Lingering Sacredness. The Persistence of Pagan Sacredness in the Forum Romanum in Late Antiquity

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Object of this study is the sacredness of the Forum Romanum in the late antique period. In contrast to most previous studies dealing with Rome in late antiquity, it will focus on persistence within transformation. The main and only focus is on the sacredness of the place. However, all possible manifestations of sacredness will be taken into account. Adopting a synoptical view on the Forum in its entirety in terms of sacredness, the paper will analyze the means and ways in which sacredness was generated on the one hand, and how it persisted and adhered on the other. The main thesis is that the sacredness of the Forum in Late Antiquity was not maintained by large scale actions and great accomplishments of the ‘last pagans of Rome’. Other mechanisms than these were the reasons that the Forum kept its high degree of sacredness for a longer time than most other areas of Rome. Therefore, the paper argues for low-profile mechanisms of the persistence of the sacred. These mechanisms will be named ‘lingering sacredness’. The term ‘sacredness’ will be used in the broadest range of meanings and conscious of its vagueness. However, the vagueness of the term is in line with the vagueness of the different forms of how pagan religiousness could be practiced and could be manifest on the one hand, and how these different manifestations and its elements could be perceived on the other.

1 The Evidence

The late antique Forum Romanum1 has been investigated from many points of view, as an architectural ensemble, in its quality as public space, its role in political life, as a place of representation, or the various aspects of its

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1 Essential studies on the Forum Romanum (also with older bibliography): Coarelli (1983); Coarelli (1985); Purcell (1995); Tagliamonte (1995); Köb (2000). In particular for Late Antiquity: Giuliani, Verduchi (1995); Bauer (1996); Bauer (2005); Machado (2006); Bauer
transformations in Late Antiquity. Also the Forum’s once prominent, now declining role within the city that came along with the diminishing role of Rome within the empire has been examined, just as well as the impact of the ongoing Christianization of the empire, of the elite and also, materially, of the city of Rome, onto the Forum. However, there is still a lack of analysis of the Forum Romanum as a sacred landscape in its entirety for the late antique period.

Based on the results of previous studies, we may start from the following. The building activities carried out by the tetrarchs after the great fire in 283/4 determined the appearance of the Forum Romanum for the following centuries in a significant way, as they also reshaped the orientation and the general setting of the Forum square. Some of the buildings destroyed by the fire were rebuilt in their old appearance. The Forum square itself, though, underwent a significant reshaping in terms of its conceptual design. First of all, the square was framed and its orientation changed. By means of these works, the Forum gained a new appearance as an enclosed space, and its architectural alignment was shifted from the longitudinal to the transverse. This had an impact on the view axes from and across the Forum and also on the connections and the viabilities between the Forum and the surrounding areas.


4 The rostra at the two narrow sides of the Forum square were equipped with five honorary columns respectively. These rows of columns were connected by a third row of seven columns set in front of the Basilica Iulia at the south side of the square: Bauer (1996) 21–26, 31–32, 42–43, 101–03; Coarelli (1999); Bauer (2011) 57–65; Muth (2011) 277 fig. 5.

5 In this regard, Sande (2003) 101–103 makes two observations. First, that ‘during the 4th century, the high point for visiting emperors appears to have been neither the Forum Romanum nor the Capitol, but the Forum Traiani’, toward which the Forum Romanum in its new appearance faced; and second, that by these measures, two important temples have been left out, that is, the temple of Divus Iulius and the temple of the Dioscuri (see the explanations ibid. 102). Actually, also the temples on the western side of the Forum (the temples of Concordia, of Divus Vespasianus and of Saturnus) were left out. It is, therefore, not so much about leaving out the two temples on the eastern side of the Forum, but rather about creating a background—the Basilica Iulia and the temples—and a foreground, which became, as