

The Theodosius Forum in Constantinople

A modern first report about the neglected remains of an ancient disaster

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Introduction

The Theodosian Forum, also known as the Forum of Theodosius or the Forum Tauri is an historical site located in Constantinople (the present Istanbul), built in a central area of the capital of the Byzantine Empire. The Theodosian Forum was constructed by the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius I in the late IVth century AD. It was situated in the south-eastern part of the city, not far from the Hippodrome. The forum was part of Theodosius' ambitious building projects aimed at enhancing the grandeur and functionality of the city. The forum complex consisted of a large rectangular open space surrounded by colonnades and adorned with various statues and monuments. It served as a public place, administrative centre, and a venue for legal proceedings. The central feature of the forum was a monumental column, known as the Column of Theodosius. The column was topped by a statue of Theodosius I, symbolizing his authority and power. Over time, the forum suffered from earthquakes and fires, and its structures were gradually destroyed. Today, only a certain number of fragments and remnants of the original forum complex have survived. In time, some architectural elements, fragments and sculptures were object of reuse and moved in new buildings in the nearby, some others were moved to other locations and some others were brought to the Istanbul Archaeology Museums, where they are visible in the collections.

The known sequence of earthquakes that gradually destroyed the forum covers about three centuries, with three hard seismic events in 478, 558 and 740 A.D. in between of them a series of restorations and reuse interventions tried to keep the monument into use until the final abandon and decay. These disastrous events had a strong impact on the will of monumentalization of the area, thus the reuse and the adaptation of the complex was probably a constant all across the time until the final dismiss and abandon.

In present time the Forum appears like a series of neglected fragments left to themselves in the continuous flow of people, citizens and visitors that in most of the cases barely known about the origins of these huge and massive stones left along the pedestrian area and often used for sitting, taking a rest, leaving trash or even having food and drinks in between and on them. The growth of grass and plants is quite chaotic, and the positioning of the fragments looks more similar to a casual storage than to any set design concept.

In recent time a new courtyard, brought to the construction of a new library and to the reorganization of the large set of fragments, something that, at the moment of this writing, is ongoing, even if, from the graphic and premises, it seems an intervention with no significant influence in the general setup of the ruins, which appear like a series of bulk masses to be outflanked.

Digital intervention and interpretation

In the past various scholars have documented, described and tried hypothetical rebuilds from these fragments, giving interesting interpretations to the original organization of the area. In July 2023, with a specific workshop organized by the Özyeğin University in Istanbul a group of students and professors operated a first digitalization of the area and started a new reading of the system of fragments present in the area, using digital survey based on lasergrammetry and photogrammetry to document and explore the elements and organize them in a coherent archive. Moving from the previous studies an updated interpretation of the archaeological elements was brought on combining an architectural and urban reading, in the try of developing the comprehension of the original setup of the urban tissue in relationship with the monument and in an attempt of reconstructing a proper representation of the monument itself. The use of digital survey tools, combined with speditive direct reading on the elements was fundamental to organize the first set of digital models and develop the interpretation of these partially erratic components. Putting together the reconstructive results with the present positioning of the fragments it is possible to define a sequence between the natural disastrous intervention and the following reuse and repositioning caused by humans.

The proposed contribution will present the first results from this research, bringing to the public, the state of documentation of the place, the results coming from the digital survey, the results coming from the digital reconstruction and the state of development of the reconstruction of the past events.

References

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