Curial Communiqué: Memory, Propaganda, and the Roman Senate House

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Italy’s Fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, held a lavish and highly anticipated ceremony within the renovated Curia Julia on May 1, 1939. The calculated service was itself reminiscent of Octavian’s dedicatory festival almost two millennia earlier, when in 29 BC, the young and newly victorious leader of the Roman world used the completion of the Curia Julia to advertise his perceived role as restorer of the Republic.1 Mussolini’s communication of his role as a *restitutor* was also transmitted visually, through his vast rebuilding projects. Intent on reviving the classical glory of Rome, Mussolini in fact exposed many of the ancient ruins of the city by destroying medieval, early modern, and Christian edifices; often publicly delivering the first thrust of the pickaxe before a demolition project began.2 Within his restoration plan, there appears a special focus on the Roman senate house. Its renovation had required that the architectural layers, which had built upon and transformed the Curia Julia since the structure’s rebuilding under Diocletian, be peeled away. As with many of the dictator’s projects within the city of Rome, such as the display of the *Ara Pacis*, the restoration both installed an aesthetic association between him and the emperor Augustus and would further articulate the relationship between Mussolini and the Italian senate. As these two leaders demonstrate, the restoration and decoration of the senate house was itself a power move; it conjured legitimacy, could function as a link between the new ruler and the previous administration, and asserted his relationship with the senate. As it will be explored, the notable histories of the Roman senate houses, the Curia Hostilia, the Curia Cornelia, and, in particular, the Curia Julia, speak to the pivotal position of the

1 Octavian’s ‘restoration’ would not be formally recognized until 27 BC, when the senate granted him the title of ‘Augustus’ (*RG* 34; Cf. Ov. *Fast.* 1.589). An alternate view suggests that the senate house was never dedicated in the strict sense of the word, due to the inherent nature of the senate, see Simpson (1998).

2 Baxa (2010) 54–75, especially 59, “Mussolini’s pickaxe became iconic of fascism’s reworking of the Roman landscape, but equally important was the relentless pace of work.”
structure as an intercessor in Roman society. Furthermore, an examination of the intercessory nature of this temple can facilitate a better understanding of its preservation in the seventh century, when the papacy drew on the renown of the Curia in order to establish a sacred site (S. Adriano) that would continue to function as a liturgical focal point and a victory monument.

While a simple litany of the decorations, modifications, and renovations of Rome’s primary senate house is informative, it can overlook the explicit ways in which others—Mussolini, Sulla, Julius Caesar, Theodoric, etc.—manipulated the Curia for their own purposes. This analysis of the Curia’s modifications will instead translate the visual messages articulated by various patrons and consider the broader meaning that different restorations of the senate house came to signify. In this article, I look beyond the previous accounts of Rome’s early senate houses and the Curia Julia, which have tended to focus on the archaeological components of the structure, in order to expose a more complex role within a broader topography of power. Likewise, I will illustrate the fact that, unlike other curiae, the Curia Julia was potent not only in antiquity, but remained a locus of political and religious authority into the middle ages. Even after the administrative shifts to cities such as Constantinople and Ravenna in Late Antiquity, and long after the purported “fall” of the Roman Empire, the site of the Curia continued to exert a recognized power. It is this power which Pope Honorius perhaps attempted to harness in c. 630 by consecrating the space as the church of S. Adriano (Liber Pontificalis [Duchesne] 72.6; 324). Like the rulers that built and rebuilt the Curia during the Empire, the Church further communicated the victory of Christianity in Rome and within the Empire by transforming the space into a site that was vital to the “liturgical life” of the city. As it has been noted, the Curia also stood at a strategic position at the intersection of the Via Argiletum and the Via Sacra in the Forum Romanum. Despite its Christian re-contextualization, the site continued to be recognized as the Roman senate house and sought out by travellers and locals alike, with its architectural elements taking on an almost relic-like nature up until the time of Mussolini.

I approach this curial biography chronologically from the purported consecration of the Roman senate house in the seventh century BC to the seventh century AD, concentrating on the building itself, the addition or removal of

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5 Von Reber (1858); Mommsen (1864); Lanciani (1963); Morselli and Tortorici (1989); Richardson (1992) 103–104; Grant (1970) 118–25; Coarelli (1985).
6 See Kalas (1999) 262.