

The Visibility of Vesta: the Effect of Augustan Monuments on Viewsheds in the Roman Forum

When we study the lived experience of an ancient built environment, the factor of visual prominence can give us insight into the cultural and societal significance of a particular monument or building. Yet, visibility of urban landscapes, such as Rome's, were subject to constant changes, from the erection of temporary structures for festivals to the construction of monuments that would last centuries. In this paper, I will focus on a building whose position and prominence in the Roman Forum reflects its significance as a symbolic cornerstone of Rome's state religion: the Temple of Vesta. In particular, I will argue that the visibility of the Temple of Vesta in the Roman Forum was significantly altered in the second half of the 1st century BCE and that these alterations correlate to changes pertaining to the Vestal Cult during the Augustan period.

Until the late 1st century BCE, visitors to the *Forum Romanum* had a clear view of the Temple of Vesta from almost anywhere in the forum. Located in the southeastern corner of the forum, the temple in its earliest form was believed to originate with Numa and was marked not only by its distinctive round shape but also its visual prominence in the social and political heart of the city. The temple's main function was to house the state hearth, and as the symbol of the health and security of the state, the hearth was diligently maintained by the priestesses of the Vestal cult who lived on the grounds of the precinct and have been noted as highly visible among priests at Rome (Rupke 2022). The continued unobstructed prominence of the temple throughout the Republican period suggests that the temple acted as a barometer for the state of the city. If anyone entering the forum needed confirmation as to the condition of the city, its endeavors, and

its institutions, the rising smoke of Vesta's eternal flame assured them of Rome's continuing stability.

Nevertheless, the second half of the 1st century BCE brought about major changes for the Vestal cult and, as I argue, the Temple of Vesta. The period under Augustus brought about several institutional and architectural changes to the city of Rome, and as a part of the major adjustments made to Roman religious institutions, the Vestal cult experienced the relocation of several of their activities and artifacts to Augustus's home on the Palatine hill in 12 BCE. In the house, a shrine was built both to house several of the cult's sacred artifacts, most notably the *palladium*, and to serve as the site of some Vestal rituals. Several scholars (e.g., Beard et al. 1998, Wildfang 2006) have observed how these changes in particular serve as evidence of Augustus's determination to make his hearth synonymous with the city's. Less attention, however, has been paid to the original site of these objects and activities—the Vestal precinct—at this time because of the lack of textual and archaeological evidence for modifications in the Augustan period (Scott 2009). I aim to approach the issue from an alternative direction by focusing on the changes in the surrounding landscape rather than those made directly to the precinct.

In this paper, I will argue that by the late 1st century BCE, built interventions in the southeastern corner of the forum almost completely blocked the Temple of Vesta from sight, severely affecting any visual engagement with it. To support this claim, I will model the changing visibility of the temple by integrating my own digital 3D models based on archaeological evidence into UCLA RomeLab's digital rendering of the landscape of the Roman Forum in 44 BCE. I will then analyze the changes in the temple's visibility in successive stages by establishing a "control" of the temple's visibility in 44 BCE and then introducing the Temple

of the Divine Julius Caesar and the Arch of Augustus. Ultimately, I will show that by 19 BCE, the Temple Vesta was hardly visible from the rest of the Roman Forum, and thereby, one of the most important reminders of women's participation in the Roman state religion was visually diminished by monuments dedicated to the male progenitors of Rome's new political regime.

Works Cited

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