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The Forum Politics in Early Roman Empire

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Abstract: *This article investigates the political dynamics of forum space in the early Roman Empire by employing a power-space analytical framework. Focusing on the transition from the Republic to the Principate, it examines how public architecture, legislative venues, and triumphal rituals were spatially reorganized to support imperial consolidation. By analyzing Caesar and Augustus's manipulation of spatial structures—from the relocation of rostra and construction of imperial fora to the invention of triumphal honors—this paper reveals a complex grammar of visibility and authority. The forum emerged not merely as a civic stage, but as a domain of power contestation, where rituals and spatial design encoded strategies of inclusion, exclusion, and legitimation.*

Keywords: Roman forum, triumph, Saepta Julia, Caesar, Augustus, political space

INTRODUCTION

Modern scholarship increasingly views Roman political space as a performative and ideological construct. Scholars such as Lefebvre (2016) have theorized space as a medium of power, a framework applied by Russell (2015) in her analysis of the Roman Forum as a site of symbolic negotiation and institutional visibility. Within this context, the triumph has emerged as a key object of study. Beard (2007) emphasizes its dual function as both spectacle and political statement, while Lange (2016) highlights its transformation under the Julio-Claudian dynasty into a tool of dynastic legitimization.
Spatial design also played a critical role in the manipulation of electoral and ritual authority. Zanker (1988) and Favro (1996) examine how architectural programs encoded Augustan ideology. Phillips (2011) argues that Augustus's use of the Temple of Divus Iulius reoriented legislative power into a sacral-imperial domain. Archaeological reconstructions by Gorski and Packer (2015) reveal how imperial forums, through layout and visual axis, structured elite competition and centralized

symbolic control.

This literature confirms that Roman forums were not neutral backdrops but strategic instruments. Through controlled access, ritual sequencing, and monumental inscription, forum space was engineered to manage power, embody political memory, and stage imperial authority.. Whether through ritual choreography, monument placement, or procedural redefinition, spatial politics encoded the shifting balance between republican ideals and imperial centralization.

The Displacement of Republican Space

The Roman Forum, nestled between the Palatine and Capitoline Hills, originated around the 8th century BCE as marshland gradually drained for civic use. Its architectural core during the monarchy featured the Temple of Vesta and the Regia (royal residence), laying the groundwork for its later political centrality.In the Republic, the Forum became the spatial anchor of Roman public life. The southeastern Temple of Castor served as a voting station, while the Senate House (Curia) and the Rostra—an attached speaker's platform—framed the space for legislative and rhetorical performance. Citizens ascended the Rostra after voting, enacting visibility and oversight. These spatial features constituted the visual and functional axis of republican politics.

This configuration was disrupted under Julius Caesar. Following the Senate House's destruction in 52 BCE, Caesar rebuilt it and, in 44 BCE, relocated the Rostra to the Forum's western end, transforming it into a freestanding structure. This new Rostra—30 meters long and 3.5 meters high—faced the open plaza rather than the Senate, symbolically detaching popular address from senatorial oversight. Scholars note this architectural shift signaled a rupture with Republican norms, diminishing aristocratic constraint on public speech.[1]

In 29 BCE, Caesar's successor Augustus completed the Curia Julia and constructed the Temple of Divus Julius on the site of Caesar's cremation. By 9 BCE, this temple replaced the Temple of Castor as a voting site. Though adjacent, the new and old stations faced opposite directions, reflecting a new spatial hierarchy. A second speaker's platform, the Rostra Divi Iulii, was built at the temple's front, mirroring the Imperial Rostra across the Forum. These two platforms created a new east–west visual axis,

[1] Amy Russell, *The Politics of Public Space in Republican Rome* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 123–127.

relegating the Senate House to a peripheral northwest corner.

Critically, all key structures—Senate, temples, platforms—now bore Caesar's name. In contrast to the Republic's collective anonymity, where authority was attributed to "the people," the Principate inscribed elite ownership directly onto space. Naming became a form of commemoration and control, aligning architecture with dynastic memory and imperial authority. As Morstein-Marx and Sumi argue, such spatial strategies were not neutral; they redefined the grammar of political legitimacy in imperial Rome. [2]

III. Imperial Spatial Collage

Alongside the Roman Forum, two other civic spaces—Campus Martius and the Comitium—were central to Republican political life. Campus Martius, outside Rome's sacred boundary, housed large-scale facilities such as the racetrack and voting enclosures. The most significant was the Saepta Julia, a grand structure initiated by Caesar and completed in 26 BCE. Though originally a voting venue, it was repurposed under Augustus for gladiatorial games and markets, symbolizing the Republic's ceremonial survival amid democratic decline. Later emperors restored rather than erased it, affirming its commemorative role.

The Comitium, once the semi-enclosed core of senatorial and popular interaction within the Roman Forum, faded as the Rostra was detached and relocated, signaling the spatial dissolution of Republican governance. From the late Republic onward, new imperial forums emerged. Caesar began this trend by building the Forum Iulium beside the old Senate House, complete with a Temple of Venus Genetrix and a mirror-image Rostra. Augustus extended this project with the Forum Augustum and the Temple of Mars Ultor, embedding Rome's heroic and dynastic lineage into colonnades and statuary. Figures from Romulus to Pompey lined one side; Julian ancestors the other—converging symbolically beneath Augustus's own chariot statue, titled "Father of the Nation."

Subsequent emperors such as Vespasian and Trajan continued the pattern, creating architecturally distinctive forums that coexisted without demolishing their predecessors'. This strategy revealed a spatial logic of imperial collage: layering new political identities atop Republican remnants, while allowing multiple elite genealogies to coexist visibly. In this way, early imperial space presented a façade of harmony that

[2] Robert Morstein-Marx, *Mass Oratory and Political Power in the Late Roman Republic* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 232–240; Geoffrey S. Sumi, *Ceremony and Power: Performing Politics in Rome Between Republic and Empire* (University of Michigan Press, 2005), pp. 45–59.

masked dynastic competition, absorbing Republican symbols into a monarchical order.

Monopolizing and Manipulating the Assembly

In the Roman Republic, space functioned as a mechanism to limit absolute power. Legal boundaries prohibited consuls and tribunes from exercising authority beyond the city or leading armies across fixed borders like the Rubicon. Even citizen assemblies were structured to prevent impulsive action: votes were spread over days and distributed across locations such as the Roman Forum and Campus Martius.

These assemblies took three forms: the Centuriate Assembly (comitia centuriata), Tribal Assembly (comitia tributa), and Plebeian Council (concilium plebis). The Centuriate Assembly convened outside the pomerium at Campus Martius, where citizens entered oval-shaped enclosures (saepta) by tribe or century to cast votes—originally by acclamation, later by secret ballot. Tribal and plebeian gatherings met within the Forum and mainly handled Rome-based legislation. Laws followed strict intervals between proposal, debate, and voting, enabling travel and reflection.

Republican procedures thus reflected an ideal of publicness—openness, accessibility, and mutual surveillance. Yet this openness also bred volatility: riots burned down the Senate House; bridges were blocked to hinder opponents; and elite and non-elite actors contested control of public space.

Caesar disrupted this balance. After gaining unilateral appointment power over half the magistracies, he bypassed assemblies through manipulation. He pre-selected candidates and circulated ballots without summoning voters. According to Frei-Stolba, some laws were passed without any formal vote.[3] Lily Ross Taylor observes that Caesar began turning electoral assemblies into legislative rubber stamps.[4]

Augustus retained assembly forms but subtly reshaped their function. He institutionalized a *Consilium*—a legislative advisory body of consuls, senior magistrates, and selected senators—that effectively replaced full Senate deliberations. By the third century CE, this council evolved into the emperor's core governing body.

Augustus also shifted legislative locations. In 9 BCE, a law was passed at the Temple of Divus Julius rather than the traditional Temple of Castor. The law listed the first

[3] Frei-Stolba, cited in Werner Eck, *The Age of Augustus*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 144–145.

[4] Lily Ross Taylor, *Roman Voting Assemblies: From the Hannibalic War to the Dictatorship of Caesar* (University of Michigan Press, 1966), pp. 197–200.

voting citizen but omitted any tribune as sponsor. Under the Republic, tribunes proposed legislation; their absence suggests Augustus's efforts to reduce plebeian influence. Tribunes were reassigned to manage new urban districts alongside aediles. Though the evidence is fragmentary, one thing is clear: the ceremonial backdrop to lawmaking had changed.

As Darryl Phillips notes, Augustus built a legislative system that guaranteed approval, eliminating risks of defeat.[5] Although elite manipulation existed under the Republic, competitive pluralism made domination difficult. Caesar's naked power grab triggered backlash. Augustus, by contrast, masked control with institutional continuity.

In sum, Caesar and Augustus transformed assemblies through monopolization and spatial strategy. By relocating venues, altering personnel, and circumventing traditional norms, they redefined public participation. What once symbolized democratic practice became a stage-managed display of imperial authority.

Spatiotemporal Choreography: Caesar's Triumphs

The Roman triumph, a dazzling and sacred ritual, served as the Republic's most visible celebration of military victory. Rooted in Etruscan customs and formalized in the Republican era, the triumph fused honor, divinity, and political power. This section explores how Caesar used triumphs—particularly those in September 46 BCE—as choreographed performances to glorify himself and legitimize personal rule. In September 46 BCE, Caesar staged four triumphs on the 20th, 22nd, 24th, and 26th, celebrating campaigns in Gaul, Alexandria, Pontus, and Africa. He scheduled them immediately after the Ludi Romani festival (September 5–19), thereby extending public festivity to a climactic finale. On the final day, Caesar consecrated the Temple of Venus Genetrix and hosted a monumental banquet.

This temporal sequencing was deliberate: it transformed religious festivity into a political crescendo. Yet beyond timing, Caesar also curated the visual and symbolic content. The triumphs highlighted foreign victories, but many enemies had once aligned with Pompey, rendering these spectacles veiled celebrations of civil war victories. Notably, Caesar avoided direct references to Pompey but included signs of domestic conquest—such as a placard referencing Cato's suicide.

To obscure civil discord, Caesar staged purely foreign-themed spectacles. Across the Tiber in the Codeta district, he created an artificial lake to reenact a naval battle between

[5] Darryl A. Phillips, "The Temple of Divus Iulius and the Restoration of Legislative Assemblies under Augustus," *Phoenix*, Vol. 65, No. 3/4 (2011): pp. 371–388.

Tyrians and Egyptians—likely fictional—using chained prisoners. At the Circus Maximus, he orchestrated land battles involving 500 infantry, 30 cavalry, and 20 elephants. These simulated combats emphasized Rome's supremacy over external foes, omitting signs of fratricide.

Caesar also drew upon archaic ritual to enhance his legitimacy. Instead of the usual aediles, he formed a special priestly collegium to oversee the temple's dedication—evoking early Roman festivals like Consualia and Equirria. By linking himself to divine Venus, he framed the temple as a second founding of Rome, this time within his personal forum.

The post-triumphal banquet marked the final act in this political performance. Reportedly feeding nearly 200,000 guests, Caesar appeared in festive garb—sandals and garlands—blurring lines between private hospitality and public spectacle. In contrast to traditional triumphs, which concluded with sacrifices or ceremonies, Caesar's event indulged the senses and drew attention to his personal generosity. This privatization of ritual signaled a shift: the Republic's collective celebrations became arenas for imperial display.

In sum, Caesar's triumphs of 46 BCE were not merely celebrations of military success—they were complex spectacles of spatiotemporal control. Through careful staging, he blurred boundaries between public ritual and private ambition, myth and manipulation. Triumph became a political instrument, reconfiguring civic space and memory to elevate Caesar as Rome's new founder.

Rewriting Ritual Standards: Augustus's Triumph Model

In the Republic, Roman triumphs were classified into two types: the full triumph (*triumphus*) and the lesser ovation (*ovatio*). The former honored military conquest; the latter recognized diplomatic success or victories over slaves. Ritual distinctions marked the difference: a full triumph featured a chariot and laurel crown, while an ovation involved a horse or foot procession with a myrtle crown and flute music.

In 29 BCE, Augustus celebrated three full triumphs. But after that, he never held one again. A key moment came in 12 BCE, when his stepson Tiberius was awarded not a triumph but *triumphal honors* (*ornamenta triumphalia*) for victories in Pannonia—retaining triumphal dress without a public parade. This created a new hierarchy: full triumphs at the top, followed by ovations and triumphal honors. Soon, only Julian family members could claim full triumphs; others received lesser forms.This change played out visually. In 11 BCE, Lucius Calpurnius Piso earned triumphal honors for

suppressing a revolt in Thrace. Two years later, Augustus dedicated the *Ara Pacis*. Its friezes show processions of senators and imperial kin. Some scholars argue this may depict Piso's ceremony, visually subordinating non-dynastic elites within imperial celebration.

This strategy had three layers: fading public memory of full triumphs, inserting a new ritual layer for elite inclusion, and inscribing inequality in monumental art. As triumphal honors marginalized rivals, Augustus redefined triumphal ritual as a dynastic privilege.Further refinements appeared in the early first century CE. When Augustus's grandsons died, he summoned Tiberius to campaign in Germania. Upon Tiberius's return in 9 CE, Augustus met him outside the pomerium and escorted him to the *Saepta Julia* for a formal reception. Augustus and Tiberius sat center-stage, flanked by senators. This spatial arrangement emphasized dynastic hierarchy. Holding the event at the *Saepta*—symbol of popular sovereignty—reinforced imperial legitimacy.

In 12 CE, Tiberius finally received a full triumph. Before ascending the Capitoline Hill, he knelt before Augustus. This act of submission underscored succession. His procession included generals who had once qualified for full triumphs but instead received triumphal honors. They walked behind Tiberius's chariot on foot—symbolic endorsements of imperial power. These rituals delivered multiple messages. They rewarded loyal elites without threatening the centrality of the imperial family. Scholar Carsten Lange likens the triumphal structure to a top hat: high in the center, sloped at the sides—unified but hierarchical.

In sum, Augustus restructured triumphal practice to consolidate dynastic power while ceremonially managing elite inclusion. By controlling ritual access and spatial symbolism, he redefined the triumph not as a republican reward but as imperial theater. As Mary Beard observed, "The triumph was about military success and display—successfully displaying and displaying success were equally vital."[6]

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the politics of the forum in the early Roman Empire from the late Republic through the rise of imperial power. Beginning with the transformation of public architecture and the construction of new imperial forums, it analyzed the fading

[6] Mary Beard, *The Roman Triumph* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 21.

of republican space and the consolidation of imperial spatial orders. It then explored changes in forum-based political activity, including shifts in citizen elections, the relocation of voting venues, and the symbolic reengineering of triumphal ceremonies. These developments reveal how Caesar and Augustus strategically manipulated space and ritual to assert control.

From the perspective of power-space, physical spaces regulated behavior, and behaviors in turn reaffirmed the symbolic meaning of those spaces.Regarding the trajectory of power, Caesar and Augustus—two of the most pivotal figures at the Republic-Empire juncture—both achieved the centralization of supreme authority. Their styles diverged: Caesar was overt and theatrical; Augustus was restrained and institutional. These differences are evident in their approaches to citizen assemblies and triumphal spectacle. Nevertheless, four consistent strategies emerge:

First, naming public buildings and spaces to anchor collective memory. In Roman political culture, memory was vital: the most severe punishment was *damnatio memoriae*, erasure from public record. Conversely, inscribing one's name in stone secured political immortality. Second, manipulating citizen assemblies to express political will. From Caesar's ballot engineering to Augustus's redefinition of legislative procedures and spaces, both leaders rewrote the spatial grammar of republican participation. Third, staging public scenes to glorify personal power. Caesar's triumphs, timed and scripted with precision, invoked archaic rituals and constructed a second founding myth centered on himself. Fourth, Augustus redefined ritual standards by inventing *triumphal honors*, regulating elite access to public celebration. He established a monarchical model of triumphs, elevating the imperial family while subordinating others in carefully choreographed spectacles.

These strategies together answer the questions posed at the beginning of this paper: how were the outward forms of republicanism (*the façade*) woven together with the substance of autocracy (*the structure*)? Buildings like the Senate House, voting sites, and *Saepta Julia*—iconic republican spaces—were preserved but renamed after the Julian family. Their public character was hollowed out. Reviving citizen assemblies became Augustus's way of "restoring the Republic," yet through new institutions, revised procedures, and altered locations, he ultimately controlled them. The triumph, though rooted in republican military tradition, was repurposed by Caesar and Augustus into a medium for power consolidation. Through spatial appropriation, spatiotemporal scripting, and controlled access to ceremonial space, they rewrote the relationship between visibility, legitimacy, and authority.

In short, the forum politics of the early Roman Empire constituted a strategic contest over public space: a visible structure of seeing and being seen, enacted through ritualized behavior and procedural choreography, yet always embedded in tactical calculation. The forum, as a spatial resource, became the object of political struggle and the medium of imperial sovereignty.

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