

Mention the word "forum" in respect to ancient Rome and people will usually think of the famous "Forum Romanum" in the heart of the city. Here stood not only secular buildings such as law courts, but also sacred temples to such divinities as Vesta, Saturn, Castor and Pollux. Here was the famous Senate House, and even the spot where the body of Julius Caesar was cremated. Yet, by the time of Caesar the Forum Romanum was already a crowded area, and the great dictator himself began a new forum (not surprisingly called the "Forum of Caesar") nearby. Augustus, his adopted son, and the first Roman emperor, would finish both the Forum of Caesar and another new forum, named after himself and located just across the road from that of Caesar. Nonetheless, as the city of Rome continued to grow, additional space was needed for both secular and sacred affairs, and so, in the reign of the emperor Marcus Ulpius Traianus, or Trajan (98-117 AD), there was built the largest and grandest of all the Roman fora: the Forum of Trajan. While providing the Roman public with much needed space in which to conduct their affairs, this forum also served another, equally important purpose: proclaiming visually the greatness of Trajan himself.

Built in a depression between the Capitoline and Quirinal hills, the Forum of Trajan (see plan) featured two outstanding monuments: the Basilica Ulpia (named after the emperor's family and used as a law court and money-exchange) and the still standing Column of Trajan, designed to commemorate the emperor's victories against the Dacians of the Danube River region. But there was much more to this forum: it was entered through a grand triple arch [A], adorned with a large bronze chariot group featuring Trajan on top; this passageway provided access to a large (116 by 95 m) paved court [B], in the centre of which stood an equestrian statue of Trajan himself. On the east and west sides of the court were long formal colonnades, each with a large semicircular apse behind it; around the eastern apse there eventually grew the so-called Market of Trajan [C], with over 150 shops and offices to serve the people of Rome (obviously Rome's Eaton Centre).

The structure which dominated the forum, however, was the Basilica Ulpia [D], almost 180 m long and 95 m wide. Built by the famous architect Apollodorus of Damascus, this basilica formed a backdrop to the open court, from which it was entered through elaborate doors. Inside, the basilica was divided by columns into a large central nave with two smaller side aisles on each side. At each end stood a large apse, clearly intended to echo the two apses of the open court to the south. The roof over the central nave was extended upwards to form a clerestory that would allow more light into this massive building. With its marble floor and other lavish interior decoration, this basilica

provided a spectacular setting for the trials and banking activities that went on here. But it also served as a visual expression of the greatness of the Ulpian family itself, just as the old Basilica Julia in the Forum Romanum had immortalized the powerful Julian clan. Unfortunately, all that remains today of Trajan's monument to his family (and to himself, of course) are a few lonely-looking columns, which most tourists just pass by with hardly a passing glance: *sic transit gloria mundi!*

Behind the Basilica Ulpia stood two libraries [E], intended to emphasize the more intellectual qualities of the emperor. There were two because, by this time, the Roman Empire had become very bilingual: thus one library housed works in Greek and the other works in Latin. More important, in terms of imperial propaganda, was the towering monument that stood between these two (now lost) libraries: the ca. 40 m tall, almost perfectly preserved Column of Trajan [F], a structure that had no other purpose than to commemorate and praise the military achievements of Trajan against the Dacians in the East.

Made of 17 hollow marble drums placed atop each other, the Column is a superb example of the Roman art of the historical relief. Having a strong sense of their own place in history, the Romans had always enjoyed commemorating great events in stone relief sculptures, but Trajan's Column took this old art to new heights, both literally and figuratively. A frieze in low relief winds its way around the Column some 23 times; if "unrolled", this frieze would be about 200 m long. Starting from the bottom of the Column, where the personified Danube River appears, the frieze tells the tale of Trajan's exploits in the East, with the emperor himself being depicted more than 50 times. Joining him on the frieze are some 2500 other figures, all of which show us key events of the Dacian Wars: e.g., Trajan exhorting his troops, Roman soldiers building fortifications and making sacrifices to the gods, Roman ships sailing the waters of the Danube, and captured Dacians bowing before their Roman conquerors. The frieze is, in fact, a kind of "visual diary" of the campaigns, and even an illiterate Roman peasant could "get" its message: how great is our emperor Trajan, conqueror of Dacia. Just for added insurance, however, a statue of Trajan himself was placed at the top of the Column. Finally, after the death of Trajan, the emperor Hadrian fittingly had his predecessor's ashes interred in the square base on which the Column stands. Hadrian also made a

physical addition to the Forum of Trajan in the form of a temple dedicated to Trajan and situated behind the great Column [G].

While it is indeed easy to view this massive forum simply as blatant imperial propaganda, we should not close our eyes to its artistry. A look at its plan shows at once the symmetry and balance of this Forum: in fact, one could draw a line right through the centre of the Forum and have mirror images on each side. Circular forms mesh perfectly with linear ones, and the entire complex, with its individual structures differing in size, form and function, nonetheless strikes one as an organic whole. Who said propaganda had to be unimaginative and bland? Certainly not the Roman emperors!