

# A new view of the origins of the Basilica: the Atrium Regium, Graecostasis, and Roman diplomacy

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Few archaeological problems have been debated more than the origin of the Roman basilica.<sup>2</sup> The name itself is the first puzzle, being derived from the Greek *basilikē*. Why would a structure with a Greek name meaning 'kingly' have been constructed in the very heart of Rome, the Forum Romanum, in the mid-Republic, a time when Roman attitudes towards Greek kingship were ambivalent at best? A second puzzle has to do with the form of the basilica. Its lofty, centralized hall is a logical place for a congregation, but its other grand architectural features — aisles, upper walkways, and especially the profligate use of columns — have no obvious relation to the function of the Republican basilica, as a commercial space. Another type of Roman administrative building, the Curia, whose function was more elevated, is notably austere by comparison. Why, then, does the basilica present the imposing and sumptuous architectural form that it does?

This article addresses the aetiology of the Roman basilica through a combination of architectural, topographical, and historical evidence. Starting from a previous idea of a distinct Hellenistic, formal prototype for the basilica, I will argue that the origin of this type is closely connected to diplomatic practices in the Forum Romanum that occurred during the 3rd c. B.C., when we first hear of basilicas being built. Since no recent publication provides a detailed survey of the different theories for the origin of the basilica, and because — given the complexity of the problem — informed speculation must play a rôle in any attempt to resolve the issue, it is necessary to present a survey here. But first I will consider what evidence there is.

## Evidence for the earliest basilicas: the Forum Romanum

The obvious starting-point is an examination of the evidence for the earliest basilicas, those in the Forum Romanum (fig. 1). The first basilica about which we have any specific information is the Basilica Porcia, built by M. Porcius Cato in the year of his censorship, 184 B.C. Plutarch says that Cato built his basilica in the face of considerable opposition.<sup>3</sup> This had to do in

1 Frequently cited sources:

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Zevi 1991 F. Zevi, "Atrium Regium," *ArchCl* 43 (1991) 475-87.

2 Important discussions on the architecture and development of basilicas: P. Gros, *L'architecture romaine I: Les monuments publics* (Paris 1996) 235-60, with extensive bibliography, and id., "Basilica," *EAA*, 2, *Suppl.* (Rome 1994) 612-16, with the most complete bibliography from the 1960s on; L. Crema, *L'architettura romana* (Turin 1959) 61-68, with summary and bibliographical citations up to 1959; A. Nünnerich-Asmus, *Basilika und Portikus* (Cologne 1994), a large catalogue of basilicas, with pp. 5-24 on development; K. F. Ohr, *Die Basilika in Pompeji* (Berlin 1993) esp. 79-81; Lauter 1979, 436-57; P. Gros, A. Corso and E. Romano, *Vitruvio, De Architectura I* (Turin 1997) 619-22, a succinct summary; J. Ward-Perkins, "Constantine and the origins of the Christian basilica," *PBSR* 53 (1954) 69-74; K. Lange, *Haus und Halle* (Leipzig 1885). Also F. J. Brown, F. H. Richardson, L. Richardson, jr, *Casa III* (University Park, PA 1993) 226-27; cf. H. Bauer, "Basilica Fulvia," in *LTUR* I, 173-75.

3 Livy 39.44.7 (184 B.C.): 'Cato bought two atria, the *Maenium* and the *Titium*, in the region of the Lautu-