

Roman Utilitarian Monumentality in the Rainwater Harvesting System of Cosa

The monumentality of Roman constructions is well accepted and found to have manifested in codified ways through specific building materials and social practices. In fact, scholarship on Roman monumentality often does not pause to define the word because it is “known” and accepted that Roman works are monumental. Monumentality, as it applies to building activity, has been seen to reinforce social hierarchy via conspicuous consumption demonstrated by constructions which are larger than necessary for quotidian purposes, visible in the landscape, and built from durable materials. Through monumental constructions, the Romans exhibited power by shaping the earth and by evoking natural features with tall columns and high ceilings—thereby even establishing supremacy over nature (DeLaine 2002; Thomas 2007). This kind of monumentality has predominately been highlighted in conjunction with the invention of and advances in Roman concrete and the scale it allowed, especially during the Imperial period.

There has been a long standing debate, however, regarding whether utilitarian constructions can be classified as monumental. For Trigger, public works projects are not monumental (Trigger 1990; Trigger 2004). From Trigger’s viewpoint, three Roman hydraulic structures, aqueduct arcades, bath complexes, and *nymphaea*, can be considered monumental because each operated at a level of size and prominence beyond the basic servicing of water needs. Yet Osborne notes that monumentality can encompass public works like roadway and irrigation projects (Osborne 2014). And momentum is gaining for the case that utilitarian Roman hydraulic constructions are monumental. Hopkins identifies the landfill and reclamation of the Forum valley as a monumental building project (Hopkins 2014); part of this endeavor

involved the creation of the Cloaca Maxima, the name of which alone implies monumentality, but which later was reputedly large enough to accommodate small boats sailing through it (Pliny *NH* 36.24.104). Poehler makes a similar assertion about the drainage system of Pompeii which he argues was designed as monumental infrastructure that molded the subterranean urban landscape (Poehler 2012). Van Oyen demonstrates that at Roman *villae* aboveground cisterns, features usually classified as utilitarian, are monumental since they perform both conspicuous production and consumption functions, paralleling contemporary monumentality in other kinds of *villae* staple storage (Van Oyen 2015; Van Oyen 2020).

A good case study for further considering the monumentality of Roman utilitarian hydraulic structures such as cisterns is the site of Cosa. Due to a dearth of natural resources, at this Latin colony the water supply was provisioned entirely by harvesting rainwater. In addition to the familiar domestic cisterns of the ancient Mediterranean, therefore, Cosa had ten large reservoirs and cisterns built near or under non-domestic buildings to gather rain. All of these were stone-built, utilizing hydraulic cement but not concrete, between 273 and 140 BCE, placing them securely in the middle Roman Republic; these qualities situate these presumed utilitarian water storage structures even farther outside the traditional conception of Roman monumentality. The existence of these subterranean features is only marked by puteals for withdrawing water, but at Cosa several of these are inscribed, suggesting attention was being drawn to the importance of the features below. And though they are basic in their construction details, the non-domestic Cosan cisterns and reservoirs indelibly shaped the landscape and harnessed nature by collecting a volume of water that far exceeded what the population required. In all these ways, the ten largescale non-domestic reservoirs and cisterns of Cosa are as much monumental

water displays as aqueducts, baths, and *nymphaea* and Roman monumentality must be redefined to incorporate such utilitarian features.

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