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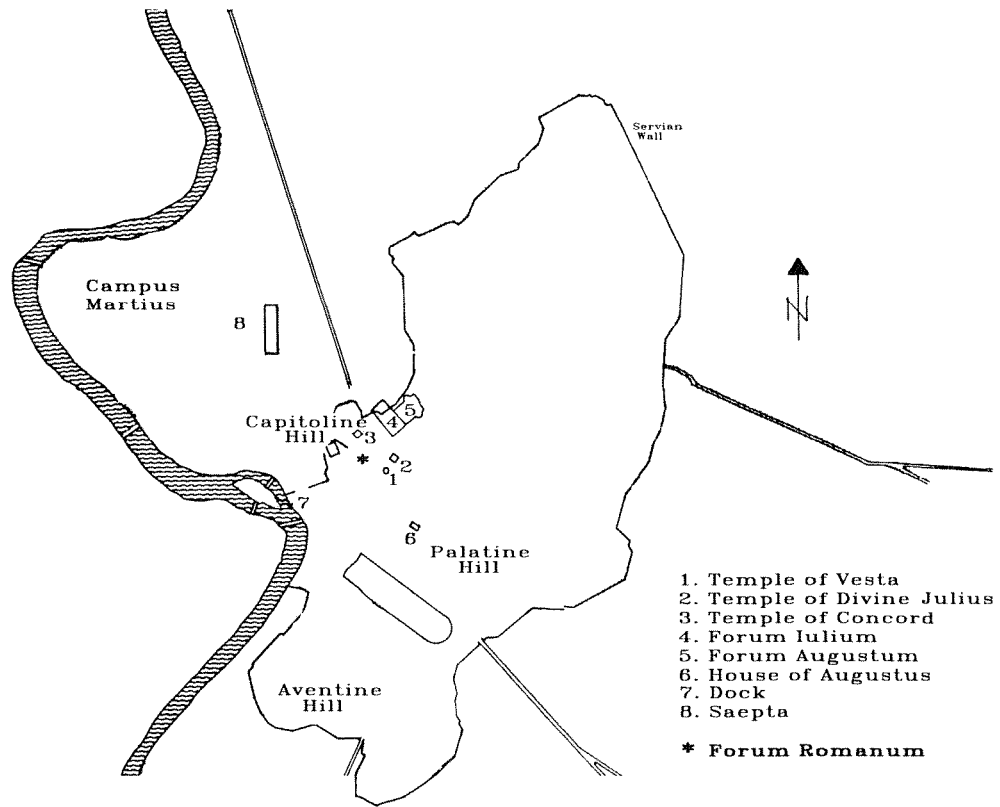
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The Roman Forum and Roman Memory

Diane Favro

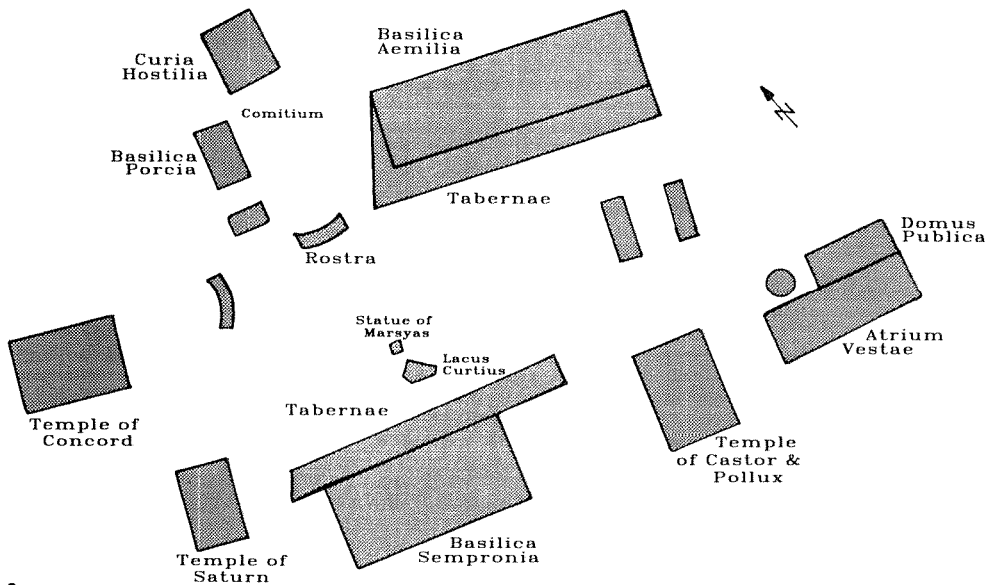
In the first century B.C., Cicero and Marcus Piso concurred on the irrevocable link between place and memory. Remembering the Forum Romanum, Piso remarked, “One’s emotions are more strongly aroused by seeing the places that tradition records to have been the favorite resort of men of note in former days, than by hearing about their deeds or reading their writings.”¹ For the Romans of the Republic, every physical location had a unique *genius loci*. This “spirit of place” drew power from the site’s inherent forces and from the cumulative input of human interaction. As a focal point for communal energy, the Roman Forum was not just an open space in urban Rome, it was a container of collective consciousness. The genius of the Forum was the genius of the state.

During the Republic, every Roman’s life revolved around the Forum. In this central urban space citizens received schooling, worshipped, conducted business, attended ceremonies, gathered news, and took part in history.² The very notion of the Forum reflected the needs of a state based on group rule by a small number. A magistrate walking through the republican Forum was expected to recognize the individuals he met, their rank, affiliations, and family history. In virtually every case, he could spark his



1 City of Rome during the early Empire.

Plans of the Forum are adapted from drawings in a book by Erika Simon, *Augustus, Kunst und Leben in Rom um die Zietwende* (Munchen: Hirmer Verlag, 1986)



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2 Forum Romanum in the Republic.

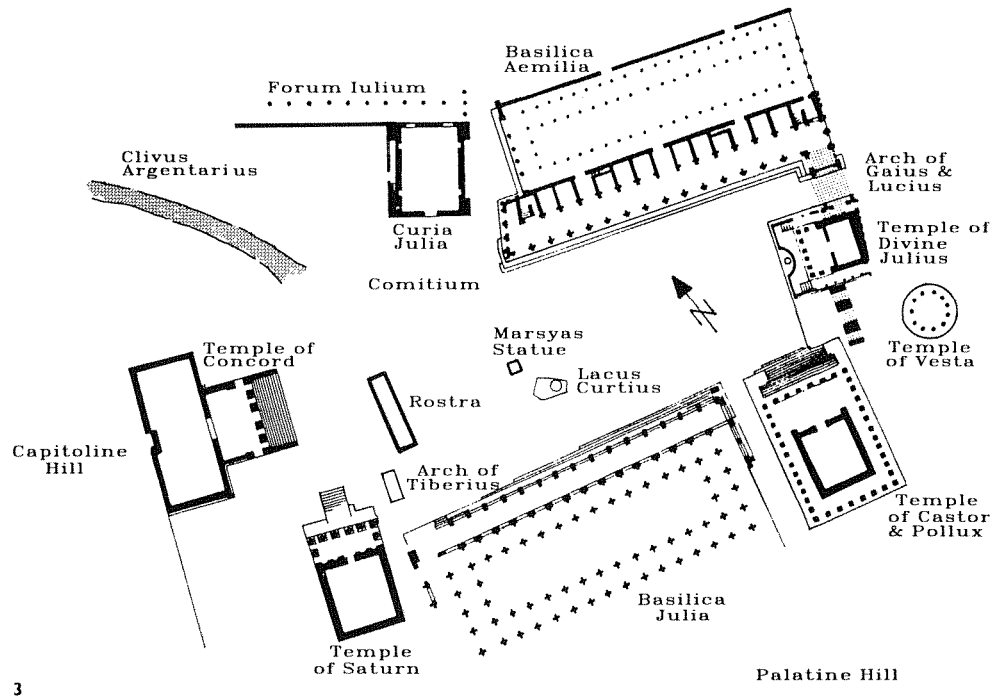
memory by referencing a particular building or locale. A glance at the Curia Cornelia called to mind the deeds of Lucius Cornelius Sulla; a stroll by the Basilica Aemilia recalled the deeds of all the Aemilii, and so on. In fact, a trip to the Forum was a lesson in republican history. Every building, every space, every stone had a story and a moral; every individual named or depicted stood as an exemplar. So powerful were the associations of place and memory, the genius loci actively affected current events. Alarmed that the dictator Caesar was exalting himself above the government, Marc Antony staged a public rebuke in early 44 B.C. Cassius Dio records that Antony “selected the Forum and the Rostra (speakers’ platform) that Caesar might be made ashamed by the very places.”¹

By the first century B.C., the Roman Forum embodied over 500 years of memorable republican actions. As the century waned, tremendous changes occurred. Slowly, the aristocratic Republic was transformed into an absolutist imperial state with political control concentrated in the hands of one man.² The spirit of the Forum Romanum had been nurtured on republican ways, ideals, and goals. The new rulers recognized, however, that this genius had to be weakened, or redirected, if the Empire

were to succeed. Although the Forum continued to be a popular gathering point and the site of traditional ceremonies, displays, and portents and although magnificent new structures were erected and earlier buildings embellished, Rome's first emperors simultaneously drained the Roman Forum of contemporary import.

Activities in the Forum gradually became more and more debased. Decisions made in the Senate House (Curia) did not carry real weight unless endorsed by the emperor. The tribunals in the Forum's basilicas served more as entertainments than vital, official courts. Rome's residents frequently met in the Roman Forum to recall Rome's glorious past, gossip, examine artwork, and carouse. In effect, the Forum became a museum of history and art, not a stage for contemporary action.⁵

As activities in the Roman Forum decreased in contemporary significance, the power of the Forum's genius loci was siphoned off to other locales in the capital. In part, such transferral was necessitated by the new scale of the Roman world. The capital's population now numbered close to a million. Measuring approximately 200 × 70 yards, the Forum's central open space was too small for gatherings of the entire citizenry. Furthermore, the



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3 Forum Romanum in the early Empire (ca. A.D. 20).

Forum could not easily expand internally or externally. Within, religious restrictions prevented the alteration of existing sacred structures. Without, Rome's dense urban fabric threatened encroachment on every side. The grand secular structures of the early imperial age could push outward only at great expense. Cicero notes that in 54 B.C. Caesar paid a small fortune to widen and extend the Forum to the west.⁶ All activities involving large crowds eventually were relocated. After the time of Augustus (27 B.C.–A.D. 14), there is no further mention of games in the Forum Romanum. Similarly, the boisterous assemblies of the Roman people no longer met in the open-air Comitium before the Senate House. Parades continued to pass through the old republican center, but they culminated in ceremonies located in more spacious, more imperial environs.

At first, the early emperors carefully justified alternative urban centers on the basis of need. Caesar argued that he constructed the grand Forum Iulium (ca. 52 B.C.) to accommodate public business.⁷ Tangent to Caesar's enclosure, Augustus added his own imperial forum, claiming that "the increase in the number of people and lawsuits . . . seemed to call for still a third Forum."⁸ Subsequent emperors no longer

referenced their complexes to the Forum Romanum, constructing three additional imperial forums to the east.

The Forum Romanum was a monument to the state; the imperial forums were monuments to individuals. In the new complexes, the emperors did not have to compete with the republican memories so strongly felt in the old Forum. Here, they could orchestrate their own manipulated, imperial memories. The material grandeur, formal organization, rich colors, and well-defined spaces of the imperial forums contrasted sharply with the disordered appearance of the old Forum. These new environments provided the appropriate backdrop for imperial actions.

Programmatically, as well as visually, the magnificent imperial forums drew power away from the Forum Romanum. Both Caesar and Augustus vitalized their complexes by transferring activities from the old republican center. In addition, the Forum Augustum usurped the Forum Romanum as the capital's most prominent place for the display of commemoratives. Other imperial centers in Rome also detracted from the Forum Romanum. Augustus drained the Campus Martius north of the city center and transformed this undeveloped plain into a

grand, orthogonal zone. Here Romans attended games and political assemblies formerly located in the Forum Romanum. These events of republican origin now had to contend with the decidedly imperial genius loci of the Augustan Campus.

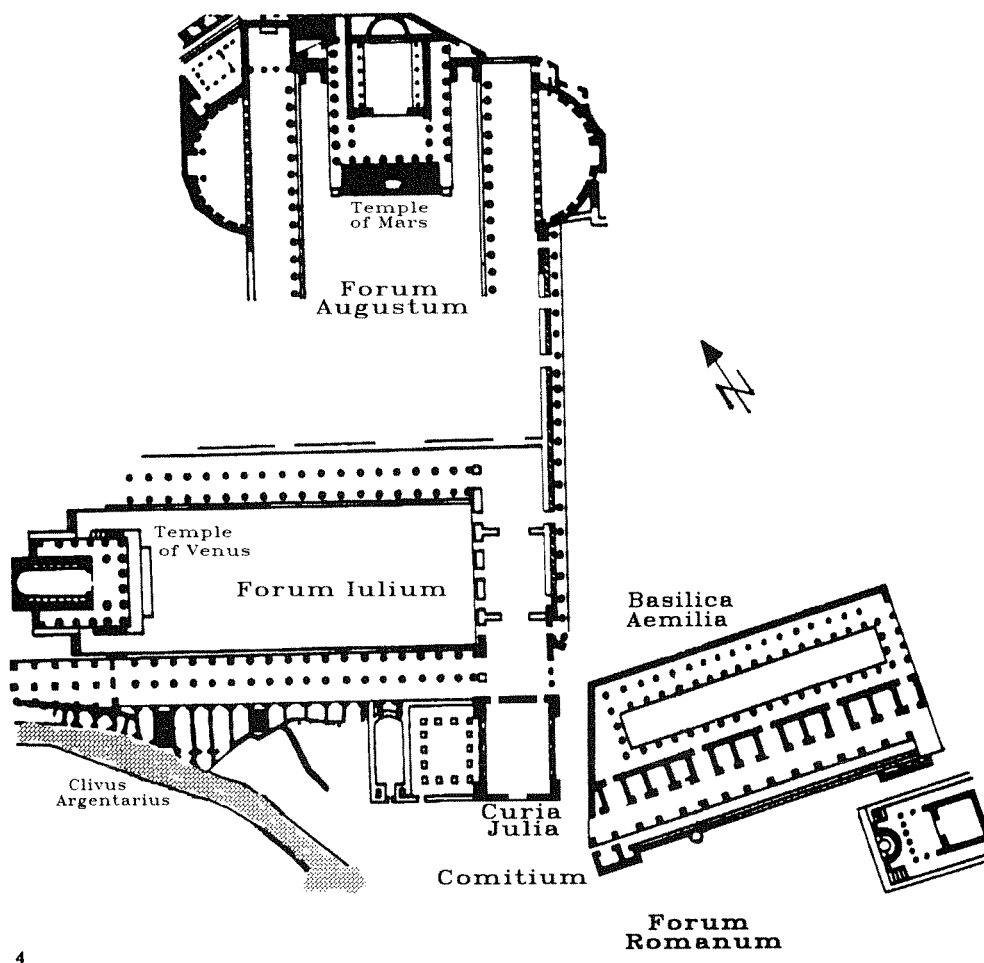
Yet another imperial development appeared on the Palatine Hill. With political control concentrated in the hands of a single man, the physical center of government shifted away from the Forum Romanum to the person of the emperor and to his residence. Although initially Augustus lived close to the Forum, he soon distanced himself from this republican center by moving up to the fashionable Palatine Hill. Gradually, more and more power migrated up the hill, away from the egalitarian Forum Romanum.⁹ When Augustus became high priest, or Pontifex Maximus, in 12 B.C., tradition dictated that he reside in the Domus Publica at the southeastern end of the Forum Romanum. However, by that date, the emperor and his bureaucracy were well established on the Palatine. Wishing to keep both his hilltop residence and the title of Pontifex Maximus, Augustus devised a skillful solution. He donated part of his house to the state to ensure that he, as high priest, resided on public land. Subsequent emperors continued to aggrandize the

Palatine, until it became the premier focus of imperial action.

Overshadowed by Rome's new imperial centers, the Forum Romanum became an area of secondary importance. Significantly, the Forum reverted to its original function as a transition space. Ambassadors crossed the Forum as they prepared to greet the emperor on the Palatine. Businessmen docking on the Tiber River traversed the area as they moved to the offices in the Forum Iulium. Plebians from the Aventine Hill to the south passed through the old Forum as they hurried to the baths in the Campus Martius. With major imperial centers on several sides, the Forum became merely a vestibule. In fact, two structures served as literal foyers. Caesar oriented the Curia Iulia (ca. 50 B.C.) to open directly into the Forum Iulium. The emperor Caligula (A.D. 37–41) sacrilegiously transformed the Temple of Castor and Pollux into the entryway to his Palatine residence.¹⁰ He demonstrated further disdain for the old republican center by building a bridge from the Palatine to the opposing Capitoline Hill, bypassing the Forum altogether.¹¹

The early emperors also made major alterations to the physical form of the Forum Romanum. During

the Republic, the Forum was an arena for public debate. In keeping with an egalitarian state, its large open area was loosely defined and accessible. The Forum had no confining physical boundaries and lay open to the city on every side. Within, each structure was distinct and autonomous, just as each republican citizen was free and self-determined. During the late first century B.C., the state began to negate group decisions and individual autonomy. No longer was there a reason to preserve an unencumbered open space for lobbying and voting. Many debates and trials moved indoors. Outdoors, the dictator Caesar reconstructed the Curia building and Rostra, blithely siting them to encroach upon the sacred open space of the Comitium. Augustus continued to build in the Forum's limited open space, completing Caesar's projects and adding a new temple, arches, and pavements and enlarging several existing structures.



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Slowly the building projects of the late first century B.C. transformed the Forum Romanum into an imperial environment. The Fora Iulium and Augustum served as models. Each consisted of a well-defined rectangular space with flanking colonnades on the long sides and a towering temple on one short side.¹² To create a similar effect in the old

4 The first two imperial fora were located to the northeast of the Forum Romanum. Julius Caesar sited the Curia building so that it would stand as a vestibule to his new Forum Iulium.



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5 The Temple of Concord
 stood at the foot of the Capitoline hill on the Forum's northwestern edge. Shown on a Tiberian coin, the temple has unusually large windows to allow visitors in the Forum to see the artwork on display inside.

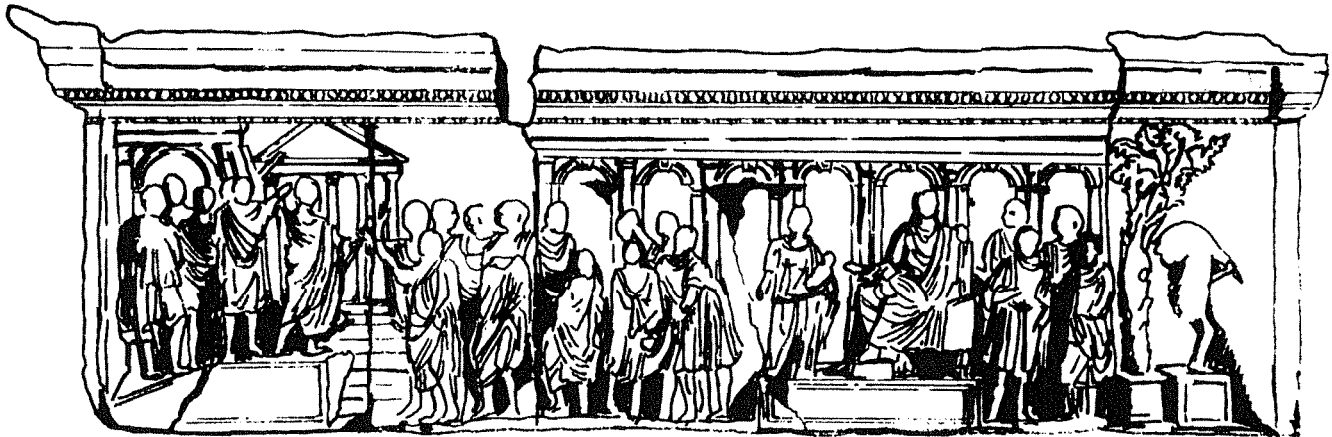
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Forum, Augustus reworked and enlarged the Basilicae Aemilia and Iulia. The frontal colonnades of these two huge structures defined the long sides of a trapezoid, leaving only minor gaps for roads and glimpses of the city beyond. To the southeast, Augustus' temple to the Divine Julius (29 B.C.) fixed the trapezoid's short side. This structure rose on a high podium and was connected to the flanking structures by arches on both sides. As a result, it blocked the view toward the Temple of Vesta and the Domus Publica, two buildings whose power had been transferred to the Palatine Hill. At the Forum's opposite end, the trapezoid was terminated by the Temple of Concordia Augusta and the Capitoline Hill beyond. Only in the northern corner was there a break in the Forum's enclosing wall. A steep street—the Clivus Argentarius—encouraged movement outward, toward the adjoining Forum Iulium and beyond to the imperial attractions of the Campus Martius.

These alterations changed the northwestern Forum Romanum into a contained, ordered, and directed complex, in effect another imperial forum. The area's buildings no longer stood as independent units; like Rome's occupants, they succumbed to the greater power of the imperial state. Visitors to the Forum in the Augustan age found their

every view and thought carefully manipulated. For example, Romans approaching from the northern Campus Martius first saw the Temple of the Divine Julius, a structure proudly proclaiming the Emperor's divine lineage. In contrast, their gaze rapidly passed over both the Senate House standing parallel to the line of vision and the long, uniform facades of the flanking basilicas.¹³ Instead, attention was drawn to the Lacus Curtius and the Marsyas statue in the Forum's center. These freestanding monuments encouraged circumambulation. As they turned, visitors saw other commemoratives, including a sparkling equestrian statue of Augustus on the Rostra. Beyond, they glimpsed the Temple of Concordia Augusta, which celebrated the blessings of civil harmony brought to Rome by the first emperor.

The manipulated form of the imperial Forum Romanum recalls ancient stage sets. The individual structures created a roughly continuous, multistoried backdrop, complete with well-defined entries and easily identified associations, much like the front wall of a stage building (*scaenae frons*).¹⁴ The theater analogy is apt. Wishing to deplete the Forum's republican power, the emperors transformed this once vital environment into a stage set for carefully regulated imperial performances. Augustus



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went so far as to dictate the costumes of the actors on the stage. He ordered all citizens entering the sparkling environment of the imperial Forum Romanum to discard their dull gray cloaks and don more dramatic white togas.¹⁵

Imperial ceremonies also showed an increased preoccupation with theatricality at the expense of content. In fact, written descriptions of events in the Forum read like stage directions. In a lengthy passage, Tacitus describes the pageantry of A.D. 66, when the Parthian king Tiridates visited Rome to accept Nero's terms of peace:

Before dawn the center of the Forum was filled with delegations of the Roman people, in white garments and with laurel wreaths on their heads; on the sides and at the entrances the soldiers, with gleaming

weapons and standards, were drawn up; countless spectators occupied every available inch of ground, even the very roofs of the buildings. At the rising of the sun Nero appeared in the Forum clad in the garb of triumph . . . When the public saw [Tiridates] . . . bowing humbly before their emperor, they raised . . . shouts of enthusiasm.¹⁶

The description implies that the action of political importance—the negotiation of a bloodless peace—was eclipsed by the elaborate pomp of the performance. Nero staged this event to affirm his power and, simultaneously, to entertain Rome's idle residents. Familiar with such events, they played their part well, booing and applauding at the appropriate moments.

By the first century, the substance of events in the

Forum Romanum clearly had changed. In this time-honored locale, Romans of the Empire enacted pallid recreations of full-bodied republican performances. Distanced from real power, the Forum became a stage for animated, yet eviscerated performances. Appearance, not substance, mattered. The Forum Romanum of the early Empire was more ordered, magnificent, and contained than in republican times. Here, citizens did not have to worry about actions and achievements. They were too preoccupied marveling at the Forum's opulent buildings, splashy ceremonies, and wondrous artworks. In effect, the Forum Romanum itself became a great monument, a well-carved piece of sculpture admired by residents and tourists alike. Two centuries before, the censor Cato had laughed at the portraits by bronze workers and painters,

6 A hadrianic relief depicts the Roman Forum as a theatrical backdrop for imperial ceremony, in this instance the celebrations at the institution of the *alimenta* to support poor children.
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complaining, “They overlooked the fact that citizens carry around the best portraits of themselves in their souls . . . I should rather be asked why there is no statue of me than why there is one.”¹⁷ Seduced by the blessings of peace, relieved of the burden of governing, Rome’s citizens passively enjoyed the well-designed Forum Romanum of the early Empire. They did not want to be asked why.

Notes

- 1 Cic.*de fin.*V.2.
- 2 Cicero’s orations and letters provide ample examples of activities in the Forum Romanum; on crowding see *Planc.*7.; on financial transactions see *Leg. Man.*VII.19, on judicial action see *Cat.*1.3–4.
- 3 XLVI.19.
- 4 The traditional date for the start of the Roman Republic is 509 B.C. Various dates are given for the Empire’s beginning: 44 B.C., the date of the death of the dictator Caesar; 31 B.C., the year of the victory of Caesar’s heir Octavian at Actium; or 27 B.C., the year of Octavian’s assumption of the title “Augustus.”
- 5 Losing effectual power in the governing of the state, Rome’s citizens focused their attention on architectural and artistic materials and artistic styles rather than on politics. J. J. Pollitt provides an interesting overview of connoisseurship during the late first century B.C., in *The Art of Rome* (Prentice-Hall, Inc.: Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1966), pp. 74–81.
- 6 *ad Att.*IV.17.
- 7 App.*BC.*II.102.
- 8 Suet.*Aug.*29.
- 9 Augustus kept a low profile on the Palatine, living in a modest structure and reworking the interiors of surrounding houses for his staff. Subsequent emperors erected ostentatious residences that also served as governmental centers. The word *palace* derives from these magnificent residential/governmental buildings on the Palatine.
- 10 DioCass.LIX.28.5.
- 11 Suet.*Calig.*22.
- 12 Because extensive excavations still have not been conducted in the forums of Caesar and Augustus, the configuration of the sides opposite the main temples remains uncertain.
- 13 Admittedly, the visual rhythm of the two basilica facades was different. The Basilica Aemilia, restored by the first emperor (14 B.C.), had a trabeated front elevation. The Basilica Iulia, begun by Caesar and reworked by Augustus twice (dedicated A.D. 12), had a visually faster arcuated facade.
- 14 Vitruvius.V.6.6–9.
- 15 Suet.*Aug.*40 Augustus also promoted the white toga because of its historical associations. Virgil describes the earliest Romans, “Behold them, conquerors of the world, the nation clad in the toga” (Virgil.*Aen.*1.282).
- 16 *Ann.*XVI.3.
- 17 Plut.*Cato.*19.