CHAPTER FOUR

A MARBLE GALLERY FOR A CITY OF MARBLE

When, and how, did the idea of a Gallery of Heroes in his Forum first occur to Augustus? This, of course, is just a part of the question of the origins of the Forum. Moreover, since the Forum and its main architectural glory, the Temple of Mars Ultor, are closely connected, it will not be prudent to consider this question in isolation. Even before discussing the issue it will be instructive to observe that there exist remarkable parallels between the Forum Augustum with the Temple of Mars Ultor, and the Forum Iulium of Julius Caesar, completed by Augustus,1 with the Temple of Venus Genetrix, and thus a short reminder of the main facts concerning the earlier complex is in order. Already in the summer of 54 Cicero and Oppius were busy with the plans and the acquisition of land for Caesar’s Forum: they thought that sixty million sesterces would be required,2 but the eventual cost amounted to a hundred million3—it is a consoling thought that this sort of habitually increasing estimates is not one of the improvements of modernity. While in the case of Caesar lawful acquisition was the only available means, Augustus’ insistence on a similar procedure, beside the obvious political statement of the civilis princeps who abides by the laws like any other citizen, also demonstrated his adherence to the precedent established by his Divine Father.4 Evidently Caesar’s Forum was already planned in order to meet the increasing needs of the expanding city—Cicero speaks of extending the forum (ut forum laxaremus). We do not know how far works on the project had progressed by the time Caesar vowed a temple to Venus Victrix on the eve of Pharsalus (and was then assured of its coming true in a dream).5 As we shall see, his son either vowed a temple to Mars Ultor bello Philippensi or later wished it so to be believed.

1 RG 20.3.
2 Cic. Att. 4.16.8 with Shackleton Bailey ad loc.
3 Suet. Jul. 26.2; Plin. nh 36.103.
4 One would surmise that abiding by the letter of the civil law would also be a distinguishing mark of the civilis princeps, for whom see Wallace-Hadrill 1982. For a discussion of the importance of this issue see Haselberger 2007, 157 with n. 205.
5 App. bc 2.281.
In neither case are we told how the idea to build a forum and a temple came to be linked. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in the case of Caesar the vow of the temple came a great number of years after the first steps to build a forum had been undertaken, while with Octavian, if we give credence to the story of his vow, there could not yet be a question of even contemplating the building of a new forum at the time. Caesar dedicated the temple, eventually to Venus Genetrix rather than Victrix, and opened the forum on the very same day, the last day of his triumph in 46 BCE, even before the completion of the latter. There is no knowing exactly what is meant by Augustus’ assertion that he completed the forum of his father that was almost finished, though it is surely of some significance that he did this in 29 BCE, after his own triple triumph; after the initial planning of the Forum Iulium in the mid fifties and its opening to the public in 46 Augustus would hardly have been too dismayed by the slow progress of his own forum or too concerned about the opening to the public of a somewhat incomplete structure. Shall we ascribe all this to coincidence or are we to assume that the marked similarity was intentional, a hypothesis entirely in step with the cool, calculating mind of Augustus? Perhaps it is not too far off the mark that he, at least initially, ‘conceived the entire Forum Augustum as an homage to Caesar’.

Taking an oath to build a temple was a customary procedure, more often than not connected with military achievements, and its dedication was an act of religious and legal significance, delivering the building into the possession of the god in question. In contrast, the construction of a secular building project such as a forum was a private act devoid of religious implications, and the legal meaning of making it public was that the property passed into the ownership of the Roman People. Nevertheless, the festivities connected with the dedication of the Forum, and Dio’s lost description of them, may have been extensive.

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6 Dio 43.22.1–2.
7 Plin. nh 35.156.
8 RG 20.3 coepta profligataque opera… perfeci.
9 Dio 51.22.f.
10 Favro 1996, 96.
11 OCD ss.vv. dedicatio, votum.
12 D. 50.16.15.
13 Swan 2004, 95. Haselberger 2007, 197 seems to be rather imprecise when speaking of the formal inauguration of the Forum, with the inauguration of the Temple as the culmination of the festivities.