

Architectural decoration

Research aims and introduction

This doctoral thesis will study the architectural decoration of the forum of Ostia on the basis of marble fragments (re)excavated by the Ostia Forum Project. The main aims of the study will be 1) to create a comprehensive overview of the identifiable marble material collected by the project between 2010-2019 including material from the planned campaigns for 2020/21, 2) to attempt to create a holistic reconstruction of the marble decoration of the forum from the earliest to the latest possible phase on the basis of the analyzed marble fragments, and 3) to contextualize architectural and stylistic elements of the Forum of Ostia with the wider Roman World.

The ancient city of Ostia is a unique and important archaeological site in a variety of ways, but mainly due to two factors: 1) it served as Rome's main harbor alongside Portus throughout Antiquity and 2) it is one of the most well preserved examples of an ancient Roman city. As was the case with most ancient cities, the size and appearance of Ostia changed greatly throughout its existence. This was also the case for the forum of the city, which underwent many alterations over time – from being little more than an intersection of the two main roads in the center of the city in the Republican period to becoming a proper standardized forum in the reign of emperor Hadrian. As in Rome itself, marble became a major feature of the urban environment of Ostia and its forum in the imperial period. In addition, Ostia likewise had easy access to many different types of marble, due to the vast majority of the marble destined for Rome, a major consumer of the prestigious material, went through Ostia before being transported up the Tiber.

The largescale excavations of the 19th and 20th centuries uncovered the majority of the ancient city along with its many marble elements, but often documented little. The extensive study of Patrizio Pensabene on the Ostian marble scattered around the excavated areas of the city has provided us with a great deal of knowledge into the use and distribution of the material in Ostia. The excavations conducted by the Ostia Forum Project over the last decade has provided us with huge amounts of marble. A major percentage of this material was found compiled in large Late Antique marble depots located in rooms in connection to or next to the forum. These depots of marble were likely intended for either reuse in new building projects or lime production. A large part of the diagnostic fragments from these depots originates from the buildings around the forum, such as the Temple of Roma and Augustus and the Flavian Basilica – to which other known fragments mentioned by Pensabene are also credited. However, even though many fragments can be attributed to specific buildings, a study of the architectural decorations in a larger forum-wide context has yet to be done.

Method and theory

The first stage of the study will be to get an overview of the hitherto collected fragments of architectural marble from the forum, which consists of roughly 12000 fragments. However, only around a 1000 of these fragments are of specific interest due to their identifiable features such as decoration. Therefore, the aim will be to create a database of these identifiable fragments, from which to draw stylistic comparisons and to propose ideas of their original context and appearance.

This database will contain basic as well as interpretive information on each selected fragment such as the dimensions of the fragment, marble type, the nature of the fragment (column base, architrave, profile ect.), as well as dating. Additional documentation of each fragment such as photos, drawings and 3-D images would also be attached in the catalogue entry – the latter being of particular interest. The method of generating highly detailed 3-D point cloud models of individual fragments – already a standard documenting tool within the Project – adds a very useful perspective on the fragments, which can help to virtually reconstruct the fragments in their original context. A successful application of this method can be seen in the convincing attribution of several marble fragments to the Temple of Roma and Augustus, which has made possible the reconstruction of the temple pediment as well as parts of the interior decoration of the temple. The continued application of 3-D models will therefore be a vital part of this study.

The creation of an all-encompassing database of the identifiable architectural marble fragments from the forum will likely make it easier to propose a more comprehensive reconstruction the architectural decoration of the square. For instance, it would be likely be possible to create reconstruction proposals of the individual forum buildings in the same vein as the model of the front of the Temple of Roma and Augustus made previously by the Project. These 2-D reconstructions can tell us a lot about appearance of the building, but they do, however, reveal little about how the forum space and its architecture was experienced by the ancient inhabitants/visitors of the city. As already stated by Alex Gering, it is impossible for us to know exactly what the individual visitor to the forum thought when they walked around the square, but we can with the aid of an interactive 3-D model of the forum, incorporating the results of this thesis, get an idea of how it was perceived from a visual perspective. Ideally, such a reconstruction would be able to show the different chronological phases of the forum in order to highlight the individual building programs, including the architectural decorations. Particularly interesting would be the Augustan phase of the forum, since the site radically changed in layout at this period and would additionally present a prominent example of the emperor's new style of imagery, already exemplified in the pediment of the Temple of Roma and Augustus.