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Decoration and Attention in the Forum of Augustus: The Agency of Ancient Imagery Between Ritual and Routine

Abstract: The rich decoration of the Forum of Augustus has been convincingly interpreted as the expression of an iconographic programme conveying political, religious and cultural messages as they were promoted by the first emperor. This approach, while conducive to fundamental insights about Augustan ideology, does not explain how the decoration functioned in actuality. In particular, it fails critically to consider the relationship between the forum's pervasive imagery and the ritual practices and routine activities that were meant to take place within the forum's framework. With the help of well-known, but hitherto underutilised evidence, this paper argues that, in order to understand the kinds of attention commanded by the various components of the forum's imagery, and thereby to fully appreciate its impact, we need to focus closely on the interaction between space, decoration and viewers in the context of such practices and activities. Furthermore, by taking into account not only the correspondences, but also the discrepancies between decoration and social practices, this paper proposes a more complex interpretive model for understanding ancient *ornamenta* – one that both incorporates and goes beyond traditional iconological approaches.

Ancient Roman monuments had agency – or at least this is what the Romans thought. An exemplary instance of this claim is provided by the Claudian relief that Lucos Cozza reconstructed in the 1950s by assembling, with the help of plaster casts, two fragments incorporated into the façade of Villa Medici (Fig. 1)[1]. The scene depicts a sacrifice taking place at the Forum of Augustus in the centre of Rome. The location can be identified easily thanks to the representation of an octastyle temple with its architectural sculpture: it is the Temple of Mars Ultor – Mars the Avenger – inaugurated by Augustus in 2 B.C. The temple is, however, much more than a topographical indicator, let alone a component of the background. In fact, it is one of the main protagonists of the scene. The crowd of participants in the sacrifice opens up, parting in two, as it were, to permit the building to display itself in full magnificence. The temple thus becomes an actor, on the same level as the humans – something that is best demonstrated by the fact that, against any concern for perspectival or proportional verisimilitude, the temple overlaps with one of the togate figures on the right, just as the people on the left do with each other. In other words, the building, with its altar, has a presence of its own and stands on par with the other figures: it comes to life, almost elbowing its way towards the foreground in the crowd.

Most relevant, the temple's active prominence in the ritual is both echoed and reinforced by the careful and detailed rendering of its decoration, figurative and abstract alike – from the figure of Mars flanked by Venus, Fortuna and other mythological characters on the pediment to the *fasciae* and mouldings of the entablature, not to speak of the leaves, *helices*, volutes and abacus flowers of the Corinthian capitals. These details do not simply confirm the temple's identity; they also confer

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1 Villa Medici relief: Hommel 1954, 22–30; Cozza 1958; Koeppel 1983, 98–101; Quante-Schöttler 2002, 34–41; Kaderka 2018, 145–162. A proper discussion of the role of ornamental detail in this scene should take into account the relief's own character as an image that originally decorated (together with other such images) a now lost monument. For reasons of space, and given the uncertainties concerning this structure, the present chapter will focus on only one of the possible layers of analysis. For the monument and the other reliefs that can be attributed to it, see Torelli 1982, 63–88; Koeppel 1983, 72–76. 98–116; La Rocca 1992; 1994; Quante-Schöttler 2002, 26–54; Maderna 2010, 75–77. 313 f.; La Rocca 2019, 132–134.
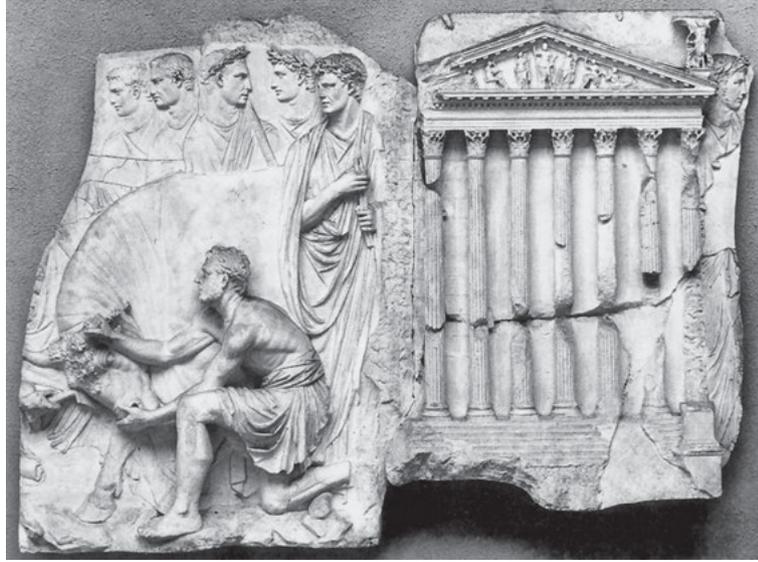
Fig. 1: Plaster cast reconstruction of a Claudian relief with the temple of Mars Ultor.

to the building a distinctive vibrancy as it becomes involved as a protagonist in the cultic activity. Decoration plays a key role in the constitution of the temple's agency.

In light of the prominence of the building in the image and the density of its decoration, it is all the more remarkable that no one within the relief itself appears to be looking at it. The profusion of ornamental details that characterises the temple does not seem to have been meant for an internal viewer, but rather addresses us as external spectators of the whole scene: we are implicitly invited to focus our attention on the temple, recognising it and appreciating the rich vividness of its decoration at the same time.

This relief thus appears to provide corroboration, from an ancient perspective, of theories of agency of images and things as they have been developed by art historians and other scholars over the past few decades[2]. Its value for us, however, does not reside so much in its alleged validating role of current scholarly trends: rather, it is its potential to modify and enrich our views and make us ask new questions that matters most for our purposes. In this respect, what is especially remarkable is the fact that, despite the absence of viewers within the scene, the relief does not present the temple's agency as an absolute element; the building comes to life insofar as it is a *participant* in the ritual, i. e., insofar as it is placed in relation to the other protagonists of the event. To use the notion discussed by Annette Haug in the introduction to this volume, the 'action context' is crucial for the building's decoration to express its full potential[3]. From this point of view, the presence of viewers within the scene is a variable of subordinate import. At the same time, and almost paradoxically, this perspective discloses the possibility of assessing in a more nuanced way the roles of viewing and perception vis-à-vis both the temple decoration itself and the circumstances under which this decoration was experienced. As this chapter will argue, the focus on the action context in which viewing took place allows us to treat the idea of appropriateness (which is constitutive for any ancient notion of decoration) as more than just a convenient hermeneutic device to reconstruct the abstract meaning of iconographic 'programmes'. Instead, and quite fundamentally, this focus invites us to understand appropriateness as a dynamic principle that, through its embeddedness in real social practices, governs the functioning of ornament in actuality – a quality of *decor* of

2 As is well known, the notion of the agency of objects has gained traction in art historical studies thanks mainly to Gell 1998. Further relevant contributions have come from work on reception and response, thing theory, studies of materiality and research on embodiment: e. g., Freedberg 1989; Brown 2001; 2004; Bennett 2010. Two important collections of essays focused on classical antiquity are Bielfeldt 2014 and Gaifman et al. 2018.
3 See Haug, this volume.

which the Romans themselves were well aware. Evidence for how this principle worked is provided by ancient images (the relief with the depiction of the Temple of Mars, but also, for example, the Forum Anaglyphs) as well as written documents, such as the charter of the Temple of Mars Ultor, which have been hitherto relatively neglected by art historians. In this perspective, even modes of viewing that are seemingly unconcerned with the intended 'meaning' of the forum's decoration (specifically, those attested by legal documents from the Vesuvian cities), far from representing deviant or degraded forms of reception, can be seen as integral to the web of communicative strategies presupposed by the decorative apparatus of the space.

A key role in this context is played by the notion of attention. Attention has been investigated in other fields – e. g., in relation to the visual culture of the 19th and 20th centuries – but still awaits exhaustive examination with regard to ancient art[4]. More generally, it has not been related systematically to studies of ornament and decoration. In a certain sense, this is understandable. Traditional readings of ornament suggest that it is secondary, superfluous, tendentially content-less and/ or resisting interpretation, and thus not intended to draw focused attention. Its semantic charge is (or should be) low, or at any rate lower than that of the decorated object. As soon as we focus our attention on the details of ornament and examine its significance on its own terms, we *de facto* stop treating it as such. Treating ornament *qua* ornament and not paying focused attention to it seem to be tightly correlated. But is that really so? In fact, the situation is more complex. In ancient Roman thinking, the subordination of ornament to that which it decorates – its relational character – does not have pejorative connotations *a priori*; on the contrary, *ornamentum* (with cognate words) is understood primarily in terms of enhancement and expression of status, if not outright constitution of it; as for *decor* (and related terms), the emphasis is on the aspect of appropriateness, as already mentioned. Ornament in Rome, whether abstract or not, is meaningful almost by definition: in fact, it is precisely its specific relevance that makes it suitable to be attributed to an object, or a person[5]. In other words, meaningfulness – which is not necessarily always translatable into verbalised 'meaning' – is an intrinsic quality of ancient ornament, which therefore deserves, even requires, attention. But what kind of attention did decoration, thus understood, elicit? As this chapter will show, the range of possibilities is broad and conditioned by several factors, prominent among which is the relationship between the character of the decorative elements and the action contexts in which they are involved[6].

The best starting point for any discussion of the meaningfulness of the Forum of Augustus' decoration is another representation of it: not an ancient one, though, but a modern one – in fact, what is arguably *the* most influential modern representation of the Forum of Augustus, namely Paul Zanker's diagram visualising the forum's iconographic programme (Fig. 2). Just over fifty years old (it was first published in 1968), this diagram has been adopted and adapted countless times in scholarly literature, irrespective of translations, new and more nuanced interpretations and even new developments with respect to the archaeological evidence[7].

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4 Of primary importance among art historical studies on attention are Crary 1990 and 1999; see also Arasse 1992; Zschocke 2006; Löffler 2014. In recent years, attention has also been an object of study in the fields of rhetoric, sociology, philosophy and literature: e. g., Assmann – Assmann 2001; Seebert 2012; Möller 2013; Schroer 2014; Wu 2014.
5 *Ornamentum*: cf. Moussy 1996; von Hesberg 1996; Thomas 1999; Gros 2006b; Moussy 2008; Estienne 2010. On *decor*, see footnotes 8 and 9.
6 In the following, the discussion will focus almost entirely on figurative decoration. A proper treatment of abstract ornament would require more space than is possible in this context. However, given the typical Augustan tendency towards the semantisation of ornamental motifs, the conclusions of the present chapter can claim a more general validity for this time period.
7 The diagram was originally published in Zanker 1968, Pl. A. Subsequent reproductions (and variants) include: Zanker 1987 and its many translations; Hofter 1988, 198 Fig. 87; Kuttner 1995, Fig. 123; Favro 1996, 96 Fig. 50; Galinsky 1996, 198 Fig. 111; Spannagel 1999, Pl. 1, 2; Knell 2004, 80 Fig. 89; Barchiesi 2005, 283 Fig. 49; Pollini 2012, 22 Fig. 1.3; Goldbeck 2014, 207 Figs. 30 and 31; von den Hoff et al. 2014, 199 Fig. 50.
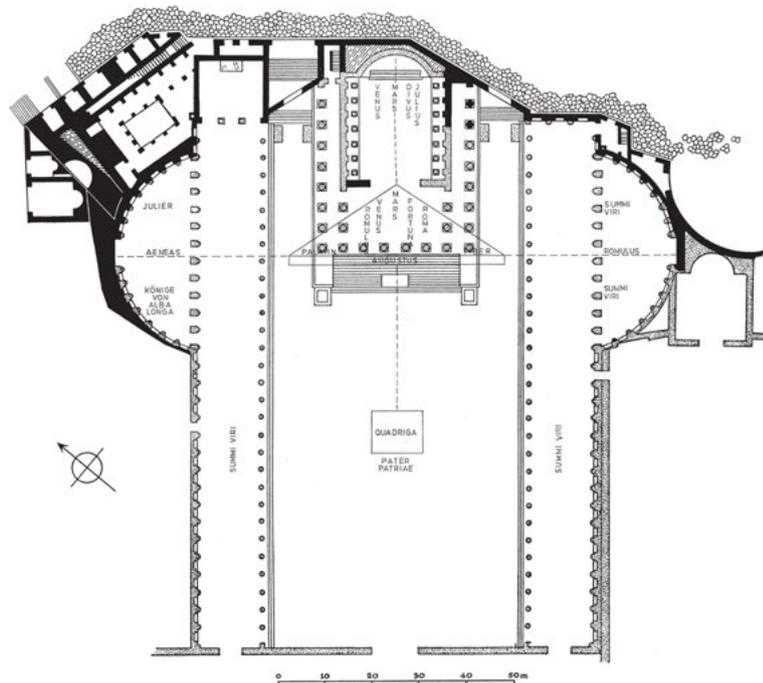
Fig. 2: Diagram with the iconographic programme of the Forum of Augustus, from Zanker 1968.

There are two main reasons for the ongoing success of the diagram. One is the fact that, in its insightful simplicity, it is based on a historically sound, sophisticated and overall persuasive understanding of the forum's imagery. Zanker manages to place the figurative decoration of the forum within the conceptual constellation of Augustan ideology by highlighting all of its relevant components. From the parallel stress on the origins of Rome and the Julian family (embodied by Romulus and Aeneas, respectively) to the celebration of Roman history in its exemplary fullness; from the many allusions to piety to its combination with the sphere of war, the forum functions as a perfect showcase for the ideals and values upheld by the first *princeps*. A number of themes – military valour and success, peaceful devotion, noble ancestry (both civic and gentilician), divine protection, reconciliation and the redressing of wrongdoing, the sense of the past – resonate from one corner to the other and from one image to the next, culminating in the figure of Augustus himself. Subsequent scholarship has modified, refined and added nuance to Zanker's interpretation, but no one has questioned it.

The second reason for the success of the diagram has to do with the fact that it is an early (and in many respects paradigmatic) incarnation of the 'iconographic programme', an idea that became popular in European scholarship focusing on ancient art in the 1970s and 1980s, when iconology provided a particularly influential hermeneutic paradigm. To be clear: the notion of a programme underlying the visual apparatus of the forum and its layout is not unsubstantiated. Ancient writers imply that Augustus himself was the author of the forum's inscriptions; anecdotes attest to the emperor's personal interest in the construction process of the complex. In other words, one can legitimately argue for the existence of circumstances in antiquity that are as close as one might hope to those that obtain in cases à la Erwin Panofsky, in which patrons (with or without counsellors) are deeply involved in the production of meaning through imagery – regardless of the degree of credibility and accuracy that one may want to accord to particular pieces of evidence[8]. At the same

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[8] On Augustus' involvement in the planning and construction of his forum: Plin. HN 22, 13; Macr. Sat. 2, 4, 9. A study that highlights the patronage dynamics underlying the creation of iconographic programmes in an exemplary fashion is Settis 2010. For a (partial) account of iconological approaches in Classical archaeology, see, recently, Isler-Kerényi 2015.

time, however, it bears emphasising that the popularity of this diagram is indicative of broader trends and attitudes in archaeological scholarship, and it is in this capacity that it is relevant for the present purpose. In particular, the reduction of the forum's visually abundant decoration to a series of verbal labels embodies in a powerful way the widespread idea of an encoded 'message' intended for the viewer (in the first place its scholarly representative, the art historian) to decipher.

Against this background, it is all the more interesting that the latest reproduction of Zanker's diagram is featured in the concluding chapter of Tonio Hölscher's *Visual Power in Ancient Greece and Rome*, a chapter devoted to '*decor*'. Given Hölscher's relativising of his own previous emphasis on semiology, his use of the diagram may appear surprising at first[9]. Yet, as a paradigmatic instance of a consistent, self-contained and carefully devised programme, the Forum of Augustus embodies Hölscher's notion of the autonomy, even autarchy, of ancient figurative decoration, the value and function of which does not depend on its full intelligibility by actual viewers, but rather its appropriateness to the space (building, monument) that it decorates[10]. From this perspective, the conformity of the Forum of Augustus' imagery to the celebratory functions of the complex is enough to justify its existence, regardless of how many (or few) historical viewers would have actually looked at all of the details, let alone understood them.

The main implication of such an approach, which makes a clear distinction between the expressive nature of figurative decoration and its communicative dimension (positing the primacy of the former aspect over the latter), is that the detailed reception of the imagery's content almost becomes a side-effect of its decorative function. As a consequence, a potential gap, if not a dichotomy, has to be posited between the original 'message' or 'messages' encoded in the decoration and their actual comprehension by the viewers and users of the forum. Only very few visitors to the forum in antiquity would have been interested in, let alone able to grasp, the thematic range of the imagery in its full complexity. This situation is heuristically productive insofar as it opens the space to consider a whole array of further potential 'readings' and 'gazes': partial, non-conformist, resisting, subversive and so on. At the same time, however, it is crucial that even the most radically alternative modes of reception be considered in relation to the official meaning and purpose of the decoration. It is in this respect that the circumstances of viewing – the action contexts – play a key role.

In the case of the Forum of Augustus we are particularly fortunate because we have evidence that provides information on precisely this subject. We owe to the Vesuvian eruption, among many other things, the preservation of a substantial number of testimonies about the reception of the forum's decoration in the context of judicial activity, namely the inscribed wax tablets found in Herculaneum and in the suburbs of Pompeii. As is well known, these tablets are legal documents that were part of the private archives of individuals living in the Vesuvian cities and in Puteoli. A certain number of them concerned *vadimonia*, the formal requests to defendants to appear at a certain place and time to engage in legal procedures. In several instances, either the nature of the disputed matter (e. g., freeborn status) or the amount of money involved required the case to be heard not by local magistrates, but by the *praetor* in Rome. These documents are highly relevant for the purposes of this chapter because they explicitly mention monuments and statues of the Forum of Augustus, where the *praetor* had his seat[11].

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9 Hölscher 2018, 299–333 (esp. 329 for the diagram with the Forum of Augustus). Previous steps in Hölscher's engagement with the notions of *decor* and *decorum* are: Hölscher 2004, 21–23; 2009; 2015. For his semiological approach see, most famously, Hölscher 1987, as well as Hölscher 2000. Crucial for Hölscher's approach to decoration is the notion of 'presence,' on which see Belting 2001; Gumbrecht 2004; Fielitz 2012.

10 The pioneering work revealing the fruitfulness of the principle of *decorum* for interpretive purposes was Neudecker 1988. Cf. moreover Perry 2005, 28–77; Bravi 2013.

11 The authoritative editions of the tablets are Camodeca 2017 (Herculaneum, THerc: in progress) and 1999 (Sulpicii archive, TPSulp), both with a copious bibliography. On *vadimonia*, see Kaser – Hackl 1996, 226–231; Metzger 2000; Donadio 2011 (for *vadimonia* in the Forum of Augustus, see also Neudecker 2010).

In some cases, the agreed venue is the tribunal of the *praetor* himself. More often, however, reference is made to one of the monumental components of the forum. Understandably, the Temple of Mars is well represented in this context. So, for example, in A.D. 75 Calatorius Spendon, the legal representative of a woman from Herculaneum, Calatoria Themis, was summoned 'to Rome in the Forum of Augustus, in front of the Temple of Mars Ultor (*Romae in foro Augusto ante aede Martis Ultoris*) at the third hour' on March 12th in the context of a lawsuit in which another woman, Petronia Iusta, claimed to have been born free rather than as a slave of Calatoria Themis. On an unspecified year of the mid-1st century B.C., one Gaius Publicius Carus promised to appear 'in Rome in the Forum of Augustus in front of the altar of Mars Ultor, near the steps (*Romae in foro Augusto ante aram Martis Ultoris proxume gradus*), at the fourth hour' on 19 November[12].

But the Forum of Augustus provided many other reference points. Another citizen of Herculaneum, P. Marius Crescens, promised to Q. Herennius Capito that he would appear 'in Rome, in the Forum of Augustus, in front of the statue of Diana Lucifera, near the tenth column (*Romae in foro Augusto ante signum Dianae Luciferae ad columnam X*), at the fifth hour' on an unknown day. On January 31st, A.D. 40, the Puteolan banker Gaius Sulpicius Faustus had to appear 'in Rome in the Forum of Augustus in front of the statue of Gracchus, near the fourth column close to the steps (*Romae in foro Augusto ante statuam Gracci ad columnam quartam proxume gradus*), at the ninth hour'. In this latter case, the statue was one of the *summi viri* of Republican times (the consul of 177 and 163 B.C.) that belonged to the original programme devised by Augustus. Additionally, monuments set up in later periods could quickly become reference points. This is the case for a statue mentioned in *vadimonia* concerning an Alexandrian, Trupho, son of Potamo, who promises to Gaius Sulpicius Cinnamus (a freedman and *procurator* of the aforementioned Faustus) that he will appear 'in Rome in the Forum of Augustus, in front of the triumphal statue of Gnaeus Sentius Saturninus (*Romae in foro Augusto ante statuam Cn. Sentii Saturnini triumphalem*)' on March 17th or 20th, and the 30th of September, at the fifth and the third hour, respectively. This statue was erected only in A.D. 44, to honour Saturninus for the important role he had had in the conquest of Britain the year before[13].

In sum, several documents attest to the reception of the forum's components and imagery by ancient visitors to the complex. What is particularly striking about these testimonies is the combination of precision of detail with the apparent lack of interest in the subject matter (or the function) of the monuments decorating the forum. Quite likely, the choice of reference points was not completely random, but took into account their visibility and identifiability within a crowded visual landscape. It is even possible, although not provable, that the locations of *vadimonia* concerning specific categories (or sets of categories) of legal cases were relatively stable. What is evident in any case is that there was no strong intrinsic correspondence between the nature of the case and the subject or character of the chosen monument. The link seems to have been mainly an arbitrary one as far as 'meaning' was concerned, and was probably determined by mostly practical factors, such as the proximity of a monument to the tribunal of the competent magistrate. This is particularly true of the statue of Saturninus, which occurs in more than one *vadimonium*; as noted above, the statue was not part of the original programme and must have become a convenient venue mainly because of its prominent location within the forum. At least from the perspective of the documents cited – and therefore also that of the forum's common users (that is, the historically attested users) – the actual content of the decorative imagery did not really matter; the identity of the statues was relevant only insofar as it ensured orientation, thus providing safe and shared reference points for the litigants' meetings.

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12 For the examples mentioned in the text, see THerc 15 (*vadimonium* of Calatorius Spendon); TPSulp 15 (*vadimonium* of C. Publicius Carus). See also THerc 14 (*vadimonium* of Calatoria Themis, 3 December, A.D. 74: *Romae in foro Augusto ante tribunal praetoris urbani*).
13 For the examples mentioned in the text, see THerc 6 (*vadimonium* of P. Marius Crescenes); TPSulp 19 (*vadimonium* of C. Sulpicius Faustus); TPSulp 14 (*vadimonium* of Trupho).

The documents pertaining to the legal life of the Forum of Augustus would thus seem to prove the point made above; in fact, they may even go beyond that. As concerns reception, the figurative decoration of the forum – its 'iconographic programme' – was experienced very selectively, in a process characterised by fragmentation and atomisation. The imagery served purely instrumental, utilitarian and practical purposes. Focused attention on details was combined with a lack of interest in their intended meaning, or even a disregard for any meaning at all.

There is, however, a risk inherent in this approach, and that is to perpetuate (albeit in a variant version and with a reversal of hierarchies) the same separation between conceptual content and experienced form that underlies the devaluation of ornament and its relegation to the realm of superfluous *parergon* in Kantian and neo-Kantian hermeneutic systems, such as the ones that ultimately are at the root of scholarly iconological paradigms[14]. If the actual reception of the imagery's meaning was of subordinate importance for the ancient patrons of a monument or building (as a reductionist reading of Hölscher's views would imply); if content and subject matter – i. e., the 'message' – could be so easily misunderstood or even ignored, as the legal documents from Herculaneum and Pompeii suggest, then we have to assume that the specific semantic charge of decoration was largely irrelevant from the point of view of its efficacy, and that the Augustan regime would have been able to live and thrive with much less wealth of ornamental detail. In this view, the communicative effects of figurative decoration are mainly to be assessed in terms of failure – failure to achieve the impossible goals set by the concept underlying their creation – and therefore to be understood as superfluous and ultimately dispensable. We would have to surmise that the Romans, due to an aprioristic adherence to their own understanding of *ornamentum* and *decor*, were either unaware of, or uninterested in, the actual impact of the imagery decorating spaces such as the Forum of Augustus. Even though this is not impossible *per se*, such a scenario is hard to reconcile with the evidence of the diffusion of the forum's imagery beyond Rome[15].

A way out of this quandary is provided by the very wax tablets that seem to support this narrative of failure. If carefully considered, they do not simply provide evidence for the *viewers* of the forum's imagery, but also (and primarily), for its *users*. On the one hand, what we call 'viewing' is in fact a complex phenomenon that subsumes a whole range of more specific actions, such as counting the columns, locating the altar, reading the inscriptions, examining the iconography, scrutinising the portrait features and so on. On the other, viewing is itself part of a broader set of activities that are meaningfully carried out in the context of the judicial life of the forum. In other words, the *circumstances* under which the forum's imagery was experienced – the 'action contexts', to use Haug's terminology – as they were determined by the social activities and practices that took place within it, were just as important as the act of viewing, and affected it in decisive and profound ways[16].

The artists of the Imperial period were very much aware of this aspect, even after Augustus. The most eloquent examples can be found in the Forum Anaglyphs, the famous reliefs from the Hadrianic period that functioned as balustrades flanking the entrance to a precinct, most likely in the Forum Romanum (Figs. 3–4)[17]. The reliefs show two scenes taking place in the Forum itself. In the first, Hadrian is announcing a distribution of largesse – *liberalitas* – to an audience of senators,

14 Degler 2015 provides a stimulating recent discussion of the notion of *parergon* (for antiquity, see Platt – Squire 2017).
15 On the diffusion of forum's imagery in Italy and the provinces, see the bibliography cited in note 29, as well as Kockel 2005; Zevi – Valeri 2008; Dardenay 2011; Palma Venetucci 2011.
16 In all likelihood, the exclusivity of the focus on the 'viewer' in so much art historical scholarship of the last thirty years is due not only to the need for analytical sharpness, but is also (at least in part) the consequence of the prevalence of the disembodied visual dimension – the virtual – in our contemporary world. Scholarship on viewers and viewing in Roman antiquity includes, with different perspectives and approaches, Bergmann 1994; Zanker 1994; Elsner 1995; Zanker 1997; Veyne 2002; Clarke 2003; Stewart 2003; Elsner 2007; Hölscher 2012; Perry 2015; Squire 2015.
17 Forum Anaglyphs: Rüdiger 1973; Torelli 1982, 89–118; Koeppel 1986, 2–5. 17–24; Spinola 1990, 15 f.; Köb 2000, 130–139; Hölscher 2002, 141 f.; Quante-Schöttler 2002, 155–173; Sinn 2010, 184 f. 333 f.; Brown 2020. The date of the anaglyphs is not certain, even though most scholars prefer a Trajanic one: I argue for a Hadrianic chronology in a forthcoming article.

Fig. 3: Forum Anaglyphs: imperial *adlocutio* concerning the *alimenta*.

equestrians and plebeians gathered in front of him; in the other, he publicly sets fire to the tablets recording the debts owed to the state by Roman citizens. Quite remarkably, the same set of monuments occurs in both reliefs, namely a fig-tree and a statue of Marsyas. Their presence here is not accidental and is only partially owed to the fact that they were themselves part of the landscape of the forum. The fig-tree, the *ficus Ruminalis* of Romulus and Remus, was associated with the origins of Rome and the Comitium, the Republican place of political discussion: it was an emblem of Roman citizenship[18]. The statue of Marsyas, with broken shackles at his feet, was a symbol of *libertas*, or freedom. Perhaps not coincidentally, it was also related to debt, being the meeting point for usurers[19]. Both monuments were thus connected closely with the events concerning civic freedom (more precisely: freedom from need and freedom from debts) taking place nearby, which in turn were linked strongly to the idea of citizenship. The emphasis accorded to these monuments clearly depended upon the specific character of the activities staged in their proximity. Something similar can be said for the statuary group visible in the largesse scene, with a personification of Italia presenting children to a seated emperor. It likely celebrated Trajan's institution of the *alimenta*, a provision for the poor children of Italy, and is the only monument in the forum's central area to be singled out and represented in the relief.

What is especially interesting in these scenes, however, is not simply the way the activities represented resonate with the highlighted monuments, but the fact that other components of the forum's decoration are 'toned down' and thus recede into the background. The setting of the activities in the Forum Romanum is made certain by the representation of the *rostra* at both ends and by the various buildings and monuments that lined the Forum's southern border: the Arch of Augustus, Temple of the Dioscuri, Basilica Iulia (spanning both reliefs), Temple of Saturn, an arch framing the path leading to the Capitol, the Temple of Vespasian and the Temple of Concord (largely lost at the damaged end of the record-burning relief). Even though their identification is certain by virtue of their general appearance and their position in the sequence, if one looks at them more closely one notices that all have been stripped of their decoration: there are no *quadrigae* on the tops of the arches, no figures in the pediments and no *acroteria* on the roofs of the temples. Even the exact number of columns in the temple façades seems to have been an irrelevant feature in this context. So, for example, the Temple of the Dioscuri does not have eight columns, but five (not even six, which would at least have been an even number, as is normal for a temple façade). The entablature of the Temple of Vespasian has not only lost its frieze with sacrificial utensils, but also the three

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18 Fig-tree of the Comitium: LTUR 2 (1995) 248 f. s. v. *Ficus Navia* (F. Coarelli).
19 Marsyas statue: LTUR 4 (1999) 364 f. s. v. *Statua: Marsyas* (F. Coarelli). Marsyas and the *faeneratores*: Hor. sat. 1, 6, 120–121 (with *scholia* of Ps.Acro and Porph. ad loc.).

fasciae of the architrave. The Temple of Saturn does not display any of the Tritons that decorated its *acroteria*, a detail we know from Macrobius[20].

The oddly modernist flavour of this interpretation of Roman architecture stands in contrast with the careful rendering (twice) of the fig-tree and the Marsyas statue. It would be easy to conclude that, according to the conception of the sculptors of these reliefs, the activities staged in the forum triggered a selective focus on the surroundings. Such a view presupposes an understanding of attention as the crucial factor in a zero-sum game, one very much in line with current theories that conceptualise attention as a 'scarce resource', a precious good that is the object of competition; i. e., one pays attention to certain details to the detriment of others. However, one needs to be cautious about such an interpretation of the anaglyphs.

In the first place, this is because of the risk of anachronism. The theories described above are heavily permeated by an economic logic – a fact that is made explicit by the titles of several recent books[21]. This is not simply the consequence of the prominence, if not the tyranny, of economic paradigms in contemporary thinking; there are also deeper roots in modern European linguistic conventions. Here, attention can be understood as a kind of currency ('to pay attention', 'payer attention'); it can also be talked about in terms of loans ('to lend attention', 'prêter attention', 'prestare attenzione') or as a toll ('Aufmerksamkeit zollen'); and it can even be presented as a gift ('Aufmerksamkeit schenken'). In all these cases, attention is conceived as a good with its own autonomous existence which can be made the object of exchange. In antiquity, the situation was radically different. Not only did those nouns that can be considered approximate equivalents of 'attention', such as προσοχή or *attentio*, have a more limited range of uses and applications, the act of paying attention (προσέχειν τὸν νοῦν, *animum advertere*) was conceptualised rather as an internal disposition of the mind, an attitude that affected the inner self. This attitude could be induced, no doubt (and much of ancient rhetoric focuses precisely on how to achieve this goal), but could not be the object of a transaction.

More fundamentally, just as in the case of the Villa Medici relief discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the Forum Anaglyphs do not show anyone looking at the monuments being represented. The focus of attention is in both cases placed upon the emperor and the actions he performs or orders, not the statues and other landmarks of the place. The purpose of the drastic reduction

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20 Temple of the Dioscuri: Nilson – Sande 2008; cf. also LTUR 1 (1993) 242–245 s. v. *Castor*, *aedes*, *templum* (I. Nielsen). Temple of Vespasian: De Angeli 1992; cf. also LTUR 5 (1999) 124 f. s. v. *Vespasianus*, *Divus*, *templum* (S. De Angeli). Temple of Saturn: Macr. Sat. 1.8.4; see also LTUR 4 (1999) 234–236 s. v. *Saturnus*, *aedes* (F. Coarelli).
21 See, e. g., Franck 1998 ('Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit'); Lanham 2006 ('The Economics of Attention'); Wu 2016 ('The Attention Merchants').

in the ornamental detail of the surrounding architecture, therefore, is not to underscore the monuments' competition for a 'scarce resource' (in this case, the attention of the Roman citizens in the scene). Quite to the contrary, it is a way in which the various buildings lining the southern side of the Forum Romanum attenuate their individual identity – an identity that was made manifest through the architectural decoration – in favour of a *collective* definition of the forum as a civic space. In their lack of individual profiling, the buildings of the forum respond to the acts of *liberalitas* carried out in front of them, as do the Marsyas statue, the fig-tree and the group with Italia, her children and the emperor, by coming to the fore. In other words, the Forum Anaglyphs are permeated by that correspondence between ornamental content and the functions of a space that underlies ancient theories of *decorum*, as well as their reinterpretation by Tonio Hölscher. Most importantly, this correspondence is made manifest through the activities – the action contexts – depicted in the scenes. And just as in the case of the relief with the Temple of Mars Ultor, the absence of internal viewers of the monuments' decoration does not imply a devaluation of viewing; it is the external, 'real' viewer who is invited to establish the correspondence, and whose attention is guided in the process by the varying degree of detail.

At the same time, these examples allow us to go beyond Hölscher's model, helping us avoid a risk that is inherent in understandings of *decorum* in terms of abstract, 'programmatic' appropriateness. This risk can be described as follows: if we, as scholars, assume without further qualification the constant existence of a meaningful relationship between the imagery and the functions of a given space, we will always be able to find such a relationship, no matter how far-fetched. Quite apart from the danger of hermeneutic circles, the issue is that such a way of proceeding blinds us to the fact that the nature of the relationships thus established can differ widely from case to case, and that these relationships may be characterised by various degrees of intensity, semantic and otherwise. The representations of monuments and buildings on the Forum Anaglyphs remind us that the nature of any space ultimately is the outcome of the interaction between the physical features of that space (its layout, architecture and decoration) and the human activities, social practices and occasional actions that take place within it[22]. The dynamics of this interaction are by no means unidirectional: activities and social practices affect the understanding of the space and its imagery via the attention of the human actors; but, in turn, the imagery also affects the way in which activities are perceived and experienced. Moreover, this process is a complex phenomenon: some elements become more strongly emphasised, others are downplayed – and to different degrees, as well as at different times. In other words, any theory or model of *decorum* cannot focus solely on the correspondences between decoration and function, but needs to take into account and incorporate also the discrepancies, as well as all the varying levels of correspondence between these extremes. Appropriateness is not a given, but an ideal that needs to be actively produced and reproduced.

To illustrate this point, let us return to the Forum of Augustus[23]. It is quite striking, but perhaps not entirely surprising, that scholars interested in its ideological programme have generally failed to appreciate, and exploit for interpretative purposes, the strong relationship that exists between the forum's imagery and the Temple of Mars Ultor's charter – its *lex templi*. A substantial portion of this charter has been transmitted by a Byzantine excerpt of Cassius Dio[24]:

... Ἄρει, ἑαυτὸν δὲ καὶ τοὺς ἐγγόνους, ὁσάκις ἂν ἐθελήσωσι, τούς τε ἐκ τῶν παίδων ἐξιόντας καὶ ἐς τοὺς ἐφήβους ἐγγραφομένους ἐκεῖσε πάντως ἀφικνεῖσθαι, καὶ τοὺς ἐπὶ τὰς ἀρχὰς τὰς ἐκδήμους στελλομένους ἐκεῖθεν ἀφορμᾶσθαι, τάς τε γνώμας τὰς περὶ τῶν νικητηρίων ἐκεῖ τὴν βουλὴν ποιεῖσθαι, καὶ τοὺς πέμψαντας αὐτὰ τῷ Ἄρει

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22 On the socially constructed and relational nature of space, see Lefebvre 1974; Löw 2001; Schroer 2006 (for theories of space, see also, more generally, Dünne – Günzel 2006).

23 On the Forum of Augustus in general, see Zanker 1968; 1987; Hofter 1988; La Rocca 1995, esp. 74–87; Ganzert 1996; LTUR 2 (1995) 289–295 s. v. *Forum Augustum* (V. Kockel); Spannagel 1999; as well as the literature mentioned in the following footnotes. On its functions: Köb 2000, 225–268; Carnabuci 2010; Neudecker 2010. For a presentation of the most recent excavations, see Meneghini 2009; Meneghini – Santangeli Valenzani 2007; 2010.

24 Cass. Dio 55, 10, 2–5, translation by E. Cary 1917, 407.

τούτῳ καὶ τὸ σκῆπτρον καὶ τὸν στέφανον ἀνατιθέναι, καὶ ἐκείνους τε καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους τοὺς τὰς ἐπινικίους τιμὰς λαμβάνοντας ἐν τῇ ἀγορᾷ χαλκοῦς ἵστασθαι, ἄν τέ ποτε σημεῖα στρατιωτικὰ ἐς πολεμίους ἁλόντα ἀνακομισθῇ, ἐς τὸν ναὸν αὐτὰ τίθεσθαι, καὶ πανήγυρίν τινα πρὸς τοῖς ἀναβασμοῖς αὐτοῦ ὑπὸ τῶν ἀεὶ ἱλαρχούντων ποιεῖσθαι, ἧλόν τε αὐτῷ ὑπὸ τῶν τιμητευσάντων προσπήγνυσθαι, καὶ τήν τε παράσχεσιν τῶν ἵππων τῶν ἐς τὴν ἱπποδρομίαν ἀγωνιουμένων καὶ τὴν τοῦ ναοῦ φυλακὴν καὶ βουλευταῖς ἐργολαβεῖν ἐξεῖναι, καθάπερ ἐπί τε τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ Διὸς τοῦ Καπιτωλίου ἐνενομοθέτητο.

'... to Mars, and that he [*sc.* Augustus] himself and his grandsons should go there [*sc.* to the Forum of Augustus] as often as they wished, while those who were passing from the class of boys and were being enrolled among the youths of military age should invariably do so; that those who were sent out to commands abroad should make that their starting-point; that the Senate should take its votes there in regard to the granting of triumphs, and that the victors after celebrating them should dedicate to this Mars their sceptre and their crown; that such victors and all others who received triumphal honours should have their statues in bronze erected in the forum; that in case military standards captured by the enemy were ever recovered they should be placed in the temple; that a festival should be celebrated beside the steps of the temple by the cavalry commanders each year; that a nail should be driven into it by the censors at the close of their terms; and that even senators should have the right of contracting to supply the horses that were to compete in the Circensian games, and also to take general charge of the temple, just has had been provided by law in the case of the Temples of Apollo and Jupiter Capitolinus.'

A series of common themes – citizenship, the succession of generations, time and history, projection outside of Rome, war and triumph, the care of the cult and of course the figure of the emperor – characterises both the images of the forum and the charter's prescriptions, and helps us understand how the attention of the visitors to the forum could be directed towards certain features and connotations. Thus, the conspicuous sight of Augustus' image in the *quadriga* in the centre of the piazza (as well as the colossal statue of his *genius* – if this is what it was – in the Hall of the Colossus) must have been vivified by his potential presence *in corpore*, which was favoured by the access privileges mentioned in the charter; the emperor's name, gleaming in golden letters in the dedicatory inscription on the architrave of the Temple of Mars, provided a further connecting element in this respect[25]. The genealogical aspect present in the statues of the Julian *gens* and especially in the group with Aeneas rescuing both his father and his son (but also in the figure of Venus in the pediment) was mirrored by the emphasis placed on the presence of Augustus' heirs and adoptive sons, Gaius and Lucius Caesar[26]. Through its obvious allusion to the imperial brothers, Apelles' painting of the Dioscuri, which was likely displayed in the Hall of the Colossus, would have further underscored the relevance of the pair's presence in the forum, while at the same time drawing attention to their exemplary role as *principes iuventutis*. Not coincidentally, the Roman youths about to become part of the citizen body through their enrolment in the army were granted the same privileges of free access and movement in the forum as the princes, in a hierarchically connoted parallelism[27]. Moreover, as they viewed the numerous statues of the cuirassed and togate *summi viri* populating the forum's niches, the *tirones* were confronted with a sequence of historical incarnations of civic and military virtues, whose paradigmatic and didactic aspect was underscored by the *elogia* personally composed by Augustus[28]. The role of the forum as a setting-off point for generals and provincial governors helps us understand the presence there of the *tituli provinciarum*, attested both by literary sources and archaeological evidence. It also points to the *generative* dimension inherent within the prescriptions of the *lex templi*: the decoration of the forum was not conceived as frozen and immutable; quite to the contrary, it was explicitly open to the future and intended to organically grow over time[29]. The triumphal connota-

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25 For the *quadriga*, see Strocka 2009; for the Colossus, Ungaro 2008.
26 On the genealogical aspect of the Aeneas group: Spannagel 1999, 86–255.
27 On Gaius and Lucius as *principes iuventutis*: Mellado Ribera 2002; Wolters 2002. Painting of Apelles with the Dioscuri: Plin. HN 35, 27; 35, 93 f.
28 *Summi viri*: Spannagel 1999, 256–358 esp. 317–344; Geiger 2008; Shaya 2013.
29 *Tituli provinciarum*: Vell. Pat. 2, 39, 2; CIL VI, 31267. The significance of this aspect of the Forum of Augustus is confirmed by the replicas of its decoration in Italy and the provinces, on which see Goldbeck 2014 (also Gros 2006a; La Rocca 2011).

tions found in much of the imagery – from the shields on the attics to the Victories of the *acroteria*, from the image of Romulus with the spoils of Acron to the *quadriga* of Augustus – were matched by the many military and victory rituals mentioned in the charter, as a consequence of which the Temple of Mars competed with that of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitol[30]. The ritual of the nail insertion by the censors not only marked the passing of time (history being one of the great themes of the whole complex, as mentioned above), but also related to the censors' competence in granting citizenship and therefore controlling the composition of the citizen body, ideally visualised by the statues of the great Romans[31]. The clauses concerning the involvement of equestrians and senators in the ritual and cultic care of the forum have a counterpart in the series of pious Caryatids solemnly overlooking the *area templi*, as well as in the maidens carrying the festoons decorating the *cella* walls[32]. Nor should one forget that the now lost portion of the charter also seems to have regulated sacrifices and other cultic activities, as suggested by the extant words 'to Mars' at its beginning.

As is evident, the links between the charter's prescriptions and the imagery of the forum are manifold and strong. Especially when taken together, they constitute a complex and dense web of semantic relationships in which all components reinforce and augment their reciprocal meaningfulness. Crucial for our purposes is the fact that this web is not simply the outcome of the visual implementation of a conceptual iconographic programme (even though the existence of such a programme should not be denied), but results from the regulation of activities and social practices. The degree of proximity between these two sets of factors – actions and decorative elements – is all the more remarkable if we consider that, although the whole forum was an inaugurated space, it was distinct from the Temple of Mars, to which the *lex* specifically referred. The forum and temple had been inaugurated separately, and each must have had its own charter; but the decoration of the forum appears to have been planned mainly with an eye to the functions of the Temple of Mars[33]. Activities, practices and movements with strong ritual connotations thus found a rather direct visual echo and a monumental confirmation in the imagery of the whole forum, triggering a corresponding degree of attention.

At the same time, we should not expect a perfect equivalence between every formalised activity described in the temple's charter and each single detail of the forum's figurative decoration. Clearly, in each case it is possible to detect a surplus of meaning and significance on both sides of the equation. And in each case the relationship is established on a different level and in different ways. To take just one example, the significance of the Caryatids cannot be reduced to a reflection (and even less to a visualisation) of equestrian and senatorial involvement in the cult: rather than simply mirroring the ritual life of the complex, they complement (and engage with) it through the double reference to the female sphere and to Greece – both of them left unmentioned in the *lex templi* as transmitted by Cassius Dio.

In conclusion, the heuristic potential of this action-related understanding of the principle of *decorum* can best be appreciated if we focus on the main function of the Forum of Augustus, namely the exercise of judicature[34]. This set of activities was in all likelihood also mentioned in the forum's founding *lex*, but appears to be substantially de-emphasised when we consider the imagery of the complex. On the one hand, Suetonius explicitly attests that Augustus built his forum to provide an additional location for the exponentially growing number of judicial cases[35]. On the other, the only significant element in this respect is the epithet of Mars: Ultor, the Avenger[36]. By pointing to the idea of revenge and punishment, the epithet provides an association with justice that at least

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30 On the military functions of the Forum of Augustus, see Bonnefond 1987.

31 On the relevance of the *census* in Augustan ideology, see Kondratieff 2012.

32 Caryatids and maidens with festoons: Hölscher 2007, esp. 119 f.

33 Separate inauguration of the Forum of Augustus and the Temple of Mars: Cass. Dio 55, ind. 6–7; Suet. Aug. 29, 2.

34 Carnabuci 1996; Carnabuci 2006; Neudecker 2010.

35 Suet. Aug. 29, 1–2.

36 On the role of Mars as Ultor, see Siebler 1987; Barchiesi 2002.

in principle is not out of place in a space dedicated to lawsuits and judicial hearings. As a matter of fact, Augustus himself had explicitly linked the two notions in his *Res Gestae*[37]:

> *Qui parentem meum [trucidaver]un[t, eo]s in exilium expuli iudiciis legitimis ultus eorum [fa]cin[us, e]t postea bellum inferentis rei publicae vici b[is a]cie.*

> 'Those who slew my father I drove into exile, punishing their crime by lawful trials, and afterwards when they waged war upon the state I twice defeated them in battle.'

It bears stressing, however, that *ultio* is not a legal term, strictly speaking. The kind of justice that it implied had a different character from the justice that was normally administered in the forum. The military nature of Mars Ultor, as well as dedications like the Parthian standards in the *cella* of the temple, made this difference clear and must have prevented the users of the forum from linking these two dimensions, except on a very abstract level. Most importantly, no strong resonance was established between the judicial life of the complex and its decoration. The griffins heraldically framing a central vegetal stalk on the cult statue's breastplate may have provided a visual counterpart to the concept of *ultio* thanks to their association with Nemesis. This connotation, however, would have been rather weak, since their attribution to the goddess of rightful vengeance, though not to be underestimated, was far from exclusive – particularly under Augustus, when the griffins' links to Apollo would have been much more prevalent[38]. In other words, the judicial activities in the Forum of Augustus had no monumental counterpart that underscored their relevance, amplified the impact of their sight or reminded viewers of their existence whenever they did not take place. It is not coincidental that none of the modern interpretations of the iconographic programme of the forum refer to the judicial sphere.

What are the consequences of such a situation? By not being given a visually direct and semantically correspondent counterpart in the permanent furnishings of the forum, the sphere of justice was distanced from the ceremonial and the monumental and pushed instead towards the dimension of the everyday and the ordinary – towards routine rather than ritual. Hearings and lawsuits were the most common activity in the Forum of Augustus, and justice was therefore a visible feature of the space. But for all its frequency, this visibility was not accorded the same kind of monumental durability as that of other spheres, such as the military. This circumstance provides an adequate frame also for the reception of the forum's imagery as attested by the Vesuvian *vadimonia*: their peculiar combination of focused attention to details and disregard for their meaning is not an example of haphazard banalisation, let alone of a failure of the Augustan decoration to fulfil its ideological purpose. As their very repetitiveness suggests, the practices attested in these documents follow a pattern that both acknowledges and reproduces the distancing of the experience of justice from the ceremonial level of the forum's decoration. Thereby, they reinforce the subordinate character attributed to judicial life in the Forum of Augustus.

The significance of this situation – which is not restricted to the Forum of Augustus but concerns all the spaces of justice in Rome – is best appreciated if we focus on the figure of the emperor. As is well known, at the beginning of the Principate on January 16th, 27 B.C., the senators honoured Augustus with a golden shield that celebrated his outstanding virtues: valour, clemency, justice and piety[39]. Given the programmatic character of the shield, we should not be surprised to find these virtues visualised in subsequent imperial imagery, in particular in state reliefs showing the emperor while he is performing acts that offer a visual expression of his qualities. So, for example, several scenes depict the emperor demonstrating his *virtus* on the battlefield or celebrating it in the triumphal procession, performing an act of *clementia* by sparing the lives of enemies who submit

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37 R. Gest. div. Aug. 2, translation by F. W Shipley 1924, 347.
38 See LIMC 6.1 (1992) 754 s. v. *Nemesis* (P. Karanastassi) and LIMC 2.1 (1984) s. v. *Apollo* (E. Simon), respectively.
39 On the imperial virtues, see Wallace–Hadrill 1981; Noreña 2001; 2011.

to him, or, finally, displaying his *pietas* by sacrificing to the gods. Interestingly, however, none of the extant images depict him adjudicating or participating in any other activity thematising justice. *Iustitia* was not a subject of imperial state reliefs, despite the fact that this was one of the emperor's foremost occupations, if not the main one. More generally, it is only rarely a theme of official imperial imagery[40]. The emperor's justice never became an explicit subject of the symbolic dialogue conducted between the emperor and the *Senatus Populusque Romanus* through monuments and images, although such dialogue was fundamental in defining and fixing the respective roles and statuses of these protagonists in Roman official life. As a matter of fact, the emperor's jurisdiction and its relationship to the jurisdiction of traditional Republican magistrates was not formally determined from the outset, but grew and developed step by step over the centuries. It was a process that was not without tensions and one that required a great amount of flexibility and many compromises. This flexibility was favoured precisely by the lack of solemn confirmation of the exercise of law in the figurative decoration of public spaces: in other words, by the fact that, with respect to the administration of justice, the experience of the users of the Forum of Augustus rarely exceeded the dimensions of the everyday, due in large part to the agency of the complex's decoration.

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Fig. 3: Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel, Klassische Archäologie Fototek, inv. R73.
Fig. 4: Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel, Klassische Archäologie Fototek, inv. R73.

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[40] On the emperor's engagement with the exercise of justice, see Millar 1992, 3–12. 228–240. 507–549; Kaser – Hackl 1996, 445–451; de Angelis 2010. On the rare occurrences of *iustitia* in Roman official art, see Lichocka 1974; Noreña 2011, 61 f.; McClintock 2016. No scene representing the emperor as a judge is listed in Gabelmann 1984. By contrast, the imagery of personified justice in Western art is extremely rich from the Middle Ages onward: see, e. g., Pleister – Schild 1988; Jacob 1994; Kissel 1997; Prosperi 2008; Resnik – Curtis 2011.

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