



Myth at the heart of the Roman Empire

The Lapis Niger

Chris Smith:

We're in the most important monumental part of the city of Rome. The Forum is a natural hollow between hills, you have the Palatine hill behind me and the Capitoline hill which is just in front of me. These two hills create the natural valley that was full of water, full of silt and over a period of time is paved to create a meeting space, which is what a forum is, a meeting place for the peoples of the city of Rome.

Jessica Hughes:

Now it's still thronging with people but of course these are tourists and it's ceased to be the central civic space in the city of Rome, but it's still such an important site for the construction of civic memory.

Myth was built into the political heart of Rome.

Chris Smith:

This is a canvass on which the Romans painted their own history and continue to paint it. It's a place that was monumentalised to record the way that their past had happened, the story of Rome, but it's also a place in which part of that history actually happened.

Chris Smith:

Under the scaffolding is an excavation which is looking at a really important part of the political mythical history of Rome.

It marks the tomb of a mythical founder and an archaic place of assembly.

Chris Smith:

What we're standing on right now is the circular arc of the Comitium, a great monumentalised arena for the engagement of the Roman people in politics. This is where they listened to speeches, this is where they met. This is where they passed laws. And just over here you see the unprepossessing looking stones of the Lapis Niger, an Augustan monument, incredibly important because it marks the spot of ancient archaic monuments that are underneath here.

Augustus covered the spot with black basalt, integrating it into the Comitium.

Chris Smith:

One thing that we know to be underneath is a tomb. Who's the tomb for? And there are a series of possible candidates in the sources. One is Faustulus, he's the shepherd who looked after Romulus and Remus when they were found as babies. Another is Hostus Hostilius, who's a contemporary of Romulus who engaged in that great battle between the Romans and the Sabines around the Rape of the Sabine women. But the most common features of the story is that this is somehow associated with the death of Romulus.

Jessica Hughes:

When you look at the biography, if you like, of the Lapis Niger you see that it's always had a really important role within Roman society and Roman civic life, and it's not always possible to trace the exact contours of what it might have meant for different populations, but you see that it was given a position of importance, and that position was maintained right through history, right down to the present day when it's the subject of ongoing excavations and clearings, and it retains its really important place within the Roman Forum even though many people around Rome don't necessarily know all of the stories behind it.

Chris Smith:

So the Lapis Niger becomes a memorial of this range of stories in the Augustan period, which takes Augustus back to the beginnings of Rome. But look where it is, it's in the middle of the political arena of Rome. This is where Romans did their democracy, and here is a myth about their earliest foundations. And here we're standing in a place where politics in the raw takes place, here you stand and address the Roman people gathered in this area here, until the middle of the C2nd, when a democratic, demagogic politician turns around and speaks to the gathered populus, a much greater populus of Rome outside in the Forum proper. One of the most important democratic moments in the change of Rome.

Jessica Hughes:

For me the Lapis Niger is one example of how closely imbricated myth and civic power were for ancient Romans. Now, I can't decide what the story is behind this monument, all I've got to rely on as a historian is one very corrupt and bitty source from at least a hundred years after the stone was laid. But, by looking at how the Lapis Niger is integrated into the Comitium, and into the actual fabric of the Forum, I know that this was really important, at least to Augustus, and it was important enough for this space to be clear and conserved in later generations.

Chris Smith:

I think what Romans would have had in their mind is that this marked, whatever story they chose to believe, that indissoluble link between where they were now and where they had come from.

Chris Smith:

And this is where you really feel tremendously close to that combination of political action and history and I feel very connected, it's very exciting to be in here, and see that the city is still being rethought, restructured and represented, still this living political history moving on into the modern time.