The Elegiac Cityscape

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WHAT IS LAST is first; the last topographical poem in Propertius’ tour of Rome describes Rome’s first public monument. The elegist’s description of the temple of Jupiter Feretrius proves that *arcana* are not arcane. On the contrary: from the beginning, Rome’s buildings responded to and shaped the Romans’ sense of themselves, and stood for Romans of all eras as reminders of who they had been and who they had become. Many of these monuments continue to shape the self-identity not only of Romans, or even of Italians, but of all those who inhabit Rome’s legacy. From Napoleon’s Arc de Triomphe in Paris; to the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C.; to the Government-General building in Seoul, recently demolished as a symbol of Japanese colonial rule; to the Memorial Coliseum in Los Angeles where teams compete at American football, Roman architecture continues to endorse strong ideological positions on such matters as manly virtue, statecraft, and imperialism.

Cynthia’s poet demonstrates with uncomfortable clarity the extent to which Roman identity is encoded in its buildings and places. Throughout Book 4 Propertius scrutinizes the monumentalization of various ideological positions in Rome, poking and prodding Rome’s monuments to see what further meanings they might admit. The result is a poetic book rife with different voices and different perspectives on the eternal city, perspectives that often call into question any sleepy or complacent adherence to Rome’s traditional values.
Propertius’ achievement in building a written city rivals Augustus’ achievement in building a marble one. In elegy 4.1 the elegist promises to do just that:

moenia namque pio coner disponere uersu . . .

scandentis quisquis cernit de uallibus arces,
ingenio muros aestimet ille meo!

For I would try to lay out the city walls in my holy verse . . . whoever sees these citadels rising above the valleys, let him judge their walls by my genius! (4.1.57, 65–66)

We, his readers, are to judge Roman buildings by Propertius’ genius, not Augustus’. The incipit for elegy 4.10, written at the end of his “architectural” project, marks his success. Propertius triumphs, climbing his own scripted Capitol (magnum iter ascendo, 4.10.3) in the Rome that is his own, not the Princeps’, creation. Where the Augustan building program urges a sense of individual duty to the state (the Basilica Aemilia), a sense of wonder at Rome’s place in the world and the emperor’s place in Rome (the temple of Palatine Apollo), a sense of the proper relationship between traditional gender roles and success (the Ara Maxima and the sanctuary of the Bona Dea), and a sense of the manifest destiny guaranteed by Roman martial aggression (the temple of Jupiter Feretrius), Propertius encourages instead caution about a state that assumes too much control over private affairs, awareness of the civil strife that enabled Augustus’ Principate, skepticism about the virtues encoded into traditional roles for men and women, contrition at the human cost of Roman expansion—and, above all, a Vertumnus-style open-mindedness in what monuments mean and how that meaning is conveyed.1

Perhaps this aspect of the book explains the curious choice of monuments presented in Book 4; they are all part of Rome’s public rather than private face, all more central than peripheral, but they are not necessarily Rome’s “greatest hits” nor its freshest wonders. Propertius all but ignores, for example, the theater of Marcellus and the new emperor’s mausoleum, the temple of Jupiter Tonans and even the Forum Augustum already under way and unlike anything Romans had ever seen before. With the exception of the temple of Palatine
Apollo, the elegist rather chose to elaborate on places already imbued with a long history into which the Princeps inserted himself. The pre-existing history of most of Propertius’ sites emphasizes the changes of his own time as part of a process of identity formation rather than its result. Rome was not yet imperial in 16 BCE. The poet’s task was to show it becoming so. Though his is not the most flashy Rome, the elegist’s city—his poems on Roman rites, days, and the names of places, issued from his tiny breast (*exiguo . . . e pectore* 4.1.59)—nevertheless persists in ringing in our ears. Propertius’ entry into the urban landscape argues forcefully that Roman identity is not something created from the top that trickles down, but rather something that is negotiated, discussed, and disputed at all levels. A Princeps is only as successful in crafting a new Rome as Romans are willing to accept it without pause.

The poet succeeds in another way as well. Time has proven true Propertius’ boast from elegy 3.3.19–26—that monuments and pyramids, mausolea and temples will fall, but Propertius’ *ingenium* will endure.² Pound’s version at *Homage to Sextus Propertius* 1 captures the idea with a bold Ozymandias-like flair:

Happy who are mentioned in my pamphlets,
the songs shall be a fine tomb-stone over their breasts.

But against this?
Neither expensive pyramids surpassing the stars in their route,
Nor bones modeled on that of Jove in East Elis,
Nor the monuments or effigies of Mausolus,
are a complete elucidation of death.
Flame burns, rain sinks into the cracks
And they all go to rack ruin beneath the thud of years.
Stands a genius a deathless adornment,
a name not to be worn out with the years.

Propertius’ poems remain intact—unraveling at some textual seams, to be sure, but nevertheless still there to be read and appreciated. In contrast, none of the buildings or monuments he describes in Book 4 remains. Augustus’ city and the messages embedded in it endure only as long as the marble from which they are built. The transience of the physical world is a theme that runs throughout Book 4. It has pride of place at the beginning of the book’s introductory poem. To start his tour of Rome, Propertius introduces the contrast between Rome’s current splendor and its rustic beginnings:
hoc quodcumque uides, hospes, qua maxima Roma est,
ante Phrygem Aenean collis et herba fuit;
atque ubi Naualii stant sacra Palatia Phoebou,
Euandre profugae procuibere boues.
fictilibus creuere deis haec aurea templap,
nec fuit opprobrio facta sine arte casa;
Tarpeiusque pater nuda de rupe tonabat,
et Tiberis nostris aduena bubus erat.
qua gradibus domus ista Remi se sustulit, olim
unus erat fratum maxima regna focus.
Curia, praetexto quae nunc nitet alta senatu,
pellitos habuit, rustica corda, Patres.
bucina cogebat priscos ad uerba Quiritis:
centum illi in prato saepe senatus erat.
nec sinuosa cauo pendebant uela theatro,
pulpita sollemnis non oluere crocos.

All that you see here, visitor, where great Rome stands now, was but hill
and grass in the days before Trojan Aeneas. And where stands the Palatine sanctuary for Phoebus Protector of the Sea, the exiled cattle of Evander used to take their rest. These golden temples arose out of statues made of clay, nor was it any shame to live in a house built without pretense. The Tarpeian Father thundered from his bare rock, and Tiber was a neighbor to our cattle. Do you see where the house of Remus rises up yonder on its high steps? Once a single hearth was the extent of the brothers’ kingdom. The Curia, which now gleams aloft with the Senate in its ceremonial toga, once held skin-clad Elders, humble hearts, those. A shepherd’s horn used to assemble Romans of yore: then “the Senate” was often any hundred men in a field. Nor did supple curtains hang in the hollow theater back then, and the platforms did not smell of ritual saffron. (4.1.1–16)

As mentioned in chapter 1, the newer buildings cited in these opening lines all have a strong Augustan flair: the temple of Palatine Apollo; a thundering Jupiter—i.e., Jupiter Tonans on the Capitol; the house of Remus, probably the temple of Quirinus restored in 16 BCE; the Curia, restored by Augustus after a fire in 29 BCE; and the theater of Marcellus, built in honor of the Princeps’ nephew and dedicated in 13 BCE, a decade after his death. This golden Augustan city stands in stark contrast to pastoral proto-Rome. Like Vergil, who employed the same juxtaposition of past and present from the perspective of the
past, Propertius invites contemplation on Rome’s change over time. But unlike Vergil, whose temporal trajectory points only toward the rise of Rome, Propertius points toward its eventual decline as well.³ Elegy 4.10 brings full circle the movement from rustic to rich and back to rustic, juxtaposing the former splendor of the great Etruscan city Veii, defeated by Rome, with its current, conquered humility:

heu Vei ueteres! et uos tum regna fuistis,
et uestro posita est aurea sella foro:
nunc intra muros pastoris bucina lenti
cantat, et in uestris ossibus arua metunt.

Alas, ancient Veii! At that time you were still a kingdom, and the golden throne still sat in your forum. Now within the walls sounds the horn of an unhurried shepherd, and they harvest fields upon your bones. (4.10.27–30)

Many readers have noted the correspondence between risen Rome in 4.1 and fallen Veii in 4.10, but few have teased out its implications for Propertius’ view on monuments and identity.⁴ Cities rise and cities fall. Their transience in the elegist’s work is not so much a commentary on the persistence of nature as on the fragility of man’s achievements; his focus on the past is not so much a nostalgic preference for simpler times as an examination of how Rome’s very beginnings contain the seeds of both its rise and its eventual fall. Ruined Veii, viewed with pity and despair, emphasizes the vulnerability of monuments and cities, and with them the vulnerability of the men who build them and the identity they foster. Against the failings of the political and physical worlds, only music—the *bucina pastoris*—will survive.