Monumentality in Etruscan and Early Roman Architecture: Ideology and Innovation


Reviewed by Jeffrey A. Becker

Thomas and Meyers edit a set of papers that formed part of a colloquium organized for the 2009 Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America. This volume succeeds on two levels—it presents a slate of interesting and up-to-date papers, and it honors the oeuvre of Ingrid E.M. Edlund-Berry of the University of Texas at Austin, a scholar most known for her careful and meticulous work on the archaeology, society, and material culture of pre-Roman Italy. In fitting tribute to Edlund-Berry’s career, the volume focuses on the key themes of her work. The overarching focus on monumentality serves to loosely link the contributions together and to situate some key concerns for Italic archaeology within a current, larger disciplinary discussion of monumental construction and the role of monumentality in the archaeological record—notably studies that consider monumentality and its role in generating urbanism (e.g., A.T. Creekmore and K.D. Fisher, Making Ancient Cities: Space and Place in Early Urban Societies [Cambridge 2014]) and Osborne’s consideration of archaeological approaches to monumentality (Approaching Monumentality in Archaeology [Albany, N.Y. 2015]).

In the introductory chapter, Meyers considers what the topic of monumentality means for Italo-Roman archaeology, focusing in particular on terminology—namely, how to approach the Latin term monumentum. This establishes a framework for the volume as a whole, although it is not entirely clear that all authors embrace the same notion of monumentality in their respective papers. Particularly interesting is the explication of the usage of the term in Late Republican Latin, all of which seem to agree that monumentum is a multifaceted term (perhaps more so than “monument” in English), and that the monument need not be a specific construction. Meyers’ overview thus encourages the reader to think both macroscopically and microscopically about monuments and reactions to them.

Colantoni’s paper examines the important transition in building materials that transformed Latium and Italy from a landscape dotted with ephemeral buildings to one marked by monumental structures built of stone. This transition in building technology particularly influenced domestic architecture during the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E., allowing social elites to further reinforce their positions by living in stone-built, orthogonal houses as opposed to wattle-and-daub huts. Moving beyond the remit of central Italy, Colantoni introduces ethnographic evidence from other primitive societies in order to encourage a reappraisal of the received wisdom about Iron Age Latium and its huts. She finds that protohistoric huts of Latium were the direct predecessors of monumental courtyard houses that elites would use by the Archaic period.

Tuck examines death as performance, exploring connections between Etruscan burial practice and ritual. Tuck is especially interested in Orientalizing burials (eighth–seventh centuries B.C.E.) at Tarquinia, Caere, and Chiusi. Tuck finds that a common funeral practice may be identified at these three sites based on the treatment of biconical cinerary urns and that, over time, changes in funerary assemblages emphasize social status more and more. Tuck argues that funerary practice at these three sites developed in parallel to sociocultural change connected with the emergence of urban centers. As at other central Italian sites, the organization of the necropolis can then serve to emphasize familial groupings that were important to the community of the living as well as to the commemoration of the dead. This approach that equates
commemoration and monumentality in the funereal sphere is thought-provoking, but it does not focus on architecture per se to any great extent.

Architectural moldings are a hallmark of Etrusco-Italic temples, and Winter discusses the sixth-century B.C.E. Etruscan round molding in terms of monumentality and connects them to later, similar moldings in stone that have been studied by Shoe Meritt and Edlund-Berry (Etruscan and Republican Mouldings [Philadelphia 2000]). The molding profile referred to as the “Etruscan round” played a key role in the decoration of archaic temples, notably the Mater Matuta temple at S. Omobono in Rome. These moldings—both the terracottas of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. and the carved stone versions of the fifth—demonstrate sustained elite investment in the elaboration of sanctuaries in central Italy. Winter’s focused approach to the moldings allows for a close consideration of individual elements that contribute to monumentality. Indeed, the Etruscan round molding is an element of monumentality, one part of a set of elements that can elevate the reception and architectural impact of a structure such as a temple.

Warden explores “monumental embodiment” (82), examining cases in which scale is not the only (or most important) aspect of monumentality. Using the site of Poggio Colla, located in Italy’s Mugello River valley, as a case study, Warden discusses the ritual destruction of the early-phase temple at the site, a process that might mimic the burial of a human body. This ritual is connected with practices of deconsecration and, by extension, to the discussion on the part of Vitruvius and other ancient authors about the concept of the building as a body. Warden's conclusion that the deconsecrated Poggio Colla temple can be envisioned as a metaphorical dead human body challenges the reader to consider the role of monumental architecture in the community and the relationship between human and architectonic forms.

Hopkins confronts the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus in Rome, exploring the design of this critically important, but still enigmatic, structure. Architectural historians have long debated the temple’s scale throughout its several phases—a discussion that is made difficult by the vagaries of preservation. The scale of the temple’s podium (and its resulting footprint) remains somewhat uncertain, since the superstructure of the temple does not survive. Scholars have argued various cases for the reconstruction of the temple itself, with some camps preferring a structure that occupies the bulk of the podium, while another envisions a much more restricted area for the temple building. Hopkins sides with the former camp in his analysis. The sheer size of the Capitoline temple was even more significant in that it influenced—perhaps even created—Roman notions of architectural monumentality that, in turn, influenced temple construction elsewhere. Hopkins suggests that the Capitoline temple, despite its nonsurviving superstructure, occupies a vital place in the genesis of a recognizably Roman architecture.

Davies considers the beginnings of the use of stone entablatures in Republican-period Rome, testing Roman architectural conservatism against innovation. Since building materials themselves make a statement about the opulence (and monumentality) of a project, establishing the chronology of when temples at Rome first adopted stone entablatures is an important issue. Davies reviews the traditional opinions that tend to place the introduction of stone entablatures anywhere from the late third to the later second century B.C.E. Diverging from this tradition, Davies argues that the Temple of Victoria (ca. 294 B.C.E.) on the Palatine may be the first temple at Rome with a stone entablature, a proposal that is significant for Republican architecture. A good deal of temple building—and innovation—at Rome was driven by elite competition, a sociopolitical landscape that Davies details clearly. The transition from wood to stone affected temple architecture, especially in terms of shortened intercolumnar spaces. This proposal, as with other essays in the volume, equates monumentality with materiality—a proposition that would have found acceptance in the minds of Republican aristocrats.

Edlund-Berry provides an afterword that reflects on the monumentalization of Austin, Texas, over the course of the 20th century. Austin serves as a useful urban analogy here, as its own cosmopolitan development has included the creation of an ever-growing architectural landscape that includes taller and taller buildings. Edlund-Berry sees the Etruscan practice of allowing the natural landscape to accentuate architectural monumentality as a fitting comparison to Austin’s own urban experience. This commentary on a modern urban landscape set against the first-millennium B.C.E. topics considered in the other papers serves to link the contributions together and to provide the volume with a conclusion.
Overall, the volume under review represents an important contribution to a number of key discussions in Italo-Roman architecture today. The text is well edited and is served by illustrations that are numerous and of good quality. The themes raised in the various contributions encourage the reader to consider some assumptions that have been made about scale and materiality in architecture and also encourage a revision of the timeline for the emergence of monumental building in stone at Rome. The iconic and canonical buildings of Imperial Rome are unquestionably monumental in all senses of the term—the Flavian Amphitheater, the Domus Aurea, and the Basilica Nova all, in their own way, stretched and even redefined monumentality. However, those structures were not conceived ex nihilo. The authors here have provided interesting fodder for a consideration of the underpinnings of Italo-Roman concepts and traditions of monumentality that should spark further discussion.

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