

Reconstructing Viewer Engagement with the Septizodium

Though its structure no longer survives, the Septizodium was once one of the foremost building projects in Severan Rome. Called one of the *opera publica praecipua... extant* of Septimius Severus' reign by the *Historia Augusta* (*SHA Sev. XIX, 5*), it was a large aedicular, colonnaded fountain dedicated in 202 or 203 CE by the emperor at the southeastern corner of the Palatine Hill facing the approaching Via Appia (Lusnia 2014). Establishing the form of the building, its sculptural program, and its intended message are all issues that have occupied scholars (e.g. Lusnia 2004 and 2014, Thomas 2007), as there is a great deal of room for interpretation of what little evidence for it remains. While this work has been fruitful and has established a reasonable reconstruction of the Septizodium and its ideological program, still lacking in much of the work on the fountain are explorations of the possibilities for viewer engagement with the monument. I argue that in setting up a fountain Septimius Severus gave the city a practical benefaction on which the people could directly draw, but at the same time the sculptural program created literal and figurative distance between the people and the imperial benefactors. This one-sided relationship is one of multiple between emperor and people evident in the Severan building program in Rome.

The Septizodium was a roughly rectangular fountain, with several exedrae, water basins, and a superstructure of three stacked colonnades decorated with sculptures and figural water spouts (Lusnia 2004). The sculptural program likely included Septimius Severus and the imperial family, animals, planetary deities and other deities, and potentially the Tigris River, promoting the Severans' imperial and cosmological legitimacy, military power, and dynastic claims (Longfellow 2011). Its position in the city may have also masked the accumulated buildings on

the Palatine Hill to give those approaching on the Via Appia a distinctly Severan impression of the city (Lusnia 2014).

How participatory or complicit were non-imperial viewers in these imperial messages? This is absent in the scholarship. In its form as a fountain, the Septizodium was a practical benefaction to the people; its proximity to the Circus Maximus and the Via Appia made it a refreshing point after travel or a day of watching races (Longfellow 2011). The Septizodium played an important public role, and framed Septimius Severus and the imperial family as the benefactors of this crucial service to the people. The stability and prosperity that comes from Severus' legitimate dynasty, military victories, and divine and cosmological approval allow him to bring water to the people.

But while those in Rome benefit from the fountain and Septimius Severus' patronage of it, they cannot interact with Severus, the gods, or the imperial family the way they might have been able to in other monuments (Petsalis-Diomidis 2007). Only in gathering water can people engage with the fountain, and the sculptural program, far over their heads, is removed from the viewers both physically and visually. In this way the form of the Septizodium serves to distance the emperor, the imperial family, and even the gods from the citizens of Rome; imperial power is a sphere now completely out of reach of non-imperial viewers. Viewers can appreciate the prosperity that comes from military victory, a stable dynasty, and pleased gods, but can do no more than accept those results by collecting water. Septimius Severus's arch in the Forum, on the other hand, represents a style of imperial representation that does allow for viewer participation (Lusnia 2014), indicating that the image of the emperor and his relationship to the people of Rome was one that was fluid.

The emperor could frame his power in relation to his subjects in a variety of ways, and the Septizodium serves as one useful example in understanding this spectrum. When viewers are added to the conversation on this monument's structure, ornamentation, and context, nuanced messages develop beyond broad statements of imperial meaning and add new layers to our understanding of Severan imperial building in Rome.

Bibliography

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