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The Macella of Rome

Introduction

After all these things which pertain to human sustenance had been brought into one place, and the place had been built upon, it was called a Macellum.¹

So wrote Varro.

It seems that almost every city and town with any pretensions to importance within the Roman Empire had, as part of its suite of civic amenities, a macellum. This building normally sat alongside the forum and basilica, providing a place in which a market could be held. Why then did Rome, the foremost and most populous city of the Empire, have only one, or very possibly two, at any one time? Why did it not form one of the sides to the Forum in Rome as it did in other cities? Was the macellum intended to provide the only market place for the entire population of Rome? These questions highlight the problems about the role of the macellum within the market and retail structure of the City of Rome.

Macella

Before discussing the problems raised by the macella in Rome it may be beneficial to give an overview of their development and to describe the buildings themselves. In her book, called *Macellum*, Claire De Ruyt² outlines the problems and arguments related to the origins of the word and the form the buildings took. One part of the debate is to the origin of the word *macellum* itself, Greek, Latin or even Semitic beginnings have been advanced. The word *macellum* first appears in the comedies of Plautus, who was writing in the Late Third and Early Second Centuries BC, but as anyone who has tried to use these as a source knows to their cost, these have a major problem. This problem is that Plautus was not an original playwright, he adapted Greek comedies, the majority of which are now lost to us, for his Roman audience, so it is difficult to be certain whether he is giving the original from the Greek or is adding Roman details. In the case of the word *macellum* De Ruyt appears to side with those who think it has a Latin origin. This is important because the word is associated, through the function of the building, with the desire on the part of the civic dignitaries to separate the buying and selling of foodstuffs from the other functions of the forum, an idea which has been thought to be Hellenistic in origin. It may be worth adding here that the word is usually used in the singular, the

¹ Varro *LL.5.147*

² Claire De Ruyt, 1983.

plural, *macella*, is rarely used in ancient sources. This may be of significance in itself. Another problem with *macella* is that there appear to be no precursors to the form of the building we recognise today, it appears to have been conceived and built from scratch and remained fairly consistent in its design until the end of the Empire. A sort of instant design classic.

Varro, in quite a rambling and odd section of *On the Latin Language*,³ says that the 'old' macellum had been the Vegetable Market, the *Forum Holitorium*. Plautus⁴, supported by Livy⁵, however, has the macellum situated in the northeast part of the forum. Livy uses macellum and forum piscatorium interchangeably, as does Plautus, indicating that they were one and the same, but giving an indication of what was sold there. From Plautus it is also apparent that what is being mentioned is a daily market, not a weekly market, or a ninth day market in Latin, a *nundinae*. This indicates that by the end of the Third Century BC, at the latest, Rome had a population large enough to make a daily market sustainable and probably necessary. This may be an explanation as to why the macellum building had no precursors, the facilities required by both the buyers and the sellers may have so well understood that the building was tailor made for them. It may even be that the old macellum ground plan was replicated in the permanent building which then acquired the name. It is clear from what Varro says about bringing all the provision markets to one place, and housing them in a building, as opposed to stalls in an open area, that for him the word macellum denoted the building itself, not just its function⁶. For sources prior to 179 BC *macellum* means a market, after this date it denotes the building the market is housed in.

A macellum is a fairly easy building to identify from its design. The characteristics of a macellum are of a ring of shops around a courtyard which contains a central tholos. This is a round structure, usually built upon a couple of steps (a podium), with a ring of columns supporting a domed roof. A macellum is usually square in shape, although in her survey of *macella* throughout the Roman Empire De Ruyt found examples of different shapes, the shape of the macellum being constrained by the area available when it was constructed. The central courtyard of the macellum is surrounded by *tabernae*, shops, all of the same size or two together. As well as examples where all the *tabernae* face inwards there are examples where there is a double row with the outer row facing out onto the surrounding streets. It was also possible to extend the macellum upwards to include upper stories. Entrance to the macellum was either through central gates on each of the four sides or through some of the *tabernae* themselves. It appears that the *tabernae* set aside for butchers were together in one area of the macellum where they were provided with marble counters, presumably to keep the meat cooler, and drains for the removal of water and fluid waste. It has been suggested that the central tholos, also well provided with water and drains, was where fish was sold, although other uses for the central tholos have been suggested, such as the place where official weights and measures were held for reference or as shrines to the gods of the market place. Some *macella* had a water fountain or water feature in the centre of their courtyard instead of a tholos structure. It is the presence of this central water feature which seems to denote a building a macellum.

³ Varro *LL.5.146*

⁴ Plautus *Curculio* l.465ff

⁵ Livy 26.27.2; 27.11.16

⁶ Varro *LL.5.147*

The Macella of Rome- Macellum

There are only three macella buildings attested for Rome in the classical literary sources. The first, and best documented, was built by Marcus Fulvius Nobilior when he was Censor in 179 BC. Livy⁷ records that he contracted to build a Fish Market (Forum Piscatorium) “with shops around it which he sold for private use”. Livy does not give its precise location, but it appears to have been outside the immediate confines of the Forum (The Forum Romanum as it later came to be called), but not too far away from it. Fulvius also constructed a basilica, the *Basilica Fulvia*, also known as the *Basilica Aemilia et Fulvia*, after his co-Censor Marcus Aemilius Lepidus. This later came to be known as the *Basilica Aemilia*, the name by which it is called even today. The Macellum is thought to have been to the north of the basilica. One theory is that in building this prestigious basilica, one of the early ones in Rome, Fulvius required land already used to hold the old market, and so he may have felt himself obliged to provide an alternative home for it. He appears to have been the first to try to divest the forum of its traditional role as a market place, although this may have been due more to the lack of space around the forum than through a desire to separate its functions. Livy says that what Fulvius built was the Fish Market, however, in referring to the earlier market it replaced, as mentioned before, Livy uses the words macellum and Forum Piscatorium interchangeably. Fulvius is also credited with building the first Macellum and this must be it as no other is mentioned.

There are other sources which mention the macellum and so narrow down the area in which it may have been built, although some appear to be contradictory. Varro appears to place the macellum near the Sacra Via, the Corneta and the Argiletum, putting it close to the Subura, still a thriving retail area of Rome. Varro also says that in this area is the *Forum Cuppedinis* or *Forum Cupidinis*, the ‘Luxury Market’ or ‘Greed Market’. It seems from the use of both these names that Varro is giving nicknames for the area as it seems unlikely that there is an unknown forum here. It is possible that the macellum outgrew its original building and became the centre of a market district, which may explain Varro’s use of the word *Forum*; it may have been to denote a separate part of the macellum. It is also through Varro⁸ that we know the macellum had a tholos, as explained before this appears to be the defining characteristic of macella. Cicero in his *Verrines*⁹ says that Aemilius Alba sat at the entrance to the Macellum in order to be seen. This may be important information about who was expected to make use of the macellum when one considers who he wished to be seen by, such actions having a political motive.

The macellum appears to have had a reasonably long life, although it is not much mentioned after the end of the Republican period, it may have finally burnt down in the fires of 64 AD, and it is certainly not mentioned after this date. It is unlikely that any archaeological evidence of the 179 BC macellum will ever be found due to the building of the complex of Imperial Fora to this side of the Forum Romanum and the flattening of the area to do so. Anderson¹⁰ suspects that the Templum Pacis was built on the site of the macellum and preserves its dimensions. If this was so it was a vast building connected closely to the main thoroughfares of the city and so may have been large enough to provision Rome on a daily basis.

⁷ Livy 40.51.5

⁸ Varro *ap Nonius* 719L

⁹ Cicero *Verrines* 2.3.145

¹⁰ Anderson, J.C. jr 1984

Macellum Liviae

The Macellum Liviae is thought to be the second macellum of Rome, but there is no evidence as to when and under whose orders it was constructed. It is sometimes confused with the Porticus Liviae dedicated in 7 BC, which was on the Oppian Hill. Its existence is attested in the Regionary Catalogues alone, in Regio V, where it is called the Macellum Liviani. Its continued existence is demonstrated by the finding of a marble beam bearing an inscription¹¹ for the restoration of the building by the emperors Valentinian, Valens and Gratian, dating to between 364 and 378 AD. Unfortunately this inscription does not help to identify the site of the macellum having been found out of context.

A late text, which so far I have been unable to trace, places the Macellum Livianum near the Arch of Gallienus. This area was also called, prior to Gallianus, the Porta Esquilina, where, according to Appian¹² there was a large *agora* in the First Century BC. Excavations in the late 19th Century uncovered a central courtyard measuring 80 m by 25 m with the remains of a large fountain in the centre and a complex series of drains. To one side was a row of shops, to the other three sides were found an arcaded portico 6.25 m deep with a row of shops opening off it. Another row of shops, opening outwards, backed onto those facing the courtyard. The building complex appears to have had a long history as there was evidence of rebuilding and alterations stretching over 400 years. The archaeologist, Lanciani, did not think this was the Macellum Liviae as he thought it too ordinary to be an Imperial building, he was expecting a monumental structure¹³. The site of this building, being situated between the Servian and later Auralian Walls places it in Regio V, where the Catalogues say the macellum was to be found.

Macellum Magnum

The Macellum Magnum is a better attested building. Dio Cassius¹⁴ records that the Emperor Nero dedicated it in 59 AD, although he does not record where in Rome it was. The Regionary Catalogues list it as being in Regio II, which would put it up on the Caelian Hill. Inscriptions have been found, dating to the First Century AD, referring to the Macellum Magnum¹⁵ and it is even represented on a series of coins bearing the title 'Macellum Augusti' (MAC AUG)¹⁶. This has led some to believe that there was another macellum called the *Macellum Augusti*. It is now accepted that the Macellum Augusti and the Macellum Magnum were one and the same¹⁷. The building on the coins is represented as having a two storied domed central tholos on a high podium, the tholos being reached by a flight of steps. Two two-storied porticos are shown behind the tholos; the one to the right appears to be depicted as being smaller than the one to the left. Unfortunately, the central space or the surrounding tabernae are not shown.

¹¹ CIL 6.1178

¹² Appian *Bel. Civ.* 1.58

¹³ Richardson, L. jr 1992

¹⁴ Dio Cassius 62 [61].18.3

¹⁵ CIL 6.1648; 6.9183

¹⁶ BMCRE Nero 191; 196; 197 Plate 43 Rome Mint, No.5; 6 and 7 OVERHEAD

¹⁷ Rainbird and Sear

Conclusion

The three macella of Rome have several problems in common. We don't know, exactly, where they were. We don't know how big they were. We don't know how long each was in use, in their original form. Because of this we can say little about the specifics of each building or their place in the commercial system in Rome, but we can make some generalities. I must emphasise that I am considering the macella of Rome here, not macella in general. Firstly, I think that the rarity of finding a plural of macellum in the ancient sources is significant, that to the Romans Macellum meant some thing very specific. Evidence which may support this argument comes from the Marble Plan. Although this dates to after the period of my interest there is a fragment which appears to show the word *Macellum*. Unfortunately it has not yet been ascertained where on the Plan this fragment belongs. It is also unknown which macellum it depicts. What is of interest is that on the Marble Plan there appear to be many shopping complexes which look like macella, but which are not indicated as such. These are courtyards surrounded by tabernae, some appear to have been horseshoe shaped, open to the adjacent road, but some are square. In the modern literature these are commonly referred to as 'bazaars' although no-one appears very happy with this identification. It is unclear, from the Marble Plan, whether any had a central water feature.

A tholos seems to me to be a pretty grand structure to have in the middle of an ordinary marketplace. Although the Censors of the Republic were responsible for contracting for the building of practical structures (roads, bridges, aqueducts) most of these were grand or prestigious constructions. The first macellum of Rome, the daily market which the Macellum building replaced, was connected with fish and other luxury items in the sources. Other sources also connect the macellum with luxury items, not always in a positive light, most are complaints about the prices in the macellum. Nero's Macellum Magnum also appears to have been a magnificent structure with its two-tiered tholos and porticos, one which made such an impression that it was chosen to put on coins, some minted at mints outside of Rome. It must have been a famous building in its day. Because of the little known about the Macellum Liviae it is not possible to be certain if it was also an Imperial construction, but its name may be taken as an indication that it was. It is possible that the development of other retail opportunities, such as shops and local market places within the city, superseded the macella, they may have become fossilised within the retail structure of the city.

The introduction of the first macellum building in Rome, which appears to be the first recorded anywhere, coincided with the process, which had begun earlier, of the increasing monumentalisation of the Forum (the Forum Romanum as it is now known) and the clearer division of its roles between civic and commercial functions. This is not to say that with the creation of the macellum the forum ceased to be used as a market place; commercial activities such as banking continued; just that there appears to have been an effort to smarten the area up. This may be a case of early urban renewal. When Julius Caesar planned an extension to the Forum, begun in 54BC and dedicated, unfinished as the Forum Iulium, in 46BC, his intentions for it were clear. Appian¹⁸ reports that

¹⁸ Appian *Bel. Civ.*2.103

‘He [Julius Caesar] laid out ground around the temple [Venus Genetrix] which he intended to be a forum [*agora*] for the Roman people, not for buying and selling, but as a meeting place for the transaction of public business’

Rome was not a planned city, building took place where and when space was made available. Most of the area around the Forum Romanum was already in use for prestigious buildings by 179 BC, this may explain why Fulvius’s macellum was set back from the forum. Building land in this area was very expensive. Augustus may have had problems purchasing land for his forum, this problem would have increased as the complex of Imperial Fora grew. They were built upon land which had been the commercial heart of the city. With the construction of the Imperial fora it is thought that the macellum gradually became less accessible from certain parts of the city. The construction of the Macellum Liviae may possibly be connected with Augustus’ division of the city into Regions, so trying to encourage the local development of trade within the city. The city was growing rapidly and the macellum in the centre may have been isolated from its customers enough that it went out of business. As Julius Caesar had planned for his forum so too for later emperors, the Imperial Fora were places of state and private business, I have been unable to find evidence for any provision markets within them.

Because of the size of the Roman population and the connection with luxury goods, as well as the sheer practicalities of scale, I think it unlikely that the macella were intended to be the sole marketplace within the city of Rome. There is evidence to suggest a thriving retail life to the city, separate from the macellum. The macellum seems to have symbolised something dear to the hearts of the Romans though, the ability to get their hands on anything they fancied. I started with a quote from Varro, so I will end with another. Caecubum was celebrated for its wines, Seplasia and Capua for their perfumes.

Dotis dato insulam Chrysam, agrum Caecubum, Seplasia, Capua, Macellum Romanii

The island of Chrysam and the lands of Caecubum, Seplasia and Capua keep on giving their dowries to the Macellum of the Romans¹⁹.

¹⁹ Varro *Sat. Men. Anthr. Fr.3*

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Plautus	<i>Curculio</i> l.465ff
Varro	<i>LL.</i> 5.147 <i>LL.</i> 5.146 <i>ap Nonius</i> 719L <i>Sat. Men. Anthr. Fr3.</i>

Inscriptions

CIL 6.1178
CIL 6.1648
CIL 6.9183