

Environmental archaeology in the Velabrum, Rome: interim report

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Introduction

For most of the city's history, the Velabrum signified a bustling commercial district. Essentially the area bounded on the north by the Forum Romanum, on the east by the Vicus Tuscus, on the south by the Forum Boarium, and on the west by the Vicus Iugarius,¹ it was according to Macrobius a *locus celeberrimus* (*Sat.* 1.101.15). Those moving between the Palatine and the Capitoline hills and between the Forum and the Tiber all contributed to the heavy flow of traffic there. In the context of the study of early Rome, the name is also used for the low, open valley as a whole that once ran from the Forum basin to the river. Yet, despite its central position, the Velabrum has long remained one of the least well known parts of Rome.² This is particularly true for the regal period and its original environmental setting. Fieldwork begun in 1996, the subject of this preliminary report, is now throwing new light on the early Velabrum.

Previous notions about the area were based for the most part on what could be gleaned from the ancient sources. A brief account of the Velabrum was regularly included in almost all comprehensive topographies since the time of Jordan and Gilbert,³ and in general these accounts are in reasonable agreement with one another though, notwithstanding the proposals made by Varro (*LL* 5.43-44, 156) and Plutarch (*Rom.* 5.5), uncertainty remains about the etymology and meaning of the term itself.⁴ Moreover, no ancient source gives a detailed description of what environmental conditions in the Velabrum were like before the Republic. Only brief hints are offered: Ovid (*Fast.* 6.405-7), for example, imagines a canebrake and stands of willows on the banks near the Tiber. Varro (*LL* 5.44), Plutarch (*Rom.* 5.5), and Propertius (4.9.5) all seem to envision a wet place with a more open vegetation — one covered with enough standing water at those times of year when the Tiber was in flood so that small boats were needed to ferry people between the nearby hills. The lack of detail in the sources should come as no surprise: description of the environment does not appear to have been a leading concern for the classical authors, and the surviving passages are all much later in date (at least four centuries after the regal period, by which time conditions in the early Velabrum had been completely transformed).⁵

The last 10 years have witnessed major gains in our knowledge of the environmental setting of early Rome. Advances have been made over a broad front, including the Forum basin, the Capitoline and the Palatine hills.⁶ The Velabrum has lagged behind. On the map of early

1 For basic accounts on the Velabrum, see Platner and Ashby 1929, 549-50; Richardson 1992, 406-7. For the Forum Boarium, see Coarelli 1995, 295-97.

2 Cressedi 1984; for archaeological work more specifically in the area near the Tiber — the Forum Boarium — see Coarelli 1988 and *Il viver quotidiano in Roma arcaica* (1989).

3 Jordan 1871, 126-27 and 194-95; Jordan 1885, 469-75; Gilbert 1883, 69-70; Gilbert 1890, 439. See also Richter 1901, 181-83; Lugli 1946, 591-99.

4 Platner and Ashby 1929, 549-50; Richardson 1992, 406. In two passages in poetry, Ovid (*Fast.* 6.405) and Propertius (4.9.5), the name is used in the plural (Velabra); Varro (*LL* 5.156) is the only classical author who draws a distinction between the Velabrum Maius and the Velabrum Minus (the latter is associated with the Lautolae and there is still uncertainty about its location). For a compilation of the sources on the Velabrum, see Lugli 1962, 281-86.

5 By the time of Augustus, for instance, ground levels in the central part of the Velabrum had risen some 5 to 7 m above those that had obtained in the 7th c. B.C.

6 On the Forum basin, see Ammerman 1990. On the situation at the Comitium, Ammerman 1996. For the Capitoline Hill, Alvarez *et al.* 1996; Ammerman and Terrenato 1996. On the Palatine Hill, see Ammerman 1992; Ammerman *in press*.