

The display of the Colossus at Villa Caffarelli

The Villa Caffarelli Garden, where the life-sized integral reproduction of the Colossus of Constantine is set up today, insists in part on the area occupied by the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, which once housed the statue of Jupiter, the same one from which perhaps the Colossus was derived or at any rate the one that was its model. The remains of the temple are visible today inside the Exedra of Marcus Aurelius.

The temple was dedicated in 509 BC by the first consul of the Republic, M. Horatius Pulvillus to the Capitoline triad: Jupiter, Juno, Minerva. The first cult statue of Jupiter was made of terracotta and was the work of the sculptor Vulca of Veio, which in 69 BC, on the occasion of the reconstruction promoted by Sulla, was substituted by a new statue inspired by the famous Zeus of Olympia by Phidias: seated on a throne, the torso uncovered, a cloak covering the legs.

After the severe fire of 80 AD, during the reign of Emperor Titus, a further makeover was undertaken, concluded by Domitian, his brother and successor. Again, the cult statues of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva were replaced. For Jupiter the model is still the statue of Phidias, reproduced as an acrolith in marble. Little is now preserved of Domitian's temple, but the sumptuous decoration of the pediment is documented by a famous historical relief now in the Capitoline Museums, from an honorary monument of Marcus Aurelius and depicting the sacrifice at the temple of Capitoline Jupiter.

Between 217 and 222 AD, a lightning bolt severely damaged the statue of Jupiter. This event may have set the stage for its reuse to celebrate the new emperor Constantine in the early fourth century AD. Whatever statue was reworked to make the Colossus, Constantine nonetheless appropriated one of the symbols of the Roman religion to legitimize his rise to power, placing it in a location of great value: the basilica of Maxentius along the Via Sacra, the last public architectural monument of a civil character that was built in ancient Rome.