Vandalism and Resistance in Republican Rome

PENELOPE J. E. DAVIES
University of Texas at Austin

In 122 BCE, Roman officials erected seating in the Forum to accommodate paying spectators at the upcoming gladiatorial games (Figure 1). One of the people's tribunes, Gaius Sempronius Gracchus, then ordered the seats removed so that the poor, too, could watch the show. To quote Plutarch, a Greek biographer of the imperial period:

Since no one paid any attention to his command, he waited till the night before the spectacle, and then, taking all the workmen whom he had under his orders in public contracts, he pulled down the seats, and when day came he had the place all clear for the people. For this proceeding the populace thought him a man, but his colleagues were annoyed and thought him reckless and violent.

This is one of a set of episodes recounted by ancient authors involving late Republican acts of violence against built structures, temporary and permanent (Figure 2). These acts have been discussed, along with other forms of violence (such as rioting and bodily assault), by modern political historians such as Wilfried Nippel and Andrew Lintott, but they have never, to my knowledge, been addressed in histories of Roman architecture. In assessing the destruction of buildings during the Kosovo conflict of 1998–99, architectural historian Andrew Herscher suggests a reason for this: although violence has entered artistic and architectural discourse as a resource for cultural production, especially in the early twentieth-century avant-garde, destruction usually displaces architecture from the architectural discourse, if not the domain of “culture” more generally, and positions it in the domain of “violence,” and so, in typical formulations, in radically different disciplinary sites and epistemological frameworks. The underlying assumption, characteristic in humanist discourse, is that “culture” and “violence” stand in unmediated opposition to one another.

Violence, Herscher contends, seems fairly apparent: when rational, it is already interpreted; when irrational, its interpretation often relies on contextualization. Architecture, by contrast, attracts critical interpretation—that is, until its destruction. At that point, its context examined, it becomes “a mere surface expression of supposedly ‘deeper’ social, political, or economic conditions”—the realm of violence scholars. Focus passes to agents or catalysts, while the buildings themselves receive only passing mention.

In this article, I aim to characterize late Republican acts of violence against architecture as something more than vandalism. Viewed in their historical and political contexts, these acts express broad discontent with the status quo (as Lintott argues regarding violence more generally), and in this they are clearly ideologically driven. The choice of targets suggests as much, too. But more important, perhaps, is that when these violent acts are set against the background of architectural sponsorship patterns, it becomes clear that they were part of a calculated strategy to challenge those in political authority. They were a form of cultural production, or antiproduction: in their own right, they constituted part of an architectural discourse, a counterlanguage, that, through architecture’s destruction, defied and circumvented the language of power established by the dominant class. In other words, where the dominant built, the dominated destroyed. This language, in turn, takes its place in a long tradition encompassing (inter alia) the French Revolution and Britain’s late nineteenth- and early
Figure 1  Forum Romanum (Roman Forum), with the Curia (Senate House) on the right, current state (author’s photo).

Figure 2  Map of Rome, ca. 44 BCE, showing demolished structures and (in gray) vandalized structures: 1, Saepta Iulia (voting enclosure); 2, Temple D, Area Sacra di Largo Argentina (Temple of the Nymphs); 3, Temple of Concordia; 4, Basilica Porcia; 5, Curia (Senate House); 6, Forum seating area; 7, Regia; 8, precinct of Vesta; 9, Temple of Castor; 10, Temples of Fortuna and Mater Matuta at S. Omobono; 11, house of Cicero; 12, Sanctuary of Magna Mater; 13, theater on the Palatine (created by Penelope Davies and Onur Öztürk).
twentieth-century women’s suffrage movement, as well as the Kosovo conflict and the events of 9/11; it also reverberates through current efforts to confront vandalism, which inform city planning. My claim is predicated on the extraordinary power of public architecture, for which there is probably little need to build a case. But it is still worth noting that in ancient Rome public architecture developed as a means, if not the means, of communicating elite ideology long before the written word. Here, I hope to amplify a nonelite voice; where other scholars have assessed nonelites as agents of nonelite works, I propose the possibility of discerning agency on behalf of, and sometimes by, nonelites in the realm of state architecture.

Acts of Vandalism in the Late Republic

Some years after the Forum seating incident, other acts of vandalism occurred. In 100, so the mid-first-century Roman historian Sallust relates, Lucius Appuleius Saturninus served, like Gracchus, as the people’s tribune—an office set up in the fifth century to protect the people from abuse by elected officials (known as magistrates). Saturninus championed a bill proposing that the state buy and store grain and sell it to the public below market price. When it came to a vote in the Forum, the city quaestor (supervisor of the treasury), Quintus Servilius Caepio, balked. Saturninus responded by smashing the pontes—the “bridges” onto which voters climbed to cast their ballots—and scattering the ballot boxes. Later that year, when Saturninus hoped to install his ally Gaius Servilius Glauce as consul, his agents clubbed to death one of the other candidates. Gaius Marius, then consul, locked Saturninus, Glauce, and their supporters in the Senate House, supposedly for their own protection. Furious crowds ripped roof tiles off the building and hurled them down below, effectively stoning Saturninus and Glauce and other officials to death.

Further episodes occurred in the mid-first century and clustered around the person of Publius Clodius, a young man of patrician descent who was tribune in 58. First, as a populist protest, Clodius commandeered the Temple of Castor in the Forum as a rallying point for his gangs of supporters and as a place to store weapons (Figure 3). His supporters trampled down the building’s doors and purportedly, at one point, ripped up its steps. On a separate occasion, at the trial of Publius Vatinius, Clodius and his followers incited crowds to drive the presiding praetor (a magistrate tasked, inter alia, with overseeing courts, usually in the Forum) from the tribunal, scatter his benches, overturn the ballot boxes, and impose general chaos on the
Next, having convinced the Senate to legalize Cicero’s voluntary exile on the grounds that, as consul in 63, he had falsified the Senate’s wishes by executing the Catilinarian conspirators without trial, Clodius confiscated the orator’s Palatine residence and arranged for its sale at auction. Clodius took possession of the house, which rioters had pillaged on Cicero’s departure, and began to demolish and burn it and distribute its appurtenances as plunder. He then invited his brother-in-law, Quintus Pinarius Natta, the most junior pontiff, to authorize a shrine to Libertas (Liberty) on the site, and he expropriated an adjacent portico that Quintus Lutatius Catulus had erected around 101 to house spoils of war. When Gnaeus Pompeius (Pompey), one of the most influential men in Rome, agitated for Cicero’s recall, Clodius staged an assassination attempt against him. Pompey barricaded himself inside his house for the rest of the year, with Clodius’s gangs lurking ominously outside and Clodius threatening to deal with Pompey’s house as he had Cicero’s.

Two years later, in 56, Clodius was aedile (a magistrate in charge of city maintenance, as well as the games and the corn supply). Insinuating that Pompey, now in charge of the grain supply, was slashing the dole list, one of Clodius’s henchmen, Sextus Cloelius, incited a food riot, and Clodius’s supporters set fire to the Temple of the Nymphs in the southern Campus Martius (probably Temple D in Largo Argentina) (Figures 4 and 5). Finally, in January of 52, as Clodius and his entourage were returning to Rome...
from Aricia along the Via Appia, they encountered Clodius’s
rival Titus Annius Milo and his men. A fight broke out, and
Clodius was murdered. The city erupted into turmoil. Over-
night, crowds gathered in the house where his body lay, and
just before dawn they moved it, naked, to the speakers’ plat-
form in the Forum, where tribunes proclaimed lamentations
over it. The result was explosive. In the words of historian
Cassius Dio (155–235 CE):

The populace, as a result of what it both saw and heard, was
deeply stirred and no longer showed any regard for things sa-
cred or profane, but overthrew all the customs of burial and
burned down nearly the whole city. They took up the body of
Clodius and carried it into the senate-house, laid it out prop-
erly, and then, after heaping up a pyre out of the benches,
burned both the corpse and the building.17

Consumed in the flames with them, so Asconius (a first-century
CE historian) recounts, was the adjacent Basilica Porcia. The
crowd also launched attacks on the houses of Marcus Aemilius
Lepidus, who was interrex (a short-term authority in the absence
of elected consuls) and Milo.18

Defining the Aggression against Architecture

To convey ideological motivation for aggression against
painted or sculpted images (e.g., during religious conflicts in
Byzantium and the Protestant Reformation), scholars use the
term iconoclasm.19 Aggression against architecture, however,
usually falls under the rubric of destruction—a term that implies
completeness—or vandalism.20 The latter term, often used to
characterize the sorts of events recounted above and evoking
the Germanic tribe(s) that sacked Rome in 455 CE, was coined
in 1773 by the French revolutionary Joseph Lakanal to deni-
grate both the act and its agents, associating them with barba-
rism. With similar objectives, Abbé Henri Grégoire was the
first to use the term in print some twenty years later.21 In
the eyes of these men, to be a vandal was to destroy French patri-
mony and was therefore against the aims of the new state.
Yielding to destructive ignorance, so-called vandals were said
not to be revolutionaries; conversely, truly “revolutionary”
destruction could not be called vandalism. Thus conceived,
the term vandalism—implying barbarism, blindness, igno-
rance, baseness, lack of taste—allowed revolutionaries to exert
legitimate forms of violence against suspect or “enemy” archi-
tecture and artworks while branding unauthorized forms of
violence as vandalism and excluding the perpetrators from civ-
ilized society.22

This pejorative charge persists into the present. Social sci-
entist Alison Ravetz concluded in 1983 that for many people
the term vandalism implies perpetrators who are little more
than thugs.23 While Cicero and his peers would probably have been satisfied with this characterization of Clodius and
his ilk (and, such is the influence of Cicero’s voice, many still
are), Dario Gamboni, historian of the French Revolution, in-
sists that the word’s connotations make it inappropriate for
use in more objectively aimed interpretive contexts.24 At
the very least, we should qualify the term. Sociologist Stanley
Cohen does this when he distinguishes “conventional vandal-
ism” (its motives being “unawowed”—e.g., greed, envy, intol-
erance, stupidity, and the “bestial instinct of destruction”) from
“ideological vandalism” (which is driven by motives that are
“avowable,” such as religion, prudishness, sentiment or
aesthetics, and politics).25 How destruction is characterized
is, thus, a matter of perception. As art historian Martin
Warnke cautions, iconoclasm, broadly conceived, is “a privi-
lege for the victors, and a sacrilege for the vanquished.”26
The challenge, then, is to determine motives while also reck-
oning with outcomes.

Late Republican Violence: The Political Context

That the late Republican episodes noted above should be
identified as ideological vandalism seems evident from their
political context.27 These episodes fall into two phases, cor-
responding with peaks in activism on the part of the tribunes
and the plebs as cooperation and collaboration broke down
and new strategies for political engagement emerged. The
first phase, during the last quarter of the second century, was
the culmination of a development that began at midcentury,
when tribunes willfully defied the conservative majority in
the Senate. Thus, when Lucius Licinius Lucullus, a consul
(one of the two principal magistrates in charge of the city and
the armies) of 151, proposed a levy to address growing resis-
tance to military service during the war in Spain, tribunes cast
him into prison. A similar event occurred in 138.28 Whatever
their personal goals, the tribunes did achieve some successes
for the plebs through these tactics (improved army condi-
tions, a permanent extortion court beginning in 149, the se-
cret ballot in 139–137); official efforts to rein them in bear
witness to their growing autonomy.29 Tribunician activism
reached its crescendo in 133 and 123–122 with Tiberius and
Gaius Gracchus, whose agitation for popular causes (agrarian
reform for the first, a grain dole for the second) and unortho-
dox tactics (taking bills to the people’s assembly rather than
the Senate) exposed the enormous power of the office.
The result was their deaths—Tiberius lynched by members of
the Senate, Gaius by his own hand in the midst of an uprising—
along with the execution of thousands of partisans. Their
actions also led to an abiding tension between those members
of the governing elite who pursued their agendas through
traditional senatorial means (the optimates) and those, like the
Gracchi, who took their agendas to the assembly (the popu-
lasses). Gaius Gracchus’s dismantling of Forum seating in
122 and Saturninus’s demolition of the voting galleries in
100 fit this pattern of tribunician defiance through innovative strategies. The people’s abuse of the Curia in the same year followed their cues.

To contain the tribunes, Publius Cornelius Sulla, during his dictatorship of 82–81, drastically curtailed their powers. The second phase of destructions followed the restoration of those powers in the 70s. In the next decade, tribunes, now the principal agents of political change, learned to exploit the weight of the neighborhoods (vici), where old discontents—underemployment, poor housing, debt—had been exacerbated by an influx of new citizens after the Social War of 91–88. In 67, one tribune, Gaius Manilius, scheduled an election concerning the assignment of freedmen into voting tribes late on the day of the new-year neighborhood entertainments (ludi Compitales, or Compitalia), when those who were assembled for the games could be mobilized to vote en masse. The bill passed, fighting ensued, and the law was overruled by an influx of new citizens after the Social War of 91–88. In 67, one tribe, Gaius Manilius, scheduled an election concerning the assignment of freedmen into voting tribes late on the day of the new-year neighborhood entertainments (ludi Compitales, or Compitalia), when those who were assembled for the games could be mobilized to vote en masse. The bill passed, fighting ensued, and the law was overturned. But the incident fired the political consciousness of the plebs, and by 64 the Senate saw the neighborhoods as so volatile and so ripe for subversive activity that it dissolved all the plebs, and by 64 the Senate saw the neighborhoods as so volatile and so ripe for subversive activity that it dissolved all the plebs, and by 64 the Senate saw the neighborhoods as so volatile and so ripe for subversive activity that it dissolved all the plebs.

Against this backdrop, Clodius came of political age. By 59, he had sufficiently championed popular issues to cultivate a following among the lowest social ranks in the vici. Apparently, he saw this as his path to a political career. Ineligible for the people’s tribuneship on account of his patrician birth, he made the extraordinary move of changing his status to plebeian. Winning the office in 58, he used it, whatever his personal goals, to reward the people for their support (providing, among other things, a free monthly corn dole at crippling expense to the state) and to challenge leading senators through alarmingly aggressive tactics. His incitement of acts of violence against architecture was one such tactic. Again, the people followed.

As Lintott puts it, by the late Republic, most Romans would not have regarded political violence as primitive barbarism. They would have recognized it as a political weapon. Similarly, I suggest, they would have seen violence against buildings as something more than simple vandalism. They would have understood it to be ideological.

Choice of Target

Target selection drove this point home, making the acts easily decipherable to an urban population already keenly attuned to architectural messages. When sponsoring buildings, magistrates made calculated choices regarding building types, deities to be honored (for temples), designs, and locations. Over the Republic’s duration, a finely tuned language of competitive construction developed, with incontrovertible signs of architectural intertextuality—where new buildings referred to and gained meaning from preexisting ones. The juxtaposition of temples sometimes signaled family connections, alliances, or rivalries. In other cases, divinities were rehonored to emphasize lineage or to display bitter ironies. Aqueducts vied in munificence. Even a road like the Via Appia of 312 could be a site of competitive topographical expropriation through successive repavings.

All the targets for aggression were located in or on the fringes of Rome’s principal political centers, the Forum and the Campus Martius. Some constituted evident markers of wealth and/or social inequity. In the courts (such as the Basilica Porcia, built in 184 by Marcus Porcius Cato), which were disrupted by Clodius and burned in 52, the rich had a history of looking after their own. In election venues, too, the votes of the wealthy carried greater weight than those of the poor. Forum seating further represented wealth inequality and the clear articulation of Rome’s profoundly hierarchical social order. In 191, at the inauguration of plays in honor of Magna Mater and at the Roman Games, the censors (magistrates in charge of assigning public contracts) instructed the aediles to segregate senators from the rest of the audience, a practice that was maintained thereafter. The Temple of the Nymphs, selected as the venue for a riot that resulted in arson, was where censors probably stored census lists and the state sorted citizens into rank by wealth. T. P. Wiseman notes that Clodius’s partisans may have been targeting Pompey’s new grain dolce lists when they attacked the building, these lists having been intended as a corrective to Clodius’s controversial grain policy.

Other targets were senatorial icons. By Clodius’s time, the Temple of Castor, commissioned in about 496 and one of the oldest of the Republic, had long been the seat of the consuls and a bastion of the Senate. Successive restorations had rendered its cela gradually less accessible, with a conversion from tetraestyle to hexastyle façade around 130, and finally to octastyle along with the removal of its axial staircase in about 117 (Figures 6, 7, and 8). This building’s fronton tribunal and lateral staircases, added in ca. 130, may also have accommodated elections, allowing citizens to ascend to the voting gallery on one side, cast their votes on the tribunal, and return to ground level on the other. In this case the temple may have been designed to maintain elite control over the ballot even once it was secret. Storming the temple and tearing down its doors in a popular revolt, Clodius’s supporters exerted their right to enter, and with the destruction of the steps, they defended their new headquarters while visibly denying entrance, symbolically reversing traditional hierarchies of access to political authority and the gods (as Cicero recognized in an appeal to the Senate).

Cicero’s house, in turn, was the dwelling of one of the most vocal of the senatorial majority, for whom it served as...
Figure 6  Temple of Castor, Rome, ca. 496 BCE (hypothetical reconstruction by John Burge).

Figure 7  Temple of Castor, Rome, as restored in the second half of the second century BCE (hypothetical reconstruction by John Burge).

Figure 8  Temple of Castor, Rome, as restored ca. 117 BCE, showing lateral and frontal steps targeted for vandalism (hypothetical reconstruction by John Burge).
a headquarters.\textsuperscript{43} With that building’s destruction, Clodius exulted in Cicero’s exile, and with the expropriation of the portico of Lutatius Catulus the elder, he rejoiced in the death, in 61, of Quintus Lutatius Catulus the younger, chief representative of the Sullan old guard and princeps senatus (head of the Senate). The long history of this much-contested site added to the impact of Clodius’s act: at the time of construction, Lutatius Catulus’s portico had replaced the house of Gaius Gracchus’s cohort Marcus Fulvius Flaccus, which was demolished after his assassination.\textsuperscript{44} Clodius could claim that the shrine to Liberty and the portico reappropriated the property in the name of the people’s freedom from tyranny. The house of Aemilius Lepidus was similarly charged, while that of Milo, like its owner, stood in for his patron, Pompey.

Most iconic of all was the Curia Hostilia, constructed in archaic times, purportedly by King Tullus Hostilius, as a meeting place for his council.\textsuperscript{45} It later served as the headquarters of the Republican Senate. When Sulla doubled the size of this body from three hundred to six hundred, reinvigorating it and returning it to authority in all public spheres, he rebuilt the structure, enlarging it and renaming it the Curia Cornelia. More than any building, this spacious hall, dominating the people’s assembly place on the northwest edge of the Forum (the Comitium), communicated Sulla’s vision of the Senate’s place in government and vis-à-vis the people and their tribunes.\textsuperscript{46} For Cicero, the building was metonymic with the dictator and his reforms.\textsuperscript{47} So its destruction in 52 was no accident. As Cassius Dio wrote, “They did not do this under the stress of such an impulse as often takes sudden hold of crowds, but with such deliberate purpose that at the ninth hour they held the funeral feast in the Forum itself, with the senate-house still smoldering.”\textsuperscript{48} Making it Clodius’s pyre, the people gave their martyred hero his own version of the extraordinary state cremation with which the Senate honored Sulla more than twenty-five years earlier, substituting paraphernalia of state—senators’ benches—for aromatic flowers and incense.\textsuperscript{49}

Violence against Architecture as an Act against the State

In a study of Roman arson, Steven Johnstone argues that the ideological force of arson derived from the identification of the state with its architecture. If public architecture represented the state, then acts of violence against architecture were the acts of outsiders.\textsuperscript{50} I would extend this to other forms of architectural destruction as well. Indeed, the equivalence between the state and its architecture was exceptionally close in Republican Rome because of unusually restrictive patterns of architectural patronage. From the early Republic, the governing elite recognized that architecture bestowed authority on its sponsors and perpetuated that authority. These were the ends to which kings had used architecture, and the ends to which those in power continued to use it throughout the Mediterranean for many centuries to follow.

To contain architecture’s exploitation within an elective system, the elite established that public buildings could be commissioned only by elected officials, and specific ones at that: aediles for entertainment venues, infrastructure maintenance (such as street surfacing and minor restorations), and occasionally temples; dictators or consuls, in their capacity as generals, for most temples; and censors for major civic initiatives (such as aqueducts and basilicas). These officials, who did not include the tribunes of the people, acted on the state’s behalf. Even given their authority, they labored under constraints that informed their building projects: most were in office for only a year’s term (about eighteen months for censors), and their use of state resources was subject to senatorial supervision. A single structure was usually buildable in a short time and with a limited budget, but the sorts of massive projects carried out by Hellenistic kings and later emperors were not. The resultant architecture was more than a representation of the state; the cityscape, composed of a multiplicity of independent buildings sponsored by a multiplicity of talented individuals, mirrored the state’s leadership structure and ideals.\textsuperscript{51}

Yet even if Rome’s architecture did not represent a monarchy’s power, it did exert that of an oligarchy—the Senate. And just as the sponsorship system helped the political elite to self-regulate and kept wealthy private individuals from buying visibility through building, so it barred everyone outside the senatorial class—the great majority, even many of the rich, and the tribunes, men of wealth and political ambition who represented the plebeians and who saw building as a means to power—from harnessing a potent language of authority to challenge a system heavily biased against them.

Late Republican episodes of ideological vandalism posed a direct challenge to this system. They served as a response to the dominant language of authority expressed and perpetuated through construction. Denied access to that language by the constraints of state sponsorship, the tribunes and the people defied it and devised an architecturally based counterlanguage of their own, which replaced construction with alteration and destruction. Where those in authority built, they, lacking authority, demolished. They recognized, as Gamboni puts it, that the very images (or buildings) that were used to express, impose, and legitimate power could be misused to challenge, reject, and delegitimize that power.\textsuperscript{52} Their destructions, then, should be seen as a means of communication in their own right, even if the materials they used were already the vehicles of other people’s expression and communication.\textsuperscript{53}

Earlier Acts of Ideological Destruction in Rome

Although these late Republican destructive acts are the first recorded instances of ideological vandalism in Rome, they
were not the first politically motivated architectural demolitions. Signs of deliberate destruction are apparent at the beginning of the Republic in two places: the Area Sacra di Sant’Omobono in the Forum Boarium (the commercial district by the Tiber), and just beyond the east end of the Forum. At the end of the sixth century, buildings at these sites seem to have been willfully leveled before they were reconstructed in slightly modified forms. The structures (a temple probably dedicated to Fortuna in ca. 580–570, rebuilt and enlarged in ca. 540–520; the Regia, in a fourth phase of construction dating to ca. 530; the precinct of Vesta, in a second phase of construction ca. 575; and an adjacent structure identified with the Domus Publica) were probably all closely associated with regal patronage. Their treatment may have been conceived as an erasure of monarchy, expressing the notion of a res publica defined by the absence of a king.54

Much later, the censors of 154, Gaius Cassius Longinus and Marcus Valerius Messalla, commissioned Rome’s first stone theater on the southwest slope of the Palatine.55 According to the Periochae, this building was close to completion when “on motion of Cornelius Nasica it was torn down by order of the Senate, on the ground that it was inexpedient and would be injurious to the public character; and for some time thereafter the people stood to see theatrical performances.”56 Unlike Greeks, who took seats for their assemblies at the bouleuterion (council house) and during entertainments, and whose meetings fostered discussion, Romans remained standing during comitial meetings, and their contiones (political assemblies), always convoked and supervised by a magistrate, were organized to constrain audience participation. Only designated speakers presented their views, and no debate was tolerated. As tensions rose in Rome, Cornelius Scipio Nasica, a high-ranking senator, may have persuaded the Senate that a permanent theater would encourage political gatherings in the Greek style, allowing Romans to assemble without a magistrate’s oversight, engage in populist debate, and challenge the social hierarchies that earlier forms of audience segregation articulated.57 More than that, it was in the theater that Greek monarchs and strategoi conflated drama and reality to frame and perform their leadership before their seated subjects; so the theater might prove the perfect Roman venue for social subversion and crowd control by populist agitators and transgressive generals such as Cassius Longinus.58 In the construction of a stone theater, the Senate may have feared a threat of power from below (the populus) and from above (an autocracy)—a threat to its own place in the running of the state.

Other documented destructions targeted private residences. By Cicero’s time, tradition told of the Senate ordering the demolition of the houses of those condemned of, and executed for, aspiring to kingship. According to one tradition, one of the first consuls, Publius Valerius Poplicola, started building a stately house on the Velia, a ridge beyond the eastern edge of the Forum where the kings Ancus Marcius, Tullus Hostilius, and Tarquinius Priscus had purportedly lived, before tearing it down to quell suspicions of regal aspirations.59 Spurius Cassius’s house was purportedly demolished on his death in 485, as were Spurius Maelius’s house on the Capitolinus after 439 and Marcus Manlius Capitolinus’s after his execution in ca. 384.60 Scholars have cast doubt on all these instances, judging it unlikely that the Senate would have destroyed the inherited property of Roman families and suggesting that tales of destruction evolved by analogy with a Greek practice and as etymological elaborations of traditional place-names.61 Used as exempla, these stories were rhetorically embellished during and after the Gracchan upheavals. More credence might be given to the demolitions of the Palatine residences of Gaius Gracchus’s cohort Fulvius Flaccus and Marcus Vitruvius Vacci, a citizen of Fundi whose house was destroyed after his execution in 329 for leading the Fundani and Privernates in revolt against Rome.62

The common denominator in all these instances, historical or not (with the exception of Valerius Poplicola’s case), is that the agent was the Senate, which was acting against a perceived threat to the Republic (that is, the action was state sanctioned). Architectural destruction was therefore commonly conceived as ideological. Gracchus was the pioneer of deploying this strategy without the state’s sanction and against senatorial conservatives as a means of circumventing his lack of a building mandate. Clodius was its master, a demolition man who played to the populace while maneuvering to diminish his eminent rivals. As for the people, when they attacked the Senate House, they harnessed architecture’s symbolism to express rage at their lot and at urban lawlessness in the only way open to them, pressing blame on the Senate with a destructive force learned from their tribunes. If public buildings represented the state, destruction signified that the perpetrators were not of the state.63 Perhaps the claim is better turned on its head: if the sponsorship process meant that public buildings represented the state, destruction signified that the state was not of the perpetrators.

Alternative Forms of Protest

Demolition and destruction were not the only means of using architecture as a vehicle for protest. Plutarch claimed that the people called on Tiberius Gracchus to recover public land for the poor “through writings upon porticoes, walls, and monuments.”64 When Lucius Opimius sponsored his Temple of Concordia after Gaius Gracchus’s suicide and the murder of his partisans, someone etched onto it, “A work of mad discord produces a temple of Concord.”65 Graffiti, like arson, offered...
relative anonymity. Inscriptions on statues made them speak, so the writers could stay silent. Anthropologist James Scott describes graffiti as a “hidden transcript,” a “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’” beyond direct observation by power holders.66 Graffiti was ubiquitous in Rome during this period, and Roman attitudes toward it differed from modern-day attitudes. The act of defacement was not judged a crime, so it was not considered vandalism. Resistance resided not in the act but in the message inscribed.

More overt and institutionalized, ritual protests (a term coined by anthropologist Setha Low to describe fiestas, parades, and carnivals) might invert hegemonic meanings of public space much as they did social structures, although only temporarily.67 During parades for the cult of Magna Mater, imported from the east and a nonelite favorite, foreign priests (Galli) in bright, luxurious robes brandished knives to symbolize their self-castrated state, begging for alms in Magna Mater’s name and playing loud music to an unfamiliar Phrygian meter. The cult’s Phrygian adherents, the Corybants, resplendent in crested helmets, leapt about, shaking their heads and clashing armor, while fervent crowds showered their path with money and roses.68 Every April, these raucous processions transformed the hallowed Palatine into the people’s realm. Other rituals could alter space more permanently, as they did in the early days of tribunician activism. Standing on the Rostra to champion a bill for elective priesthoods in lieu of co-optation in 145, Gaius Licinius Crassus turned his back on the Comitium to address the crowd in the Forum; or, in an alternative version of the event, he led the crowd out of the Comitium to vote in the piazza.69 Either way, history was made and the Comitium, dominated by the Senate House, began to recede as a political space in favor of the larger piazza. Conservative authority was diminished.

There were also moments when tribunes, lacking a building mandate, contrived populist adjustments or contributions to the urban landscape through their bills. It was probably by virtue of his position on the agrarian commission that Tiberius Gracchus brought bills for road and granary construction.70 In 119, Marius championed a bill to narrow the voting bridges to reduce abuse and interference by patrons during elections.71 To build his shrine to Liberty, Clodius probably claimed the authority of the exile law.72 His creativity was on fullest display, however, when he was aedile, a post many Romans exploited furiously for visibility through construction. Although Vettius Cyrus, Cicero’s architect, cleared his books of commitments in anticipation of Clodius’s contracts, Clodius apparently built nothing at all.73 By not complying with the expectations of his mandate, he defied established order.

Still, arson and other forms of destruction remained the most aggressive and public strategies. For the perpetrators, there was much to recommend such actions, as criminologists Robin Griffiths and J. M. Shapland suggest:

Vandalism is one of the safest and most anonymous of offences. Rarely is there a personal complainant (since public property is such a ready target) and the offender does not have to carry away or dispose of property. Nor does he have to carry an instrument of destruction with him—simply hands or feet, or the use of an object lying ready to hand at the scene will often suffice. . . . Unless the vandal is caught at the time, the chances of escaping detection altogether are extremely good.74

Such acts were also loud and far-reaching. Experienced firsthand, destruction—sometimes carefully staged—is a spectacle: blinding clouds of commotion, the swinging of axes, abandon in the release of anger.75 Fire brings primal fear and fascination; it dashes or wanders with changes of the wind. Unhidden and unseen, the noise of fire travels and beckons. Smoke and flakes of ash, dancing lazily through the air, creep silently into taverns and bedrooms, reaching for the uninformed, angering some, drafting others to join this “mythic present” of revolutionary consciousness, to savor, momentarily, the self-realization of this collective act. For participants in a destructive act, community is born around a sacred new consensus; in the foundational moment, history is made—the past defined as an ancien régime—and progress is performed.76 As the building crumbles, its past significance is constructed, intensified, in a way that justifies and necessitates its destruction.77 And after the moment: odors linger, of charred wood and acrid stucco; ash settles, a dissident’s unmelting snow. The city bears its scars: hacked shells of former glory, torched with blackened edges. Here the abstract becomes real, while the real becomes a revolutionary legend.78

Immediate Outcomes

Did the acts of destruction in Rome achieve anything? Perhaps not, for if they had, history would cast them as modernization or progress rather than vandalism.79 Violence against buildings failed, in fact, to create a viable consensus (just as it did two millennia later, when the costs of suffragettes’ destructions helped to alienate the perpetrators from a wary public).80 Indeed, it is Gamboni’s view that vandalism tends to entrench rather than challenge the balance of power to which it reacts, precisely because the agents can be cast as enemies of culture and society—so much so that charges of targeting visual culture can become a propaganda weapon. In Rome, charges of arson, which reverberated loudly in a city dependent on wood construction, were leveled against internal opponents thought to be vying for control of the state.81
“The illegality,” Gamboni writes, “but even more the illegitimacy of ‘vandalism’ . . . make it a dominated reply that reinforces domination.”

The various strategies for resistance did provoke reactions, however. In the short term, the clearest indications of success followed graffiti. Plutarch believed that “most of all, the energy and ambition of Tiberius Gracchus were fired by the people’s graffiti,” but the graffiti urged action on the part of a single dissident, not consensus among the many or concessions from those in power. Most reactions were negative. In spaces that had been transformed through use, temporarily or permanently, the Senate reasserted hegemonic power.

By the end of the second century, a redesigned Sanctuary of Magna Mater, credited to a member of the Caecilius Metellus family, figureheads among senatorial conservatives, contained and controlled processions (Figure 9); access to the temple could even be shut off.

As for destructions, Plutarch cites a (disputed) claim that the Forum seating demolition cost Gracchus a third tribuneship. In other cases, the boot of oppression stamped firmly down. Thus, after Cicero’s return from exile in 57 and his lengthy appeal, the Senate restored his house to him; the site, however, remained contested, with another phase of violence by Clodius’s followers. The Temple of the Nymphs, meanwhile, was magnificently restored from the ground up (see Figure 5). Its huge new podium (23.5 by 37 meters) extended back beyond adjacent temples—all the more remarkable given that podia were rarely destroyed by fire and the standard practice was reuse—and its unusually large cella occupied almost two-thirds of the podium’s length and its entire width. The restoration was grand enough to be seen as a pointed rebuttal to Clodius’s vandalism and sufficiently spacious to house a new census archive. As for the Curia, symbolism was answered with even more deafening symbolism: as violence raged after Clodius’s death and cremation inside the building’s walls, and the Senate charged Pompey with levying troops, one of the Senate’s first orders of business was to assign the Curia’s rebuilding to Faustus Cornelius Sulla, a conservative and son of the dictator. For Cassius Dio, the reason was evident: “It was the Curia Hostilia, which had been remodeled by Sulla; hence they came to this decision about it and ordered that when restored it should receive again the name of the same man.” The Senate restored order after Sulla’s model, through its own visible reempowerment.

Figure 9 Sanctuary of Magna Mater, Rome, ca. 100 BCE. The procession probably moved along the Clivus Victoriae (path shown on the left) through a covered road under the forecourt to join the Scala Caci (Steps of Cacus) on the right; from there it ascended to the Temples of Victoria (right) and Magna Mater (left) (hypothetical reconstruction by John Burge).
Long-Term Outcomes

In the longer term, it is tempting to suppose that the cost and danger of destructive acts—discontent with the state made manifest—helped to lead Gaius Julius Caesar (who had crossed the Rubicon in the name of the tribunes’ freedom) to urban policy that, like his calendrical and legislative reforms, improved the lot of the city populace. Caesar strove to increase homeownership, compiled regulations for municipal administration, prescribed street maintenance and limitations on traffic, and aspired to enhance the city’s overall grandeur. Still today, homeownership, regular building services (cleaning, maintenance, and so on) and general visual appeal are all deemed crucial to the prevention of vandalism. For debt relief, Caesar remitted low-end rents for 46, and he revised the census list vicus by vicus to manage the grain dole more efficiently.

Whatever his motives, Caesar, too, used the language of architecture to empower the people in the sometime spaces of their protest. His initiative to monumentalize the wooden voting enclosure on the Campus Martius (previously known as the ovile and henceforth as the Saepta Iulia) and his magnificent new Forum Iulium (built for legal business), both begun in 54 and clad in Carrara marble, exalted the people’s sovereignty and the very institutions—elections and the law—that might promote their cause. Caesar visibly marginalized their constant target, the Senate, most obviously in 44 when he moved the Rostra from the northwest corner of the Forum, adjoined to the Comitium and overshadowed by the Curia, to the west end of the Forum (Figure 10). There, picked out in vivid colored marble—slabs of pink portasanta from Chios and decorative pilasters of black Lucullan stone, one of the earliest uses of colored stone in permanent public architecture in Rome—against the pale travertine pavement and surrounding buildings, and separated from the Curia, the structure was literally and symbolically released from senatorial will and supervision. A new east–west axis governed the Forum, framed by lateral basilicas (the Basilica Sempronia, now named Iulia for Caesar); the Rostra and the people’s assembly place dominated. Off axis entirely, the Senate House, still under construction, was sidelined. In fact, when the Senate gave Caesar the charge to assume construction of the new Senate House in 45–44, he indulged in a second design phase in his Forum, extending it to the east so the buildings would be integrated. The Curia, now an appendage to the Forum Iulium, hung between the city’s growing powers: the Forum Romanum, where the people were sovereign, and Caesar’s Forum, drenched in his presence.

If under Caesar the voice of the people drew strength, the rise of the young Gaius Julius Caesar—Augustus—brought suppression, achieved again through architecture. Like Caesar, Augustus modified the Forum, only now to shut it down. At the site’s southeast corner, his triple-bayed Parthian Arch, vowed around 19 and probably completed by 6, controlled and restricted access from the lower Via Sacra; by the late first century, a pendant arch probably spanned the

Figure 10 Plan of the Forum Romanum (Roman Forum) and environs, ca. 44 BCE, highlighting buildings erected or restored by Julius Caesar: 1, Capitoline substructure (“Tabularium”); 2, Southwest Building; 3, Basilica Opimia; 4, Temple of Concordia; 5, Carcer (prison); 6, Basilica Porcia; 7, Comitium area; 8, Curia Iulia (Senate House); 9, Forum Iulium (Forum of Caesar); 10, Macellum (market); 11, Basilica Aemilia; 12, Regia; 13, Domus Publica; 14, precinct of Vesta; 15, Temple of Castor; 16, Basilica Iulia; 17, Temple of Saturn; 18, Rostra Caesaris (Rostra of Caesar) (created by Penelope Davies and Onur Öztürk).
Via Sacra’s northern branch, connecting the Basilica Aemilia and the Temple of Divus Iulius (Figure 11).\(^9^8\) As for the Forum buildings, the Temple of Castor, site of popular protest, was neutralized in the 30s, when the Temple of Divus Iulius was sited so as to jut into the assembly space out in front of the Temple of Castor.\(^9^9\)

Other buildings would be adapted to refer to Augustus’s victory over Marcus Antonius at Actium in 31, a mark of his autocracy: a new East Rostra, with ships’ prows from Actium, mirrored the West Rostra, with prows from the Battle of Actium in 338; the Curia Iulia, completed by Augustus, featured Victory atop an orb at the peak of the pediment, draped figures holding naval implements as corner acroteria, and another statue of Victory inside; and acroteria in the form of tri-tons blowing conches adorned a restoration of the Temple of Saturn, begun by L. Munatius Plancus in 42 but apparently completed in the early 20s (Figure 12).\(^1^0^0\) The emperor’s family was featured heavily: magnificent reconstructions of the Temples of Castor and Concordia Augusta were undertaken by Tiberius, Augustus’s adoptive son and eventual heir, and redecorated in his name along with that of his deceased brother, Drusus (in 6 and 7 CE, respectively). Augustus also built a portico in honor of his grandsons Gaius and Lucius Caesar in front of the Basilica Aemilia.\(^1^0^1\) In short, if Caesar turned the Forum into the people’s voting space in lieu of the Comitium, Augustus circumscribed and controlled that space. Indeed, by historian Nicholas Purcell’s estimation, by the time of Augustus’s death in 14 CE, the Forum had become a symbol of imperial power, a place of display. For the Augustan geographer Strabo, it was “reduced to being a venerable and grand forecourt to the new heart of the city,” meriting only passing mention as an appendix to a description of Rome.\(^1^0^2\)

Use of public space was controlled to a similar end. Accelerating a process begun by Caesar in an apparent attempt to expand the Forum, Augustus ensured that functions once accommodated there were transferred to, or duplicated in, other venues, such as the Forum Augustum (after 2) and his own Palatine residence.\(^1^0^3\) Still a site for gladiatorial games in the early Augustan era, the Forum seems to have been stripped of these, too, after its repaving in the last decade BCE. Writing in the early second century CE, the imperial biographer Suetonius claimed that, on seeing a crowd of men in dark cloaks (pullati) at a public meeting, Augustus cited a line of Virgil (“Behold them Romans, lords of the world, the nation clad in the toga”) and instructed the aediles to ensure that nobody appeared in the Forum or its vicinity unless clad in a toga and uncloaked.\(^1^0^4\) Long a marker of citizen status, the toga was
encoded, through variations in ornamentation, to communicate rank within the citizenry. Consisting of an ample swath of white wool, a toga was beyond the financial reach of many of the less affluent, and most Romans who could afford a toga rarely wore one, except on ceremonial occasions. The likely effect of the dictate, then, was to “cleanse” the Forum of many from the working classes, whose remonstrations rang the loudest. As for Caesar’s glorious reconception of the voting enclosure on the Campus Martius, completed under the first emperor, the most noteworthy events there in Augustus’s time, according to Cassius Dio and Suetonius, were gladiatorial games held in 7, a mock sea battle, and the public display of rhinoceroses. Topographical context helped convert meaning: if once the Saepta stood adjacent to the Villa Publica, headquarters of the censors, it found new Augustan neighbors in structures designated for leisure—Agrippa’s magnificent lake, gardens, and heated baths.

In the end, the people’s newfound ability to articulate concerns through their own architectural language—destruction—was ruthlessly quelled. When arsonists targeted the Forum in 7, “the blame for the fire was laid upon the debtor class, suspected of having contrived it on purpose in order that they might have some of their debts remitted when they appeared to have lost heavily.” Augustus reorganized the city’s administration, encircling the four regions attributed to Servius Tullius with an additional ten. Within those fourteen regions, he established extensive bureaucracies at the vicus level. Inspired, perhaps, by Caesar’s neighborhood-by-neighborhood census, Augustus designed these new agencies ostensibly to administer food and water distribution and to address the threat of fire, but their reach stretched further. Managed separately to preclude the unification of the vicii against the center, they were manned by a network of magistri vicini (neighborhood officials) who reported to the aediles, tribunes, and praetors. This scheme may have stemmed vandalism by involving residents in the maintenance of their neighborhoods. The officials who ran it, however, drawn from the lowest ranks of society, wore their status as a source of pride; they paraded it through the streets of their vicini on designated days, each escorted by a pair of lictors and wearing the toga praetexta (with a purple border stripe, the privilege of magistrates and priests). Some even erected marble altars at street corners (such as the monument from the Vicus Aesculeti now in the collection of the Centrale Montemartini); carved with their names and with symbols associated with the new regime (laurels, oak wreaths, and shields of virtue), these altars functioned as silent reminders of their watchfulness (Figure 13).

The following year, Cassius Dio wrote that when “the masses, distressed by the famine and the tax and the losses sustained in the fire, were ill at ease, and they not only openly discussed numerous plans for a revolution, but also posted at night even more numerous bulletins,” their pleas fell on deaf ears. Again Augustus refused debt relief and instead instituted the vigiles, a corps whose duties included firefighting. In this, he improved the material welfare of the urban plebs, but...
the vigiles were, first and foremost, a military force, indistinct from any other. Their role was not simply to control arson but also, through a crackdown on places and means of sedition, to suppress its larger context: political and social turmoil. Faced with the people’s resistance, Augustus entrenched and proclaimed the mobilization of force in the city as solely the state’s right. Whatever chance the people once had for collective political action was over; whatever voice they had found was silenced.

The history of Roman state architecture is usually written as the history of the powerful, and for good reason: the voices of the dominant resonate loudest in our sources, while the voices of the dominated rarely rise to audibility. In this article I have described the mechanisms that made popular protest through architecture so difficult, but I have also considered the means by which tribunes and the people they represented, far from accepting domination, used acts of purposeful vandalism—their language of defiance—to defy it publicly. These acts have a rightful place in Roman architectural history. Although repressed in their immediate aftermath, protests through architecture’s destruction may have gained some ground for the urban plebs under Caesar. Setting a different course, Augustus silenced them, leaving Cicero’s voice to echo through the ages with a charge of mindless vandalism.

Penelope J. E. Davies is author of Death and the Emperor (Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Architecture and Politics in Republican Rome (Cambridge University Press, 2017), as well as numerous articles and essays in scholarly publications. Her research focuses on Roman state architecture and its ideological purposes, investigating the interdependence of building and diverse political systems. pjedavies@austin.utexas.edu
Notes

1. I am grateful to Onur Öztürk for assistance with maps, and to Keith Eggner and an anonymous reviewer for JSAH for their insightful comments on the text.

All ancient dates in this article are BCE unless otherwise indicated.


6. For instance, in the 1970s a British group of local authorities, the Consortium for Method Building, cautioned that the siting of school buildings and their relationship to play areas and circulation spaces can influence the likelihood of vandalism. See David White, “Vandalism in Housing Estates: Where It Occurs and How It Can Be Prevented,” in Designing against Vandalism, ed. Jane Sykes (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1979), 43–53; see also other essays in the same volume.


9. Actus ad Herennium 1.21; Sallust, Historiae 1.62; Lintott, Violence in Republican Rome, 68.

10. Appian, Bella civilia 1.32.

11. The patricians were a group of aristocratic families who controlled Rome in the early Republic. Nonpatricians were known as plebeians. See T. J. Cornell, The Beginning of Rome: Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars (c. 1000–264 BC) (London: Routledge, 1995), 242–58.


18. Asconius, Pro Milone 2.34; Cicero, Pro Milone 13, 64; Meier, Caesar, 298; Millar, Crowd in Rome, 182.


27. Lintott, Violence in Republican Rome, 67.


40. Cicero, De domo tua 54.


45. Cicero, De finibus 5.2; Cicero, Pro Scauro 46; Catharine Edwards, Writing Rome: Textual Approaches to the City (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17; Flower, Art of Forgetting, 96.


47. Appian, Bella cicuta 1.105–6; Plutarch, Pompeius 15.3; Plutarch, Sulla 31.1; Granarius Licinius 36.25–26; Cicero, De legibus 2.57; Pliny, Naturalis historia 7.187; Keaveney, Sulla, 174–75.


49. Davies, Architecture and Politics in Republican Rome. For the argument that magistrates merely fulfilled a senatorial program, see Eva Margareta Steibly, Edilizia pubblica e potere politico nella Roma repubblicana (Rome: Jaca Book, 2012); and for a contrasting view, see Seth Bernard, “Politics and Public Construction in Republican Rome: Review of E. M. Steibly, Edilizia pubblica e
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For instance, Plutarch, *Architecture and Politics in Republican Rome*

Sheena Wilson, *Observations on the Nature of Vandalism,* in *Sykes, Designing against Vandalism.*

Caico 59.

Pergamon "(New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 65


Plutarch, *Tiberius Gracchus 8.7.*


Polybius 21.37.4


The Art of Ancient Spectacle


Rome responsible for the maintenance of their buildings and the sidewalks in front

77. Herscher, Violence Taking Place, 18, 88; Bresnahan, “Remaking the Bas-

8. Bresnahan, “Remaking the Bas-

9. Gamboni, Destruction of Art, 214. Baron Hausmann’s destructions, de-

81. Gamboni, Destruction of Art, 188–89; Johnstone, “On the Uses of Ar-

82. Gamboni, Destruction of Art, 189. See also Herscher, Violence Taking Place,

83. Plutarch, Tiberius Gracchus 8.7.

84. Low, On the Plaza, 184.


86. Plutarch, Gaius Gracchus 12.4.

87. Cicero, Epistulae ad Atticum 4.2.5, 4.3.2; Papi, “Porticus (monumentum Canali); Tatum, Patrician Triumph, 181, 193.


90. Caesar, Bellum civile 1.5.5, 1.8.1; Meier, Caesar, 342–46.


92. Burall, “Introduction,” 7–9; Wilson, “Observations on the Nature of Vandalism”; Ravet, “Deviance and Disciplines,” 225. Low notes that when the city plan of San José, capital of Costa Rica, was being overhauled, the minister of culture introduced changes to municipal laws to hold landlords responsible for the maintenance of their buildings and the sidewalks in front of their properties. Low, On the Plaza, 195.

93. Cassius Dio 42.50; Suettion, Caesar 38.2; Cicero, De officiis 2.83–84; Meier, Caesar, 418; Angela Donati, “ Cesare e il diritto,” in Gentili, Giulio Cesare, 38–41, esp. 39.


95. Cassius Dio 43.49.


98. Cassius Dio 54.8.1–3; Eutropius 7.9; Florus 2.34.63; Orosius 6.21; Gorski and Packer, Roman Forum, 24–27, 301–11. A Fornix Fabianus dating from soon after 120 BCE spanned the Via Sacra just before it branched: Davies, Architecture and Politics in Republican Rome, 168. On the basic outcomes of pub-


103. Purcell, “Forum Romanum.” Within two months of taking office as pontifices maximi, Augustus had installed a shrine to Vesta in his house on the Palatine, leaving the old temple and the eternal flame on the edge of their properties. Low, On the Plaza, 195.

104. Suettion, Augustus 40.5.


106. Cassius Dio 55.8.5; Suettion, Augustus 43.1, 43.3; Gatti, “Saepta Iulia,” in Steinby, Lexicon topographicum Urbis Romae.

107. Cassius Dio 55.8.6–7, adapted from the translation by Cary.


111. Wallace-Hadrill, Rome’s Cultural Revolution, 276–90.


113. Cassius Dio 55.8; Ramsay MacMullen, Enemies of the Roman Order: Treas-

114. Ian Harrison, “Carthage, Ciotics, and Popular Politics at Rome during the 60s and 50s BCE,” Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies 51 (2008), 118.