

In C.E. 357 the historian Ammianus Marcellinus accompanying the emperor Constantius II on a trip to Rome describes the already 244 year-old forum of Trajan as follows.

singularem sub omni caelo structuram...etiam numinum assensione mirabilem,
...giganteos...nec relatu effabiles, nec rursus mortalibus appetendos.

A structure singular under all heaven, even wondrous in the opinion of the gods (with) indescribable gigantic monuments not ever again to be attempted by mortals.¹

Ammianus goes on to relate the quip made to Constantius by Ormisada, a Persian prince. Constantius seeing immediately the impossibility of replicating, let alone surpassing, this enormous forum complex set his sights on the twelve meter high monumental bronze sculpture of his ancient predecessor, Trajan, astride a horse in the middle of the courtyard. Ormisada hearing Constantius' plans to have such a bronze made of himself said

Ante, imperator, stabulum tale condi iubeto, si vales; equus quem fabricare disponis, ita late succedat, ut iste quem videmus.

Emperor, order first that such a stable be built, if you are able; the horse that you set out to make may then range as widely as that one which we now behold.

Ammianus' account written two and a half centuries after the dedication of the forum bears witness to the splendor and enormity of Trajan's undertaking. Built between 107-113 C.E. under the direction of his chief architect, Apollodorus of Damascus, Trajan's forum is the most magnificent of any of the ancient Roman fora.

The architecture of the forum is an expression of political and religious themes. Apollodorus used Greek, Roman, and Italic architectural elements in a carefully crafted way to illustrate visually to the citizens of Rome that the city stood as Caput Mundi with emperor (soon to god) Trajan solidly in control.²

Marcus Ulpius Traianus, Roman Emperor AD 98-117 Trajan was born in about the year AD 53 in Spain, the son of a consul and thus a member of a noble Roman family. He showed such prowess in public and military service that he was chosen by Nerva to be his successor on the Imperial throne, which he became at the age of forty-five. Trajan achieved military glory through two wars fought against the Dacians; these successful campaigns provided the theme and background for much of the architecture of Trajan's forum complex.

East and west of the forum's central plaza stood Corinthian colonnades, each with a high attic story that contained frieze sculpture that depicted the spoils of the Dacian wars (*manubia*). Each bay of the frieze was punctuated with colossal sculptures of humbled and shackled Dacian prisoners. Behind each colonnade was a hemicycle whose wall was

¹ All translations are my own.

² James Packer *The Forum of Trajan in Rome : a study of the monuments* (University of California Press, 1997) page 260

divided by pilasters into bays bracketing a central rectangular recess. Large gilt bronze statues crowned three porches that projected into the plaza and formed entrances to the transaxial Basilica Ulpia. Above the center porch stood a statue of Trajan driving a triumphal chariot with four horses, *quadriga*. On the east and west porches stood similar chariots with two horses a piece, *bigae*.

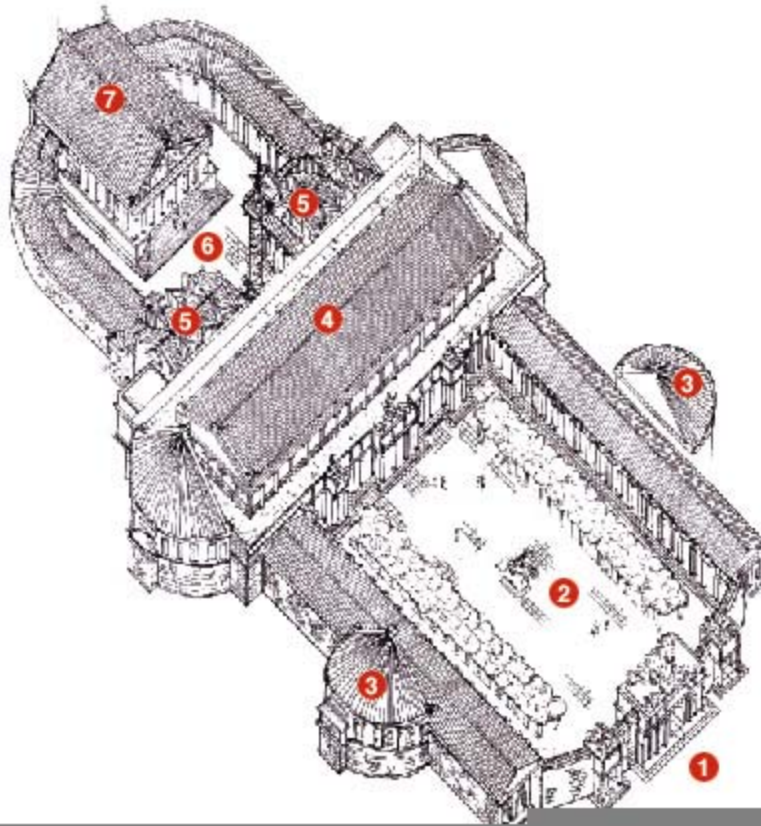


The Basilica Ulpia itself had a two story façade with Corinthian columns below and Ionic above (a conscious reversal perhaps of the order observed on the stories of the Flavian Amphitheater.) The second story Ionic portico served as clerestory illuminating the nave of the basilica. The roof was made of wood with sheets of gilded bronze. North of the Basilica Ulpia lay the Column with two flanking libraries, one for Greek texts and the other for Latin texts. The libraries were topped by high groin vault roofs. Each vault had a large, arched window that would have furnished light. Inside the libraries were Corinthian colonnades on both stories. The libraries probably housed about 22,000 scrolls.

The northern temple of Trajan completed by his successor, Hadrian, in 128 C.E. lies unexcavated beneath the churches of S. Maria di Loreto and SS. Nome di Maria and under part of the modern Valentini Palace.

The entire complex measures 300 meters on a north-south axis³ and 180 meters from west to east. The forum's open courtyard alone can fit the entire forum of Augustus and the transaxial Basilica Ulpia with its apses could encompass the forum of Nerva or Julius Caesar. From the point of view of someone entering the central southern gate the top of Trajan's 45 meter column sustaining a bronze statue of the emperor could be seen rising behind the roof of the Basilica Ulpia. The column lies on the central axis with the abovementioned equestrian statue and with the triumphal *quadriga* chariot atop the central projecting porch of the Basilica Ulpia.

³ For simplicity's sake I will refer to the northwest-southeast axis as the north-south axis and the northeast-southwest as the east-west axis.



Reconstruction drawing of the Forum of Trajan shows (1) the triumphal arch at the entrance, (2) statue of the emperor on horseback, (3) hemicycles, (4) Basilica Ulpia (a law court), (5) two libraries, (6) Trajan's Column, and (7) his temple. (Kevin Lee Sarring/James E. Packer)

The composition and presentation of Trajan's most impressive complex can be thought of as having five interconnected but distinct objectives.

1. to UNIFY the rather haphazard sprawl of imperial fora that taken place from the time of Julius Caesar through the Flavian dynasty.
2. to AMPLIFY and echo the architectural elements of earlier imperial fora and even to magnify elements within Trajan's own forum to develop a climatic pattern which rewarded the viewer as he walked further into the complex.
3. to STUPEFY the viewer with the enormity of the structure and its colossal images, its gleaming bronze statuary and ornament, and with the contrast of luminous sunlit marble with darker exotic materials and spaces.
4. to JUSTIFY the long and costly Dacian wars by presenting tangible results of Roman imperial conquest and to pave the way for acceptance of Trajan's upcoming Parthian campaign.
5. to DEIFY Trajan at his death with the temple at the north end of the complex as the ultimate culmination of Trajan's military, legal, political, and religious guidance and leadership of the *res publica*.

I will examine and explicate each of these five objectives in what follows.

UNIFICATION

Since the construction of the Julius Caesar's forum, it had been clear that Rome had outgrown its central forum area and was in need of more organized public space to conduct the legal, political, and religious affairs of state. Caesar clearly took advantage of the need to for more space to celebrate and to remind Romans of his divine ancestry by making the temple of Venus Genetrix the focal point of his forum. Augustus pushed further east into the Quirinal with his own forum and made clear to Rome his *pietas* toward his adoptive father not only by building adjacent to Julius' forum but by reminding Romans by dedicating the temple of Mars Ultor that he had made good on his promise to bring his father's assassins to justice.

Vespasian added to the imperial sprawl by constructing and dedicating his own Forum of Peace after the capture of Jerusalem in 71 A.D. Separated from the Julian fora by the busy Argiletum (the road that connected Subura with the Roman Forum), the Flavian forum emphasized the theme of peace restored to the empire after the chaos and civil conflict in 69 C.E. The ornament and floral decoration of Vespasian's temple and forum stood in contrast to the former general's simple temperament and tastes.

Domitian and then Nerva joined the imperial fora together with the dedication in 97 C.E. of the narrow Forum Transitorium. This forum filler of sorts effectively replaced a portion of the Argiletum and thereby helped to divert commercial traffic away from the Forum of Peace.⁴

Domitian apparently had plans for a structure all his own in the area north of the Forum of Augustus and possibly began the excavation of the Quirinal that Apollodorus completed under the direction of Trajan.

adhuc Romae a Domitiano coepta forum atque alia multa plusquam magnifice coluit ornavitque.⁵

He (Trajan) embellished and decorated magnificently his forum and many other projects begun by Domitian.

The assassination of Domitian in C.E. 96 and subsequent *damnatio memoriae* make it nearly impossible to know whether the reclusive emperor had any plans with his new construction to tie together either thematically or spatially the range of imperial structures. By the time Trajan (or Apollodorus, rather) took the project over, however, it

⁴ **Domitian, the Argiletum and the Temple of Peace**

James C. Anderson, Jr.

American Journal of Archaeology, Vol. 86, No. 1. (Jan., 1982), P. 110

⁵ Sextus Aurelius Victor Liber De Caesaribus 13.5

is clear that one of the purposes of this latest and greatest forum was to reply to and to unify the earlier fora.

Trajan's complex extends the axis of Vespasian's Forum Pacis. Moreover Trajan's layout is a magnified mirror image of the Flavian design with the Basilica Ulpia taking the place of the colonnade in front of the Temple of Peace and Trajan's courtyard representing the formal garden laid out in front of Vespasian's temple. Trajan's southern front wall extends the line from the front of the Temple of Venus Genetrix and nestles neatly into the northern flank of the forum of Augustus whose hemicycles Apollodorus chose as a model for the Trajanic structure.

Apollodorus designed the eastern hemicycle of Trajan's forum to be concentric with the façade of his contemporaneous markets. The physical proximity and harmonized design of the markets together with the prominence of the Basilica Ulpia and the temple of Trajan harkened back to and echoed the interconnectedness of commercial prosperity, legal superiority, and divine approbation that was the Roman Forum in the early days of the empire.

AMPLIFICATION

Although we have already noted above that Trajan's forum represented a magnified mirror image of the Forum Pacis, it remains to show how Apollodorus used an essential measurement in Vespasian's structure as starting point that determined the proportions of various buildings within the Trajanic complex. 400 Roman feet (or about 120 meters) was the internal length of court in front of Temple of Peace and served as this grand measurement. One and a half times this distance gives both the width of Basilica Ulpia and length of the Basilica added to the length of the forum area. 120 meters is also the length and width (including the colonnades) of the forum area and the length of the basilica's nave. Half this measurement (60 meters) is the width of the Basilica Ulpia. One third of this measurement (40 meters) is the height of Trajan's column. Two and one half times this measurement gives the entire length of Trajan's complex.

Apollodorus also aimed for an internal amplification of simple architectural theme. The theme, a single large-scale half or segmental circle broken by a rectangular element first occurs within the curvilinear front wall which is relieved by the rectilinear monumental central gate. Proceeding north, the rectangular recesses of the east and west hemicycles play the role of the central gate in breaking up the rounded space. The theme is repeated in the apses of the Basilica Ulpia where the rectangular tribunals are the central elements of the semi-circular space. Finally the curved porticoes of the temple area give way to the temple itself, the greatest expression of the theme. This alternation of large curved spaces with smaller rectangular spaces in turn reverses the large scale shape of the entire complex in which the hemicycles, the basilica's apses, the curved entrance wall, and the temple area relieve the central rectangularity of the forum and the nave of the basilica.

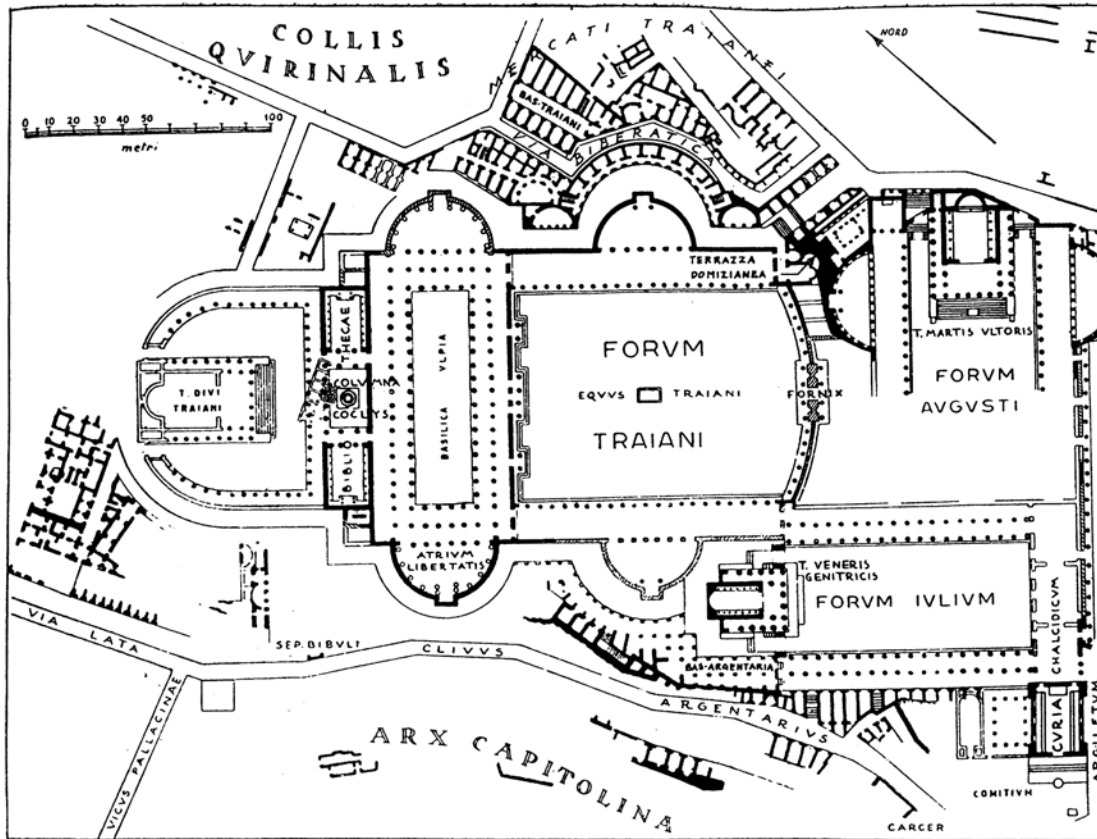


Fig. 1. Plan of the Imperial Fora by I. Gismondi. (Adapted from G. Lugli, *Roma Antica. Il centro monumentale* [Rome 1956] pl. V)

In the movement from south to north of Trajan's forum there also exists a visible political amplification of the prominence of the emperor himself. Trajan, the successful general, rides in triumphal bronze chariots one each atop the three entrance arches of the south wall. Once inside the forum area the visitor again views the champion of the Dacian wars in a bronze *quadriga* on top of the central projecting porch that leads to the Basilica Ulpia surrounded by two more Trajans riding in *bigae* on the flanking projecting porches. The central focus of the forum, the 12 meter bronze Equus Traiani, would have radiated military prowess situated in the middle of a white sea of luna marble pavement and surrounded by darker pavonazzetto marble colonnades that supported colossal statues of Dacian prisoners alternating with friezes depicting the spoils (*manubia*) of Trajan's conquests.



Trajan, the military hero, gave way to Trajan the lawgiver, as the visitor proceeded north into the Basilica Ulpia, which was named after the emperor's ancestors. The nave of the two story basilica was framed by friezes of winged victories that picked up the military theme of the plaza but also by colossal statues of the emperor at each end as *pontifex maximus* and judicial administrator.

Leaving the basilica and entering the colonnade situated between the Greek and Latin libraries which flanked the column, only the top portion of which had been visible from the forum plaza, the visitor wound his way around the massive marble illustration of the Dacian successes and marveled not only at the emperor's self-assured control as general but also at representations of Trajan's pious observance of the auspices at regular intervals to assure a victory that was in accordance with the will of the gods. If the visitor was one of the fortunate few, he was invited to climb the internal staircase of the column and atop the 100 foot monument witnessed what must have been the most spectacular aerial view of 1st century Rome. Above it all stood yet another twenty foot bronze of Trajan as emperor in control of his mighty empire.

As the visitor now must have understood as he left the column whose base would hold the emperor's ashes one day, Trajan's protection of and beneficence toward the empire would extend long after the emperor's own lifetime. Indeed the visitor continuing north of the column would have seen the beginnings of the temple that would one day be dedicated to the cult of Trajan. Thus the visitor in his tour of Apollodorus's complex would have witnessed the progression of Trajan from military hero and general to lawgiver and high priest to mighty emperor and then finally to god and divine protector of the empire.

STUPOR AND SURPRISE

The progressive revelations to the ancient visitor of Trajan's imperial and ultimately divine control of the empire would have been accompanied by visual surprises created by the alternation of light and dark spaces, varieties of exotic building materials, and the discovery of hidden architectural elements. Much of the layout of Apollodorus's creation

was hidden from the entrant to the forum. Dazzled by the gleaming monumental bronzes and bright luna marble of the plaze the visitor moving toward one of the colonnades would have noticed the contrast between the plaza floor and the polished *giallo antico* steps and the darker *pavonazetto* marble columns. Peering inside the portico, he would have seen a partially illuminated back wall divided into bays by pilasters that may have reminded our citizen of fourth style Pompeian wall painting. As he entered the colonnade, our visitor would have discovered the hemicycles for the first time. The pattern of alternation of rectilinear and curvilinear elements mentioned earlier would have been reinforced by the *opus sectile* circle and square polychrome marble patterns of the floor of the colonnade and the hemicycles.



Entering the basilica through the *giallo antico* columns of the projecting porches, our visitor would have experienced the light streaming in through the attic clerestory which again illuminated a polychrome floor that was dominated by the massive dark granite interior colonnade on the bottom floor and the *pavonazetto* ionic columns of the attic story. The apses at either end of the basilica would have been hidden from view by the interior triple colonnade until the visitor ventured closer to the tribunals.

Exiting the Basilica Ulpia between the two libraries our citizen would have marveled at the full revelation of the column for the first time. On the way up the interior spiral staircase, shafts of light from the high windows would have made for a mysterious and rather eerie climb since no views were visible until one had reached the top. Upon emerging from the top of the column the viewer would have been temporarily blinded by the bright light gleaming from the gilt roofs of the basilica and the eastern library, and having recovered his vision would have had as his first view Apollodorus' other great architectural feat, the markets of Trajan, which may have served as a reminder of the wealthy Roman mercantile economy.



The rich and exotic building materials were also reminders that Trajan's complex was the product of the world's richest and most expansive empire. *Pavonazetto* and *Africano* marbles came from Asia. The *giallo antico* came from north Africa and the *luna* marble from northern Italy. Flashing bronze Trajans interspersed with darker subservient Dacian prisoners alongside piles of *manubia* gave the unmistakable message that here was a general and an emperor who delivered on the promise of empire.

JUSTIFICATION

Rome had just fought two rather costly wars in Dacia in 101 – 102 C.E. and 105 – 106 C.E. Although conquest had typically been acknowledged as the source of Roman magnificence and opulence, these wars had been more difficult than expected to conduct. Decebalus, the Dacian chieftain, recovered so from the 102 C.E. defeat to win back old allies and to rebuild earlier strongholds that Trajan felt it necessary to confront him in person rather than designate surrogate generals to do so.⁶

After the final victory in 106, Trajan must have felt some pressure to produce some tangible results of his remote campaign. According to a sixth century historian Ioannes Lydus, Trajan returned to Rome flush with gold and silver and celebrated triumphal games that lasted 123 days⁷. Even though he used this wealth to drain marshes and build new aqueducts, Trajan needed to express his munificence to the citizens of Rome more directly. The forum complex with its celebration of Trajan's Dacian conquests became the designated vehicle. The opulence and geographical expanse represented by the forum helped to solidify the notion that foreign wars brought affluence to citizens of the empire in the form of slaves, materials, and money. This message was made all the more important by the imminence of another foreign campaign to be conducted by Trajan against the Parthians. If any should question the profit and benefit of launching yet another foreign war, Trajan had only to point to his own forum.

⁶ Cassius Dio *History* X.3

⁷ Ioannes Lydus II, 28

DEIFICATION

Trajan's predecessors only hinted at their legacy by dedicating temples to goddesses whose domains would serve to remind Romans of imperial bequests. Trajan anticipated his deification by including a burial monument (the column) and a temple to himself in the design of his forum. Archaeologists believe that the temple was part of the original design⁸.

Trajan's military and political success allowed him to make a bolder statement, perhaps, with his temple than did Vespasian and Nerva with their the temples to Pax and Minerva respectively. Even the temples of Venus Genetrix and Mars Ultor in the fora of Julius and Augustus only went as far as to draw attention to the ancestry and piety of Julio-Claudian *gens*. The temple of Trajan was the clearest statement to date that respect and attention for the person and cult of the emperor was part of every Roman's civic duty.

The 100-foot tall marble column topped by a gilded statue of the emperor himself was designed as a tomb for the emperor's remains.⁹ Burial within the pomerium would have been an extraordinary honor that would have associated Trajan with his Julio-Claudian *summi viri* models such as Julius and Augustus and set him apart from Domitian and the rest of his Flavian predecessors who were buried on the Quirinal.

Although columnar tombs and monuments were not unheard of by the early second century, Trajan's column was novel in three respects. First, it contained a chamber carved in its base to house Trajan's ashes. The second novelty was the spiral staircase which wound upwards within its otherwise solid marble shaft to a viewing platform at its top. The third and most distinct novelty was the continuous sculpted frieze which decorated the exterior of the column.

The frieze on the column is a visual account and record of Trajan's campaign in Dacia. The detail and length of the sculpture have left many scholars with the impression that there must have been some written account, now lost, on which the battle scenes on the frieze were based. The scrolling frieze winds its way counter clockwise around the column encouraging visitors to circumambulate the tomb to follow the story of Roman success. Roman soldiers on the column are generally depicted fighting upwards in the direction of the spiral so that the visitor moving around the column would naturally ally himself with the steady progress of Trajan's legions. Provisions were made in many places along the sculpture for metal attachments to be added, mainly tools and weapons held by soldiers, and small holes were drilled into many hands for these miniature implements to be inserted.

⁸ *The Forum of Trajan in Rome : a study of the monuments* (University of California Press, 1997) page 261 note 11

⁹ Penelope J.E. Davies *The Politics of Perpetuation: Trajan's Column and Art of Commemoration* American Journal of Archaeology, Vol. 101, No. 1 (Jan. 1997) Page 46

The scenes in the column are conspicuous for their absence of violent behavior and cruelty. Many scenes depict the general Trajan taking auspices or performing sacrifices. Other scenes show a general addressing his troops and in command of his army. The message is clear. Trajan is in control of an unstoppable force on a mission approved by the gods. By the time our visitor has completed multiple revolutions viewing the spiraling narrative and perhaps ascended to the top platform to earn the splendid view of Rome's mercantile, military, and engineering successes he would have been satisfied in the knowledge that Rome was *caput mundi* and that Trajan was the *caput Romae*.

Appendix: Problems with Trajan's Column Solved

The column has posed two problems to modern scholars. First, an inscription at the base of the column seems to suggest that an impossible amount of earth had to have been excavated from the Quirinal to place the column. Second, the spiral sculptures near the top of the column would have been impossible to view from a perspective on the ground.

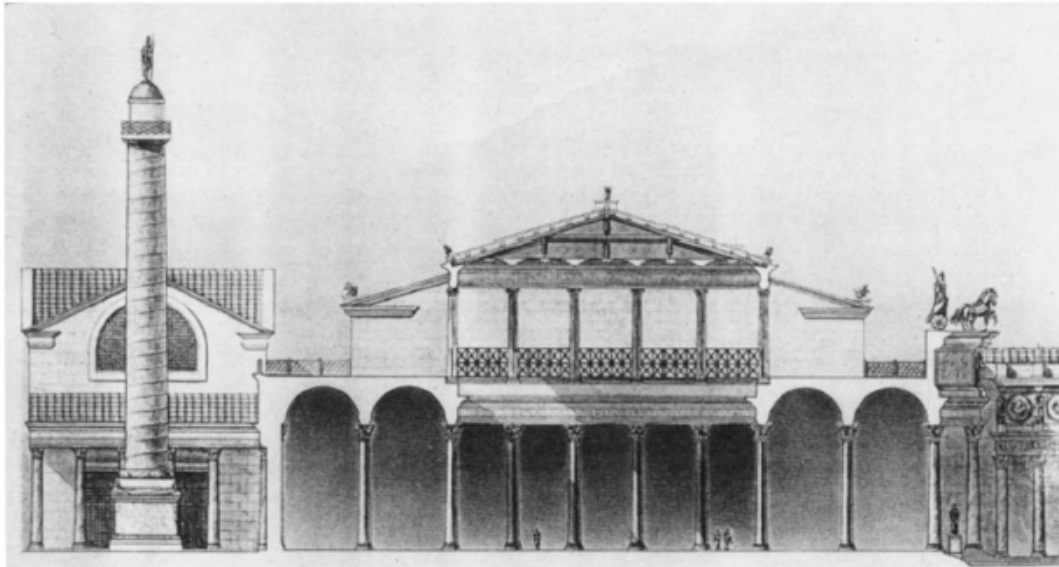


Fig. 5. Trajan's Forum, restored north-south section facing east, showing facade of east colonnade and hemicycle, section through Basilica Ulpia, Trajan's Column, and the east facade of the east library. (Courtesy J.E. Packer)

If one understands the column in the context of the entire forum complex and as the intended resting place for Trajan's ashes, the problems are solved.

The inscription on the south side of the base reads

SENATVS POPVLVSQVE ROMANVS IMP CAESARI DIVI
NERVAE F NERVAE TRAIANO AVG GERM DACICO
PONTIF MAXIMO TRIB POT XVII IMP VI COS VI P P
AD DECLARANDVM QVANTAE ALTITVDINIS MONS ET
LOCVS TANTIS OPERIBVS SIT EGESTVS¹⁰

¹⁰ *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 6.960

The Senate and the People of Rome (have set this up) for the Emperor Caesar Nerva Trajan Augustus Germanicus Dacius, son of the divine Nerva, Tribune for 17 times, Emperor for 6 years, Consul for 6 years, and Father of his Country to show the place and how high the hill was that had to be removed for such great works.

The inscription seems to suggest at first that earth to a depth of forty-five meters, the height of the column, was excavated to build the column. Not only does this seem to be an impossibly large amount of rock and soil to have been excavated even by the resourceful second century Romans, there is also evidence that there were preexisting Julio-Claudian era structures below or at the same level as base of the column¹¹ If, on the other hand, one understands *tantis operibus* to apply to the whole forum complex and even to Trajan's markets cut into the Quirinal the problem is solved. The column is one part of a whole plan to reshape the downward slope of the Quirinal and turn it into a tremendous tribute to the opulence of Roman empire and a final resting place for the emperor (and later the god) who would have made it all possible.

The problem of the uncomfortable angle at which an ancient spectator must have viewed the spiral frieze is likewise resolved by considering the column as a part of the revelation of the entire complex. First the column's narrative might have been viewed from various platforms within the Trajanic structure including the two libraries and the second story of the north side of the Basilica Ulpia which would have permitted closer inspection of the top sections of the frieze. Second, it may not have been the objective of the architect to have the frieze read per se as a narrative of the Dacian wars. Instead the column might have been intended as an interactive funeral monument that invited the viewer to engage in a ritualistic circumambulation of a fallen hero of the empire.

Penelope Davies of the University of Texas has made such an argument

For not only did the narrative's format itself require the viewer to encircle the column, but because the Column stood within a closed courtyard and because its sculpture was executed in relatively shallow relief, he was forced to do in close proximity to the Column....perhaps the idea was....to create a spiral around the column and then to decorate it in such a way as to force the viewer to pursue it... If the Column's design could engage them (citizens) to follow the spiraling narrative, then at one and same time their motion would perpetually honor and protect the ruler's mortal remains.¹²

In her argument, Davies cites various examples of ancient circular tombs in which some kind of scripted circumambulation was part of a ritual honoring the dead. One of these is the tomb of Augustus himself, the emperor whose self-assured control, splendor, and immortality may have been the exemplar at which Trajan was aiming.

¹¹ C.M. Amici, *Foro di Traiano: Basilica Ulpia e Biblioteche* (Rome 1982) 58-61

¹² Penelope J.E. Davies *The Politics of Perpetuation: Trajan's Column and Art of Commemoration* *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 101, No. 1 (Jan. 1997) Page 59

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- Architecto-political objective. Improving on the order of the Flavians. Classicizing of Augustus. Ornament and wealth of a rich and expansive empire.
- Literary sources
- Excavations and reconstructions
-
- Temple of Trajan dedicated by Hadrian in 128
- Stated in the contemporary imperial international mode, Apollodorus plan for the Forum of Trajan was an intelligent blend of oriental, Greek, Italic, and Roman elements that visually expressed Rome's unique position as the capital of the Mediterranean world. Packer page 260.
- Colored marble emphasizes power able to organize the vast human resources that supplied Rome with expensive foreign materials.
- Columns on buildings about the plaza and the bodies of colossal statues of Dacian prisoners on the attic of the BU were of white, purple veined Turkish marble called pavonazzetto.
- Step of golden purple-veined Tunisian marble giallo antico frame for central plaza paved with slabs of white marble
- Giallo antico column of the BU's 3 porches stood out from pavonazzetto colonnade
- Within BU regular alternation of GA and Pav and africano (black Turkish marble)
- .
- Light of plaza filtered into Nave of BU through multiple rows of columns. Apses more brightly lit would have been visible to someone in Nave.
- Apses and hemicycles hidden. Columns hidden, two libraries and temple hidden.
- Imported marbles and gilt bronze statuary signs of imperial prosperity and achievement.
- Compared with busy complex decoration typical of Flavian period, simple, chaste, classical forms of Trajanic ornament provided a link to solid virtues of the forum of Augustus. (happy blend of constitutionality and autocracy that governed efficiently).
-