Severan Forum at Lepcis Magna (203 CE)

Plan of the Severan Forum

[1]

Reconstruction of the Severan Forum [2]

[3]

The Severan Forum [4]

[5]


[7]

The Severan Basilica [8]

[9]
Relief from the Severan Basilica [10]

Patron/Sponsor: Septimius Severus
Original Location/Place:
Lepcis Magna

Actual Location (Collection/Museum):
In loco

Original Inscription/Graffito: East:
IMPERATOR CAESAR LVCIVS SEPTIMIVS [. . . . . . .] MAX [. . . . . . .] EX MAXIMVS [. . . . . . .] POTESTATIS
DECEMET [. . . . . . .] CTIES IMPERATOR DVO DECIES COSTER PATER PATRIAEPRO COSE OEPITE TEx MAIORE PARTE
 [. . . . . . .] ECIT IMP CAESDI [. . . . . . .] SE [. . . . . . .] MI [. . . . . . .] EVERIPII ARABI CI ADIABENI CI PAR TH [. . . . . . .]
CIMAX [. . . . . . .] RITA [. . . . . . .] FIL [. . . . . . .]

West:
DIVI MARCI ANTONINII PII GERMANICIS ARMATICI EPOS DIVI ANTONINII PII PRONEPOS DIVI HADRIANIADEPOS
DIVI TRAIANII PARCHIET DIVINERVAE ADNIPOS SIMPAI [. . . . . . .] SMARCUS AVRELIVS ANTONIVNIVSPIVS AVG PART
HIC VSMAX BRITANNIC VSMAX [. . . . . . .] ERMANICUS VSMAXIMVS PONTIFEX MAXIMVS TRIBVNICIAE POTESTA [. . . . . . .]
ISD
ECI [. . . . . . .] MNOVIES IMPERATOR TERCOS [. . . . . . .] ATER PATERPA [. . . . . . .] OC OSPERFIC [. . . . . . .]

Edition:
East
Imperator Caesar Lucius Septimius [Seuerus Pius] Pert[inax Aug(ustus) Arabicus Adiabenicus Parthicus maximus
Britanicus] max[imus pontif]ex maximus [tribuniae] potestatis decem et [o]cties imperator duodecimes co(n)s(ul) ter
pater patriae proco(n)s(ul) coepit et ex maiore parte [perf]ecit Imperator duodecimes co(n)s(ul) ter
pater patriae proco(n)s(ul) perfici c[uravit]

West
divi Marci Antonini Pii Germanici Sarmatici nepos divi Antonini Pii pronepos divi Hadriani adnepos divi Traiani
Parthici et divi Nervae adnepos Imp(erator) Ca[e]s(ar) Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Pius Aug(ustus) Parthicus
max(imus) Britannicus max[imus] Germanicus maximus pontifex maximus tribuniciae potestas[t]is dec[e]m novies
imperator ter co(n)s(ul) [qu]ater pater pa[triae pr]oco(n)s(ul) perfici c[uravit]

English translation:
The translation is taken from Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania (IRT), 428 [12]. The text is in the public domain.

East:
The emperor Caesar Lucius Septimius [Seuerus Pius] Pert[ina]x Augustus, victor in Arabia, victor in Adiabene,
greatest victor in Parthia, greatest victor in Britannia, chief priest, [holding tribunician] power for the eighteenth
time, acclaimed victor twelve times, consul [three times, father] of the fatherland, proconsul, began and
substantially completed (this). Emperor Caesar, son of deified Septimius Severus Pius, victor in Arabia, victor in
Adiabene, greatest victor in Parthia, greatest victor in Britannia.

West:
Grandson of deified Marcus Antoninus, victor in Germany, victor in Sarmatia, great grandson of deified Antoninus
Pius, great great grandson of deified Hadrian, great great great grandson of deified Trajan, victor in Parthia and of
deified Nerva, emperor Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Pius Augustus, greatest victor in Parthia, greatest victor
in Britannia, greatest victor in Germany, chief priest, holding tribunician power for the nineteenth time, acclaimed
victor three times, consul four times, father of the fatherland, proconsul, [arranged] for its completion.

Date: 203 CE
Material: Marble

Measurements: Length: 170 m
Width: 80 m

Building Typology: Forum, basilica, temple

Description: The Severan Forum of Leptis Magna included a monumental temple, a civic basilica, as well as a row of shops, presented in a quasi-rectangular shape, measuring 170 m in length and 80 m in width. In the middle of the southwestern side the huge temple was located. Erected on a high podium, it was preceded by a flight of steps, located on the eastern front of the building. The temple presented a Corinthian octastyle façade, crowned by a triangular pediment. The temple was quasi-peripteral, with eight columns at the front, and two rows of nine columns that flanked the square cela. In addition, the front of the temple was characterised by two more rows of six columns, which left the space in front of the entrance to the cela free. The eight purple granite columns of the façade leant on a lofty plinth, which was decorated with a relief depicting a gigantomachy. On the northeastern, southeastern, and southwestern sides, a row of columns surrounded the forum, creating a central courtyard. Contrary to previous examples, the columns were topped by arches, which joined the columns one to the other. The arched space was decorated with *tondi* bearing reliefs that depicted the head of Medusa. On the northeastern side, behind the arcade, was hidden a row of shops, with a central niched building decorated with columns. This commercial centre in fact concealed the huge civic basilica, whose source of inspiration may have been the Basilica Ulpia in Rome. The rectangular two-storey building, which measured 95 m in length and 35 m in width, was characterised by two apses on the short northwestern and southeastern sides. Two parallel rows of twenty columns divided the internal space in a central nave and two flanking aisles. Once more the columns were carved in purple granite which came from Egypt. Inside the space created by the southeastern apse stood a slightly raised platform, on which sat the local judge during trials (Diane Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, p. 340). At the end of each row of columns stood four decorated pilasters, which were carved with an acanthus frieze interlaced with animals. Two further pilasters flanked the two apses on either side of the basilica and were decorated with two friezes, each depicting a cycle, the first centred on the god Dionysus, and the other on Hercules. An inscription on the architrave of the basilica, IRT 428, states that the emperor Septimius Severus started to erect the basilica. A further inscription narrates that the building was terminated by Caracalla, his son and heir.

Commentary: Although much urbanisation took place in Lepcis Magna under Augustus, the city became one of the main civic centres of the Roman empire during the later rule of Septimius Severus, who had been born there in 146 CE, the son of an equestrian. He was helped in his career by two cousins, Publius Septimius Aper and Gaius Septimius Severus, who served as consuls under the emperor Antoninus Pius, and was granted access to the senatorial order by Marcus Aurelius. His *cursus honorum*, which began with membership of the vigintivirate, included the position of *quaestor* twice, *legatus legionis pro praetore* in Africa Proconsularis in the wake of his cousin Gaius Septimius Severus, governor in 173 CE, *tribunus plebis* as imperial candidate, and finally in 190 CE, *consul suffectus*. In 191 CE, Commodus appointed Septimius Severus to the command of the legions in Pannonia. Proclaimed emperor in 193 CE, he came back to his native city perhaps in 203 CE; there is some debate as to the year in which Severus returned to Lepcis, with some scholars preferring the later date of 207 CE for the imperial visit, but it is clear that whatever the date was, the visit instigated a programme of rebuilding that reshaped the civic centre of the city in light of Severus’s own ideology of divine support and his vision of the empire (see Rowan, *Under Divine Auspices*, p. 77-84 for a good, recent synopsis of the different arguments for dating).

The main additions made during the Severan period were a wide colonnaded street which crossed the city from its northern appendix, the harbour – which was enlarged by the construction of new temples and warehouses – was further improved with the addition of a lighthouse and a tower on each side of its entrance, a monumental *nymphaeum*, and a quadriporticus triumphal arch (see Tetrapylon Arch of Septimius Severus). With the exception of the latter, which was likely set up by the town council, all of these projects appear to have been initiated – and therefore funded – by Severus himself, in a lavish display of imperial generosity and *beneficium*, which acknowledged the special privilege enjoyed by his hometown (Wilson, “Urban development in the Severan empire,” p. 296-7). The new forum, located on the west of the main crossroad, was the most impressive addition to
the city. Arranged across an irregular space that was surrounded by the new colonnaded street on one side, and existing streets on the other, it was dominated by a large temple at one end, and a basilica at the other. The two structures were set at a slight angle to each other, which was masked by the inclusion of a wedge-shaped block of rooms that were perhaps used as shops, offices or for cult activity associated with the temple (Wilson, “Urban development in the Severan empire,” p. 298). The forum space itself was surrounded by another colonnade, the columns of which were linked by arches to form an arcade, with Medusa and Triton heads filling the spandrels (ibid). The deity to whom the octastyle temple was dedicated is today unknown; John Bryan Ward-Perkins suggested that it had been dedicated to Concordia Augusta, based on the discovery of a fragment of inscription with the letters ONCO there (The Severan Buildings of Lepcis Magna, p. 50-53), but others have preferred to recognise it as the temple of Bacchus and Liber Pater mentioned by Cassius Dio, which would fit with the appearance of the gods in one of the pedestal scenes of the Gigantomachy mentioned above (Cassius Dio, Roman History, LXXVII.16.3; Rowan, Under Divine Auspices, p. 101). It has been further suggested that the temple was dedicated to the imperial family, perhaps by Caracalla to his father after his death, or even to the gens Septimiana, which was worshipped in the African provinces (see Bianchi Bandinelli, The Buried City, p. 93; Ward-Perkins, The Severan Buildings of Lepcis Magna, p. 31).

At the opposite end of the forum was the basilica, which was entered through an apsidal entrance in the wedge of rooms that masked the irregular alignment. The nave of the basilica was separated from its side aisles by a double-storey colonnade, which led to an apse at either end; the apses were bordered by pilasters, which depicted the labours of Hercules at one end and scenes associated with Bacchus/Liber Pater at the other (Wilson, “Urban development in the Severan empire,” p. 299). Bacchus/Liber Pater, the god of wine, is depicted advancing in a triumphal procession that would carry him to the borders of the Oikoumenē, to India, together with Silenus, Pan, various Bacchantes, panthers, centaurs, and various other personages. Hercules is portrayed as young, clean-shaved and bearded, and is depicted with his patron goddess, Minerva. Diana Kleiner has noted the similarity of the figures of the pilasters with those of the Hadrianic Baths in Aphrodisias, leading to the hypothesis that they were possibly carved by artists coming from the well-known school of Aphrodisias in Caria. If this is the case, then the mythological reliefs would be demonstration of the freedom of movement permitted by the pax Romana, which allowed artists from Asia Minor to move their “travelling workshops” as far as Africa (Kleiner, Roman Sculpture, p. 343; Wilson, “Urban development in the Severan empire,” p. 299).

A dedicatory inscription was set up on the exterior of the Basilica (IRT 427) and on the architrave of the interior (IRT 428), the latter of which survives in the best condition. Both texts were identical, and emphasised the particular dynastic aspect of the Severan building programme. The inscriptions reveal that the Forum and Basilica were initiated and substantially advanced by Septimius Severus (Lucius Septimius Severus…coepit et ex maiore parte perfecit), but completed by Caracalla, who is referred to here as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Pius, in keeping with the Antonine ancestry that his father had claimed for him upon succession to the principate (Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Pius…perfici curavit; see also Septimius Severus claims Antonine heritage [13]). It is clear from the inscription that the construction of the forum complex was a family project, begun by the father Septimius Severus and brought to completion under his son, underlining the importance of dynastic succession for civic stability. The combined virtues of the Severans are also presented in the inscription’s text; Septimius is heralded for his military virtus, which is promoted through the different epithets – Arabicus Adiabeni cus Parthicus maximus Britannicus – that were added to his official nomenclature following each respective military victory. Having come to power after a bitter civil war, and unable to claim a familial bond with the emperors who came before him, these attestations of foreign conquest were an important legitimising statement of Severus’s right to power. For Caracalla, however, the emperor was less cautious and claimed his Antonine heritage, which is celebrated so clearly in the inscription here, as a way of consolidating both of their positions, and the importance of succession for the stability of the empire.

Septimius Severus’s military successes had been irrevocably intertwined with his imperial vision in another monumental structure in Lepcis; the triumphal quadrifons Arch that is believed to have been dedicated to him by the local council. The arch was decorated with reliefs, which celebrated the emperor together with his family, emphasising his victorious campaign over the Parthians. However, while the reliefs of the triumphal arch celebrated the emperor through images that possessed a clear historical character, the various decorative features of the basilica celebrated the emperor mythologically, and in terms of his own ideology of divine support. The procession of Bacchus/Liber Pater on the pilaster reliefs symbolised the emperor’s domination of the orbis terrarum, or the whole universe, and the Cycle of Hercules, which ends with his apotheosis, focused on one of the most important parallels with the imperial cult, namely the demigod Hercules. Yet, there is a further reason why the two mythological figures were chosen: these two gods were rooted in the Punic past of the city: Bacchus had been identified with Shadrapa, and Hercules was equated to Melk’ashtart, both crucial deities in pre-Roman Lepcis, and...
who had been syncretised with members of the Roman pantheon as a way of preserving local customs and beliefs. Clare Rowan has also noted that the decoration of the pilasters of the Basilica also claimed a particularly African relevance, given the association of the Gigantomachy myth with the conquest of the region. Since the complex was created and paid for by the emperor himself, the depiction of these myths can be said to represent a complex interplay between the official and the local, creating a “dialogue of imagery [that] ran between Rome and Lepcis in this period,” emphasising the emperor’s “divine support and his connection with the city and its culture” (Rowan, Under divine auspices, p. 102).

The extent to which Septimius Severus and his family were visually represented in Lepcis Magna is unique, not only amongst the cities of North Africa, but across the empire as a whole. Andrew Wilson has noted the unprecedented number of statues and dedications made to the imperial family by the city and by private inhabitants, particularly between 197 and 203 CE, suggesting that the city publicly associated itself, on a very personal level, with his success (Wilson, “Urban development in the Severan empire,” p. 301-304). Indeed, the relationship between Lepcis and Septimius Severus was so strong that numerous dedications made by the city to the imperial family began to be made in the name of the Lepcitani Septimiani, the “Septimian Lepcitani,” as they now preferred to be known (e.g. IRT 400, 404, 405, 406, 412-418, 420, 423, 425). In turn, “imperial ideology was adapted at a local level to communicate the relationship of the city to the ruling power,” through the employment of particular myths and divine correlations that spoke to the interests and beliefs of Lepcis’s inhabitants (Rowan, Under divine auspices, p. 84).

Thematic keywords:

- Septimius Severus [14]
- Caracalla [15]
- Severan dynasty [16]
- Africa [17]
- municipium [18]
- colony [19]
- Latin right [20]
- Roman citizenship [21]
- imperial cult [22]
- Dionysus [23]
- Hercules [24]
- apotheosis [25]
- forum [26]
- basilica [27]
- temple [28]
- Pax Romana [29]
- oikoumenè [30]
- Lepcis Magna [31]
- Leptis Magna [32]
- provincial loyalty [33]

- Reynolds, Joyce Marie, Ward-Perkins, John Bryan, The Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania [38] (Rome: British School at Rome, 1952)
of Libyan Studies, 1993)
Wilson, Andrew, Urban development in the Severan empire [43], in Severan Culture (ed. S. Swain, S. Harrison, J. Elsner; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 290-326
Other sources connected with this document: Relief / Sculpture

Arch of Septimius Severus at Lepcis Magna (203-209 CE) [44]
- Read more about Arch of Septimius Severus at Lepcis Magna (203-209 CE) [44]

Inscription

Septimius Severus claims Antonine heritage (CIL VIII, 9317) [45]
- Read more about Septimius Severus claims Antonine heritage (CIL VIII, 9317) [45]

Relief / Sculpture

Triumphant Arch of Septimius Severus (202-203 CE) [46]
- Read more about Triumphant Arch of Septimius Severus (202-203 CE) [46]

Inscription

Votive to Julia Domna as Juno (IRT 291) [47]
- Read more about Votive to Julia Domna as Juno (IRT 291) [47]

Realized by:

Caroline Barron [48]

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Links