



## Buildings of ancient Rome

### *The Roman forum*

Rome was built upon seven hills. The centre of the city, the Roman Forum, was surrounded by three: the Capitoline, from where this view was taken; the Quirinal; and the Palatine hill. According to legend, it was on the Palatine that Romulus founded the city.

The Capitoline hill is now almost entirely built upon. In ancient Rome it was the most sacred of the hills, where the most important temple dedicated to Jupiter the greatest and the best was established in the sixth century BCE. The temple was shared with the two most important Roman goddesses, Juno the queen and Minerva, in many ways the equivalent of Greek Athena. The Capitoline hill was also the Arx or citadel of Rome, the fortified stronghold of the city.

Little remains of the temples and fortifications but Roman walls still form the foundations of the Renaissance buildings.

Adjacent to the Capitoline, the Palatine hill, the first of the hills settled in the Iron Age, originally with wattle huts, became a focus for the houses of the Roman elite. Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, Cicero, Mark Anthony and Augustus all had their houses on the Palatine. It was also home to Apollo and the goddesses Victory and Vesta. After the time of Augustus it became the focus of imperial power, and eventually almost the entire hill was occupied by the imperial palace - the word palace itself derives from the name of the hill.

Between the hills lay the central open space of the forum, like a large town square or piazza. On all sides a variety of buildings clustered around the heart of the city. We shall be examining some of these buildings and investigating their importance. The central open space with its associated buildings gained an importance beyond the city of Rome itself because it became a model for city centres throughout the Roman world.

As, for example, at Paestum in southern Italy, where the new Roman city centre reproduced the form of the Roman forum.

The Roman forum was densely built up and a rich mixture of buildings, with different functions, histories, associations and mythologies clustered around its sides.

Starting at the northeast corner, in what is possibly the most important part of the Forum, there is a cluster of monuments.

This is the reconstructed facade of the curia, the senate house of Rome.

Here the senators would meet and oversee religious matters, debate foreign affairs, receive ambassadors or delegations from provinces and manage state finances. A matter brought to the senate would be debated with each senator giving his opinion on the question, if he wished to. The senators would then vote by dividing, going to one or other side of the house where they were counted. If the majority approved, the proposition would become a *senatus consultum*, a decision of the senate.

In the space in front of the curia was the *comitium*. Originally this was the assembly place of citizens where they could vote and elect magistrates and also hold trials. The area was redeveloped many times but in during the later third century BCE it was rebuilt with a circular shape with steps on the interior, probably influenced by similar buildings in Sicily and Southern Italy.

And this circular form in Rome in turn determined the shape of the comitium in Rome's colonies in Italy. Little survives of the actual building in Rome but some of its edging has been found.

On the side of the comitium nearest to the forum, by the side of the Via Sacra, the sacred processional route through the city, lay the rostrum. This was the platform from which new laws were proclaimed and orators displayed their skills in rhetoric in public speeches to those gathered in the Forum or comitium.

These three buildings the curia, comitium and rostrum provided for the principal political and legal functions of the city.

Alongside these buildings were other monuments and significant places. When the comitium was excavated, one area stood out as significantly different.

In January 1899 a small area paved in black stone was uncovered. This is mentioned in a single ancient source as the "niger lapis in Comitio", "the Black Stone in the Comitium". Clearly it marked a special area and was separated from the remainder of the Forum by a low balustrade.

When the area beneath the stones was excavated, many animal bones were found, the remains of a great sacrifice. Beneath that and dating to the second quarter of the sixth century BCE lay an altar, a column base, and part of a stone marker inscribed in very early Latin script. Only the start can be translated and it says "Whosoever violates this place shall be condemned to the infernal gods," a formulaic protection for the sacred area.

Later the inscription mentions "the king," suggesting that the king of Rome was somehow involved in religious ceremonies presumably related to political activity at the comitium.

Frustratingly, that is all that is certain. The place was clearly important enough to be preserved, and monumentalised as in some way special.

The ancient source, a mutilated passage by Festus, goes on to say that the black stone indicates a sombre place because it is associated with the death of Romulus.

Now one version of the life of Romulus has it that he disappeared, taken up miraculously to heaven, so he could have no actual tomb, perhaps the black stone marked some kind of cenotaph monumentalising the place where he vanished.

This possibility is perhaps paralleled in the empty tomb at Paestum that may have been a memorial to the founder of that city.

The area also attracted many other monuments: a water clock for measuring public time, the famous statue of the wolf and twins, and a shrine to Vulcan. All through the imperial period the comitium attracted statues commemorating victories and achievements. Only a few bases, some with inscriptions now survive. The largest monument to be constructed in the area was the triumphal Arch of Septimius Severus. He was an African general who usurped the imperial title in 193 CE. Ten years later he chose to build the arch here, close to the spot associated with Romulus. The inscription commemorates how Severus and his sons, "restored the republic and expanded the dominion of the Roman people" In this way Severus associated himself with the ancient traditions of Rome.

The arch was built over the route of the triumphal processions which led from the Campus Martius, through the Forum to the Capitoline hill.

The procession started in the western Campus Martius along a route that passed by the Theatre of Pompey surmounted by the temple of Venus the Victorious; And past the temples in Largo Argentina on its way to Circus Flaminius where the soldiers could muster. Then, on past the victory temples; in through the republican city limits; through the forum and up on to the Capitoline hill, where the triumph culminated with the sacrifice of a bull and the execution of captive enemy leaders.

This part of the city was constantly being redeveloped. Buildings were altered as their functions changed, or as they became incorporated into the self-aggrandising projects of powerful individuals.

Julius Caesar rebuilt the curia and reorganised the comitium that was repaved.

And the rostrum was moved out of the comitium to a new location at the northern end of the forum in front of the temple of Saturn. The platform is now largely a reconstruction but it gives a good idea of how the rostrum was almost like a stage at the end of the forum.

In front of that stage, the open central space of the Forum gradually attracted statues and monuments just like the area around the comitium.

Some had mythological connections, like the lake where Marcus Curtius sacrificed himself by galloping into a fissure to save the city. Others, such as equestrian statues, commemorated emperors, making the open space something of a museum or a gallery.

But the Forum was also used for performances. During the republic, before Rome had a permanent amphitheatre, the Forum was used for gladiator shows. Temporary seating would be erected to either side and galleries beneath the paving enabled gladiators to make an entrance from beneath the ground.

In the Augustan period the area was redeveloped again, and a new layer of paving that sealed off the galleries, was paid for by Lucius Naevius Surdinus.

Few of the buildings of the Forum survive above ground level, but a monument, set up on these stone bases, showed the forum as it appeared in the 2nd century CE.

Two sculpted panels originally formed part of a balustrade that was later moved into the Forum. They show scenes of the emperor's good works, and the location shown in the background is the Forum itself.

One panel shows a sacred fig tree, "the ruminal," growing in the Forum. A replacement still grows there.

Nearby is the statue of the satyr Marsyas, set up to commemorate the abolition of slavery for debtors. It is echoed in the Roman colony of Paestum.

The relief shows the records of debts being carried to be burned with, in the background, the Temple of Saturn where the public treasury was kept and next to that the temple of the deified emperor Vespasian, who can be imagined overlooking the Forum. The good and just emperor Trajan appears again in the Forum on a stage-like platform in front of the temple of Castor and Pollux, the haunt of moneylenders and trading-standards officers.

A crowd stands in front of the Basilica Julia Law courts and offices along one side of the forum a standard feature of all colonies including Paestum.

And further along, the emperor again hands out low-interest loans to generate income for Roman orphans.

The far end of the Forum, the ancient location of the house of the King of Rome, was redeveloped by Augustus and in the centre the temple of the Divine Julius Caesar was built. Trajan stands in front of this temple facing the rostrum at the other end of the forum, and to either side triumphal arches were erected to commemorate the victories of Augustus and his sons.

Along the fourth side of the forum, between the comitium and the temple of Julius Caesar was another basilica, built by the gens Aemilia, more courts and offices for running the business of the city and the empire.

The Forum, the centre of Rome was a place with many layers of functions, meaning and mythology embedded in its buildings and places. Some parts reflect the social and political organization of the city; others reflect the wealth, power and achievements of its citizens.