

Maxentian Innovations at the Temple of Venus and Roma

Item Type	Thesis
Authors	Cazzato, Antonio
Citation	Cazzato, Antonio. "Maxentian Innovations at the Temple of Venus and Roma". Master's Thesis, John Cabot University, Rome, Italy. 2024.
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Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14490/114

Maxentian Innovations at the Temple of Venus and Roma

by

Antonio Cazzato

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Art History

John Cabot University

(Rome, Italy)

[Semester and Year of Graduation]

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Maxentian Innovations at the Temple of Venus and Roma

here submitted by Antonio Cazzato in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of ___Masters of Arts _____
in _____Art History _____

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the architectural and material innovations carried out during the restoration of the Temple of Venus and Roma and how they might represent the political program of the Emperor Maxentius. By tracing the cult of Roma, from its beginnings in the Greek provinces of the Roman Republic to its solidification in the capital during the High Empire, this work highlights the significance of the Late Antique reconstruction of the Temple of Venus and Roma. Maxentius carried out several public works, but none of them were as deeply rooted in the identity of the city as the Temple of Venus and Roma, which had existed as a monument to Rome's foundations since its inauguration in the early second century CE. Maxentius used the symbolic power of the temple to represent his authority as emperor. The source of Maxentius' legitimacy was rooted in his imperial seat at the capital. In the fourth century, when Rome had long been abandoned as an imperial seat, an emperor ruling from Rome was a welcome return to tradition for the city.

Through the recognition of architectural patterns of other temples in the Imperial Fora, clear influences are present in the reconstructed temple which signal the political motivations of Maxentius. Maxentius refashioned the Temple of Venus and Roma to more closely resemble the apsidal temples of previous well-remembered emperors, and decorated the interior to signal his authority. Through the use of red porphyry, a stone which was a symbol of the emperor's authority, Maxentius transformed the cellae of the new temple into a decidedly imperial space. From this analysis it can be posited that the interventions in the temple by Maxentius were meant to buttress his position as legitimate ruler by aligning himself with previous emperors and establishing physical ties to the city of Rome.

Lay Summary

This paper analyses the reconstruction of the Temple of Venus and Roma in the fourth century CE as it relates to the political program of Emperor Maxentius. The Temple strays far from the original design, and it is these specific changes in architecture, materials and decorative scheme that will be interrogated in the pursuit of a better understanding of Maxentius's motivations.

For Ornella Bonamassa

Acknowledgements

This work is informed by research conducted at John Cabot University and the American Academy of Rome. This would not have been possible without access to the Arthur and Janet C. Ross Library at the American Academy of Rome or without the guidance of my advisors, Dr Lila Yawn and Dr Laura Foster. I would like to extend special thanks to my family, who have supported my endeavors here in Rome and to the supportive community which makes up the MA in Art History program at John Cabot University.

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Introduction

In AD 306, Constantius, Augustus of Britain, Gaul and the Western territories of the Roman Empire died at York, passing on the purple to his son Constantine, his rightful heir.¹ Maxentius, the son of the abdicated Maximian Herculus, heard this news and in a jealous rage, conspired to have the Praetorian Guard at Rome elevate him to the status of Emperor of his fathers former territories in Italy and North Africa.² Constantine, in a righteous crusade, reconstituted the fractured Empire, during the course of which he freed Rome of the tyranny of Maxentius, culminating in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.³ Maxentius the Usurper was there defeated and the people of Rome rejoiced that their suffering was at an end.⁴ This is the story which the ancient authors Lactantius, Eutropius, Eusebius and Zosimus would have us believe.

The histories these authors wrote are in fact much of what current scholarship relies upon concerning these events of Late Antiquity, but they are indeed rather dubious accounts which were either written by Christian scholars motivated by Constantine's legacy as the first Christian emperor, or by pagan authors decades, and in some cases centuries after the events took place. While these accounts can be used as references for approximate dates or the loose sequence of major events, they cannot, however, be reliably cited in the characterization or political programs of the historical actors involved. Instead, a responsible analysis must reject these narratives and rely upon the physical evidence which remains. Luckily, Maxentius left behind a great deal of physical evidence in the form of his expansive building program. While all ancient sources seem to indicate that Maxentius was a poor leader of weak morals according to both Christian and pagan sources, this is contrasted by the physical evidence, which points toward him as a champion of public works and proponent of the Roman people

¹ *The Works of Lactantius*, vol II, trans. William Fletcher (Edinburgh : T. & T. Clark, 1871), 180; Eutropius, *Abridgement of Roman History*. 10.1.

² Zosimus *New History: A Translation with Commentary* by Ronald T. Ridley. 29.

³ Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, Cameron and Hall, 84-85.

⁴ Zosimus. 31.

during a period where their importance to the Empire began to lose significance. While it might be expected that Christian scholars/ historians would have downplayed Maxentius' merits in order to bolster the myth of Constantine as the first Christian Emperor, it would appear that these histories bled into that of pagan scholarship which echoed much of this rhetoric.

The fire of 306 was the catalyst for Maxentius's construction of what Francesco Fiore aptly named, "the Forum of Maxentius."⁵ The fire destroyed the area which would later be home to the Basilica of Maxentius which had previously been a market and storehouse for spices known as the *Horrea Piperataria* and destroyed the interior of the Temple of Venus and Roma.⁶ While the exterior of the temple was not harmed and would maintain its original appearance, the interior changed drastically during its renovation under Maxentius. The major differences were the shift from a flat wooden ceiling to a barrel-vaulted concrete ceiling and superstructure, the deletion of the aisles in favor of framed niches and the cella being divided into two separate spaces by the new double-apse wall in the center.⁷ In addition to these architectural innovations which opened the space to the spectator, the decorative scheme was also affected. Porphyry columns, pavement, and wall decoration were made the central theme. The cult statues themselves, it seems, were not spared this new porphyry treatment, which can be discerned from a singular fragment of the goddess Roma's lower back carved in the stone.⁸ The question stands: what can we posit about the political program of Maxentius through his reconstruction of the Temple of Venus and Roma?

To understand these major shifts in architecture and decoration of the temple, one need only look to the other temples which lie in the adjacent Fori Imperiali, keeping in mind

⁵ Mats Cullhed, "Conservator Urbis Suae : Studies in the Politics and Propaganda of the Emperor Maxentius," 50.

⁶ Filippo Coarelli, *Rome and Environs: An Archaeological Guide*. 95.

⁷ Machado, Carlos. "Public Monuments and Civic Life: The End of the Statue Habit in Italy." 113.

⁸ Vermuele, Cornelius C. *The Goddess Roma in the Art of the Roman Empire*. 43

the specific issues faced by Maxentius. Maxentius was for all intents and purposes, a usurper, having taken power without the authorization or approval of the recognized system of government, the Tetrarchy, with Galerius the senior Augustus.⁹ This created a need for Maxentius to present himself as a legitimate ruler, a dilemma which was certainly not a new phenomenon in Rome. The most highly regarded and well known rulers of Rome to deal with this situation were Caesar and Augustus, whose respective legacies were transmitted in large part through the massive fora they left behind. After defeating Pompey, Caesar dedicated his forum to *Venus Genetrix*, or Venus the universal mother, as Caesar claimed descentance, through Aeneas, to her. Essentially, Caesar was inferring that as the direct descendant of Venus and the founder of Rome, he was the rightful leader.¹⁰ This theme was again repeated in the forum of Augustus, which was pledged after the defeat of Brutus and Cassius and meant to underline the importance of his avenging Caesar's assassins, the achievement which supposedly legitimated his rule. In addition, the hemicycles in the forum of Augustus contain statuary alluding to his connection to the Julian line, through which he was connected to Aeneas and Venus.¹¹ While these fora were intended to perform their civic function, through their dedications and decorative schemes, they had a secondary function as reminders of the accomplishments and legitimacy of rule of their respective dedicators.

The Temple of Venus Genetrix was rebuilt during the reign of Trajan as a part of the construction of the Forum of Trajan and was faithfully restored along with the Curia under Diocletian, as it was this version which existed during the reign of Maxentius, this is the one which will be discussed. The exterior of the temple followed closely the design of the Temple of Castor and Pollux, however the interior of the Temple of Venus Genetrix took the shape of an apsidal hall with framed niches that housed cycles of statuary on either side of the cella,

⁹ Corcoran, Simon. *The Empire of the Tetrarchs: Imperial Pronouncements and Government*. 6.

¹⁰ John w. Stamper, *The Architecture of Roman Temples*, 92-93.

¹¹ Stamper, 138.

terminating in an apse, which housed the cult statue. This was one of the earliest if not the first temple in Rome to follow the apsidal hall model and would become the norm following its construction.¹² This same overall shape can be observed in the Imperial Forum in the temple of Mars Ultor, the Temple of Minerva, and the temple of the deified Trajan.¹³ Where the apsidal temple model was conspicuously not present in the Forum was the Temple of Venus and Roma.

The original Hadrianic design took inspiration from Greek temples which the emperor had observed in his time in the provinces. The temple of Olympian Zeus in Athens was of particular interest to the Emperor, which he had restored and completed according to its original design. As such, the temple of Venus and Roma, which was vowed shortly after his return to Rome from Greece in 125 CE, took on a decidedly Greek appearance inside and out.¹⁴ The dual temple was originally partitioned in the center by a flat wall flanked by aisles, meaning worshippers could ambulate between the two sections of the temple, a function which would no longer be possible following the Maxentian redesign.¹⁵ So why this drastic change in style, color and overall appearance within the temple?

Large scale restorations of the forum had been undertaken by the Tetrarchs preceding Maxentius's accession to power, but they were for the most part faithful restorations of the original structures rather than wholesale remodels.¹⁶ As discussed earlier, Maxentius had very specific issues to deal with regarding his appearance as a legitimate ruler rather than an usurper. By the early fourth century, the Forum had become a crowded cityscape and Maxentius did not have the luxury of constructing a forum of his own, rather the fire of 307 granted him the unique opportunity to co-opt his own forum through restoring and reshaping

¹² Coarelli, 58.

¹³ Amanda Claridge, *Rome: An Archaeological Guide*, 165, 160.

¹⁴ Mary Boatwright, *Hadrian and the City of Rome*, 121.

¹⁵ Claridge, 120.

¹⁶ Emanuel Mayer "The Architecture of Tetrarchy," in *A Companion to Roman Architecture*, ed. Roger B. Ulrich and Caroline K. Quenemoen (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2014), 124.

the Temple of Venus and Roma, complete with the new construction of its accompanying aptly named Basilica of Maxentius.

The destruction of the Temple of Venus and Roma was a convenient catastrophe for emperor Maxentius, as it happened to house the goddess which served as a symbol for the city which had put him in power. The temple burning and then swiftly being restored to a greater and more lavish degree than ever before must have served as a powerful symbol for the state of affairs in the capital during the early fourth century. The Tetrarchs had abandoned the capital as an imperial seat in favor of border cities in part as a measure to prevent any one Tetrarch from appearing as more powerful than another.¹⁷ Were one tetrarch to be seated in Rome while the others remained in the provinces, he might appear to be the “true” emperor. Ironically, it was precisely these optics which Maxentius would come to effectively exploit. This abandonment of Rome by the Tetrarchs generated an atmosphere of resentment among the populace who had become accustomed to the favoritism and privileges granted to them, including meat rations and tax exemption. These luxuries were rescinded by Galerius and the tetrarchs to the outrage of the city dwellers.¹⁸ It was this outrage which Maxentius was able to wield to bring himself to power, he declared himself not emperor, but *princeps*, a “throwback” to the age of the early Emperors and as such, restored the privileges granted to the people of Rome and began a widespread building program which included a grand restoration of the very symbol of the city, the Temple of Venus and Roma.

In this restoration, Maxentius seems to have drawn on the temples of the Imperial Fora. There was a distinct choice made to shift away from the Greco-style temple of Hadrian’s design and toward the distinctly Roman apsidal hall, a callback to the well-remembered Emperors of a bygone age. This fits in well with the core message of Maxentius’s political program: “the dawn of a new Roman age with the capital once again at

¹⁷ Cullhed, 65.

¹⁸ Noel Lenski. *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, 44.

the core.”¹⁹ Through the restoration and reformation of the Temple of Venus and Roma, Maxentius inaugurated the site, naming the Goddess Roma his *auctrix imperii*, the title typically reserved for the previous Emperor now bestowed upon the symbol for the city of Rome, his claim to legitimacy.²⁰ Just as Caesar and Augustus signaled their connections to Venus and Domitian to Minerva, Maxentius did so to Roma.²¹ The case of Maxentius differs from these previous emperors, however, in that while his predecessors had claimed literal descentance from their respective deities, his connection to the Goddess Roma acted as metaphor. He did not appear to claim literal descentance from this deity, rather, she served to represent the citizens who had put him in power. In practice, however, Maxentius’s claims to legitimacy through Roma served the same functions employed by the emperors of old.

It was only natural that the temple itself would be decorated in such a manner that it would further push Maxentius’s political message of imperial legitimacy. The interior of the Temple of Venus and Roma was, as stated before, clad in red porphyry, a type of granite which derived from Mons Porphyrites in Egypt and was, despite its name, a deep burgundy to purple in color. The associations between the color purple and authority and opulence trace back in Roman history as far as the kingdom period, due to the purple dye procured from mollusks.²² The dye was highly labor intensive to procure and transport from its source in North Africa but was one of the few permanent dyes available in the ancient world, making it extremely desirable and prohibitively expensive for most people. Porphyry, first introduced to Rome under Emperor Claudius, did not come into popular use by the Romans until the reign of Hadrian, but it did not reach its habitual use in the portrayal of Imperial statuary until the reign of Diocletian and the tetrarchy.²³ This fondness for the purple stone by the tetrarchs

¹⁹ Marlowe, Elizabeth. “Liberator Urbis Suae: Constantine and the Ghost of Maxentius,” 206.

²⁰ Cullhed, 65.

²¹ Stamper, 168.

²² Barry, Fabio. *Painting in Stone: Architecture and the Poetics of Marble from Antiquity to the Enlightenment*, 78.

²³ Reinhold, Meyer. “History of Purple as a Status Symbol in Antiquity,” 59.

can be seen in their effigy in Venice. By the time of Maxentius's accession to power, the use of porphyry was deeply coded with imperial authority. The saturated use of the stone within the cella of the Temple of Venus and Roma suggests that the worshiper who entered was meant to make a connection between the decorative scheme and the authority of the emperor, perhaps revealing Maxentius's insecurities as the disputed and untried emperor.

Chapter 1: Hadrian's Temple and Maxentius' Rise to Power

The Original Temple of Venus and Roma: Roma Arrives in Rome

In order to best understand how the restoration of the Temple of Venus and Roma carried out under Maxentius might shed light on his political program, the worship of Roma within the city must first be covered. The Temple of Venus and Roma has always existed as an anomaly of architecture as well as an outlier concerning its religious role in the city. As Mary Boatwright covers in length in her monograph of his building program, the Temple was constructed under Emperor Hadrian, beginning in the 120s AD, though the exact date is disputed, and apart from being the largest temple ever constructed in the city, it was also dedicated in part to a deity which had never been worshiped in the city proper.²⁴

Roma, though one might assume that she was a Roman invention, was actually a creation of the Greeks, who hoped to devise a way of paying tribute to the Romans in exchange for military assistance.²⁵ Ronald Mellor produced perhaps the most exhaustive piece of literature concerning the cult of Roma as it pertains to Greece. Mellor noted that one of the earliest extant examples of this Greek worship of Roma comes from Smyrna, where in 195 BCE a temple of Roma was erected as a political ploy in order to secure Roman military aid in the Smyrnaen struggle against Antiochus III.²⁶ Her cult in the provinces might in this way be compared to emperor worship as a show of allegiance.²⁷ The transferal of her cult from the provinces to the capital is indeed a strange occurrence if analyzed in this light. What

²⁴ Mary Boatwright, *Hadrian and the City of Rome* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 129; Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome, vol 1* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 160; Ronald Mellor, *Thea Romē: The Worship of the Goddess Roma in the Greek World* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 13-15.

²⁵ Boatwright, *Hadrian and the City of Rome*, 131.

²⁶ Mellor, 16-22; Beard et al. 159.

²⁷ Kenneth Scott, "The Elder and Younger Pliny on Emperor Worship," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 63 (1932): 156-65.

purpose would the veneration of a personification of the capital serve within said capital? The answer lies within Hadrian's political program.

While scholarship has historically characterized Hadrian as a "naive lover of all things Greek," Stephanus Mols mentions that he recognizes a shift in scholarly attitudes away from this model in favor of his reign having been centered on the strengthening of the empire by fostering a united Roman identity.²⁸ The emperor carried this out through a widespread building program in the provinces as well as in the capital, of which the construction of the Temple of Venus and Roma was part.²⁹ The choice to dedicate the temple to Venus had multiple motivations and effects. The site of the temple was previously the location of a temple of Venus dating to the 3rd century BCE before it was destroyed in the fire of 64 CE, which had paved the way for Nero's Domus Aurea.³⁰ In effect, Hadrian was showing his *pietas* by honoring the site, while also righting the wrongs of a previous "bad" emperor. Simultaneously, the choice of Venus drew on connections to Rome's beginnings, as Venus was the mother of Aeneas, the mythological ancestor of Romulus, the founder of the city.³¹

The previously mentioned characterization of Hadrian as a lover of all things Greek, was not without foundation: he spent most of his reign in the provinces, Greece and Egypt in particular, and it seems that his time in Greece had a lasting effect.³² Lillian Joyce suggests that this new focus on the goddess Roma within the capital was an attempt to forge the same type of connection between Athens and Athena, which Hadrian had observed during his time

²⁸ Stephanus T.A.M. Mols, "The Cult of Roma Aeterna in Hadrian's Politics," in *The Representation and Perception of Roman Imperial Power: Proceedings of the Third Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire (Roman Empire, c. 200 B.C. - A.D. 476), Rome, March 20-23, 2002* (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 2003), 458.

²⁹ Boatwright, 119.

³⁰ Gregory P. Warden, "The Domus Aurea Reconsidered," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 40, no. 4 (1981), 275.

³¹ John W. Stamper, *The Architecture of Roman Temples: The Republic to the Middle Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 138.

³² Mary Boatwright, *Hadrian and the City of Rome* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 131.

in Greece.³³ Cassius Dio claimed in his *Historia Romana* that Hadrian himself served as architect for the Temple of Venus and Roma, which was an eclectic mix of Greek and Roman temple architecture. Note that Dio does not cite his sources and was born between CE 155 and 165. Therefore, he could not have been present for these events, making him a dubious witness.³⁴ The temple sat upon an immense podium 145 meters (about 475.72 ft) long and 100 meters (about 328.08 ft) wide, covering an area of 1.5 hectares, which, if Dio is to be trusted, Apollodorus of Damascus reportedly deemed insufficient for a temple of its size.³⁵ The cella was split into two and separated by a flat, central transept wall, which the cult statues were placed against, back-to-back and these separate cellae could be traveled between via the aisles (Fig. 1). This division of the cella, lacks precedent both in Greece, as well as Rome and can be considered a novel implementation. On the other hand, the exterior is highly reminiscent of Greek temples. For instance, the peristyle, flanked by two rows of twenty Corinthian columns on the long sides and ten on the short sides, could be accessed in all four directions via seven steps, uncommon for Roman temples, as was the distinct lack of Roman concrete, or *opus caementicium*, in favor of a peperino tufa superstructure.³⁶ Therefore, Hadrian's Temple of Venus and Roma may be characterized not simply as an imitation of Greek architecture to suit his own tastes, but perhaps as an attempt to co-opt Greek models to foster the sense of united Roman identity which was central to his political program.

Apart from the symbolic allusions in the architecture and dedications of the temple of Venus and Roma, there were also ceremonial elements which would cement the concept of a

³³ Lillian Joyce, "Roma and the Virtuous Breast," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 59/60 (2014):16.

³⁴ Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, vol. 9, trans. Ernest Cary (London: William Heinemann, 1923), vii.

³⁵ For measurements in meters and area in hectares, see Coarelli, 98 and Claridge, 120. For commentary by Apollodorus of Damascus, see Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, (69.4.4), vol. 9, trans. Ernest Cary (London: William Heinemann, 1923) 433.

³⁶ Mols, "The Cult of Roma Aeterna in Hadrian's Politics," 461; Coarelli, 99; Claridge, 119; Boatwright, 120.

unified identity in the traditions of the Romans. When the temple was vowed in 121 CE, it became the site where the ceremony of Parilia would from then on be celebrated, which further attests to Hadrian's attempt to foster a united sense of Roman identity with the new temple at its core.³⁷ It was also from this point on that the holiday shed its pastoral associations and formally became the *Natalis Urbis*, or the birthday of the city, further embedding the temple itself into Roman tradition.³⁸ Hadrian was not merely dedicating a temple to a deity, but forging a new spiritual and cultural core of the city, which focused on Rome's foundation. Furthermore, officially dedicating the site to the celebration of Parilia ensured a cultural continuity which would extend past the emperor's reign.

Rome in The Age of the Tetrarchy

Emperor Maxentius ruled from CE 306- 312, two hundred years after the reign of Hadrian. To understand the relationship between the Temple of Venus and Roma and the capital in late antiquity, it is necessary to acknowledge the state of Rome at the time. Noel Lenski characterized the late antique city as having been abandoned as an imperial seat by Diocletian's tetrarchy and though Rome remained the official capital until 330, its role had become largely ceremonial.³⁹ Late antique scholars generally hold the position that Rome was losing its importance within the Empire during the late third and early fourth century.⁴⁰ Simon Corcoran makes particular note that Diocletian only visited the capital once for his *vicennalia*, or celebration of his twentieth year of rule, illustrating that Rome maintained

³⁷ Mols, "Cult of Roma," 462; Elizabeth Marlowe, "Liberator Urbis Suae" 201; Boatwright, 121.

³⁸ Boatwright, 133.

³⁹ Noel Lenski, *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, (Cambridge University Press, 2006),44; Mats Cullhed. *Conservator urbis suae : Studies in the Politics and Propaganda of the Emperor Maxentius*. (Stockholm : Distributor P. Åström, 1994),65.

⁴⁰ C.E.V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini*, 97.

symbolic and ceremonial importance while lacking a significant administrative position.⁴¹ By this time, the *imperium* no longer relied on election by the senate, but on the strength of the army.⁴² Rome in the fourth century was home to an impotent senate and a Praetorian guard, which had been reduced to a fraction of its former body; in contrast, the citizens of the capital still managed to receive unparalleled privileges.⁴³ Citizens of the capital received food rations, total tax exemption, as well as state sponsored games and entertainment.⁴⁴ The decision to eliminate Rome as an imperial seat was likely motivated by the new organization of leadership under the Tetrarchy.

Essentially, the territories of the Roman empire were administered by two Augusti and their respective caesars, for a total of four emperors.⁴⁵ To prevent the appearance of any one emperor being the sole ruler, Rome could no longer be an imperial seat since he who ruled from Rome would appear to be of higher status than the others.⁴⁶ Instead, the tetrarchs were seated at Milan, Trier, Nicomedia and Thessalonica.⁴⁷ The imperial seats needed to be near the borders in case of civil war, reflecting the tenuous nature of the empire during the late third century.⁴⁸ The optics of an Emperor ruling from an imperial seat at Rome was precisely what Maxentius capitalized on. Once threatened, the tax privileges which the Roman city dwellers relied upon became the fuel of dissent. Emperor Galerius, possibly

⁴¹ Simon Corcoran, *The Empire of the Tetrarchs: Imperial Pronouncements and Government*, (Clarendon Press Oxford. 1996), 6; Nixon and Rodgers, *Later Roman Emperors*, 97.

⁴² Roger Rees, "Images and Image: A Re-Examination of Tetrarchic Iconography," in *Greece & Rome* 40, no. 2 (1993).

⁴³ Lenski, *Age of Constantine*, 62.

⁴⁴ John R. Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital : Rome in the Fourth Century*, 52; Corcoran. *The Empire of the Tetrarchs*, 6; Lenski, 44.

⁴⁵ Corcoran, *Empire of the Tetrarchs*, 5.

⁴⁶ Cullhed, 65.

⁴⁷ Lynne C. Lancaster, *Concrete Vaulted Construction in Imperial Rome: Innovations in Context*, (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2005), 176.

⁴⁸ Jill Harries, *Imperial Rome AD 284 to 363 : The New Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 40; Elizabeth Marlowe "Framing the Sun: The Arch of Constantine and the Roman Cityscape," *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 2 (Jun., 2006), 225; Nixon and Rodgers. *Later Roman Emperors*, 97.

seeking greater state income, proposed ending the tax exemption granted to the capital.⁴⁹ The threat of taxation, coupled with a general sense of abandonment of the capital, would have been a powerful motivation for the capital to support a new regime, especially one which promised to make these issues disappear.

As Elizabeth Marlowe makes note of, the sentiment felt in the capital of being abandoned by the emperor is best exemplified by a panegyric,⁵⁰ in which orator Mamertinus openly laments the emperor's absence in Rome for Parilia in 289:

O Emperor, how much more majestic would that city [Rome] now be, how much better would she celebrate this her birthday, if she were viewing you, surrounded by your Senate, on that famous citadel of Jupiter Capitolinus.⁵¹

This rising discontent in the capital would have been seen first-hand by Maxentius, who was living on his estate outside of Rome. Furthermore, as a member of the senate, he would have been tuned into the issues facing the city.⁵² As the son of the retired emperor Maximian, Maxentius was in an opportune position to take control of Rome in a manner which would have every appearance of legitimacy, though it was indeed an act of insurrection against the established tetrarchic government.⁵³ The son of an emperor ruling from Rome, supported by the senate and Praetorian guard, would have represented a return to normalcy for the capital not seen there since before the reign of Diocletian.⁵⁴ During Maxentius' brief six-year reign, he managed to accomplish much within the city, including a vast building program which

⁴⁹ The Works of Lactantius, trans. William Fletcher, vol II (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), 180; Lenski, 62; Cullhed, 18-19.

⁵⁰ Marlowe, *Ghost of Maxentius*, 200.

⁵¹ *Panegyrici Latini* 10.13.4, trans. C.E.V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 74.

⁵² Curran, 51.

⁵³ Harries, *Four Lords*, 41.

⁵⁴ Lenski, 44.

featured the construction of the Basilica of Maxentius as well as the restoration of the Temple of Venus and Roma, which this paper centers on.⁵⁵

Mats Cullhed notes that Maxentius initially claimed the title of *princeps* rather than Caesar or Augustus, in what appears to be an attempt to make for himself a new title which did not directly interfere with the established tetrarchic system.⁵⁶ The Tetrarchy was, by definition, ruled by two augusti and two caesars. Therefore, to usurp either of these titles would negate the system. Sven Betjes and Sam Heijnen dispute Cullhed's theory and instead suggest it is far more likely that this title of princeps was simply a part of Maxentius' conservative political program, which centered on elevating the importance of the capital through references to Rome's origins. The title of *princeps* would have drawn immediate connections to the reign of Augustus, who demanded to not be venerated as a god, but simply as the *princeps civitatis*, or "first citizen."⁵⁷ Adopting the title of *princeps*, coupled with the senate and praetorian guard at his side, Maxentius would have conjured a compelling image to the capital: the political situation in the city was returning to the golden age. Indeed, Maxentius had effectively manifested the fantasy that Mamertinus described in CE 289: The capital city looking upon the emperor surrounded by the senate.

⁵⁵ Alfred Frazer, "The Iconography of the Emperor Maxentius' Buildings in Via Appia," *The Art Bulletin* 48, no. 3/4 (1966), 385.

⁵⁶ Cullhed, 34.

⁵⁷ Sven Betjes, Sam Heijnen, "The Usurping Princeps", *Journal of Ancient History and Archeology*, (2018), 10.

Chapter 2: The Political Program of Maxentius

Maxentius' political presence in Rome, and his motivations to become emperor can perhaps be explained by his early life. The Tetrarchy was a novel system of government, in which the Augusti stepped down rather than maintain power until their deaths. In addition, the selection of successors was based on the candidate's accomplishments, not family dynasty. We can see evidence that this innovative system was unexpected and greatly contested not only by the usurpations by both Maxentius and Constantine, but also in Maximian's protest against abdication.⁵⁸ While Constantine and Maxentius would outright disobey the Tetrarchy and impose their respective rule, Maximian reluctantly accepted his fate as a retired emperor.⁵⁹ Perhaps bearing witness to the humiliation of his father was an added motivation for Maxentius's usurpation of the purple.

Very little is known about Maxentius before his reign, but ancient sources indicate that he lived his early years under the pretense that he would succeed his father, Maximian Herculeus, as emperor. As John Curran points out, the very first reference to Maxentius comes from a 289 panegyric for his father, Maximian, in which he is explicitly referred to as a fitting successor:⁶⁰

Surely the day will soon dawn when Rome sees you victorious, and alert at your right hand, your son, born with every endowment of talent for the most glorious arts, whom some lucky teacher awaits. It will be no great labor for him to encourage in this divine and immortal scion a yearning for glory.⁶¹

While this reference might simply be attributed to the panegyrist's ignorance of the inner workings of the new system of government, it is also possible that the decision to make

⁵⁸ Harries, 41; Corcoran, 6; Lenski, 60; Curran, 51.

⁵⁹ Martjin Icks, "Three Usurpers in Rome: The Urbs Aeterna in the Representation of Maxentius, Nepotian, and Priscus Attalus," in *Studies in Late Antiquity*, (2020): 8; Lenski, 62; Cullhed, 67.

⁶⁰ Curran, 50.

⁶¹ *Panegyrici Latini* 10.14.1, trans. Nixon and Rodgers, 75.

tetrarchic accession non-dynastic had not been made yet. While the Panegyrist may not relay accurate information, he does reflect the atmosphere of the time. He reveals that during the late third century, it was assumed that the son of an Emperor would succeed him, and this was the world which Maxentius grew up in.

In 306 CE Maxentius was living just outside Rome on an estate while also serving on the senate, and it was this close tie to the Senate which placed Maxentius in an opportune position to take power, but also one which would define his rule. Maxentius had serious obstacles to overcome as emperor. He took power by conspiring with the senate and the Praetorian guard at Rome to grant him the status of emperor, a process which presented the optics of legitimacy, but was in reality, an act of insurrection.⁶² Though the Senate once held the power to select the Emperor, by the late third century it no longer retained this privilege, making this step, like the senate itself, largely ceremonial.⁶³ This relationship with the senate, with them granting him the appearance of legitimacy appears to have been reflected in his political program, which focused greatly on the restoration of the capital. As Sven Betjes points out, numismatic evidence alludes to Maxentius promoting himself as the savior of the city, as numerous coin legends minted during his reign name him *Conservator Urbis Suae*, and his widespread building program attests to this.⁶⁴ This approach to rule, which focused attention to the capital where he was seated, would have accomplished several things for the emperor: It would appeal to the senate, whose desires tended to be rather conservative, while also giving Maxentius the additional appearance of being a legitimate ruler.⁶⁵ It was this desire to appear legitimate which became the focus of this vast building program.⁶⁶

⁶² Betjes and Heijnen, 9; Corcoran, 7; Marlowe, 201.

⁶³ Lenski, 62.

⁶⁴ Cullhed, 46; Betjes and Heijnen, 23; Curran, 55.

⁶⁵ Boatwright, 29.

⁶⁶ Curran, 56; Marlowe, 206; Emanuel Mayer, "The Architecture of Tetrarchy," in *A Companion to Roman Architecture*, ed. Roger B. Ulrich and Caroline K. Quenemoen (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2014), 124; Coarelli, 91; Betjes and Heijnen, 7; Frazer, 385.

Maxentius signaled his legitimacy as ruler partly through his coinage. Coins are in a sense, miniature monuments, they carry with them, through their combinations of imagery and legends, a pointed message from the emperor to the Roman people. Coins lined the pockets of most citizens and gave them a snippet of, perhaps not the truth, but precisely what the emperor wanted to communicate to them, which makes them an invaluable asset when attempting to understand the motivations of emperors who have been the victim of the erasure of their legacy. Following the death of Maxentius, he received what modern historians have termed *damnatio memoriae*.⁶⁷ Essentially, any public reference to Maxentius was removed, defaced or somehow concealed from the public eye. As a belligerent of Constantine, the victorious emperor, Maxentius could no longer receive any public honors, with the *damnatio* being perhaps the most direct way to accomplish this. While bronze statues can be melted down, marble can be shattered, and epigraphs can be re-chiseled, coins present a greater challenge. Portraits on coins have in some cases been the subject of defacement, they are so numerous that the logistics of doing this to every single one presents obvious limitations.⁶⁸

Coins provide us with information that can otherwise be absent, as well as give a small taste of what the emperor wished the public to know about him or his intentions as ruler, untarnished by later interpretations. Curran, Culhed and Martjn Icks all note the extensive use of the legend, *conservator urbis suae*, combined with the image of the goddess Roma in coinage minted under Maxentius (Fig. 2).⁶⁹ This lines up with the political program which scholars agree focused on the renewed importance of the capital city, which was

⁶⁷ Eric R. Varner, "Portraits, Plots and Politics: Damnatio Memoriae and the images of Imperial Women," in *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, vol. 46, (2001): 41; Frazer, 385; Eric R. Varner, *Mutilation and Transformation: Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture*, (Boston: Brill, 2004), 218.

⁶⁸ Varner, (2001), 42.

⁶⁹ Culhed, 46; Icks, 23; Curran, 54.

carried out in large part through his building program.⁷⁰ Where then, most of all, does Maxentius's political program, the capital's renewed importance and this widespread building program intersect? This paper aims to posit that the restoration of the Temple of Venus and Roma best represents this intersection, as evidenced by the coinage minted during Maxentius's brief reign.

The appearance of the goddess Roma on Maxentian coinage should be treated as an anomaly during the tetrarchic period as she is practically absent from coin faces until his reign.⁷¹ Tetrarchic coinage prior to Maxentius's accession to power tended to feature two things: nearly identical portraiture and frequent pictorial reference to Jupiter and Hercules (Fig. 3).⁷² These tetrarchic coins functioned to convey the political program of the Tetrarchy, which was based heavily on the concept of a unified entity of augusti and ceasars. This unity is conveyed visually by rendering the portraits of each emperor indiscernible. Apart from their names in the legend, Diocletian's portrait is identical to Maximian, Constantius, and Galerius; this would have had the effect of merging their identities in the minds of the Roman people, which would have been advantageous in an empire coming out of years of factionalism and civil war. The reverse side of the coin further expressed this concept of divided rule via the prominence of Jupiter and Hercules. The Tetrarchy operated with four emperors, two augusti with their respective ceasars under them and this relationship is mirrored by that of Jupiter and Hercules.⁷³ The appearance of Jupiter and Hercules further presses this concept of a unified body administered by separate emperors. Maxentius' use of the goddess Roma can then be characterized as an extension of this model of visual language altered to suit his new agenda.

⁷⁰ Curran, 56; Marlowe, 206; Emanuel Mayer, "The Architecture of Tetrarchy," in *A Companion to Roman Architecture*, ed. Roger B. Ulrich and Caroline K. Quenemoen (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2014), 124; Coarelli, 91; Betjes and Heijnen, 7; Frazer, 385.

⁷¹ Culhed, 62.

⁷² Rees, "Images and Image," 198.

⁷³ Nixon and Rodgers, 45.

Maxentius appears on his coinage in a manner which does not depart from the tetrarchic model. He maintains the wide necked, short, military-style hair and beard with the oversized eyes characteristic of tetrarchic portraiture.⁷⁴ His appearance is practically indiscernible from that of any of the tetrarchs and in so doing, maintains visual continuity with them, the reverse, however does not. The reverse most frequently featured the Goddess Roma.⁷⁵ Here she represents the city of Rome, alluding to the body which gave Maxentius his authority, but also through the legend, *conservator urbis suae*, he is proclaiming his devotion to protect said body. This combination of portraiture, legend and reverse image convey to the viewer that Maxentius aimed to be perceived as legitimate. This was accomplished by maintaining continuity with the tetrarchic portraiture, and therefore associating himself with the established governing body. Furthermore, the recurring use of the image of Roma with the legend, *conservator urbis suae* has the dual effect of paying recognition to the senate and Praetorian guard who made him emperor, while also vowing to protect the city from the very real threat of marginalization that it faced.

The reign of Maxentius in literature versus the physical effect it had on the cityscape is certainly a strange dichotomy. Literature informs us of a villainous tyrant which the city was happy to see vanquished, while coinage and architecture tell us that he was an emperor of “old fashioned morals” who gave resources and attention to the capital in a time when it was facing obsolescence.⁷⁶ This paper does not advocate for a rejection of one narrative for another, rather it suggests a healthy reading of both. Indeed, to produce a fuller image of the time of Maxentius, we must use all the resources at hand, but be aware of their inherent biases. For example, when Lactantius mentions that Maxentius takes advantage of the unrest

⁷⁴ Roger Rees, “Images and Image,” 188.

⁷⁵ Betjes and Heijnen, 7; Culhed, 47. Curran,

⁷⁶ Carlos Machado, Statue Habit and Statue Culture in Late Antique Rome, *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, (2021), 656.

in the capital caused by the new tax imposed by Galerius in his greed.⁷⁷ We might take from this that there may have been a new tax on the Roman people, but we must acknowledge that the Christian author had many reasons to cast Galerius, a persecutor of the Christians and Maxentius, the enemy of Constantine, “the first Christian emperor” as villains. If we set these characterizations aside and combine what remains with the archaeological record, we are left with a narrative that the city was faced with a tax by the Tetrarchy, Maxentius becomes emperor, and a wide scale building program ensues.

⁷⁷ *The Works of Lactantius*, trans. William Fletcher, vol II (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), 187.

Chapter 3: Maxentius' Innovations and Their Precedent

Maxentian Changes to the Temple of Venus and Roma

As discussed in the previous chapters, Maxentius's political program hinged on his position in the imperial seat at Rome, although his authority there was not recognized by the official governing body of the Roman Empire. His authority was officially rejected by the tetrarchy at a conference in Carnuntum in 308, where Maxentius was named *hostis*, essentially an enemy of the empire.⁷⁸ He would therefore have had a great motivation to maintain the appearance of a legitimate ruler. The second pillar of his reign was the return to normalcy for the capital, a task he made clear attempts to accomplish through the adoption of the title *princeps*, an archaic title which drew symbolic connections to the Julio-Claudian dynasty, as well as the undertaking of a vast building program.⁷⁹ Part of this building program took place in the Roman Forum, and the project this paper interrogates is the restoration of the Temple of Venus and Roma.

The Temple of Venus and Roma, as stated previously, was badly damaged in a fire in 307.⁸⁰ The restoration of the temple, which took place the same year, was accomplished alongside the construction of the Basilica of Maxentius and should perhaps be viewed as companion pieces. The construction of a basilica in tandem with the restoration of a temple in

⁷⁸ Varner, *Mutilation and Transformation*, 216.

⁷⁹ Curran, 56; Marlowe, 206; Mayer, Emanuel. "The Architecture of Tetrarchy." In *A Companion to Roman Architecture*, ed. Roger B. Ulrich and Caroline K. Quenemoen (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2014) 124; Coarelli, 91; Betjes and Heijnen, 7; Frazer, 385.

⁸⁰ Machado, Carlos. "Public Monuments and Civic Life: The End of the Statue Habit in Italy." Proceedings of the Poggibonsi Seminar, 18-20 October 2007, 113.

the Roman Forum might then be considered a “Forum of Maxentius.”⁸¹ This theory falls in line with the emperor’s political program, as the last forum built in the area had been the Forum of Trajan, nearly two-hundred years prior. Just as the adoption of the title of *princeps* had called on the legacies of “golden age” emperors, the construction of a new forum would have had similar connotation.

The forum of Trajan pushed the boundaries spatially and geographically, with major earthworks having to be carried out to make enough flat ground to build a forum of such magnitude.⁸² It was likely for this reason that Hadrian, whose rule followed that of Trajan, opted not to build a forum of his own. Though the emperor was heavily associated with his widespread building program, there simply was not enough room for another forum in the administrative center of the capital and to build a forum elsewhere would lack the desired associations with the other fora.⁸³ Additionally, to concede on size and build a smaller forum would only have drawn negative comparisons to Trajan. Maxentius was therefore rather fortunate to have the opportunity to reshape the Velian hill into a forum of his own in an area which would draw the desired associations. The Basilica of Maxentius was the largest Basilica ever built in Rome, and fittingly, the Temple of Venus and Roma was the largest temple in Rome, the construction of the former and restoration of the latter would therefore not fall victim to negative comparisons to previous fora.⁸⁴

To refer to Maxentius’s intervention in the Temple of Venus and Roma as simply a restoration, I fear may be a gross understatement. The word “restoration” in the world of art history recalls the restorations which take place in the modern era, such as the restoration of the Sistine Chapel ceiling or perhaps the eighteenth-century restorations of ancient marble statues. To compare modern restoration with the restorations of architecture carried out

⁸¹ Eric R. Varner, “Maxentius, Constantine and Hadrian: Images and the Expropriation of Imperial Identity,” In *Using Images in Late Antiquity*, (2014): 49.

⁸² Coarelli, 115.

⁸³ Mols, 459.

⁸⁴ Beard et al, 257.

during antiquity is in this case absurd, this was not merely the removal of candle soot from a ceiling or the replacement of a nose or chin to a portrait bust, rather, this was a full *reconstruction* of the former structure. The fire which ravaged the temple incinerated the wooden roof of the Hadrianic temple, which then fell into the cella along with the gilded bronze roof tiles which then melted in the blaze.⁸⁵ The temple which stood after the fire would have more closely resembled the ruins of the Parthenon which stand in Athens today than the structure's former appearance.

The reconstructed Temple of Venus and Roma differed from the original in several key ways. While it maintained the same exterior footprint of the original structure, the Maxentian redesign replaced the wooden roof with a concrete barrel vault.⁸⁶ Concrete barrel-vaulted structures have precedent in Rome as early as the second century BC although these identifications have recently come into question, (Porticus Aemilia) but by the first century BC concrete barrel vaulting was firmly established in Rome.⁸⁷ The vault builds on the principle of the arch, which allows a distance to be spanned using compression rather than tension. Stone and concrete are extremely strong under compression, while they are very weak under tension, unlike wooden beams. While wood has great tensile strength, it is very susceptible to pests, rot and like the roof of the Temple of Venus and Roma, Fire. The greatest drawback of barrel vaulting is the powerful outward forces their weight can cause. To counter these forces the rule of thumb is that the thickness of the walls should be roughly twice the thickness of the vault.⁸⁸ In the case of the Temple of Venus and Roma, the walls of the cella were buttressed using the existing Hadrianic walls. Though the Hadrianic walls do not remain, traces of them are imprinted on the extant concrete walls. Replacing the wooden

⁸⁵ Claridge, 119; Boatwright, 124; Lawrence Richardson, *A New Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 409; Stamper, 211.

⁸⁶ Richardson, *New Topographical Dictionary*, 409; Claridge, 120; Coarelli, 99.

⁸⁷ Lancaster, *Concrete vaulted Construction*, 5.

⁸⁸ J. H. Acland, "Architectural Vaulting," *Scientific American* 205, no. 5, 1961, 148; Lancaster, 133.

roof with a concrete barrel vault, thereby fireproofing it, would have cemented Maxentius' legacy into the fabric of the city.

The shape and materials used for the roof were not the only aspects of the temple transformed in the Maxentian reconstruction. The Hadrianic layout of the temple divided the cella into two chambers separated by a flat wall, with each chamber flanked by aisles. These aisles allowed direct ambulation from the Venus cella to the Roma cella, but this would be altered in the revisions carried out under Maxentius. Rather than retain the original layout, the Temple of Venus and Roma was transformed into an apsidal hall, with the vaulted ceiling terminating in an apse, framed by porphyry columns where cult statues of the respective goddesses were placed (Fig. 4).⁸⁹ The side aisles were deleted in favor of niches framed by porphyry columns.⁹⁰ The choice of stone is a topic which will be discussed at length in chapter four. The main innovations in architecture of the Maxentian reconstruction of the temple were the removal of the side aisles and the conversion of the space into an apsidal hall lined with framed niches.

The Apsidal Temple and its Precedents in the Imperial Fora

The apsidal hall is a layout which was commonplace in Roman temple architecture and has several precedents in the Imperial Fora including the Temple of Venus Genetrix in the Forum of Caesar, the Temple of Mars Ultor in the Forum of Augustus (Figs. 5 and 6).⁹¹ It is important to note that all the temples which take the shape of an apsidal hall in the Imperial Fora are associated with a specific emperor and the deity which acts as their claim to legitimacy. Julius Caesar vowed to construct the Temple of Venus Genetrix in the case that

⁸⁹ Coarelli, 99; Verena Jaeschke, "The Roman Civic Center under Maxentius," in *History Takes Place: Rome. Dynamics of Urban Change*, 2016, 182.

⁹⁰ Jaeschke, "Roman Civic Center," 182, Carlos Machado, "Public Monuments," 113.

⁹¹ Stamper, 95,137; Claridge, 166, 178; Coarelli, 107, 112 ; Jaeschke, "Roman Civic Center," 182.

he was victorious over Pompey the Great at the battle of Pharsalus.⁹² The temple was dedicated to Venus as she was the goddess which he claimed descentance from. The message here is quite clear, Caesar is descended from Venus, and therefore possesses divine authority.⁹³ Though the temple of Venus Genetrix is on the surface dedicated to the goddess, it is also a monument in honor of himself and his victory over Pompey. These messages coded into the temple point to a similar issue that faced Maxentius some three-hundred years later: Legitimacy. Caesar was a dictator who needed to sway the masses to believe he was rightfully in charge, and the temple of Venus Genetrix acted as a clear avenue to do so. The structure not only monumentalized his connection to a goddess and the mother of Rome, but also boasted his military prowess, demonstrating not just his ability, but his divine right to lead.

The Temple of Mars Ultor in the Forum of Augustus presents another case study of an apsidal temple associated with an emperor's forum dedicated to their source of legitimacy. The Temple was vowed by Augustus after the deaths of Cassius and Brutus, two of Caesar's assassins, and featured hemicycles of statues which alluded to the emperor's connection to the Julian line as well as heroes of the past.⁹⁴ Augustus follows the pattern of Caesar here, where he creates a temple which acts as a monument to a deity, himself and his military prowess, while also signaling his legitimacy of rule. His military prowess is alluded to through the temple's commemoration of the deaths of Brutus and Cassius, highlighting Augustus's role as Caesar's avenger, while the hemicycle dedicated to the Julian line further stressed his connection to it. This connection to the Julian line was in effect a connection to Venus and therefore a divine right to rule. Maxentius accomplishes this similarly in the reconstruction of the Temple of Venus and Roma.

⁹² Claridge, 164; Stamper, 92; Coarelli, 104.

⁹³ Roger B. Ulrich, "Julius Caesar and the Creation of the Forum Iulium," *American Journal of Archaeology* 97, no. 1 (1993), 67.

⁹⁴ Stamper, 103; Claridge, 178; Coarelli, 111.

The decision to reconstruct the Temple of Venus and Roma in the form of a barrel-vaulted apsidal hall and thereby stripping it of some of its Greek attributes and visual references, Maxentius transforms the structure into a truly Roman space. The barrel vault, which had come to be emblematic of Roman architecture, its strength and durability likened to the strength and longevity of the empire, combined with the apsidal shape of the cellae made direct reference to the nearby imperial fora.⁹⁵ The same claims to legitimacy present in the dedications of the temples built under Julius Caesar and Augustus are evident in Maxentius's reconstruction of the Temple of Venus and Roma, but they operate in a slightly different manner. Rather than a direct familial tie to a goddess as claimed by Julius Caesar and Augustus, Maxentius's ties to Roma are somewhat metaphorical. Verena Jaeschke posits that by reconstructing the structure as an apsidal temple, Maxentius was naming her his tutelary goddess.⁹⁶ While this may be the case, what we know somewhat certainly is that Maxentius was brought to power by the Praetorian Guard and Senate of Rome. In the same way that Caesar dedicated his temple to Venus to signal his ties to her and therefore his divine right to rule, Maxentius signaled his own right to rule through the city, represented by Roma.

⁹⁵ Lancaster, 177.

⁹⁶ Jaeschke, 182.

Chapter 4: Porphyry Usage in the Temple of Venus and Roma

Apart from the grand architectural intervention carried out within the Temple of Venus and Roma during the reign of Maxentius, the decorative scheme was also altered greatly. The new design was marked by a heavy use of the purple-colored granite known as porphyry.⁹⁷ Porphyry comes from a single mountain in Egypt known as Mons Porphyrites.⁹⁸ Early mentions of the stone in Rome come from Pliny, who related the story of the stone being brought back to the city to to the emperor Claudius, who was not particularly taken with the material:

Statues of this stone (porphyry) were brought from Egypt to the emperor Claudius in Rome by his official agent Vitrasius Pollio, an innovation that did not meet with much approval. No one at least has since followed his example.⁹⁹

The stone came into use in the capital as decoration before sculpture, there is evidence of this in the decoration of the Domus Aurea which utilizes porphyry. By the time of Hadrian's rule (117-138) Porphyry had come into regular use in the capital, one example being the opus sectile floors at Hadrian's Villa.¹⁰⁰ Literary references suggest that the stone had come under imperial monopoly as early as the reign of Antoninus Pius (138-161 AD) according to a quote from the *Historia Augusta*, which alludes to Antoninus Pius' forgiving nature when he discovers porphyry columns in the home of an associate named Homullus: *cum in domum alienam veneris, et mutus et surdus esto*, or, "When you come to another's house, be deaf and dumb."¹⁰¹ The *Historia Augusta*, however, must be treated with caution as it was written in the

⁹⁷ Vermuele, 43; Claridge, 120; Machado, "Public Monuments," 113; Jaeschke, 182; Coarelli, 99.

⁹⁸ Fabio Barry. *Painting in Stone: Architecture and the Poetics of Marble from Antiquity to the Enlightenment*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 149.

⁹⁹ Pliny The Elder, *Natural History*, Book XXXVI, (11.3.1).

¹⁰⁰ Philippe Malgouyres, Clément Blanc-Riehl. *Porphyre: La Pierre Pourpre Des Ptolémées Aux Bonaparte*. Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2003.

¹⁰¹ Antoninus Pius, *Historia Augusta I*, 1.11.8, trans. David Magie, 129.

fourth century and may be referring to a law which was contemporary to the author, but not necessarily in place at the time of Antoninus Pius.¹⁰²

The reason for the imperial monopoly placed on porphyry was for its color. The deep purple hue of the stone was associated closely with Tyrian purple dye.¹⁰³ Tyrian purple was produced through the harvest of thousands of murex sea snails and only yielded a minute amount of the dye.¹⁰⁴ It was the only colorfast dye in antiquity and therefore held a utilitarian value apart from its vibrant and appealing shade.¹⁰⁵ However, the cost of harvesting, processing and shipping from Tyre (modern-day Tunisia) to Rome, made the color a symbol of conspicuous consumption and therefore accessible only to the very wealthy.¹⁰⁶ Purple dye was first placed under limited control of the Roman authorities during the reign of Julius Caesar, who passed sumptuary laws which reserved purple edged togas for wear by senators only and restricted the wear of purple to select days of the year, setting a precedent for state control of the color. During his reign, Nero forbade the sale of purple garments to anyone outside the royal courts, followed by Diocletian, three centuries later, who deemed the workshops which produced the dye imperial property.¹⁰⁷ There is a clear pattern here that over time Roman emperors tightened their grips on the purple, which had the effect of the color no longer being a vague reference to opulence, but a specific and exclusive chromatic reference to imperial authority.

The use of purple as a garment dye has a much longer history in Rome than the use of porphyry, which began in earnest during the reign of Trajan, and was prized for its resemblance

¹⁰² Michael Meckler, "Comparative Approaches to the *Historia Augusta*." In *Splendide Mendax: Rethinking Fakes and Forgeries in Classical, Late Antique, and Early Christian Literature*, 2016, 206.

¹⁰³ Mark Bradley, "Color and Marble in Early Imperial Rome," *The Cambridge Classical Journal* 52, (2006): 13.

¹⁰⁴ Barry, 78; Dario Del Bufalo, *Porphyry: Red Imperial Porphyry. Power and Religion*. (Torino: U. Allemandi, 2012), 21.

¹⁰⁵ Charlene Elliott, "Purple Pasts: Color Codification in the Ancient World." in *Law & Social Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (2008): 177.

¹⁰⁶ Elliott, "Purple Pasts," 179.

¹⁰⁷ Elliott, 183.

to the imperial purple dye.¹⁰⁸ However, porphyry is not the only purple hued stone to bear these imperial connotations, the Forum of Trajan was decorated with a series of statues which depicted captive Dacians in triumphal procession (Fig.7). The series of statues (along with the rest of the complex) commemorated the conquest of Dacia (modern-day Romania) and the captive Dacians are rendered in phrygian marble, also called pavonazzetto.¹⁰⁹ Phrygian marble, while mostly white, has veins of purple, giving the Dacians the appearance of being caught in a “net” of imperial purple, reflecting the prisoner’s position as a captive and property of the emperor.

Colored stone had a long tradition in Rome of conveying larger concepts than simply their intrinsic beauty. As Mark Bradley notes, colored stone in early imperial Rome was frequently named after the region of the empire which it was sourced from, rather than any reference to its color, such as *marmor phrygium*, *marmor Numidium*, *marmor Lacedaemonium*.¹¹⁰ This tradition of naming marbles suggests that the value placed on them came from a sense of triumphalism of the far-reaching empire. Essentially, the Romans ability to source these stones from these territories represented their influence and authority there. This is perhaps best exemplified in the Forum of Augustus, which contained a great number of marbles from across the empire, including carrara, Numidian, africano, pavonazzetto and bardiglio.¹¹¹ This fanciful and public display of exotic stones was surely intended to represent the territories under Roman control as well as the vast trade networks and herculean task of physically moving them to the capital. These colored stones carried greater meaning than simply beauty and opulence, they conveyed concepts of the reach of the Empire and centralized strength, while their very presence in the capital suggested that the city of Rome was *caput mundi*, reaching out with its tendrils and pulling resources to the core.

¹⁰⁸ Malgouyres and Blanc-Riehl, *Porphyre*, 28.

¹⁰⁹ Barry, 78.

¹¹⁰ Bradley, *Colour and Marble*, 1.

¹¹¹ Stamper, 137.

Porphyry as a symbol of imperial authority was not a concept introduced by Maxentius, instead, it was his direct predecessor, Diocletian who solidified this association.¹¹² Porphyry was certainly not a local stone, it came from Mons Porphyrites, Egypt, on the Eastern shore of the Red Sea and the task of transporting the stone to the capital was tremendous in itself.¹¹³ Its implementation in architecture in Rome would have likely invoked the same sense of the long reach of the empire as those discussed earlier, but with an added layer of coded meaning. Porphyry, with its deep purple hue was associated with imperial purple, and by the fourth century, had become synonymous with imperial sovereignty.¹¹⁴ This association is evident in the portraits of Diocletian, which are almost exclusively carved from porphyry.¹¹⁵ The main precedent for the use of porphyry in public architecture is in the Baths of Caracalla, constructed in CE 212, where porphyry columns framed the entryway to the *natatio*, basins of porphyry and porphyry tesserae made up portions of the mosaic floors.¹¹⁶ In the Temple of Venus and Roma, the use of the stone is not quite as moderate.

During the Maxentian reconstruction of the Temple of Venus and Roma, porphyry became the single most prominent decorative material used in the new cellae.¹¹⁷ The pavement of the temple, which is visible today in its restored state, was made up of two main materials: phrygian marble and porphyry (Fig. 8).¹¹⁸ Phrygian marble, as discussed earlier, is mainly white, with purple veins running throughout, suggesting a concern for maintaining a purple theme even during the selection of the material to contrast the dark shades of the porphyry portions of the pavement. The niches in the north and south walls of the cella housed statues

¹¹² Del Bufalo, *Red Imperial Porphyry*, 26; Malgouyres and Blanc-Riehl, 35; Reinhold, *History of Purple*, 59.

¹¹³ Barry, 149; Reinhold, 34.

¹¹⁴ Del Bufalo, 26; Malgouyres and Blanc-Riehl, 35; Reinhold, 59.

¹¹⁵ Reinhold, 60.

¹¹⁶ Claridge, 360; Malgouyres and Blanc-Riehl, 29.

¹¹⁷ Coarelli, 99; Jaeschke, 182.

¹¹⁸ Coarelli, 99.

and were framed with porphyry columns, but perhaps most conspicuously, the cult statue was adorned in a garment carved from the purple stone.¹¹⁹

Porphyry in public architecture in Rome was not isolated to the Temple of Venus and Roma, but the saturated use of the stone in this particular setting is certainly worth interrogation. Porphyry, which carried strong ties to imperial authority, was made the main decorative scheme in the temple of the goddess Roma, who was a central pillar of Emperor Maxentius' political program. Through the coded stone, Maxentius tied himself to the temple and concretely established his connection to the goddess Roma, which would further lend legitimacy to his questionable authority.

Conclusions

The reconstruction of the Temple of Venus and Roma under emperor Maxentius was perhaps the greatest single urban intervention of his reign. While the Basilica of Maxentius was grand in scale, it did not have the same kind of connections to the capital city as the temple, which served as a monument to Rome's beginnings and its legacy. While the goddess Roma began as a creation of the Greeks to venerate the Romans, Emperor Hadrian successfully transformed her into a way for the Romans to celebrate themselves. When fire destroyed the temple two hundred years later, Maxentius, an usurper, had a chance to solidify his image as emperor through a grand redesign.

The changes made to the temple by Maxentius suggest a desire to create his own forum by way of association. The interior was shifted to two, back-to-back, barrel vaulted, apsidal halls. The barrel vaults, a distinctly Roman feature, effectively erased references on

¹¹⁹ Vermuele, 43.

the interior to Greek architecture. The new apsidal form brought the temple of Venus and Roma in line with the other temples in the Imperial Fora, temples which had direct ties between deities and emperors. Just as Julius Caesar and Augustus had made the temple of Venus Genetrix and the Temple of Mars Ultor as monuments to their divine right to rule, Maxentius did with the Temple of Venus and Roma.

Maxentius claimed power illegitimately and therefore had strong motivations to represent himself as a rightful dictator. He accomplished this, in part, through the reconstruction of the Temple of Venus and Roma and his greater building program as a whole. Analysis of the specific stylistic and chromatic choices made in the interventions in the temple reveal a clear attempt to draw associations between the emperor and the goddess Roma and through her, the city which she represented. The porphyry which lined the newly reconstructed temple strengthened the visual ties between the goddess and the emperor. The purple stone acted as a symbol of imperial sovereignty, and in the context of the temple of Venus and Roma, represented Maxentius' claims to power in the capital. Through the heavy use of porphyry in the cult statue, pavement, and columns in Maxentius' reconstruction of the temple, he was able to honor the deities and through them, the city they represented. This was particularly persuasive in a time when Rome was waning in importance to the greater empire.

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Illustrations

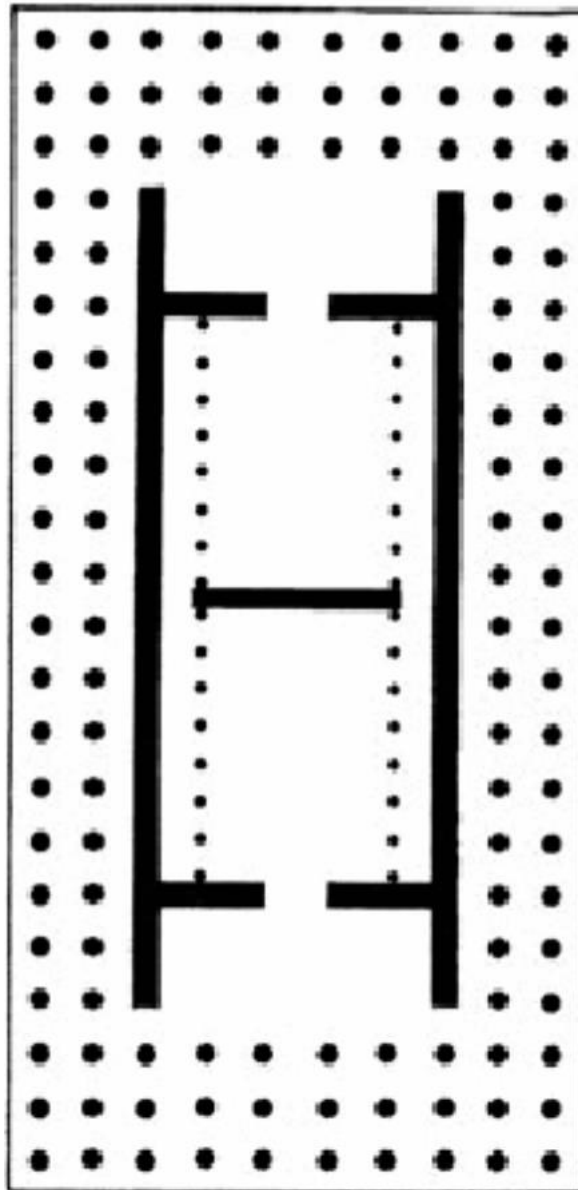


Figure 1: Temple of Venus and Roma. Hadrianic Floor Plan. From Amanda Claridge, Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 119.

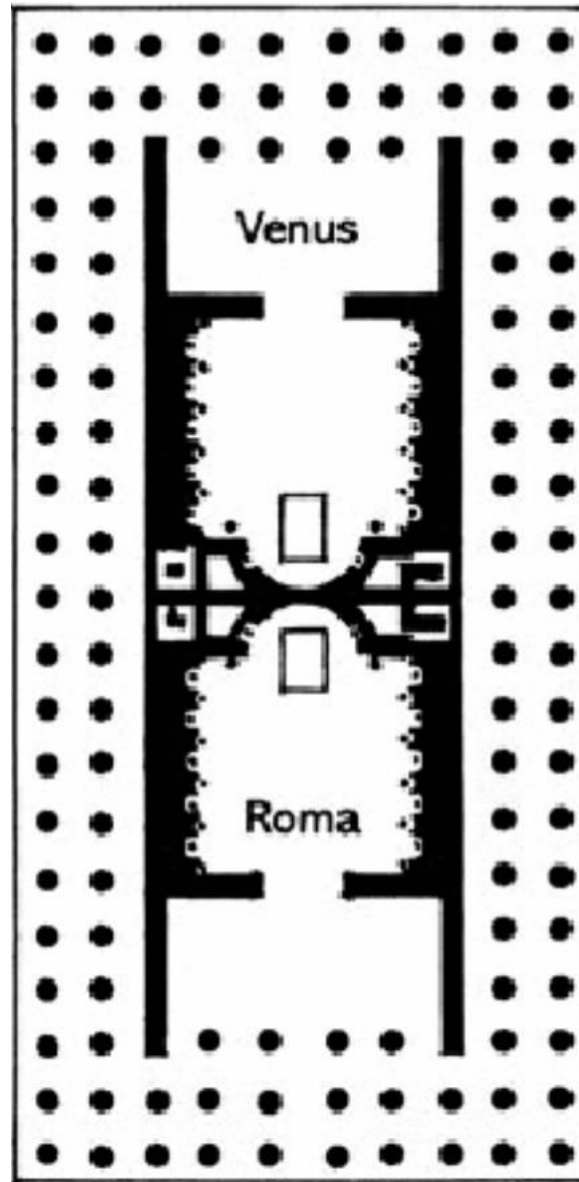


Figure 4: Temple of Venus and Roma. Maxentian Floor Plan. From Amanda Claridge, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 119.

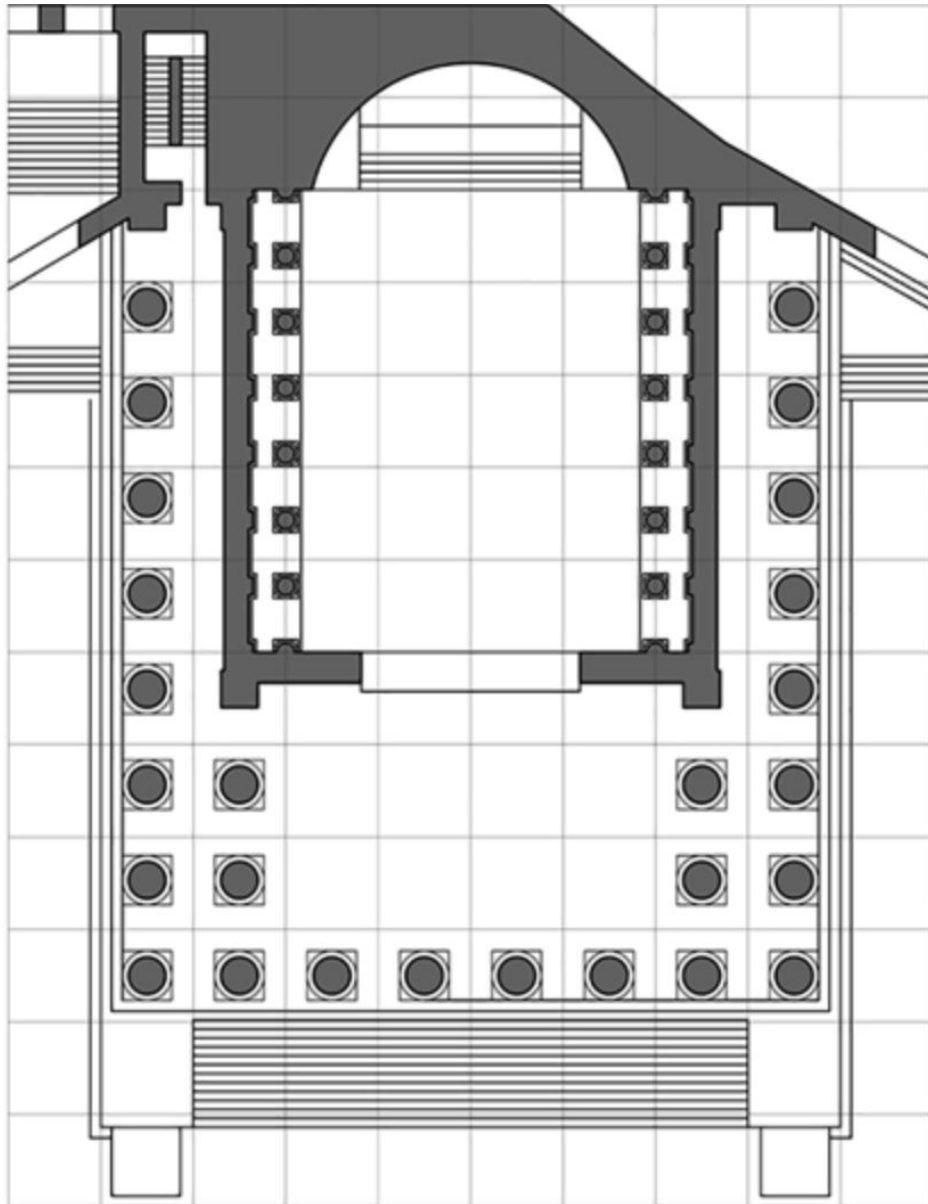


Figure 5: Temple of Mars Ultor. Floor Plan. From Filippo Coarelli, Rome and Environs: An Archaeological Guide (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 109.

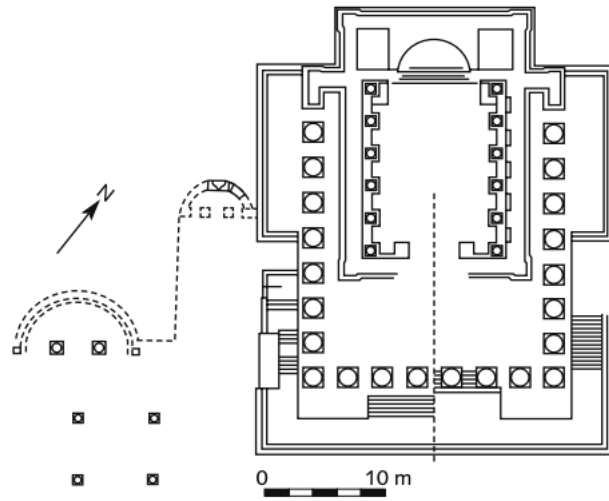


Figure 6: Temple of Venus Genetrix. Floor Plan. From Filippo Coarelli, Rome and Environs: An Archaeological Guide (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 107.



Figure 7: Dacian Captive from Forum of Trajan. Arch of Constantine. Photo by Jeff Bondono.



Figure 8: Temple of Venus and Roma. Interior of cella showing floor pavement. Photo by Stefano Castellani.