SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

FORUM: A brief history

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*If you proceed to visit the ancient* ***Forum****, which is equally filled with basilicas, porticoes, and temples, you will there behold the Capitol, the Palatine, and the noble works that adorn them, and the piazza of Livia – each successive work causing you speedily to forget that which you have seen before. Such then is Rome!\*[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Strabo, (64/63 B.C.E. – 25 C.E.), the author of the above paragraph, may have in all likelihood written the first travel book. According to his *Geographica*, a 17-volume book written in 15 C.E. about people and places known to his era, forum is a large square located in the center of the city Rome.

The word “forum” has evolved and changed over time. Today’s most popular use of the term is to designate a discussion board on the Internet, precisely the interpretation adopted by [www.mastersball.com](http://www.mastersball.com) web site.

Forum is Latin. Its original meaning is “market place”\*[[2]](#footnote-2).

Shops lined the streets leading to the *Forum Romanum*, as the square described by Strabo was known 2,000 years ago. Street vendors crowded all around. In addition to shopping, people gathered to meet, engage in business transactions, discuss current events and listen to public sermons. New imperial laws and outcomes of distant wars were announced to the throng assembled on the square. Cicero gave his most famous speeches from a podium known as *rostrum*.

A more apt although not literal translation of forum would be “center of public business”.

Rome had two other market places; one built by Julius Cesar and one built on orders of Emperor Trajan to celebrate his victory in Dacia. *Forum Traiani,* constructed against the flank of one of Rome’s seven hills, was a multi-story porticoed building. Trajan Forum, whose *grandeur defies description and can never again be approached by mortal men*,\*[[3]](#footnote-3) was probably the first ever-shopping mall.

The concept of having a market square in the center of town was a feature common to cities built by the Romans in all their provinces. For example, a pagan basilica, the tallest structure north of the Alps in the second century C.E., stood on the north bank of the river Thames in Londinium (today London). Forum surrounded the basilica on three sides. \*[[4]](#footnote-4)

Even small towns followed the same topographical pattern with a centrally located basilica and a nearby forum. In Calleva (today Silchester) located west of Londinium, the market square was surrounded by the wall of the basilica on one side and by shops on the other three sides. \*[[5]](#footnote-5)

Fori\*[[6]](#footnote-6) maintained their significance as centers of public gatherings in cities of the Roman Empire well into the late antiquity. A spontaneous festival broke out in Edessa in 498 C.E. when the abolition of an unpopular merchants and artisans’ tax was read out in the city’s forum.\*[[7]](#footnote-7)

With the advent of Christianity, people stopped worshipping pagan gods and abandoned the basilicas. City topography changed. Starting around the fourth century, the new Christian churches were built near the cemeteries, which were located outside the town walls. By then urban decay had begun. Medieval economy was based on barter and on self-supporting local production. Trade was primarily short distance. What were once daily markets were now fairs held a few times a year on Martyr’s or Saint’s Days. Many centuries later when Christian cathedrals and duomos were erected in the center of town where the pagan basilicas once stood, markets were not part of the building plans.

The term emerged from obscurity relatively recently and it gained popularity mid last century. Parties born in the Eastern European countries out of the opposition to the Soviet regime incorporated it in their names. East Germany had a “New Forum”; there was a “Hungarian Democratic Forum”; Czechoslovakia had a “Civic Forum”. Forum meant, “Speaking for the people”. \*[[8]](#footnote-8)

It is a small step from here to the commonly accepted meaning of today.

I doubt that Cicero would have believed that an ordinary word indicating the place where he sent his slaves to shop would still be in use after all this time and, on top, have such a lofty meaning.

Latin expressions, e.g. *mea culpa*, *non-sequitur* or *carpe diem* to list a few, have maintained their original meaning in our vernacular. Forum stands apart. It has a modern interpretation and acceptance. It is a 25 centuries old word alive and living in our changing language.

We continuously invent new words and new expressions or assign new meaning to the existing ones. Our everyday language is endlessly changing. Will any of the words or expressions of our modern time stimulate the imagination of future generations in such a way to remain in use for the next 25 centuries?

Yes, I can think of one: “fantasy baseball”, of course.

1. \* Strabo, *Geographica*, as referenced in *Book of* *Eyewitnesses* - *Ancient Rome*, edited by Jon E. Lewis, Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2003 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. \* Lorna Robinson, *Cave Canem*, Walker & Company, 2008 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. \* Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*, Book 16, written in the 4th century CE, as translated by Walter Hamilton [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. \* Peter S. Wells, *Barbarians To Angels*, W.W. Norton & Co. 2008 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. \* R.R. Sellman, *Roman Britain*, Methuen & Co. London, 1956 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. \* the plural form of forum [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. \* Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome*, Penguin Books, 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. \* Timothy Garton Ash, an eyewitness to the events of 1989 in Eastern Europe, *The Magic Lantern*, Vintage Books by Random House, 1990. To the reader interested in the epochal events of that historic year, I recommend *Revolution 1989* by Victor Sebestyen [↑](#footnote-ref-8)