours of the Pantheon or other sites when they're in Rome?

Agnes

Well, I'm on Instagram @understandingrome. My website is understandingrome.com and Twitter, Facebook, et cetera. I run private tours, so anybody gets in touch with you, whatever you want to do, and I'll come up with some ideas. Yeah.

Katy

You've got some great ideas on your website, actually. So if anyone passing interest in any aspect of Roman history, you cover pretty much everything from the ancient through Renaissance and Baroque and beyond. It's really wonderful.

Agnes

Thank you.

Katy

Now, in a city that's really just bursting with architectural treasures, history and culture, the Pantheon is in my mind and the first among equal. Thank you, Agnes, for taking us there today on that wonderful virtual journey. I really appreciate it.

Agnes

Thank you very much indeed, for having me.

Katy

I hope you enjoyed exploring the Pantheon with Agnes. I just love how she explained the practicality of the Romans, and how they built their construction methods into the design of the Pantheon and also how the symbolism and rituals of 2000 years ago continue to this day. I can't wait to get back to Rome and stare up through the oculus and wonder, as many many people have done before me.

Our discussion really brought home to me how valuable a local guide like Agnes is when visiting Italy and sights like the Pantheon. Imagine everything you would have missed out on if you'd simply wandered in and taken a look without this context. And this is why local guides are an integral part of our Untold Italy tours, because we simply wouldn't want you to miss all of the stories and background that bring the history and architecture alive.

If you'd like to learn more about Agnes and where to find her online, her details and website Understanding Rome are up on our website at untolditaly.com/101.

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That's all for today, next week we're having a little Christmas theme. I love Christmas, so I hope you'll join us then

But until then it's "ciao for now"