

Ancient Rome crumbles under 20th century progress

"IN JUST a few decades, we are facing the complete loss of the most striking artistic and archaeological heritage to be found anywhere in the world in a single city."

With these apocalyptic words, Prof Adriano La Regina recently summed up the threat facing the ruins of ancient Rome. The damage they have suffered over the past 25 years exceeds that of the preceding thousand.

The instigator of this second decline and fall is not Goth or Visigoth, but those twin 20th century gifts to civilisation - oil-fired central heating and the motor car.

The latest victim has been, perhaps, the most prestigious: the bronze equestrian statue of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, cast in the 3rd century AD, some 100 years after his death.

Earlier this month, the statue, one of Rome's most famous landmarks, was delicately lifted from the horse where it has sat in Michelangelo's Campidoglio Square on the Capitol Hill. His steed, even more pitted and damaged by atmospheric pollution, soon followed the great man to the workshop for restoration.

It is doubtful when, and indeed, if, they will return to their home of five centuries.

For two years the damage elsewhere has become more evident - especially since the 1979 earthquake in the nearby Apennines foothills.



Rome: famous sites at risk

Tremors, clearly felt in Rome, brought many monuments to the brink of collapse. But they did at least have the positive effect of focussing public and official attention on Prof La Regina's earlier warnings, which were widely disregarded. The process set in motion

then is at last beginning to bear fruit.

The scientific culprit is a form of tetra-ethyl lead emitted by car exhausts and oil-fired central heating installations. In simple terms, as Prof La Regina says: "The marble is simply being turned into chalk."

The 85 tons of dust, oxides and other pollutants deposited every year on each square kilometre of central Rome are steadily obliterating the reliefs, inscriptions and sculptures which provide so valuable a documentation of the city's past.

But how have things come to such a pass? In the first place, there was the transformation of the sleepy provincial city chosen to be capital of newly unified Italy to today's sprawling metropolis of 3m residents. In 1964, the historian Edward Gibbon could draw quiet inspiration from the "barefoot friars singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter." Today, he would hardly be able to hear himself think.

Before the First World War, conservationists had made some progress towards the dream of huge single archaeological park, stretching from the Capitol through the forums, the Colosseum and the Baths of Caracalla (where the summer opera now takes place) up to the beginning of the old Appian Way. Then came Fascism.

As part of Mussolini's design of forging a symbolic link between the ancient Roman empire and the one he planned to create, he drove what is today the Via Dei Fori Imperiali from Piazza Venezia (and his own official residence of Palazzo, Menzies) to the Colosseum, in the process separating the Roman and Imperial forums.

Amid the bombast he thrived on,

the role of the car was exalted. The Colosseum, wrote the captive Italian press of the day, "should be stripped of its ancient solitude" to become "the hub of a revolving wheel of cars," which in turn would "almost brush with their tyres the venerable stones of the Via Sacra."

Today, indeed, they do; there and a myriad other places, with pernicious results.

In the days of Mussolini the role of the car was exalted and a contemporary newspaper wrote that the Colosseum should be stripped of its ancient solitude "to become the hub of a revolving wheel of cars." It has - and the Colosseum has been seriously weakened. The effects of car exhausts and oil-fired central heating systems have eroded many of Rome's most splendid ruins. But now at last Italian politicians are showing that the plight of ancient Rome is not a matter just for archaeologists but for all Italians.

The Colosseum has been seriously weakened. The marble facings of the three main triumphal arches of Imperial Rome, of Constantine next door to the Colosseum, of Titus and Septimius Severus in the Roman Forum, have been badly eroded.

So, too, have the two columns erected at the height of the Empire's splendour, by Trajan in the Forum which bears his name and by Marcus Aurelius in today's Piazza Chigi, the official residence of the Italian Prime Minister.

Now, however, the municipality, under Sig Luigi Petroselli, the Communist mayor, is at last challenging the absolute rule of the motor car. From next month, on Sundays, part of the Via Dei Fori Imperiali leading into Piazza Venezia will be closed to traffic. Via Della Consolazione has met the same fate, and the Capitol Hill will physically rejoin the ancient Roman Forum and the

The new allocation of funds will be concrete proof of the politicians' acknowledgment that the plight of ancient Rome is a matter not just for archaeologists, or the city authorities, but for the country at large.

Once again, too, the purists are talking of completely dismantling the six-lane Via Dei Fori Imperiali, and of what Prof La Regina calls the "squalid little gardens" which adorn its edges. That will entail a huge reorganisation of traffic in central Rome, and underlines how the protection of Rome's ruins is entangled with overall urban planning.

No wonder that the thought of such dislocation is arousing considerable controversy.

The rescue of ancient Rome is largely contingent on the Romans' willingness - in scant evidence so far - to put the public good above private convenience, and the capacity of the authorities to endow the city with an adequate public transport system.

But changing the ways of a city is difficult, particularly when its palate is dulled by the very wealth of monuments it contains, and when history has bred an indifference about the past, and a fatalism to the future.

Sites which would be the eight wonder of the world anywhere else, in Rome, as often as not, are the homes of political graffiti, cats and small boys playing football.

Palatine, on the right as you look up towards the Colosseum.

Scaffolding clothes many columns and obelisks. A new underground railway line - 20 years in the building - finally opened a year ago, and there are plans to convert much of Rome's heating to clean methane gas.

Best of all, the Italian Parliament seems at set to vote L180bn (\$194m) over five years for maintaining and repairing the monuments - compared with the current L2bn a year