

# Fora as Urban Sanctuaries: Continuities in Form and Function

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The placement of temples in communal spaces was a long-lasting tenet of Roman urbanism. From the riverside Temple of Mater Matuta in the archaic Forum Boarium at Rome, to the republican Temple of Jupiter in the central Forum at Pompeii, and the temple for imperial cult in the new Forum at Lepcis Magna, religious buildings were a part of open public spaces in a variety of different periods, settings, and political systems. This is usually attributed to two things: firstly, the character of the Forum Romanum in Rome, which has been seen as a template for the form and functions of fora more generally; and secondly, the role of temples in civic life, which saw them serve as custodians, hosts, performance spaces, and repositories of collective memory, and thus suitable ornaments for public areas. This paper suggests a third possibility, namely that the phenomenon stems from a wider crossover between sanctuaries and assembly spaces in central Italy, a crossover that goes back as far as the Iron Age and is by no means restricted to the city of Rome.

Two Iron Age sites, Satricum in Latium and Tarquinia in Etruria, illustrate part of a proto-urbanising process in which people came together to worship a natural phenomenon or deity from a very early date, in places that were simultaneously growing as population centres: a convergence of people and cult.<sup>1</sup> The result might be a meaningful relationship between worship and assembly, between rituals and habitation, in certain places.

In the Archaic Period, a greater range of assembly spaces with temples appear in the archaeological record. The construction of the Temple of Mater Matuta in the Forum Boarium at Rome gave the area (which was possibly Rome's original forum) the architectural character of a sanctuary. The construction of monumental cult buildings in the Forum Romanum some eight decades later conferred a 'ritual halo' on this open space, with the gods residing in temples as the elites did in multi-functional houses further along the Via Sacra.<sup>2</sup> In effect the Forum valley became a space where people could assemble and interact under the eyes of powerful members of the community, both mortal and divine. Other spaces in central Italy had comparable features and functions but are usually termed sanctuaries. Sites including Pyrgi and the Fanum Voltumnae, among others, hosted conspicuous displays of wealth and privilege, were venues for communal and civic events, and had roles in local, regional, and even international trade.<sup>3</sup> It is usually claimed that Etruscan cities lacked fora. Is that because they had sanctuaries instead?

During the Republican period the architectural components of fora and sanctuaries became increasingly shared, with the growing use of porticoes and colonnades; stepped, semi-circular structures; and a tendency to design an open space and its surroundings

as a coherent, self-contained whole. Studies of the fora at Pompeii and Paestum suggest that their topography grew out of pre-existing, religious patterns of land use.<sup>4</sup> At Cosa, where the forum only gained a temple at a later stage, the layout of the central space displays a preoccupation with ordered and supervised communal activity, first by elites and later by the gods, and again is far from a copy of the Forum Romanum at Rome.<sup>5</sup>

Conflation between sanctuaries and fora reached new heights in the Augustan period with the construction of the Forum of Caesar and the Forum of Augustus in Rome. In architectural terms these fora were religious precincts (sanctuaries of Venus and Mars), and functionally they were civic spaces. They ambiguously straddled the line between god-given authority and being subject to the will of the divine, and thus in some ways come full circle in a pattern in settlement architecture that began in the chiefly, ‘big man’ society of Iron Age Italy and found its fullest expression with the introduction of its later equivalent, an emperor.

The close relationship between fora and sanctuaries in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC can be read as the physical expression of a conceptual connection: the gods were powerful members of the community, and as such were present and consulted in spaces where activities central to communal life occurred. Such spaces were not restricted to the middle of settlements just as temples were not confined to extra-urban sites. The presence of temples in fora can thus be seen as an architectural representation of the connections between religious and political activities so well-known in other areas of ancient Italic life.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Maaskant-Kleibrink 1992, 108; Maaskant-Kleibrink 1995, 127–131; Bonghi Jovino 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Riva – Stoddart 1996, 95; Hopkins 2016, 39–52 with references.

<sup>3</sup> Potts forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> Pedley 1990, 114–120; Ball – Dobbins 2013, 467–469, 78–80.

<sup>5</sup> Fentress 2003, 24f.; Laurence et. al. 2011, 44.

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