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Domenico Palombi, *I Fori prima dei Fori. Storia urbana dei quartieri di Roma antica cancellati per la realizzazione dei Fori imperiali*, Espera Edizioni, 2016, 380 pp.
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The semiotic power of the forensic squares and urban layering of ancient Rome is a heritage that is being renewed in the present. Following radical modern transformations – such as demolitions and excavations – reconstructing the forms and meanings of a part of the city like the Imperial Forums may seem daring. In his 2016 edited volume, *I Fori prima dei Fori. Storia urbana dei quartieri di Roma antica cancellati per la realizzazione dei Fori imperiali* (translated by the author as: "Forums before Forums. Urban history of the districts of ancient Rome erased for the construction of the Imperial Forums"), archaeologist and university educator Domenico Palombi attempts this reconstruction. He meticulously revisits the *symbolic capital* as well as the topographical layout, place names, monumental and infra-structural components, and urban stratification of the city's districts that existed in this central civic sector, which were erased during the early imperial period to make way for the grand monumental expressions of the

Capital of the Empire. Palombi's reconstruction is a critical review of the historiographical path that traces the evolution of Rome. It begins with the archaic city, progresses through the city's reconstruction and infrastructural expansion during the Republican era, and culminates in the comprehensive redesign of the central area initiated by Emperor Augustus. Such a redesign stage is when the Forums became "the new stage of the imperial family" (p. 32).

The author employs a circumstantial-combinatorial method to compile a comprehensive collection of materials, both tangible and intangible. This includes archaeological remains, morphological studies, viable buildings, and monumental structures, as well as immaterial sources like toponymy, urban boundaries, social events and practices, and historical figures. Together, these elements reconstruct a cohesive image of the city, attributing not only formal characteristics but also aspects of its identity. For instance, the traditional depiction of Rome, spread across the seven hills, can be traced back to the antiquarian poetry of Varro. In his work *The Latin Language*, 5th book, Varro establishes the literary canon of the seven hills concerning the religious feast of Septimontium, framed within the context of the Four Servian Regions. Celebrated on December 11th by eight territorial communities, this event inspires the poet, who employs etymology to grant a territorial significance to the city. This symbolic interpretation is also ingrained in the topographical memory of Rome by Emperor Augustus, whose constitutional, political, and administrative reforms will lead to a comprehensive redesign of the *spatium Urbis*. This redesign is structured into XIV Regions, following the Pythagorean septenary scheme. Despite various interpretative perspectives, the referenced testimonies shape the framework of urban space and support the reliability of the data, ultimately becoming part of the "landscape" (p. 187).

The historical reconstruction of the urban and architectural reality of the *Forums before Forums* attempts to decode the polysemic and heterogeneous signs that populate this space and to establish the proper relationship between symbolic interpretation and reality. The historical sources, therefore, articulate the narrative

without forcibly aspiring to a definitive and programmatic reconstruction of the context; instead, they help the readers consider the limits of the interpretation of some partial or even occasional data of such a complex reality.

Why was the area of the Forums chosen as the site of the new monumental scenario of Rome? What motivations explain the long process of resematization that invested this locus *extra moenia*?

Palombi traces the core of the urban transformation of the area in the identification of the Emperor with the urban space. The aim of the *Princeps*, shared by all subsequent emperors, was indeed to establish a privileged relationship between *Power and Urbs*, with the consequent displacement of the monumental setting according to the new places of power, and also of the mythical scenery. The lack of attractive and qualifying elements in the landscape of the Forums favoured the characterisation of the space with cultural and ideological contents linked to the regime. The Palatine, on the other hand, was given a symbolic function, anchored in the memory of Rome's origins and its founder Romulus, identifying the four cornerstones of the *Pomerium* in the *Forum Boarium*, the *Porta Capena*, the *Meta Sudans*, and the *Roman Forum*. Although the ease with which buildings' replacement began with Caesar may seem unusual, according to the author, the process of building the Forum must be understood in the literal sense of metamorphosis, without implying the oblivion of the memory of venerable places and events.

The raising of the Forums transformed the city's essential orographic, hydrographic, and infrastructural elements. Just think of the gutting of the "saddle between the Capitoline and the Quirinal hills" and the obliteration of the walls along the crest of the promontory, offset by the *piaculum* of Trajan's Column, or the gradual erasure of the Velia. Against the principles of the inviolability of the *res sacrae* and despite such levellings, the identity between some topographical signs and the toponymic structure of the city, between the street grid and the shape of the sewers conduits of the Republican age (*Cloaca Maxima*), remains a recurring principle in the text for the reconstruction of the urban landscape under consideration.

Some significant elements of the space have survived in the form of social, ritual, or aggregative practices; others populate the contemporary landscape through archaeological remains of extreme symbolic value. This is evidenced by the preservation of the preexisting religious landscape, rich in votive sites and ceremonies, including the cult of Vulcan, the god of metallurgy, to whom we owe the manufacture of the sacred trumpets used in the military and commemorated in *Tubilustrium*, the festival of the purification of trumpets and weapons dedicated to Mars. The warlike connotations of the liturgies held in the forensic squares, such as the cult of Mars in the Forum of Hadrian or the cult of Minerva in the Transitory Forum, confirm the permanence of an archaic tradition guardian of the city's history. Not only that, but five of the ten place names in the areas of Rome occupied by the Forums have survived and are "considered witnesses to the original character of the natural landscape" (p. 200), such as the axis of the *Argiletum*, whose name would derive from the nature of the clay soil.

In this slow operation of reconstruction, the research becomes a tale of destructive actions aimed at designing new writings through operational strategies of selection and renewal of tradition. According to the author, this process provided an opportunity to rewrite and hand down, even today, that dense "landscape of memory" (p. 199) that we call the Imperial Forums.