

## Late Roman Epigraphy in the Forum Romanum: Fragments or Narrative?

The Forum Romanum looms large in the minds of both tourists and scholars alike as the quintessential testament to the greatness of the Roman republic and empire. What many tourists do not realize, however, is that most of the monuments on view in the Forum today were either newly constructed or substantially renovated in the late antique period (c. 250-700 CE). This phase of the Forum has received more scholarly attention in recent years. Studies combining archaeology, art history, and epigraphy have documented and analyzed the construction projects and honorific statuary added to the Forum. Kalas (2010) has argued that late fourth century senators set up statues and inscriptions in the Forum to subtly undermine the power of the Christian emperors; late antique statuary and other art work reframed the way that viewers saw the older monuments (ibid 1999). Favro et al's online project "Visualizing Statues in the Late Antique Roman Forum" (2005) deftly combines scholarship and technology to explore the spatial context of the statues and inscriptions from the late antique period. The importance of movement through space has been recognized (Favro and Johnason 2010). My project builds on these earlier studies by focusing on the epigraphy of the Forum – not just inscriptions newly carved in the late antique period, but all the inscriptions, recent and much older, that would have been visible to a late antique visitor.

In traditional epigraphic studies, inscriptions are most likely to be approached as snippets of historical data – a municipal inscription is understood as a record of the actions of an official or group, an imperial inscription provides dates for decrees or events, etc. Inscriptions are frequently published and used with little regard for their ancient/late antique context(s). Many excavation reports have published inscriptions in a separate volume or section, reinforcing the assumption that inscriptions deliver historical data not dependent on the original context of the stone. The interaction between an inscribed stone and its particular architectural or civic surroundings is suppressed. While traditional (historical, prosopographic) approaches to

epigraphy are valuable and little other work can proceed without the laying of these foundations, my aim is to build on the work of both epigraphers (Panciera 1996) and the art historical studies mentioned above by taking an interdisciplinary approach.

I argue that inscriptions in the Forum Romanum have been primarily published and studied as isolated "fragments" – as historical snapshots of a single moment in time or as representing the actions of a single official or emperor. Though this is a completely valid and useful method, I approach inscriptions, not as fragments, but as part of a composite narrative composed of all the visible inscriptions in the area: a narrative available to a viewer walking through the Forum. I have taken as my vantage point the early fifth century CE, shortly before Alaric's sack of Rome in 410. Rather than fragments attesting to the actions of individual officials at various different times, these inscriptions can be read as a whole, a narrative composed of varied parts by varied authors. This approach permits one to experiment with tools usually reserved for literature and to ask questions of inter/intra-textuality – how do the texts of these inscriptions build on or supplant other visible words in the Forum? What is the total picture presented to an early fifth-century viewer?

With this approach, each inscription visible in the Forum Romanum in c. 405 CE does not just shed light on the particular moment in history in which it was created but constructs a diachronic narrative: for the late antique Roman, a narrative that stretches back to the Republic, through the glory days of the empire, and then allows him to situate himself within this narrative.

#### Works Cited

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