

The Emperor and the Plebs

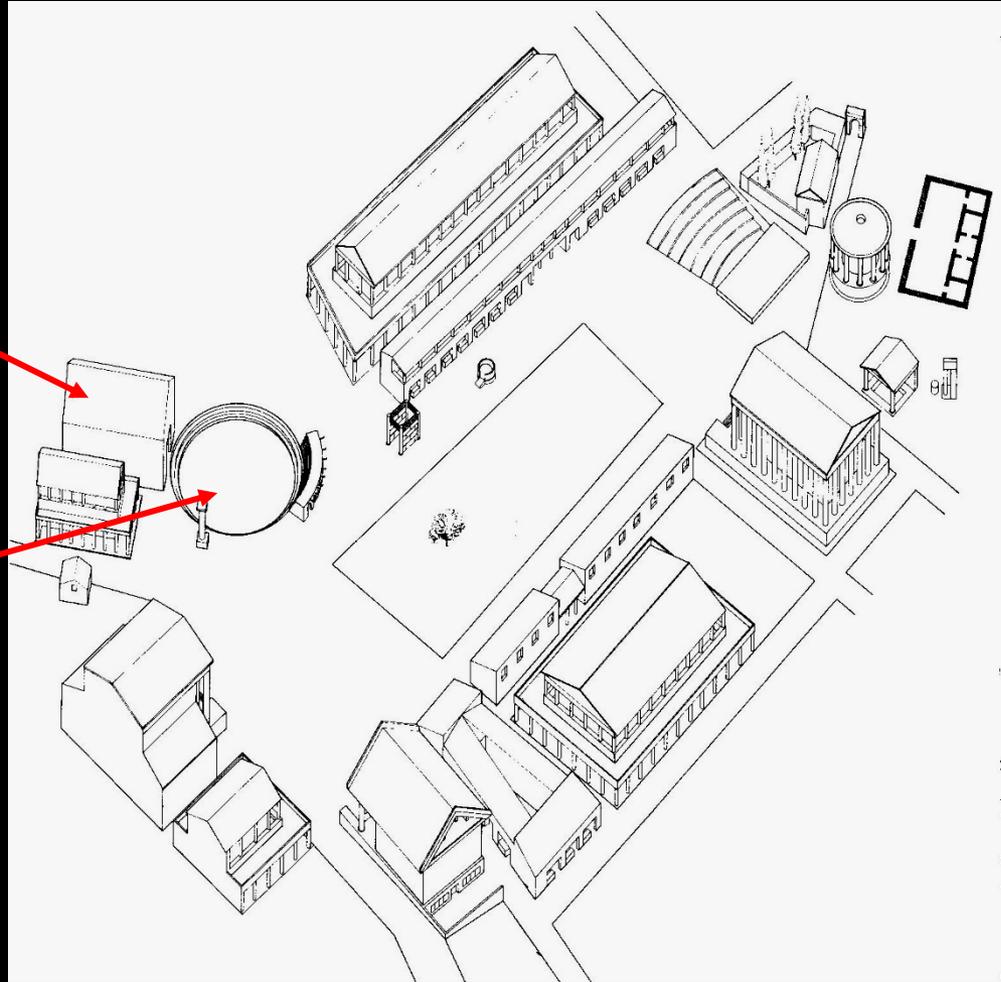
SPQR

Senatus Populusque Romanus

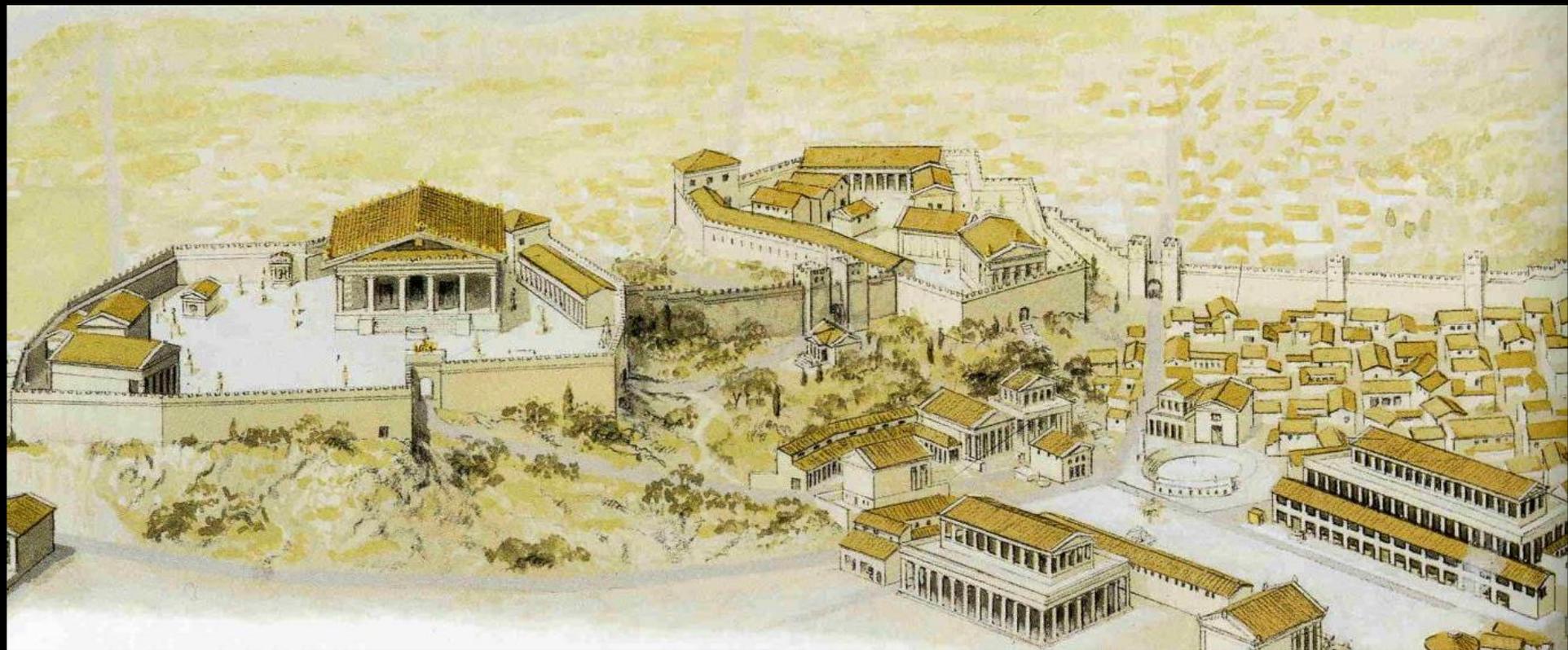
The Roman Forum in the 2nd c. BC

Curia

Comitium



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Connolly, Peter, and Hazel Dodge. *The Ancient City: Life in Classical Athens & Rome*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
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Traditional Roles of the *Populus*

- Election of Magistrates
- Creation of Law
- Declaration of War and Peace

Tacitus, *Annals* 6.13.1-2

‘The excessive price of corn all but ended in rioting; and large demands were for several days made in the theatre with a freedom not usually employed towards the sovereign.

Aroused by this, he (Tiberius) upbraided the magistrates and the senate for having failed to restrain the populace by the authority of the state; and, in addition, pointed to the provinces from which he imported the corn-supply, and to the fact that he did so on a far greater scale than Augustus.’

Tacitus: The Annals. Translated by J. Jackson. This material is in the public domain.

Suetonius, *Claudius* 18

‘When there was a scarcity of grain because of long-continued droughts, he (Claudius) was once stopped in the middle of the Forum by a mob and so pelted with abuse and at the same time with pieces of bread, that he was barely able to make his escape to the Palace by a back door; and after this experience he resorted to every possible means to bring grain to Rome, even in the winter season. To the merchants, he held out the certainty of profit by assuming the expense of any loss that they might suffer from storms, and offered to those who would build merchant ships large bounties...’

From *Suetonius: The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*. Translated from the Latin text by Maximilian Ihem. This material is in the public domain.



Tacitus, *Annals* 14.60

The measure led to general and undisguised protests from the common people, endowed with less discretion than their superiors, and – thanks to their humble station – faced by fewer perils. Then came a rumour that Nero had repented of his outrage and recalled Octavia to his side.

At once exulting crowds scaled the Capitol, and Heaven at last found itself blessed. They hurled down the effigies of Poppaea, they carried the statues of Octavia shoulder-high, strewed them with flowers, upraised them in the Forum and the temples. Even the emperor's praises were essayed with vociferous loyalty. Already they were filling the Palace itself with their numbers and their cheers, when bands of soldiers emerged and scattered them in disorder with whipcuts and levelled weapons. All the changes effected by the outbreak were rectified, and the honours of Poppaea reinstated.

Tacitus, *Annals* 14.42-5

‘...the rapid assembly of populace, bent on protecting so many innocent lives, brought matters to the point of sedition, and the senate house was besieged...’

‘While no one member ventured to controvert the opinion of Cassius, he was answered by a din of voices, expressing pity for the numbers, the age, or the sex of the victims, and for the undoubted innocence of the majority. In spite of all, the party advocating execution prevailed; but the decision could not be complied with, as a dense crowd gathered and threatened to resort to stones and firebrands. The Caesar then reprimanded the populace by edict, and lined the whole length of road, by which the condemned were being marched to punishment, with detachments of soldiers.’

The Grain Supply: key moments

123 BC

Lex frumentaria of Gaius Gracchus

- Subsidized monthly ration of grain at a fixed price

58 BC

Lex frumentaria of Clodius

- Abolishes the fixed charge for monthly rations
- Distributions now free, a proper grain dole

AD 8-14

Creation of the Prefect of the Grain Supply

- The *praefectus annonae*

Nero advertises Portus in 64



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AVGVSTI S POR OST C

Portus Ostiensis Augusti, Senatus Consulto

Juvenal 10.78-81

(early 2nd century AD)

The people which once bestowed *imperium*,
fascēs, legions, everything, now foregoes such
activities and has but two passionate desires:
bread and circus games.

Fronto, *Elements of History* 17

(mid-2nd century AD)

It was the height of political wisdom for the emperor not to neglect even actors and the other performers of the stage, the circus, and the arena, since he knew that the Roman people is held fast by two things above all, the grain supply and the shows, that the success of the government depends on amusements as much as on serious things. Neglect of serious matters entails the greater detriment, neglect of amusements the greater unpopularity. The money largesses (*congiaria*) are less eagerly desired than the shows; the largesses appease only the grain-doled plebs singly and individually, while the shows keep the whole population happy.

Suetonius, *Vespasian* 18

“To a mechanical engineer, who promised to transport some heavy columns up to the Capitol at small expense, he gave no mean reward for his invention, but refused to make use of it, saying, ‘You must let me feed my poor commons.’”

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