

Propaganda and duality in *exedras* at the imperial fora of Rome

Abstract:

This paper discusses the exedra at imperial fora of Rome. It focuses on the imperial fora of Augustus and Trajan. It examines the architectural form of both fora, including that of the exedra. It discusses the duality imposed by the placement of the exedra as well as their sculptural programs in regards to the political propaganda of the emperors, and how political propaganda was shaped by Augustus and revived by Trajan.

Keywords: Rome, Architecture, Imperial, Exedra, Propaganda, Duality

Roman emperors are known for their buildings program in the city of Rome and its outlying provinces. In the crowded city center, emperors built forums to cultivate urban space in Rome. Julius Caesar built the earliest imperial forum and the emperor Trajan constructed the latest.¹ The primary purpose of the imperial fora was to provide a public space for the people of Rome. As the fora were built to give space back to the Roman people, the emperors designed them to influence the people who viewed them in a certain way. They did so through the complexes' designs and sculptural programs.

A number of fora contain an architectural form known as an exedra. The Forum of Augustus and the Forum of Trajan both feature monumental exedras. It is the sculptural program housed in these exedras that convey the strongest message to their viewers. By examining the structures and the iconography of the sculptures, one can begin to see how the emperors intended to influence Roman Citizens through their manufactured urban spaces, as well as speculate as to if the exedras were meant to architecturally define opposites and dualities.

What is an exedra?

An exedra forms a semi-circular architectural space. MacDonald defines exedras as "curved demi-plazas or recesses of semicircular plan un-walled along their straight, open sides... They served many functions, commemorative and ritual among others"² Merriam-Webster's definition of exedra is: "[a room] used for conversation and formed by an open or columned recess often semicircular in shape and furnished with seats."³ Expanding on this definition, McElmurray describes the space as "a place that stimulates conversation between strangers and energizes the urban experience. Relatively small in size compared to its surroundings, the exedra encourages a higher level of public intimacy and interaction than can normally be found in typical streetscapes."⁴

Due to their radiality off a larger area, MacDonald refers to exedras as a type of "way station", since they do not lead anywhere and no traffic flows through them. He continues to emphasize their form and off-set positioning as a place which attracts a "focused group of people of the kind exedras accommodated when used as meeting places for philosophers and other worthies...[as well as] forming refuges from the directional pull and agitated motion of the streets."⁵

What is the purpose of an exedra?

An exedra can be used for a variety of purposes, among them: observation, commemoration, and conversation.⁶ Decoration plays a large role in the design of an exedra. It offers the owner a public place for expression, which would promote conversation.⁷ These decorative elements could include frescoes, statues, figural columns,

elaborate capitals, mosaics, or, as seen in the exedras found at the Forums of Augustus and Trajan, portrait busts. Including decorative elements in the exedra that were commemorative in nature provided a public place for Romans to connect with the emperor and his predecessors. Doing so would provide the average Roman citizen with “an understanding of how that particular urban environment developed over time; it gives a sense of continuity, of endurance.”⁸ This was essential to creating a collective Roman identity.

Augustus

Augustus was skilled at creating and cultivating his image. Leaving behind his given name of Octavian, he took the name Augustus which, was associated with adjectives such as stately, holy, and dignified.⁹ Augustus went further, and changed the realm of public portraiture through how he wished to be depicted. Unlike Republic portraiture, Augustus was depicted in the classical style, with harmonious features, a calm expression, and a slightly turned head. This resulted in a youthful, dignified depiction, which was in stark opposition to earlier, severe, and arrogant depictions.¹⁰ Augustus aimed for the portrait to be a reflection of his self-image, rather than his physical appearance. He directed the “re-branding” effort in such a way that the average citizen would have seen his image, and understood the thoughtful, remote, agelessness of Augustus, regardless of their education or literacy level.¹¹

Augustus strove to “heal Roman society... through renewal of religion and custom and the honor of the Roman people”¹² He used visual imagery to convey the political propaganda that promoted the renewal of the Roman Empire as well as the Julian family. In doing so, he created a new founding myth for the city of Rome while incorporating the past into the present. He used Rome’s forefathers extensively to assert his legitimacy as emperor.¹³ In Augustus’ visual imagery he emphasized his alleged descent from Venus and Aeneas. The sculptural program at the Forum of Augustus is rich with this type of visual imagery.

The forum of Augustus

The Forum of Augustus was dedicated in 2 BC.¹⁴ It was situated just north of the Forum Julium, built by Augustus father, Julius Caesar. The forum was rectangular in plan with a colonnaded courtyard. It included two exedra, which flanked the Temple of Mars Ultor at the far end of the forum. Henri Stierlin points out that the Temple of Mars Ultor “stood on a high platform, with an octostyle façade similar to the temple in the Forum Julium.”¹⁵ Adopting structural forms used in earlier forums, especially that of his father, further strengthens Augustus’ stance of the importance of his Julian lineage throughout Roman history.

John W. Stamper and Henri Stierlin agree on the dimensions of the forum. Stamper describes the dimensions of the forum as “54 meters wide by approximately 70 meters long, its shape conforming closely to Vitruvius’s prescription that a forum’s width should equal two-third its length.”¹⁶ He expands on dimensions, due to the fact that the Via Fori Imperiali covers the southwest end of the forum, obscuring its relationship to the Forum Julium. He states, “the overall length of the complex, from the Forum Julium to the rear of the apse of the Temple of Mars Ultor, was 125 meters. It was 85 meters wide, including the colonnades.”¹⁷

The porticoes framed the edges of the forum space, essentially functioning as *stoa*, or covered walkways. They were approximately 14.9 meters wide and 9.5 meters in height. They featured Corinthian columns made of *gialla antico*.¹⁸ Within the porticoes was a collection of art that included sculptures, paintings, and as Stierlin suggests, a

bronze chariot. The first story of the porticoes also included a row of caryatids, similar to those at the Erechtheion in Athens.¹⁹

Standing behind the porticoes, were two exedras. The exedras were approximately 45 meters in diameter. The walls were built of peperino, and a wooden roof may have covered them.²⁰ They were symmetrical and stood opposite each other on either side of the Temple of Mars Ultor. Stamper describes the inclusion of these monumental exedra as “one of the many planning innovations evident in the forum...[and] extremely influential in the later design of the Forum Traiani.”²¹ Stamper believes they were “derived from Greek exedras and from smaller curved niches for the display of sculpture like those found in many Roman houses.”²²

The walls of Augustus’ monumental exedra were honorific and served a commemorative function.²³ They were composed of rectangular niches. These niches were home to portrait busts representing Augustus’ ancestral line. Augustus utilized the position of the exedras, opposite one another, to distinguish his dual ancestry. Both exedra’s together, were meant to “illuminate Augustus’ family lineage and to exalt his divine authority by making it a part of the new national myth.”²⁴ This new national myth combined the legend of Troy and Aeneas with the myth of Venus. Their visual forms and compositions were adapted to “suit the needs of the new official mythology.”²⁵

The exedra to the right of the Temple of Mars Ultor included portrait busts of powerful and influential Romans, Kings of Rome and of Romulus, the son of Mars. The great men depicted here were dignitaries, generals, imperialists and triumphators. Romulus is depicted as Rome’s first triumphator and represents *virtus*.²⁶ *Virtus* as well as *pietas* are behaviors Augustus strove to emulate.

The exedra to the left of the temple of Mars Ultor housed portrait busts of members of the Julian family, including Aeneas from Vergil’s *Aeneid*. Aeneas, a Trojan soldier, is depicted wearing Roman armor, carrying his elderly father while leading his son by the hand. Aeneas is meant to symbolize the virtue of *pietas*, or social responsibility.²⁷

It also included kings of Alba Longa, the ancestral home of the Julian family.²⁸ By depicting eminent ancestors, as well as Aeneas and kings all the way down the line to himself, Augustus was able to “create the impression that the [Julian] family had continually distinguished itself through Roman history...while eliminating certain period better forgotten.”²⁹

In the two central niches of each exedra were large statues of Aeneas and Romulus. They stood directly opposite one another. “The juxtaposition was not intended to measure the two heroes against one another, but to celebrate their deeds as the embodiments of two complementary virtues.”³⁰ These complimentary virtues were both civic and military. They served as a model in which Augustus modeled his behavior on.

Visually, Augustus physically put himself in the center of these two exedras, by way of the chariot directly between the two in the center of the forum’s square. This placement asserted the importance of his family as being descended from Romulus and Aeneas. By positioning himself between the two, he visualized the idea that the “Julii had always been Rome’s most important family, for this family would produce her Savior [Augustus].”³¹

At the Forum of Augustus, viewers looked toward the past, and through the sculptural program were watching “myth and history woven together into a vision of salvation”³²: the salvation of Augustus and the Julian family. Here, Augustus has created a new national foundation myth with him and his family at the center.

The forum of Trajan

Macdonald describes Romans building for the social commonwealth as: “The

concept that Roman architecture is basically utilitarian, so popular for so long, is correct with respect to its emphasis upon social utility. What the romans wanted were a place where they might either act upon or debate and consider the very real and never entirely solved problems that arise among men.”³³ This is especially true of the exedra at the Forum of Trajan.

The Forum of Trajan is situated on the western side of the Forum of Augustus. It was the architectural work of the architect Appollodorus, built from A.D. 104-112.³⁴ It was the largest of the imperial fora. Its overall dimensions were 300 by 190 meters, spanning 5.5 hectares.³⁵

The aim of Trajan’s Forum was similar to the Forum Julium, as it was built with the intention of creating a large public space for the Roman public. The forum of Trajan would serve the city as a center for public administration, commercial and financial business, as well as functioning as a place where political events and judicial activities would take place.³⁶ In contrast to the Forum of Augustus, where the emperor attempted to legitimize his and his families’ reigns through the use of mythology, the Forum of Trajan was a “monument built to convey a message...that of the Pax Romana imposed upon Rome’s enemies by the victories of her great soldier-emperor.”³⁷ Statuary around the complex, such as Trajan’s’ column, was intended to promote his victories and triumphs, specifically his victories of Dacia in 98, 101 and 104.³⁸ This was a form of important propaganda for the emperor when asserting his right to rule. It “glorified his reign, while establishing his authority as emperor.”³⁹

The Forum of Trajan consisted of many parts. It was rectangular in shape, and once through the triumphal gates, there was a huge paved square with an equestrian statue of Trajan at the center. This area was surrounded by two covered colonnaded passages of solid white marble.⁴⁰ These colonnades included marble statues of Dacian soldiers above each column, supporting the cornice. It also included carved heads of historical figures that were interspersed between columns, surrounded by circular frames.⁴¹

Off these colonnaded passages were two exedras. Similar to the exedra at the Forum of Augustus, they included niches for statues that were presumably of important figures in the history of Rome, as well as in Trajan’s family line.⁴² Just to the north of the exedras were the markets of Trajan. The markets are the only surviving structures of Trajan’s Forum.

The width of the forum was taken up by the Basilica Ulpia. This building consisted of five naves, with an exedra at either end. It was built using white marble columns, had a wooden coffered roof and bronze tiles. It measure 165 meters long.⁴³ Trajan used the Basilica Ulpia to “receive visiting dignitaries and preside over trials and ceremonies...in the exedras and tribunals of the basilica he was [depicted as] the wise administrator and *pontifex maximus*.”⁴⁴

The two exedras at either end of the Basilica Ulpia were used for judicial and political activities. They were a place where trials would be held, and lawyers, senator and advocates would gather. In the niches were statues depicting Trajan’s family line.⁴⁵ The exedras contained portrait busts representing member of Trajan family, as well as colossal statues in the central niches. They were associated with the power the emperor had to dictate the law.⁴⁶

Behind the Basilica Ulpia was a small courtyard containing Trajan’s Column. This column provides an illustrated account of the Dacian war.⁴⁷ Beside the column were two libraries, one Greek and the other Latin. Beyond this area was the Temple of the deified Trajan. Hadrian constructed this in 128, after Trajan’s death.⁴⁸ It is contested whether the temple was included in the initial planning of the Forum or whether it was an addition by Hadrian. The consensus appears to be that Trajan and his architect, Appollodorus, designed it.

Trajan changed the focus of the forum by placing the temple behind the Basilica Ulpia, as it was no longer the dominant focal point. Henri Stierlin states that his “decision to replace the religious monument with a civic building represented a fundamental change in emphasis...a place dedicated to civic activity was restored to the people of Rome.”⁴⁹

Conclusion

The forums were used as a place for propaganda because they were public areas and would be viewed by Romans for generations. They provided a fresh canvas for the emperors to display their aims, power and achievements.”⁵⁰ It was a means of announcing their accomplishments, and glorifying the emperors and their family. At the Forum of Augustus, the intermingling of myth with reality, past, and present, was a way for Augustus to remind the citizens of Rome that the Julian’s had the power of the Gods, Venus and Mars, on their side. It was also a way to “avenge their wrongs with powers of an empire, aided by the gods.”⁵¹

Contemplating Trajan’s use of imagery related to military victory, it can be said imperial fora served as a means to “instill a sense of Rome’s historic mission...celebrating both ancient regal origins and more recent achievements.”⁵² The emperors always referred back to their predecessors. However, viewers to these monuments were not getting an accurate version of history. As stated earlier, it was very easy for the emperors to leave out family members and historical events that did not show them or their family in a positive light.

The duality of the exedras in the Forum of Augustus and the Forum of Trajan function in the same way. They are not meant to define opposites. Rather they are meant to complement one another. Whether it is the emperor overseeing civic or criminal trials being held at opposite exedras, or Aeneas and Romulus personifying *pietas* and *virtus*, these are attributes the emperor should have. By placing a statue of himself between these complementary behaviors, in the center of the main courtyard or the Basilica Ulpia, the emperor is giving the viewers a visual depiction of himself embodying these qualities.

If one was to stand in these exedras or fora, it is questionable whether the full extent of the sculptural program would be apparent to the viewer. It is evident when viewing the Forum as whole, but it is debatable whether one would be able to fit the puzzle pieces together, as these were sophisticated messages broken down into many parts. The viewer may have been overwhelmed by the size, grandeur and details of the forum to fully comprehend the emperor’s message.

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