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Roberto Meneghini and Riccardo Santangeli Valenzani, *I Fori Imperiali: Gli scavi del Comune di Roma (1991-2007)*. Rome: Viviani Editore, 2007. Pp. 174. 177 illustrations. ISBN: 978-88-79931-25-0. €30.

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Viviani Editore and the Comune di Roma have been exceptionally kind to us in providing a synthesis of a decade and a half of important excavations in the Imperial fora at the bargain price of €30. Publishing a summary of such in-depth investigation into one of the most complicated archaeological complexes in the world is always going to be an exercise in reduction, but it is well managed here. It is important to state that much of the material in the volume has been published elsewhere over the last decade.¹ This volume is a shortcut to the issues of fundamental importance for how we understand the historical development of these challenging but rewarding spaces. For brevity, as well as an awareness of my limits of ability to cast critical comment, this review will focus on issues related to the fora in antiquity (by Meneghini, pp. 1-114). However, Chapter 3, on the medieval and early modern periods (by Santangeli Valenzani, pp. 115-165) will be essential for late antique and medieval studies of Roman topography.²

Despite the obvious importance of the Imperial fora, they have always been a strong candidate for the most oversimplified archaeological site in the city of Rome.³ Explanations and interrogations of evidence are less forthcoming than descriptions but, when present, normally fall into two camps: necessity and ideology. Necessity speaks of relieving the Forum Romanum of the

¹ In particular, *RömMitt* 2001 included reports from the recent excavations – ‘Fori Imperiali. Relazione preliminare degli scavi eseguiti in occasione del Grande Giubileo del Duemila’.

² Santangeli Valenzani’s section details the dismantling of the fora and the emergence of new urban routes through and patterns of habitation within the monumental complexes (pp. 125-158).

³ There are some exceptions, such as Anderson 1984, but the scale of treatment afforded to the Forum Romanum has been lacking.

exponential pressure on space caused by the stringently functional equation that Rome's burgeoning importance led to more people flooding the capital, which led to more pressure on existing space, which led to the need for the Forum Iulium. Ideological interpretations cast the fora as 'showpieces', with successive emperors vying to outdo one another in a trans-dynastic contest of egos played out in monumental architecture. The biggest simplification of these spaces is undoubtedly the conflation of separate schemes into a single, master plan – the kind which is routinely probed for symbolic alignments and correspondences on the ichnographic plan.⁴ Consider the fora in three dimensions, in terms of perceived and kinaesthetic experience, and such symbolism falls apart.⁵ Despite the work that linked one fora to the next these spaces are inward looking.

Much of this simplification can be traced to the perpetuation of suggestions which, through the power of repetition without justification, become 'axioms' that 'involuntary leave traces in future work'.⁶ Although Rome is uniquely placed to grant historians, philologists, art historians and archaeologists equal claim to the study of the city's ancient topography, some things can only satisfactorily be addressed by archaeological investigation. The modern history of the Imperial fora is dominated by the *sventramenti* and the construction of Via dell'Impero (discussed briefly at pp. 163-165). Owing to the

⁴ The most guilty are those employing architectural 'method and theory' to absurd degrees, abstracting the Imperial fora from places of human experience to nothing more than the geometrics and arithmetic of a grand design. As an extreme example, see Wightman 1997.

⁵ See La Rocca 2006: 121, 'colpisce l'impossibilità per lo spettatore di recepire a colpo d'occhio la complessità degli spazi'. One could barely see around the corner, let alone conceive of a symbolic link manifested in a 'unifying design rationale' of architectural vista and axial symmetries (Wightman 1997: 81). 'Perceived' here is primarily visual, but the other senses were engaged too, as was retold in Suetonius' account of Claudius catching the scent of a nearby meal and swiftly following his nose to the Temple of Mars (*Claud.* 33.1).

⁶ This phenomenon is eloquently discussed by La Rocca 2001: 171, 'La maggiore difficoltà negli studi è liberarsi dalle pastoie di concetti appresi a memoria, di soluzioni suggerite da studiosi anche eminenti e che inevitabilmente tendono a trasformarsi in assiomi, al punto da restare fisse nella mente lasciando involontariamente traccia nei lavori futuri'. La Rocca is, in this instance, referring to the plan of Italo Gismondi and the fora of Augustus and Trajan.

straightest line from Piazza Venezia to the Colosseum, it is unfortunate that the most interesting and least understood elements of the Imperial fora – the junctures between successive complexes – have remained out of reach. The current volume does not spend time bemoaning the inadequacies of the archaeology conducted during the 1920s-1940s. Instead, it methodically reports on the recent research and the contributions made to the understanding of Rome's development. The volume balances detail with overview. This is not an excavation report, wherein every scrap of data is compiled and tabulated. It is the best of summaries, wherein every key piece of information is present and the essential data are easy to extract and command from the text. The balance is well judged. Photographs and illustrations are of superb quality and the choices are pertinent.

The volume begins with a chapter on the area of the fora from prehistory to the early Republic. The most famous discovery communicated here is arguably the tenth-century BC grave found beneath the Forum Iulium in 2006 (pp. 20-21). This grave of a woman, in her early 30s, was accompanied by objects of considerable value. If this alone did not prove her status, she was the only inhumation burial in a cemetery of contemporaneous cremation urns. The discovery of 'The Lady of the Forum' exposes sophisticated societal relations, with discriminatory internment practices, in the area several centuries before the traditional epoch of foundation. The volume contributes further to the understanding of Rome's proto-urban development in the forum valley.

This section concludes with a useful reconstruction of the saddle between the Quirinal and the Capitoline hills and the route of the Servian Wall in this area (pp. 21-23, fig. 8). The remains that were once ascribed to the Servian Wall along Salita del Grillo were demonstrated to be the substructures of houses from the sixth-fifth centuries BC. The line is thus redrawn based on the latest data (fig. 9), connecting the Porta Fontinalis to the Porta Sanqualis across the later Forum Traiani. The importance here, for other surveys, is that the Forum

lulium and the Temple of Venus Genetrix did not truncate the wall.⁷ In fact, Caesar's project appears aligned according to it. This not only contributes toward an interpretation of just how reserved Caesar was with regards to existing urban space, but it may also help to anchor the orientation of the successive complexes of Imperial fora and their deviation from the Forum Romanum and the north-south alignment so clearly manifest in the Curia Hostilia and Comitium.

Chapter 2 examines in detail each of the four Imperial fora and associated spaces – the Templum Pacis (rightly included however much the nomenclature of *Foro* or *Templo* might be debated) and the 'Terrazza Domiziana' (perhaps the house of Sextus Pompey, consul in AD 14). The length devoted to each is indicative of the new interpretations that have come from the programme of excavations. It is no surprise, then, to find Trajan's forum tipping the scales of page numbers (pp. 83-113). Bringing my own research interests to this review, I hereby summarise key suggestions that have a bearing on how we understand the topography of this area.

The Forum Iulium (pp. 31-42) has been discussed by proxy in relation to the course of the Servian Wall and the revelation that, in fact, Caesar's project was less intrusive than might have been suspected. However, it is clear that Caesar's work included a huge amount of levelling and land removal and that it was not simply a case of substituting Republican structures for the pavement of the new forum. As a result, it is not surprising that Republican footprints have been elusive, as the terracing and levelling for the piazza may have removed the corresponding levels. Nevertheless, the excavations have brought to light some valuable evidence for the nature of occupation in the late-Republic, prior to the construction of the forum. It has long been irksome that Cicero's letter to Atticus (4.16), on the planning of the Forum Iulium, does not give specific details about the occupation *ad Atrium Libertatis*. Tortorici had to settle with simply labelling this part of his otherwise detailed plan of the

⁷ As is the reconstruction of Von Gerkan 1940: fig. 13-14.

Argiletum '*domus et insulae*'.⁸ The recent excavations revealed a well that had been backfilled with debris from a demolished late-Republican *domus*.⁹ The layout of these spaces is also better understood, and speaks of an area organised around shared orientation and careful subdivision. This is quite different from the image of chaotic, haphazard development following the Gallic invasion that Livy suggested (5.55).

The new interpretation of the Forum Augustum (pp. 43-60) provides a valuable lesson in why archaeologists and architectural historians should be wary of reading too much significance into the layout of urban spaces. Kellum suggested, in a paper perhaps too keen to invent relationships between gender and power, that the Forum Augustum resembled a giant phallus in the city of Rome: 'a sexually charged, gendered masculine environment'.¹⁰ This relies on the plan of an elongated shape with the two projecting hemicycles flanking the Temple of Mars Ultor. Recent excavations (1998-2000) have suggested, convincingly, that the two hemicycles are the survivors of an original four, with two other projections on the south end of the complex.¹¹ In this plan, any notion of phallic symbolism is quickly undermined. To maintain this symbolism one has to read it only in the *later* shape of the Forum Augustum, after the interventions of Domitian and Trajan; far removed from any programme of Augustan apotropaic saturation of the city. The lesson is that form does not necessarily reflect symbolic intent and, in any case, forms change. The construction of the Imperial fora spread over a century and a half, and the volume reinstates the facts of piecemeal development that often necessitated the removal of existing elements. La Rocca considered the new

⁸ Tortorici 1991: map II.

⁹ This theme is arguably better treated in Rizzo 2001: 221-222. Paving and foundations of late Republican *domus* were also found beneath the Forum Augustum, Forum Nervae and the area of Trajan's Markets on Salita del Grillo (on the latter, see Meneghini 2003: fig. 17 and 21).

¹⁰ Kellum 1997: 165.

¹¹ After La Rocca 2001, Ventura Villanueva 2006 has championed the reconstruction of a double apse basilica across the western axis, similar to the relationship of Trajan's Basilica Ulpia with its exedrae, for the use of the urban and peregrine praetors. The current volume rejects this suggestion (p. 54).

plan of the Forum Augustum to have 'shocking results', not because it was contentious but because it demands that we rethink our attitudes.¹²

The Templum Pacis (pp. 61-70) occupies less room, but there are interesting new reconstructions all the same. Excavation has confirmed the nature of the square itself: paved only along the northern end, the open area was largely covered with gravel. Other finds are more enticing. Two figures (60, 61) reproduce newly discovered works of statuary to add to the catalogue (mainly Pliny's) for this well-known repository: a smaller than life-size portrait of the Greek stoic Chrysippus and a remarkable ivory representation of Septimius Severus, in philosophical pose, found in 2005 (pp. 66-67). Both statues, with their philosophical overtones, contribute to the sense that the Templum Pacis was in some way an oasis within the metropolis; the apogee of opulent gardens that were popular amongst the elite, 'the most beautiful and most luxurious' (p. 70).¹³ This idea is further based on the discovery of Gallic roses and of 'canals' – low structures, covered in a veil of water that spilt over the sides into smaller channels (fig. 54 and 55). As the volume states, only archaeological excavation has finally allowed us to understand what the strange marks on the *Forma Urbis Romae* represent (p. 63).¹⁴ This could serve as the mantra for the volume as a whole.

The Forum Nervae has been subject to less excavation than the other fora (pp. 71-80) and much of the summary here is devoted to an introduction to the site. Still, there are some very important points to be made. Not least of these is the rejection of Heinrich Bauer's Temple of Janus at the west end of the piazza.¹⁵ The foundations which he interpreted as the temple (reproduced as fig. 73) are the remnants of a project that seems to have faltered before it got

¹² La Rocca 2001: 184, 'La scoperta della nuova esedra del Foro di Augusto non è senza sconvolgenti risultati riguardo la intero problema della assetto dei Fori Imperiali'. La Rocca, as a consequence of the new plan of the Forum Augustum, also challenges the notion that Trajan's complex, with four exedrae, was quite as novel as had been supposed.

¹³ 'In tal senso il *Templum Pacis* era il più bello e il più lussuoso giardino dell'impero'.

¹⁴ 'soltanto gli scavi ne hanno permesso una corretta identificazione'.

¹⁵ Bauer 1976/77.

going. Excavations revealed damage to the foundation and the current suggestion is that the temple either: a) quickly collapsed, b) was dismantled or c) never advanced beyond the foundations. The current team of excavators consider this to be the first plan for the Temple of Minerva, whose podium now stands opposite. This is a more satisfying theory than Bauer's, and goes some way to resolving the puzzle of why one would enter the Forum Nervae from behind the temple. In any event, the shrine to Janus, somewhere in the vicinity and mentioned by Martial, remains elusive. Bauer's reconstruction is unworkable, but the centre of the forum remains buried.

Another extremely interesting suggestion is that the frieze of the Forum Nervae was similar to the famous *Sebasteion* at Aphrodisias (pp. 75-76). This proposition is based on the re-interpretation of the 'Minerva' figure above *Le Colonnacce* as a representation of the province of Asia Minor, and the discovery (1999) of a second, different figure (thought to represent *provincia Romana*). The variation in these two figures leads to the conclusion that all the figures around the frieze were different with each representing a people and nation subjected by Rome. The theory is tantalising, but may be saying too much from what is still a small sample. Still, if true, it would demand a rethink of the entire ideological program of this monument, and of Domitian's Rome more broadly.

Perhaps the most obvious result of the decade and a half of excavations is the rejection of the hypothetical Temple of Divine Trajan, and a fundamental reworking of the area around the north end of the Forum Traiani. This model has been championed by Roberto Meneghini in a series of publications since the late 1990s. Although La Rocca (noted above) has found reason to doubt the ingenuity of the Forum Traiani based upon the recent excavations in the Forum Augustum, Meneghini is more of an advocate for the originality of the largest of the Imperial fora: 'The archaeological investigations have also revealed the presence of some totally unexpected and original architectural

solutions' (p. 86).¹⁶ One of the assumptions of the pre-excavated fora was that the famous equestrian statue of Trajan (described by Ammianus Marcellinus, 16.10.15-16) stood at the geometric centre of the forum piazza. The excavations (1998-2000) revealed, however, that it was twenty meters to the south. Meneghini uses this to support an overall argument that the main entrance to the forum was from the north (p. 87, fig. 79).¹⁷ In a similar vein, the south side of the forum is neither straight nor a continuous curve, but a segmented wall, with oblique angles at the edges connecting to the porticoes. Again, the traditional orientation of this area is reversed, to face north and 'inwards'. The coins that show what is thought to be the entrance to the Forum Traiani therefore show, according to Meneghini's reconstruction, the interior (see figs 93 and 95). Again, the evidence points towards Meneghini's most widely publicised and important assertion – the principal entrance to the Forum Traiani was from the Campus Martius side on the north, and therefore the Temple of Divine Trajan is a figment of architectural imagination.¹⁸ Meneghini's plan reverses the entire monumental space and its relationship to the other fora (compare figs. 118 and 119).¹⁹ The issue is not likely to be agreed upon any time soon, but this reviewer finds the broader significance of Meneghini's 'reversal' of considerable interest for understanding how the fora communicated with the surrounding urban regions.

What now? Since the publication of this volume it has already been announced that Via Alessandrina will be removed, allowing for the excavation of yet more of the Forum Traiani. In December 2008, a conference was

¹⁶ 'Le indagini archeologiche hanno anche evidenziato la presenza di alcune soluzioni architettoniche del tutto inattese e originali che, come si vedrà, non trovano confronto con gli altri monumenti romani contemporanei e successivi'

¹⁷ The logic being that, as the statue was so close to the south side, it must have faced north otherwise it would have presented its back to the principal field of view.

¹⁸ See also Meneghini 2001.

¹⁹ In terms of these relationships, the excavations have also pointed towards a vestibule that links the fora of Trajan and Augustus. Claridge 2007: 90-91 rejected this and most of the rest of Meneghini's plan.

organised entirely around the Forum Iulium.²⁰ The poster for this conference showed a plan of the forum, on the external side of which the line of *tabernae* had been tentatively extended to meet the Curia Iulia – one of the hypotheses that neither La Rocca nor the present volume (p. 35) felt able to confirm, but were inclined to believe. This demonstrates the pace with which the interpretation and re-interpretation is moving. It will continue to move thanks to the publication of this volume and the accompanying treatments of each individual forum (in press). A devoted monograph to each will allow for more detailed discussion of the excavation data. If those single site volumes match the standard set by this general synthesis, they will be invaluable contributions and must-have additions to the bookshelves of anyone studying the city of Rome.

²⁰ *Il Foro di Cesare: nuovi dati da scavi e studi recenti*, Comune di Roma. Auditorium di Palazzo Massimo and Auditorium dell'Ara Pacis, 17th December 2008.

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