

The Forum Romanum: A Kaleidoscopic Analysis

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The Roman Forum is a place full of contradictions and unity. On a comprehensive time scale, the forum grows from a semi-random connection of buildings to the monumental center of the most powerful nation in the Mediterranean. On the other hand, from day to day, the Roman forum changed according to the Roman calendar, transforming from the holy grounds of a religious festival to bustling markets, and from a political battleground to a judicial arena. Ancient Romans experienced the forum through a kaleidoscopic lens, cheering on gladiators in front of the very rostra where Cicero delivered epic political speeches, purchasing a goat at the market before sacrificing at the Temple of Jupiter, and visiting the brothel beside the Temple of the Vestal Virgins.

Martial aurally narrates a scene of the noises that resounded through the forum and compellingly portrays its chaos with a first person narration:¹

1. Mart. Epigrams 12.57
trans. Bohn.

Here the moneychanger indolently rattles piles of Nero's rough coins on his dirty counter; there a beater of Spanish gold belabors his worn stone with shining mallet. Nor does the fanatic rabble of Bellona cease from its clamor, nor the gabbling sailor with his piece of wreck hung over his shoulder; nor the Jew boy, brought up to begging by his mother, nor the bleary-eyed huckster of matches. Who can enumerate the various interruptions to sleep at Rome?

This sensory overload exists because of the many different types of activities occurring simultaneously in a single space: the forum. The archaeological term, palimpsest, offers a valuable angle to approach and understand the many elements of this chaotic picture. Palimpsest derives from the Greek roots meaning “scrape again” and refers to “the superimposition of successive activities, the material traces of which are partially destroyed or reworked.”² Palimpsest exists spatially and temporarily in the forum. Spatially, the same area could be used for market stalls, political debates, or worship of the gods. Temporally, the entire atmosphere of the forum could shift dramatically from that of pagan piety to a secular spectacle. These superimpositions beg the question, when one event transformed into another, were all the other previous events held in that same area no longer relevant? I argue that each event interacted with the other events in a unique way.

2. Bailey (2007), 203.

It is impossible to understand the forum without considering the disparate elements and the ways in which they interact with each other. In this paper, I aim to explore a few selected relationships between different dimensions of the forum that shaped and frequently complemented each other. Most evidence comes from the late Republican era, with the exception of a few imperial writers whose voices echo Republican thinkers. Perspectives from this period interpret Roman society, and the *Forum Romanum* in particular, in a multitude of ways.

Religion and Economy

Markets thrived before and after religious festivals and public games for reasons of convenience. The markets opened up before religious festivals in order to meet the demand for sacrificial animals. In addition, three periods of extended commerce, *mercatus*, fell right after the public games since Romans congregated in the forum in large numbers.³ Sellers were incentivized to set up stalls during this time in order to reach the vast consumer base during these times, while

3. MacMullen (1970), 341.

consumers were incentivized to attend religious festivals in the forum for both practical and pious reasons, but also to find goods and services that were otherwise unavailable.

4. MacMullen (1970), 336.

5. Stamper (2005), 36.

Religion and the economy were not only tied consecutively on the calendar, but were also closely intertwined in the forum. Jupiter and Mercury adopted roles as merchant deities and stimulated trade through the crowds they attracted to their shrines, crowds that built a market for the exchange of goods.⁴ The Temple of Saturn referred to the agricultural god of sowing and corn, a staple in Rome's food production and the markets that surrounded the temple.⁵ Whether the merchant deities attracted the markets to their steps or the forum markets influenced the characteristics of the gods is difficult to ascertain, yet the worship of the gods and the markets certainly influenced each other's practices. Beyond the physical exchange of goods, temples were centers of intangible assets and financial investments as well. A Roman businessman seeking external financing could have looked to temples in order to acquire funds for his enterprises. Temples were an important means of pooling investment funds in the early Roman Empire.⁶ In this way, the temples in the forum acted not only as religious centers, but also as financial centers for Roman citizens.

6. Temin (2013), 176.

7. Stamper (2005), 37.

Additionally, Roman temples served the function of public treasuries, *aeraria*. In the treasury at the Temple of Saturn were kept "the treasuries and archives of the state, as well as the balance used for the weighing of precious metals."⁷ Temples were viewed as one of the most secure places in the city, the least likely to be looted and destroyed by thieves or conquerors. Therefore, the state stored the monetary reserves and the foundational documents in this place of refuge. Additionally, the balancing scales found in these temples were used for weighting precious metals. The officials wanted to insure honesty in economic transactions by ensuring standardized weights and measures to prevent fraud. The

security of the temple insured honesty, an important basis for transparent and, therefore, efficient markets.⁸

The adjacency and geometrical overlap of the physical space of Roman temples and economic structures made it possible for the forum to concurrently serve as a place of worship and as a treasury. Furthermore, archaeological evidence points to the physical adjacency of monetary and material storage units and temples. Archaeologists have frequently uncovered rooms for the display of merchandise in conjunction with the ruins of some shrine or temple.⁹ What type of merchandise did these storage units protect? While there are many possibilities, I will address one such possibility in this paper. The aforementioned rooms displayed the riches of a conquered nation, implying that the pagan worship exacted monetary sacrifice, as opposed to animal sacrifice.

This economic relationship between the gods and the people mirrors the purchase of a good or service right outside the temple on its steps. While the counterparty in the transaction was a deity rather than a plebeian, the dedicator exchanged money for the security and goodwill of the gods. In a certain sense, sacrifice is giving some of your substance to the divinity in turn for the divinity's good will. For instance, Pompey dedicated money to Minerva after his successful campaign in Asia. Diodorus the elder records an inscription "Pompey, having taken the statues and the other images of the gods and the other valuables of the enemy, has dedicated to the goddess twelve thousand sixty gold pieces and three hundred seven talents of gold."¹⁰ As soon as Pompey stepped outside the shrine, he would have seen a multitude of other types of exchanges being completed in the forum. In this way, the commercial transactions for goods and services contextualized the transactions between man and god when juxtaposed in the forum.

Although festivals customarily superseded all other activities in the forum, Ovid asks Janus why business still goes on in

8. Transparency is so vital to market efficiency and prosperity that one of the stated goals of the Securities and Exchange Commission is: "a far more active, efficient, and transparent capital market that facilitates the capital formation so important to our nation's economy." See "The Investor's Advocate" in Bibliography.

9. MacMullen (1970), 337.

10. Diod. 40.4. Also, Orlin (2002), 133.

the *Forum Romanum* during the festival of the New Year. This question suggests that he was familiar with markets that would close on the first day of the year, making the fact that the Roman Forum remained open that much more significant. Janus explains that, like the offering, business affairs persist as a precursor for prosperity the whole year round. According to Ovid, when asked to defend the business activity on the New Year, Janus rationalizes, “I assigned the birthday of the year



Modern picture of remains of Temple of Castor and Pollux

to business, lest from the auspice idleness infect the whole.”¹¹ In this poem, in describing the festival of Janus, Ovid depicts the business-like atmosphere of the festival. The religious and economic entanglements in the forum during festival time were so prominent that Ovid renders it necessary to provide the economic context in order to describe the religious event at the beginning of each year.¹²

11. Ov., Fast. 15

12. Ov., Fast. 15.

Politics and Religion

Since the Temple of Castor and Pollux was prominently located and was large enough to hold a gathering of people, it was used for many purposes. In this section, I will focus on the religious and political functions of the temples and the forum in general. The two consuls made the Temple of Castor and Pollux their headquarters, convening some assemblies and conducting official business on its podium facing the forum.¹³ By the second century BC, it would accommodate meetings of the Senate and its podium would serve as a voting site of the *comitia* or the assembly.¹⁴

13. Stamper (2005), 38.

14. Ibid.

Why did the consuls choose to make the Temple of Castor and Pollux in the forum their headquarters? Simply because of the number of people it could hold? While initially this may have been the main reason, the centrality of the Temple and its proximity to all other activities in the forum publicized the way the government operated. When many people could not read, the buildings themselves told the stories. Then, what story did the Temple of Castor and Pollux tell? Before mass news media existed, one way Roman officials educated the populace on the structure of the government was by conducting government affairs in public places. The forum is the ideal place to reach the masses, and the magnificence and sanctity of the temple commanded the people's attention and respect. Furthermore, by associating government affairs with worship of the gods in the physical space, Roman citizens also inevitably equated the importance of the two in their minds. Although the shared space can be viewed as a matter of

convenience, over time it influenced and united the practice of religious and political rituals.

The association can be extended even further. Political leaders adopted a certain god-like aura when they were seen orating next to statues of heroes and gods in front of their sanctuaries. While this association occurred naturally by mere physical positioning, Roman leaders often fabricated this heavenly relationship to elevate themselves. Therefore, if the leaders intended to deify themselves and to imbue the supernatural into their political campaigns, they had more reason to closely link their image with religious sites and priests. For example, Livy describes this purposeful deification at Scipio's triumphal parade after the defeat of Carthage. Livy recounts, "Scipio visited all the temples of the gods with the Roman people" and defines Scipio's aim in leading this parade clearly: "he moved through the city as if he were Jupiter himself."¹⁵ Livy highlights the fundamental connection between piety and political success in Rome in many accounts in his histories.¹⁶ When describing Augustus, Livy attributes a defining part of his identity and success as *templorum omnium restitutorem ac conditotrem*, "the restorer and founder of all temples."¹⁷

Not only did political leaders use the shared space of political and religious gatherings to their advantage, but the religious leaders profited as well. Political leaders benefited from the support of religious leaders and vice versa. The shared space facilitated the close interaction between political and religious leaders, enabling the mutually advantageous relationship. In this way, both benefited from cooperation. In order for cooperation to exist, there must be communication and the adjacency and sometimes even the overlap of their respective offices facilitated communication. In fact, no significant public act or event could succeed without the priests' backing.¹⁸ At the same time, the consuls and senators controlled the actual initiative and organization of religious events.¹⁹ As a result, the political and religious leaders

15. Liv. 38 51.12-14.

16. Liv. 5 49.7.

17. Liv. 40 20.7.

18. Stamper (2005), 38.

19. Ibid, 39.

consulted each other and needed to support each other in order to accomplish any major public work.

Politics and Economy

The proximity of government buildings to the market allowed for politicians to manipulate prices and regulate the markets closely. The government's role in the Roman markets relates to Juvenal's conception of *panem*. One way the Roman government ensured the people were fed was through the *annona*, "grain handout" to citizens.²⁰ In the *Res Gestae*, Augustus deems it important enough to recount from his many achievements distributing grain to the public four times: "When consul for the eleventh time (23 B.C.E.), twelve doles of grain personally bought were measured out... Consul for the thirteenth time (2 B.C.E.), I gave HS 240 to the plebs who then received the public grain."²¹ At times, economic and political circumstances necessitated manipulating the price of grain in addition to the *annona*. In times of shortage, the government intervened in the grain markets, supplementing the *annona* with lower prices. The officials, spearheaded by the *praefectus annonae*, worked with the private grain dealers in order to mediate between the people.²² For example, Pompey manipulated the prices by not allowing shipments to land, using famine as a weapon in civil war. Lucilius bemoans Pompey's political and economic maneuver, "Why should I next complain that he took into his own hands the harvests of the whole world and forced famine to do his bidding?"²³ Not only did Pompey exert control through the intimidating number of soldiers under his command, but also through his army's proximity to the markets. This was possible because both political institutions and the markets were centered in the Forum, contributing to his ability to control the supply closely and consequentially, the price.

The government not only regulated grain, but many other goods and services through taxation. The specifics of taxation

20. Morley (2002), 55.

21. Aug. RG 15.

22. Casson (1980), 28.

23. Luc. 1.26

in ancient Rome are beyond the scope of this paper, but it will explore the effects of the Forum's political and transactional nature on the efficacy of tax collection. As a center of international trade and international politics, the destination of Silk Road travelers, Babylonian merchants, and Egyptian craftsmen, many cultures and economic customs converged in the Roman Forum. Merchants not only exchanged goods, but also political tactics and colluded to evade government regulation. Livy reported that prohibitions against higher rates were evaded in the late republic by transferring the loans to foreigners who were not subject to rate restrictions.²⁴ Much like moving assets to nations with lower tax rates today, it was possible in ancient times to transfer ownership of commercial loans among interested parties.²⁵ The Roman Forum provided the ideal place for such transactions since

24. Liv. 35 7

25. Temin (2013), 170.



Modern picture of Roman forum

political and financial motives daily circulated in the forum's colonnades. It would have been natural for the conversation to shift from the topic of economic goals to political barriers.

Furthermore, politics and the economy intersected not just in the goods market, but also in the financial markets. Financial markets - which refer to intangible assets, equities, and debt—and these arenas of economic activity, thrived in the Roman Forum as well. These types of intangible markets existed within reciprocal relationships known as patronage. Patronage refers to the mutual obligations between a *patronus*, “sponsor” or “benefactor”, and his *cliens*, “client”, and many of these obligations transpired in the Forum. The *patroni*, most often politicians, campaigned in the Forum, whose markets attracted diverse crowds. These economic markets attracted



26. O'Sullivan (2014), 55.

27. Steinby (1995), 328.

28. Cic. Mur. 70.1

Roman citizens who were not part of the elite social circle the politicians interacted with in their villas, but were still important as voters to ambitious politicians. In turn, Roman citizens who otherwise would not interact with the politicians could approach and escort the patron's daily *deductio in forum* (descent into the forum) and pitch their business plans.²⁶ The interpersonal dependence between the elites and regular citizens was regularly manifested in the forum. The Roman Forum staged many displays of affection and hostility for politicians and their constituents alike.²⁷ The openness of the Forum for both the elite and the common person emboldened such interactions that transcended socio-economic classes.

In some ways, this symbiotic relationship between the elite and plebeian classes in the Forum permitted socio-economic mobility. Whether it translated itself outside of the Forum is debatable, but within the Forum, small strides of economic mobility moved the class system forward. While not enough is written by plebeian sources to draw upon, this point is suggested by Cicero's writings. Cicero considers the perspective of the men in his escort, "Poor men have only one place to earn or pay back a service to our order: this effort of providing an escort during our candidacy for office."²⁸ By sympathizing with the men in his escort, Cicero grants the plebeians a voice they would otherwise not have. These types of personal relationships fostered during the walks in the forum between *patronus* and *cliens* allowed plebeians access to opportunity and sponsorship, which could their lives and that of their families.

Like the exchange of one material good for another at the stalls lining the Forum, Cicero depicts the escort as part of a system of exchange, whereby members of the lower orders repaid their patrons for services rendered, such as representation in court and sustenance at the table. However, this personal relationship was not for the sake of camaraderie alone, if at all. The political elite were undeniably aware

that the audience of this escort as they walked through the forum were the “city denizens, the potential voters at the next election.”²⁹ The forum provided the publicity necessary to motivate the elite to listen, or at least pretend to listen, to the Roman citizens.

The political structure of the Forum also facilitated collective organizations and the pursuit of economic justice. Since the market operated in the shadow of Senate meetings, the merchants shadowed the structure of political institutions by organizing legal financial partnerships. A *societas* was a legal form of partnership that the Romans had developed by the later third century BCE to finance commercial activity.³⁰ *Societates* provided a rare example in an agrarian economy of pooled equity capital.³¹ In this way, financial institutions imitated the governmental structure surrounding them in the Forum. As an example of the pursuit of economic justice in the forum, Martial provides the example of the economic downfall of the barber, Cinnamus, who, accused of unscrupulous transactions, fled the justice of the Forum.³² Since the markets operated directly beneath and next to the judicial institutions of the government, punishment could be enacted quickly.

The Forum Romanum: A Unified Diversity

Finally, let us refer back to the first section and look at the connection between the economy, the government, and religion through the perspective of the *forum Romanum*. When Pompey dedicated his spoils in the forum at the Temple of Jupiter, publicizing and accrediting the gods for his victory, he most likely did so in order to win the respect and votes of the people. After all, everyone—the elites, the plebeians, and slaves—could witness and celebrate Pompey’s glory side-by-side in the forum. Pompey and many other Roman leaders decorated the forum as political tool to display the riches the respective leaders obtained in battle or travels, especially when it advanced their political agenda. Roman

29. O’Sullivan (2014), 61.

30. Temin (2013), 172.

31. Temin (2013), 173.

32. Mart. 7.64. In poem 10.XXXVII, Martial invokes the goddess, Maternus, and in particular, focuses on her scrupulousness of law and equity as the ruler of the forum Romanum, further emphasizing the judicial tenets of the forum and the city as a whole.

33. Mart. 9.59.

34. In fact, “monumentalization of the Forum Romanum no doubt proceeded in tandem with the growing ambitions and success of Rome,” (Steinby 330) as evidenced by monuments named after war heroes and political revolutionaries. In some ways, displaying the spoils of war so centrally in the Forum responded directly to the ambition of Rome as well. At the same time, the fact that these monumental celebrations and riches took place in the forum, alongside the assemblies, economic markets, and public meeting places reinforced the people as the cornerstone of Rome’s success.

35. Choay (2001), 6.

poets, such as Martial, expound on this publicity and suggest Rome herself—or at least the personification of the city—publicizes her own glory. Quoting Martial: Golden Rome ostentatiously displays her riches, viewed the tender young slaves, and devoured them with his eyes; not those exposed in the open shops, but those which are kept for the select in private apartments, and are not seen by the people, or such as I am.”³³ The monuments and activities of Rome, located for the most part in the forum, proclaimed Rome’s glory to visitors and citizens alike.³⁴ Actively engaging the “living memories” of the public, the forum’s monuments connect memory and history, interacting with the viewer on multiple dimensions, economic, political, and religious being just a few.³⁵ The market stirs up the memory of the sacrifice that stirs up the memory of the triumphal parade that stirs up the memory of gladiators. The memories overlap, much like the buildings themselves.

I have just skimmed the surface of some of the web of connections between the economic, religious, political, spectacular and social dimensions of Roman life in the Forum. Each function warrants further research on its own and in relation to the other elements present in the forum. Although these activities are distinguishable and undermine each other at times, there is much to glean from understanding the separate institutions of Ancient Rome inseparably from each other. In some ways, it is irrelevant whether these distinct elements consciously or unconsciously shaped each other; ancient Romans experienced the political, religious, spectacular, and economic areas of life all at once. The heterogeneity of Rome can be understood through a more nuanced perspective when explored through the activities and environment of *Forum Romanum*, a space that reconciled seemingly contradictory institutions.

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