

Negotiating Roman Imperialism in Civic Architecture at Bibracte (Mont-Beuvray, France)

In this paper, I argue that the changes made to civic architecture at Bibracte in the decades following the Gallic War represent a renegotiation of local identity in reaction to Roman imperialism. By examining the erection, mutation, and destruction of two civic centers at Bibracte (PC15 and the “forum” complex), I demonstrate that local elites initially attempted to reject traditional Gallic architecture in order to embrace Roman civic forms, and therefore identify themselves with Roman power structures, before settling on a more hybrid structure that used Roman building methods to bolster local traditions and identity.

First, I focus on a detailed study of the building phases of both PC15 and the “forum” complex at Bibracte to establish a clear timeline of the architectural changes of both structures. PC15 was first erected between 70-50 BCE as a large open courtyard with a galleried walkway encircling it (phases 1 and 2). Around 30 BCE (phase 3), the structure was completely inverted, removing the galleried walkway completely and erecting a large dense structure where the courtyard used to be. Sometime between 50-30 BCE, the “forum” complex was built in a neighborhood to the north of PC15, built and decorated in a typical Roman style. The “forum” was only in use until 20 BCE before it burned down, and it was not rebuilt. Instead, local elites returned their focus to PC15, dismantling the inverted structure of phase 3 and returning the center to its previous form of an open courtyard with encircling walkway, and using Roman masonry techniques to do so.

Second, I reexamine both structures using spatial and identity theory. I discuss the role architecture and space has on local identity formation, a topic that has been explored in settlements in the western Provinces outside of Gaul (Revell 2009), but has not been centered as

an evidentiary base within major studies of identity formation in Gaul (Woolf 1998). By expanding on the work of Hantrais et al. (2020), Meylan (2005), and Rieckhoff (2014), I argue that PC15, the “traditional” civic center, was a structure that not only facilitated local daily life of all socio-cultural strata, but also placed Bibracte and the Aedui tribe in dialogue with the broader context of Gallic religious and social society.

Therefore, the creation of the “forum” complex as a new civic center to replace PC15 served to weaken local ties with Gallic identity in favor of signaling their allegiance with Rome. When the “forum” complex was destroyed shortly thereafter, and PC15 was rebuilt in the “traditional” civic style, the elite of Bibracte were yet again renegotiating their identity and political allegiances in the face of a dissolving Roman Republic and their place as leaders in Gaul. However, the shift back to PC15 does not represent a complete reversion of local identity to Gallic norms nor a wholesale rejection of Roman hegemony; although it returned in form to the “traditional” civic center, the use of distinctly Roman architectural techniques represents the early development of hybrid identity formation among the Aedui and the elite of Bibracte.

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