THE CULT OF ROMA AETERNA IN HADRIAN'S POLITICS

By
S.T.A.M. MOLS

Recent work on Hadrian – such as Anthony Birley's biography (1997) and Mary Boatwright's monograph on his relations to the cities of the Roman Empire (2000) – depicts Hadrian much less than has been done in the past as a naïve lover of all things Greek.¹ The image created is rather one of a pragmatist whose actions, from the very beginning of his reign, were aimed at creating a unity of empire, so as to be in a stronger position in relation to the non-Roman world. To achieve this goal, drastic measures in a whole range of areas were necessary. Hadrian's building policy seems to have served – at least partially – the same purpose. This becomes clear, first of all, by his not insignificant investments in various building projects all over the Roman Empire. His building activities in Rome, I am convinced, show the same.

I will start this contribution with a quotation from the above mentioned book by Boatwright, stating: "The evidence points to the use of religion and the incorporation of the past as distinguishing Hadrian's municipal activity and fundamental to his encouragement of civic life and Pax Augusta" (p. 209). In the following, I hope to demonstrate that the same applies to the city of Rome itself, with the temple of Venus and Roma, and the cult of, especially, the goddess Roma, as crucial testimonies.

Hadrian, on his accession, *does* finish Trajan's Forum, but forgoes the construction of a forum to his own glory and honour – though such fora had become almost standard during the reigns of the Flavians and Hadrian's adoptive-father. Building a new forum would have only been useful, if it were larger and more impressive than Trajan's. It has often been suggested that Hadrian abstained from this, in order to cut the massive costs of his predecessor's unfinished projects.² But we see how Hadrian spreads out his building activities in Rome, as his new buildings on the Campus Martius, amongst others, indicate.³ Nor would it have been possible for Hadrian to

¹ A.R. Birley, *Hadrian. The Restless Emperor* (London 1997); M.T. Boatwright, *Hadrian and the Cities of the Roman Empire* (Princeton 2000), especially 204.

² See e.g. F. Kolb, *Rom. Die Geschichte der Stadt in der Antike* (München 1995), 381 f. with references. I assume this idea results from *Scriptores Historiae Augustae, Hadrianus* 5.

³ See for activities on the Campus Martius: Boatwright, *Hadrian and the City of Rome*, Princeton 1987, 33-73.

ignore larger scale projects, because of the popular acclamation that creating such employment achieved.⁴

More, perhaps, than financial difficulties, practical problems hindered any desire on the part of Hadrian for his own forum: the centre of Rome, in the area adjoining the *Forum Romanum* and the imperial fora, simply did not provide the room for a project of such size. A location further away, on the other hand, would never be associated with the other fora, and thus not serve its purpose. The choice of the only area in the direct surroundings of the fora which at the time lay fallow formed a solution for this dilemma. The area in question had originally formed part of Nero's *Domus Aurea*, and was only partially occupied – having been the site of the *atrium* and the *vestibulum* of Nero's urban villa. The subsequent effort to remove the *colossus* that Nero had build there to a location nearer to the *Amphitheatrum Flavium* – a site still traceable in the urban landscape – employing 24 elephants in the process, shows quite how willing Hadrian was to build on this particular plot of land.⁵ Furthermore, he enlarged, as it were, the southeastern part of the Velia, by creating a perpendicular descent through the creation of a foundation platform for the temple of Venus and Roma in *opus caementicium*. The temple platform thus created may have been smaller than the *Forum Pacis* and the Forum of Trajan, but it was still larger than the Forum of Augustus.⁶

Such an effort raises questions about the background to this choice of location, and about the reason for choosing this double cult. Especially since the cult of Roma, in this form, would have been new for the city of Rome.

The choice of location was, as has been pointed out, dictated primarily by its position near the fora. The temple of Venus and Roma would be thus highly prominent, and clearly visible from the *Forum Romanum*. In this way, it almost became a counterpoint to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus at the other end of the *Forum Romanum*.⁷ Of all the buildings that Hadrian constructed in Rome, this was the most central one. The fact that the building

⁴ See e.g. Boatwright 1987 op.cit. (n.3), 7 and 20-24. She even discusses emulation of Trajan in building activities: pages 29-30.

⁵ On moving the Colossus, see *Scriptores Historiae Augustae, Hadrianus* 19.12-13.

⁶ Cf. for pre-Neronian buildings in the temple area among others G. Schingo, in: C. Panella, *Meta Sudans* 1. *Un'area sacra "in Palatio" e la Valle del Colosseo prima e dopo Nerone* (Roma 1996), 151-154. Also. Cassatella & S. Panella in: *LTUR* II (1995), 50-51 s.v. *Domus Aurea – Vestibulum*; D. Palombi, *Tra Palatino ed Esquilino. Velia Carinae Fagutal. Storia urbana di tre quartieri di Roma antiqua*, Rivista dell'Istituto Nazionale d'Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte, Supplemento 1 (Roma 1997), 69-71.

⁷ On the pendant of the Temple of Jupiter: cf. Kolb 1995, op.cit. (n.2), 385. The prominence of the location is also stressed by D. Kienast, 'Zur Baupolitik Hadrians in Rom', *Chiron* 10 (1980), 391-412, especially 404-407; Boatwright 1987, op.cit. (n.3), 132.

was adjacent to the Via Sacra raised its profile even further.⁸ Dietmar Kienast, in an article in *Chiron* of 1980, has rightly emphasised the advantages of the location and convincingly argues that with the construction of the temple the *Forum Romanum* was extended to the East.⁹ His argument that the new building had an intended negative influence on the Forum of Trajan, by marginalizing the latter, does not, to me, seem tenable.

A further positive element for the choice of place could have been that a house of the Aelii, Hadrian's family, had previously been located on the Velia, as a passage in Plutarch's life of Aemilius Paulus shows. But this argument will certainly not have been the deciding factor.¹⁰

There was, however, as has been mentioned, one serious problem with the chosen location: the available space did not allow for a real forum, one that could stand comparison with the *Forum Pacis* or the *Forum Traiani* – let alone outshine them. A temple came to occupy more than two thirds of the entire terrain, which made that temple, with a length of 107 m., the largest in Rome. The effect was extreme focus on the religious component, which was already so important in all other fora. Dio (69.3-5) notes that Apollodorus of Damascus, Trajan's court architect and perhaps still active at the beginning of Hadrian's reign, criticised the temple for not being sufficiently high. This must, however, be interpreted as criticism on the absence of a high podium, which was a characteristic of Roman temples. Apollodorus fought a lost battle: the architectural 'language' under Hadrian had already become Graeco-Roman.

The Greek influence did not stop at the podium: the *peristyle* of the temple was accessible from all sides, which was extremely uncommon amongst Roman temples. The massive size of the cult statues, Apollodorus' second criticism according to Dio's passage, similarly suited Greek rather than Roman conceptions of temples. Which brings us to a short characterisation of the building that Hadrian had constructed. Andrea Barattolo has managed to clearly divide the Hadrianic building phase from the Maxentian reconstructions, which followed a major fire in AD 307 and are currently much easier to recognise.¹¹ The temple, a peripteral building with 10

⁸ Cf. *Liber Pontificalis* I 465: "... in via Sacra iuxta Templum Rome ...". Cf. F. Coarelli, *Il Foro Romano* I (Roma 1983), 42-43.

⁹ Kienast 1980, op.cit. (n.7), 412.

¹⁰ Following from Plutarchus, *Aemilius Paulus* 5.7 and Valerius Maximus 4.8. Cf. Coarelli 1983, op.cit. (n.8), 101-103, and especially 103, n.29; D. Palombi in: Steinby 1995, op.cit. (n.6), 22 s.v. *Domus: Aelii*.

¹¹ A. Barattolo, 'Nuove ricerche sull'architettura del Tempio di Venere e di Roma in età adrianea', *Römische Mitteilungen* 80 (1973), 243-269; A. Barattolo, 'Il tempio di Venere e di Roma: un tempio

Corinthian columns on the short and twenty on the long sides, was accessible from all directions by seven steps. The building thus followed Greek rather than Roman conventions. This notion was strengthened through the use of marble and the absence of *opus caementicium*.¹² To the long sides, the temple was furthermore flanked by a single row of columns at the South side and a double row on the North. The entire complex was situated on a platform measuring 100 by 145 m.

The division in two *cellae*, approachable through the short sides of the temple, was, however, alien to Greek temples. This shows how Hadrian, who played an important role in the construction of the temple, as principal or even master builder, used the Greek 'visual language' eclectically and shaped it to his own needs.

The mentioned *cellae*, as Prudentius, *Contra Symmachum* makes clear, contained the cult images, with Venus occupying the eastern, and Roma the western room.¹³

The choice of the cult of Venus and Roma firstly shows how Hadrian displayed *pietas* towards the location, an ancient cult-site of Venus,¹⁴ and towards the ever-popular Julio-Claudian dynasty, especially Augustus.¹⁵ The latter provided an important way to legitimate power – something Hadrian had partly taken care of by finishing Trajan's Forum and dedicating it to his adoptive father. The epithet *Felix* further shows Venus primarily as goddess of fertility and fortune.¹⁶ Dedicating part of the temple to this goddess demonstrates clear respect by Hadrian for imperial traditions.¹⁷

Even more important seems to have been the other goddess to whom the temple was dedicated: the goddess Roma, personification of the city, who previously did not have a temple consecrated to her in Rome itself. The

<greco> nell'urbe', *Römische Mitteilungen* 85 (1978), 397-410. Also Boatwright 1987, op.cit. (n.3), 119-133. See further, for a good recent summary of the discussion: A. Cassatella in: *LTUR* V (1999) 121-123, s.v. *Venus et Roma, Aedes, Templum*, with bibliography up to 1996 and including information on the reconstruction by Maxentius in AD 307.

¹² Cf. Barattolo 1978, op.cit. (n.11); Boatwright 2000, op.cit. (n.1), 129 f.

¹³ Prudentius, *Contra Symmachum* 1.217-219.

¹⁴ Cf. D. Palombi in: Steinby 1999, 113, s.v. *Venus, Aedes*; Palombi 1997, op.cit. (n.6), 117-120: This would be a temple for Venus from the 3rd century BC, which is named in the *Calendarium* of Amiternum (25 May) and which was destroyed by fire in 178 BC and reconstructed afterwards.

¹⁵ This is noticeable in Hadrian's building policy more often, for instance in his Mausoleum, which shows clear similarities to Augustus'. Cf. among others J. Beaujeu, *La religion romaine à l'apogée de l'Empire I. La politique religieuse des Antonins (96-192)*, Paris 1955, 150; Barattolo 1978, op.cit. (n.11), 408-410; Boatwright 1987, op.cit. (n.3), 161-181.

¹⁶ Cf. Boatwright 1987, op.cit. (n.3), 131. Also Beaujeu 1955, op.cit. (n.15), 136-141.

¹⁷ Cf. Boatwright 1987, op.cit. (n.3), 238.

epithet *Aeterna* refers to a hopeful future.¹⁸ The goddess' new iconography, depicting her sitting on a *sella curulis* or on a throne, is clearly divergent from the goddess Roma as she was put forward by the Julio-Claudians, amongst others on the *Ara Pacis*, where she is shown sitting on a pile of weapons. She similarly differs from the Flavian Roma, as depicted on amongst other the Cancelleria reliefs. The fact that the cult of Roma outside of the city was strongly linked to Augustus was not, I would argue, the main reason for Hadrian to dedicate part of his temple to this goddess.¹⁹

In fact, Hadrian had already specifically honoured the city of Rome and the goddess Venus before he constructed this temple for Venus and the goddess of the city. For them he had organised *munera gladiatoria* and *circenses*, as the *Fasti Ostienses* imply.²⁰ Although previous interpretations have argued differently, we will see how the choice for Roma had much more to do with the city itself than with any dynastic purpose. The dynastic element was already sufficiently emphasised by the choice for the goddess Venus. The combination of both goddesses shows confidence for present and future.²¹

The temple was vowed in 121, the year in which Hadrian celebrated the *Parilia* under a new name: the *Natalis Urbis* – Rome's birthday.²² Construction works, however, only started about 5 years later, as brick-stamps indicate. There is no agreement about when the building was finished. Dates between AD 131 and 144 have been proposed,²³ but I assume that the building was finished when it was dedicated in AD 135-137, following remarks of Cassiodorus and Hieronymus.²⁴ Coins minted between AD 141 and 144, which show a decastyle temple, do not, I propose, commemorate the end of construction works. Rather, they indicate Antoninus Pius' placement of *acroteria* and other decorative elements, similarly depicted on

¹⁸ Cf. on *Aeterna*: Beaujeu 1955, op.cit. (n.15), 141-157.

¹⁹ Contra M.K. Thornton, 'Hadrian and his Reign', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* 2.2 (1975), 432-476, 445 and 458-459. This author sees the introduction of the Roma cult as a first step towards imperial cult in the city of Rome.

²⁰ Cf. L. Vidman, *Fasti Ostienses*, Prague 1982, 25, 80, fragment XXXVI and A. Degraasi, *Inscriptiones Italiae* 13.1 (1947), 211, 240. For interpretation of this passage, see also: Palombi 1997, op.cit. (n.6), 117-118.

²¹ Cf. Beaujeu 1955, op.cit. (n.15), 160.

²² Cf. Athenaios, *Deipnosophistai* 8.63; Degraasi 1947, op.cit. (n.20) 13.2, 443-445.

²³ On this discussion Cassatella in: Steinby 1999, op.cit. (n.11).

²⁴ Cassiodorus, *Chronica* 142 M (= Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Chronica Minora 2, 142): "*templum Romae et Veneris ... quod nunc Urbis appellatur*"; Hieronymus, *Chronica* A Abr. 2147. On the argument, also Boatwright 1987, op.cit. (n.3), 123-124.

these coins.²⁵ Minor differences with images of the cult statues on coins from Hadrian's reign may indicate that these statues, too, like the *acroteria*, were finished late, perhaps in Antoninus' time, and that Hadrian's coins show some type of models, used to promote the cult.²⁶

As far as the cult statues of Venus and Roma are concerned, Hadrianic coins that depict them make clear that they must have been markedly similar. Both goddesses are depicted seated and wearing a long robe, Venus occupying a throne, and Roma, as we have seen, a *sella curulis* or also a throne. On their raised right hand stood respectively Amor and a Victoria or the Palladium.²⁷ In their left hand they were holding a spear, or perhaps (Venus) a sceptre. It is noticeable that the object that was held by Roma points upwards, and that by Venus downwards. Partial similarities to both Zeus' cult statue in his temple in Olympia and the Athena Parthenos, both known to us through their description by Pausanias, show that not just size, but iconography too, was strongly influenced by Greek examples.²⁸

Roma, in her new identity created by Hadrian, has been perceived as a goddess for the empire as a whole.²⁹ First and foremost, however, the promotion of her cult in this new temple, seems to have been aimed at the population of the city of Rome. An important argument in favour of this idea is the location of the cult statue of the goddess. The statue was placed in the western *cella*, this is, on the *Forum Romanum*-side of the temple, and thus at the side of the city centre. Had Roma been intended as an 'empire-wide' goddess from the very beginning, a position at the 'country-', or east-side would have been far more appropriate.³⁰

The notion of Roma as a goddess for the empire as a whole should be seen as a later development, though one that perhaps already started at the

²⁵ On this: H. Mattingly & E.A. Sydenham, *The Roman Imperial Coinage* 3. *Antoninus Pius to Commodus* (London 1930), 110, nrs. 622-623; 113, nr. 651; 114 nr. 664.

²⁶ Cf. also Beaujeu 1955, op.cit. (n.15), 298.

²⁷ According to Coarelli 1983, op.cit. (n.8), 260 the combination of the two cults must have ancient roots, also in light of the combination Roma – Amor, which would imply ties between on the one side Venus – Aeneas and the Julian gens, and on the other the city. Cf. Kolb 1995, op.cit. (n.2), 386.

²⁸ Pausanias, *Periagesis* 5.2.1-2 (Zeus in Olympia) and 1.24.6-7 (Athena Parthenos). For coins showing a seated Roma Aeterna: H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum* 3. *Nerva to Hadrian* (London 1966), 328-9 no. 703, pl. 60.18 (*aureus*); 329, no. 707 and pl. 61.1 (*denarius*) and Venus: ibidem, 334 nos 750 and 756, pl. 61.15-16 (*sestertii* and *aurei*). See also E. di Filippo Balestrazzi in: *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* 8.1, 1048-1068, esp. 1056 f.. On Venus Felix: Boatwright 1987, op.cit. (n.3), 131 and E. Schmidt in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* 8.1, 192-230, s.v. *Venus*, especially 214-215 and 8.2, especially 149.

²⁹ Cf. for example Kolb 1995, op.cit. (n.2), 386.

end of Hadrian's reign.³¹ It seems to me, that the cult of Roma *aeterna* was in fact advanced so strongly by Hadrian to show his loyalty to the people of the city, and to emphasise that Rome's primacy was eternal – as Kienast argued so convincingly. The emperor's long absences from Rome and her direct surroundings may have been more than a minor factor in the need for such emphasis.³² Perhaps Hadrian's aims went even further. It was exactly the choice of an emphatically Greek visual language in developing the new cult statue of Roma, which helped to create a counterpart to the Athena Parthenos. This goddess was, of course, the protector of Athens – the city that Hadrian had to promote to create unity in the Eastern Empire.³³

The introduction of the cult of Roma in the city of Rome – though mainly aimed at the city itself – would in this way anticipate, and prepare the way for, the *Panhellenion*, a league of Greek cities with headquarters in Athens, which made this city the centre of the Greek east.³⁴ This would explain the similarities between the role of the temple in Rome and the role that the *Olympeion* played in Athens and the *Panhellenion* in creating unity in the East – a similarity that has been rightly noted by Boatwright.³⁵

A Greek architectural language will no longer have been a novelty to the people of Rome, accustomed as they had become to this through, among others, the reconstructed Pantheon. Totally new, however, were the gigantic cultic statues. Their 'Greek' appearance made them counterparts to Greek

³⁰ Placing Venus on the city-side could have been easily defended. The place that she occupies now evokes a more 'national' character.

³¹ To support the notion of Roma as a goddess for the realm as a whole, comparisons have been drawn to the notion – on the rise under Hadrian – of the Roman Empire as *Oikoumene*, which seemed to be illustrated clearly by the personifications of the *Provinciae* in the *Hadrianaeum* on the Campus Martius. These sculptures, however, can be dated to the reign of Antoninus Pius. Cf. recently: M. Sapelli (ed.), *Provinciae Fideles. Il fregio del Tempio di Adriano in Campo Marzio* (Roma 1999), 11 and 14 (dedication of the temple in AD 145) and in the same volume C. Parise Presicce, 'Le rappresentazioni allegoriche di popoli e province nell'arte romana imperiale', 96. On the Hadrianic notion of cosmopolitanism and the Second Sophistic, see L. Nista, 'La propaganda imperiale nell'arte ufficiale adrianea e antonina', also in: Sapelli 1999, 107-115, esp. 110. Kolb 1995, op.cit. (n.2), 386-387 also argues that the new temple makes the Roma cult a state cult, and thus seems to overtly anticipate events. At least in Late Antiquity she is goddess of the city of Rome, as follows from among others Cassiodorus, *Chronica* 142 M (see n.24). Cf. E. Papi in Steinby 1999, op.cit. (n.11), 96, s.v. *Urbis Fanum, Templum*.

³² Cf. Kienast 1980, op.cit. (n.7), 404.

³³ On the privileged position of Athens see e.g. Cassius Dio 69.16.1-2; *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, *Hadrianus* 13.1 and 6. Cf. recently Birley 1997, op.cit. (n.1), 262-266; Boatwright 2000, op.cit. (n.1), 13-14, 68, 83-84, 92, with references to older bibliography. On Hadrian's idea of religion as a unifying force, also through building policy: see Boatwright 2000, op.cit. (n.1), 143.

³⁴ Cf. Boatwright 2000, op.cit. (n.1), 145 and 150.

³⁵ Boatwright 1987, op.cit. (n.3) 132-133.

exempla and made Roma a counterpart to Athena. The city of Rome should under no circumstances feel threatened by this notion, which was crucial for Hadrian's policies. Athens needed to be promoted without damaging the status of Rome as the eternal city.³⁶

Practical limitations prevented Hadrian from following his adoptive father in the construction of his very own imperial forum. He therefore had to limit himself to its essence: a temple. I hope, however, to have made clear that in form, location, and especially function, the temple of Venus and Roma was nothing short of a forum and could in fact be seen as Hadrian's Forum.

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³⁶ Barattolo 1978, op.cit. (n.11), 408-410 to my mind overinterprets matters by seeing the temple as an expression of Hadrian's panhellenism, and as such as an instrument to convince the Senate to steer away from Trajan's policy of expansion in favour of his own political-ideological programme. He fails to take into account the cult, which is primarily aimed at the city of Rome. Nor should one accept the suggestion of Beaujeu 1955, op.cit. (n.15), 135, who goes even further and argues that the new cult shows the 'provincialisation' of Rome, of which Hadrian is the creator. The opposite seems to be the case.