“For here we have no lasting city….”: Flavian Iconography, Roman Imperial Sacrificial Iconography, and the Epistle to the Hebrews

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After saying in 13.12 that Jesus ‘suffered outside the gate’, he writes in vv. 13f.: ‘Therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp bearing abuse for him. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come.’ He issues a summons out of the assimilation which conceals the Christian confession, which promises security without danger and the peaceful enjoyment of life, but which rejects solidarity with the oppressed and thus denies the abused Christ; he calls his people to join ‘the secular public with its danger and threat, to the point of being open to abuse and persecution’. Finally, he justifies that by saying that on earth there is abiding city for Christians. In saying this he is clearly opposed to the claim of ‘eternal Rome’. Christians have nothing to do with the fortress mentality of the Pax Romana. Because they belong to God’s coming city, they are now on their way to this city unprotected and full of expectation.

Klaus Wengst offers a provocative starting point for a reading of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the political context of the Roman Empire. Writing in 1986, Wengst applied his exegesis as theological rejoinder to the American-led deployment on West German soil of Pershing Cruise missiles and their symbolic expression of Ronald Reagan’s opposition to a Soviet “Evil Empire.” The promise of “security without danger and the peaceful enjoyment of life” captured for Wengst the idolatry of achieving peace through the deployment of first-strike tactical nuclear missiles. He discovered in Hebrews an expression of a counter-cultural civic order that rejected the misbegotten peace of a militaristic ancient Empire, in the expectation of a different order, God’s coming city that achieves security by other means for different ends.

However, as striking and as illuminating as Wengst’s treatment promises, few have followed his lead in offering a politically engaged reading of Hebrews, that seeks to
locate the paraenesis and ideals of the letter/sermon in the context of competing Roman imperial claims. So, for example, while Wengst recognizes the clear counterclaim of Hebrews’ enduring city (13.14; 11.13; 12.22) against Eternal Rome, commentaries pass over that contrast and instead draw attention to abundant literary parallels in Old Testament and Intertestamental Jewish tradition. Commentators of course recognize the document’s imperial context by virtue of its reference to apparently recent persecution (10.32-34; cf. 12.4), but how the political valences of the city texts might relate to that larger social situation remains unrecognized in the historical-critical and literary exegetical tradition. The result is that a broader imperial reading of Hebrews is almost without exception displaced in favour of considerations of a more parochial nature, such as what clue the reference to persecution might give to a proper dating of the letter, the relationship of Hebrews to currents in late Second Temple Judaism, rhetorical concerns, abstract theologies of penance, evidence of development from two- to three-stage Christology, and so on. Even the serious question of the status of Hebrews as an instance of Christian supercessionism leaves unaddressed the political location of the document as emergent Christian literature in relation to those forms of first-century Judaism very much living within and defining itself apologetically in terms comprehensible to an imperial civil order. One only need refer to Philo’s and Josephus’s accounts of the temple prayers and sacrifices for the well-being of the emperor and his household to recognize how charged with imperial valence Hebrews’ own representations of the once-for-all self-sacrifice of Jesus might have sounded to its first hearers.
Ellen Bradshaw Aitken offers a reading of Hebrews sensitive, like Wengst’s, to its political location. Locating its addressees in Flavian Rome, she discovers in Hebrews’ christological claims, as well as its representation of Jesus’ death as triumph and exaltation, a direct engagement with the Triumph celebrated by Vespasian and Titus in 71 CE to celebrate the conclusion of the Jewish War, and more particularly with the consecration of Titus in the Triumph to presage his apotheosis upon his death in 81 CE. She offers a compelling argument that Hebrews’ Christology of the divine enthronement of Jesus as Son of God, with its affirmation that Jesus has thereby made God’s enemies a footstool for his feet, as well as its appropriation of a repertoire of political Davidic Psalms of adoption, exaltation, and enthronement (Heb 1.3-4,5,8,13; 2.9; 3.3; 4.14; 5.5,9; 6.20; 7.15-17,26; 8.1; 12.2; see Ps. 2.7; 8.6; 44.7; 45.6; 110.1,4) should be understood against a backdrop of Flavian political and theological celebration of military victory, as well as a civic imperial theology of apotheosis. Even as the Flavian Triumph concluded with the Triumphator making sacrifice to Jupiter Capitolinus, so Jesus offers himself in his triumphal death to God the Father (Heb. 5.7,10; 9.11-14, 26,28; 10.1-18; 13.12) and reveals himself, like the emperor, as elected by God to be both Son and Priest. As in Hebrews, so in the Vespasianic theology of victory, apotheosis is a confirmation a divinely orchestrated and rewarded achievement. In support of this political reading of Hebrews we could draw attention to imagery celebrating not only Titus, but also the apotheosis of Vespasian: Roman coins with the legend AETERNIT AUG celebrating the
consecration of Vespasian show a worldwide prosperity and
universal reign in representing Aeternitas standing with her
left foot on a globe, holding a scepter in her right hand and a
cornucopia in her left (*Figure 1*) and so secure an impression
of the unending benefits of Flavian rule as well as the
divinity of the deceased emperor who secured it. Here is
another imperial analogue to Hebrews’ Christological
celebration of a reign of Christ without end (1.312; 6.20;
7.3,24; 13.8) and without limit (2.8; 13.14). More specifically,
Bradshaw Aitken’s work is instructive for its attention to
imperial monumental iconography as a means of recovering a
political reading of Hebrews by locating it in the field of Roman imperial iconography,
especially that of the imagery of triumphal imagery on the Arch of Titus on the Via Sacra
in the Roman forum, and the description offered by Josephus in his eye-witness account

In what follows I aim to broaden this way of reading Hebrews further by
continuing such an imperially engaged reading of Hebrews amidst the ruins as it were of
Flavian Rome, with reference to its affirmations of the achievements of Jesus’ self-
sacrifice, and the “letter’s” descriptions of an eternal and abiding city to come. More
particularly I seek to relate Flavian imperial sacrificial iconography to the Epistle to the
Hebrews in order to uncover more fully the imperial location of Hebrews and its ideals,
and the ways in which it finds a place within the broader imperial situation of the Flavian
dynasty. This of course accepts a Flavian date and Roman provenance for the letter, both of which rest on circumstantial but nevertheless compelling arguments. Apotheosis and Triumph describe significant elements Hebrews shares with that imperial situation; sacrifice and the creation/renewal of the civic order express two others. Even as Vespasian and his sons promoted their dynasty as a recovery of an Augustan order through a rejuvenated imperial repertoire of sacrifice, the renovation and repair of temples, and the representation of themselves iconographically as faithful practitioners of traditional Roman rites, so Hebrews invites its audience to renew its religious devotion by a refurbished commitment to communal worship, in celebration of the one who offered right sacrifice and demonstrated supreme piety. And just as first Vespasian rebuilt Rome from the ruins of civil war, and then Domitian engaged in ambitious building projects after the fire of 80 CE, both seeking to construct a city renewed on a foundation of recovered Roman tradition and values, engaging in an ambitious programme of public works, so Hebrews expresses the hope for inhabiting an enduring city built on the ideals of Christian love and solidarity and religious devotion.

As Wengst correctly notices, Hebrews’ teaching that here we have no lasting city contrasts potently with the political ideology of an eternal Rome. In fact, attention to the monumental and iconographical programme initiated by Vespasian and continued by his sons to promote a new imperial dynasty reinforces his insights by helping us notice how the language of Hebrews echoes with political resonances when read against the backdrop of the political visual culture of Flavian Rome. I use the term “resonances” advisedly: it is impossible to determine the extent to which the letter was inspired by
events in contemporary Flavian Rome. Still, placing Hebrews in the context of those events helps to identify what we may describe as, borrowing an apt phrase from Adela Yabro Collins, “the imperial situation” of Hebrews, and the ways in which it replicated while at the same time expressed discontinuity with its imperial location.\(^8\)

nil magis mirandum fuisse in toto orbe terrarum\(^9\)

The more or less instant creation of a new imperial dynasty, coming on the heels of the excesses of his predecessor, Vitellius, and before him Nero, offered Vespasian the occasion to model his regime as a return to the good government and ideals of his predecessor Augustus, and his more accomplished successors -- especially, Claudius (who had himself of course built his throne on the ashes of another imperial maniac).\(^10\)

The new emperor was careful to represent himself not as a new imperial contender, but rather a ruler in the line of his predecessors: at Brixia and Olympia, for example, statues of Vespasian and Titus were added to those of Augustus and his successors rather than replacing them.\(^11\) At home in Rome, the new emperor was quick to get to work. Nero’s fire had left ten of the fourteen districts of Rome either completely destroyed or significantly damaged. Further, the civil war with Vitellius caused significant damage to the Capitol; most significantly the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus was burned to the ground. The destruction of the city presented a victorious Vespasian with an unparalleled opportunity to celebrate his victory over Vitellius as a renovation of the political order and the remaking of Rome itself. Similarly the success of his son, Titus, in bringing to
conclusion the war in Judea became a central plank in the shaping of public opinion of his dynastic rule as a restoration of Rome and the revival of an Augustan era almost extinguished by the conflicts of 69 CE. As well as repairing the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus Capitolinus, Vespasian built the Temple of Jupiter Custos, restored the Temple of Honos and Virtus, conspicuously completed the Temple to the Deified Claudius, restored Augustan monuments like the Theatre of Marcellus damaged by the civil war, erected three triumphal arches, built new aqueducts and rebuilt bridges and roads.12 A later fire in 80 CE when again significant portions of the city were destroyed, including Vespasian’s restored Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, presented a second occasion – this time to Domitian – for an even more dramatic Flavian rebuilding of Rome.13

By the end of the century Rome had undergone a massive rebuilding and renovation completely transforming the Julio-Claudian city Vespasian and his sons had inherited into a Flavian monument. Today when the contemporary visitor looks on the ancient city, it is the the Flavian city they are looking at. Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian through dramatic building projects shrewdly added the signs of Flavian rule to existing Julio-Claudian monuments, and conspicuously situated their own alongside them. This created what A.J. Broyle aptly calls a Flavian semiotic disturbance to the monumental text of a pre-existing city.14 That Flavian achievement aimed at what another author calls a totalizing discourse of Roman supremacy inscribed on monuments and collected in displays of Greek art, architectural wonders, and the civic display of imperial luxury.15 It is what inspired Pliny the Elder to offer by way of ekphrasis an extended encomium to
the architectural wonders of Rome (NH 36.101-25; urbis nostrae miracula, at 101) and so create in the imaginations of his readers a vision of a worldwide Roman imperium. “For if you were to gather all the buildings of Rome and place them in one great heap,” he hymns, “the grandeur which towered above would be no less than if another world were described in the one place” (NH 36.101).

Pliny the Elder captures the tone of Vespasion’s reign in likening him to Augustus, in his dedication to sobriety and modesty, as proponent of moral and physical regeneration; both emperors erect architectural miracula and mirabilia, in contrast to the luxus and luxuria, insania, and maior insania of Nero and before him Caligula and Mark Antony.16 Suetonius, too, describes his modesty in his taking care to ensure the names of the original builders were inscribed on his reconstructions (Vespasion 19.1). In fact, Vespasion was at least as shrewd as he was modest, self-consciously modeling himself on Augustus’ own practice of giving credit where credit was due, and so magnifying his own stature as a reformer and builder in the style of his predecessor. To mark both his role as benefactor in line with the most celebrated aspects of the Julio-Claudians, he took the proceeds from the Jewish War and built the Flavian Coliseum in the garden of Nero’s newly constructed Domus Aureus. A large amphitheatre he learned had already been a plan of Augustus and in implementing it he skillfully promoted himself as another Augustus (Suetonius, Vespasion 9). Again he recalled the achievement of his predecessor when he erected a new Templum Pacis facing the Forum of Augustus (Figure 2). In it he placed on view objects plundered from the Second Temple such as the seven-branched candelabrum and the Ark of the Covenant, as well as precious art and artifacts plundered
from across the Empire. The Temple of Peace, like the Altar of Peace of Augustus, thus became an official monument to peace brought by the Flavians to

Rome after years of civil and foreign war, and an expression of an imperial theology of victory and the renewal of the city. The spoils of war put on display there signified Rome’s divinely appointed task of pacifying enemies, and welding the Empire’s dispersed inhabitants into a cosmopolitan unity.

That theology of victory and reinforcement of Rome as a divinely appointed sacred city was given dramatic expression when in 75 CE he was granted powers to extend the pomerium – the sacred boundary of Rome -- in celebration of his victories in Britain and Germany (thus, Tacitus, Annals, 12.23-4). This again furnished Vespasian with a conspicuous means of marking his imperial successes. The expansion of the pomerium was an important means of self-aggrandizement by successive Julio-Claudian emperors: huge markers numbered in sequence indicated the precise distance in Roman feet between each stone that established the boundary of the city and each served as a reminder not only of Rome’s limits as a sacred space (one which the emperor was
scrupulous to observe, bivouacking, for example, with his troops outside their limit the eve of the celebration of his Triumph – Josephus, *War*, 7.123), but of imperial achievement).¹⁷

In all of this, Vespasian and his sons were consciously seeking to give expression to revival of Rome as an eternal city. As significant as these building projects, was the iconographical propaganda imperial iconographers designed to go along with them. Vespasian like Augustus before him used a carefully orchestrated programme of iconographical representation to publish his achievements and shape public opinion of his reign. Like the Julio-Claudians, the Flavians developed what Tonio Hölscher aptly describes as a coherent and stylized picture language to represent its ideals and achievements.¹⁸ Traditional imperial iconographical study focuses on this imagery from the top down and attempts for example to link iconographical images with precise historical events, or to identify pre-existing artistic models or styles and then gauge their influences on the art under investigation. A more recent approach, however, considers the role of imperial art in shaping its viewers and the role of the viewer in bringing meaning to art.¹⁹ Attention to picture language here is not so much to get behind iconography to its origins, but to attempt to formulate hypotheses about its effects in culture, and the role of reception in concretizing those effects. Hölscher’s work on the blending of the Hellenistic and Classical in Julio-Claudian state art is important for gauging the full force of first century imperial claims to bring the world a particular brand of peace and moral renewal, and for helping to understand the role of audiences in taking the picture language of imperial iconographers and using it to interpret themselves as beneficiaries of that global
transformation. In this consideration, iconography takes on a dynamic quality that focuses more on appropriation than on questions of origin. Complementary to Paul Zanker’s representation of Julio-Claudian iconography as a semantic system of communication, Hölscher argues that imperial iconographers sought to promote a potent message of transformation and achievement in carefully combining the dynamic and dramatic aspects of Hellenistic art characteristic of the Republican period with the more static and sustained artistic style of a revived Classicism introduced by Augustus.

In the case of the Flavians, the mix of Neo-Classicism and Hellenistic forms became more pronounced with the introduction of ever more dramatic modes of representation, dynamism, and florid decoration set alongside the neo-classical. Extending Hölscher’s insight to the Flavian period, this made the picture language of the Julio-Claudian period more emphatic, and encouraged its viewers to conceive of themselves in a process of renewal and transformation at least as dramatic as the turn of events that accompanied the Flavian rise to power and the Jewish War that went along with it. With Vespasian and his sons the world was in a dramatic process of transformation. As we shall see, that transformation was in fact promoted a return to or restoration of a Julio-Claudian order that was almost extinguished in the final years of Nero’s reign and the year of civil war that followed his assassination. This recognition helps to set into relief Hebrews’ own hoped for transformation in the city to come, as well as the ways it might have functioned for its listeners as a mode of resistance to ideas promoted by Flavian propagandists, chief amongst which we should number its iconographers.
Chief amongst the media for communicating the Flavian picture language of transformation and renewal was imperial coinage. Numismatic iconography was a primary means of the Flavians to communicate their achievements and ideals. During the decade of his reign alone, Vespasian’s mints struck at least one hundred different legends and almost two hundred and thirty coin types to represent his rule. The effort expended in designing and cutting all these dies reveals the importance the emperor laced on iconography as a means of managing public perception of his reign. Within the first year of his victory over the Vitellians, Vespasian’s mints were striking coins hailing the emperor as Augustus and representing him raising up a kneeling Roma, with the inscription, ROMA RESURGENS (Figures 3a and 3b).

(Figure 3a) ROMA RESURGENS Rome 69-70 CE Reverse: Vespasian, togate, standing l., extending r. hand to raise up Roma, helmeted in military dress, who kneels r. in front of him, with round shield on l. arm

(Figure 3b) ROMA RESURGENS Rome 71 CE: Reverse: Vespasian, laureate, togate, standing l., l. arm, at side, r. hand extended to raise up Roma, a draped woman, kneeling r. in front of him, and holding out her r. hand to him: in the background stands goddess Roma, helmeted, in military dress r., holding spear in r. hand, and round shield on l.
Alongside an image of Rome being raised from her knees, in the same year as his accession and in several issues thereafter, imperial mints struck coins with Roma seated, helmeted in military dress, with the inscription, ROMA PERPETUA (Figure 4). In 71 CE the Roman mint issued a coin celebrated Vespasian’s achievement in winning peace and security by representing the emperor receiving from Victory the Palladium – the wooden statue of Pallas brought to Rome by Aeneas, kept at the Temple of Vesta, and symbolizing the safety of the city, and hence eternal Rome (Figure 5).

Elsewhere were published coins with Roma seated helmeted and in military dress amongst the seven hills of Rome. Accompanying these images were inscription on new and refurbished monuments celebrating the emperor as restorer and conserver of public rites.  

These were iconographical themes that accompanied the Flavians through the two and half decades of their reign, and expressed the imperial propaganda that they had been appointed by the gods to rescue the city and Empire from ruin, and to restore it for
posterity. In doing so they again promoted an image of themselves as restorers of the Augustan order, and in this imagery they invited their viewers to consider themselves as swept up in a return to a grand Augustan era of peace and prosperity. In first years of his reign, for example, Vespasian revived the two types of Divus Augustus, the altar and the eagle, to signal Vespasian’s desire to rank as successor of Augustus (Figures 6 and 7).

Other coins reflect ambitious building projects initiated at the start of Vespasian’s accession. By the middle of the decade, images of a rebuilt Temple of Jupiter appeared on his coins.
(Figure 8). Titus magnified Flavian achievement by having his mints represent the coliseum (Figure 9).

In addition to these more direct invocations of the restoration of civil order were the ways the mints invoked imperial victory on Flavian coinage. Vespasian exploited the memory of Augustus by representing Victory inscribing a clypeus. The clypeus had been awarded to Augustus by the Senate in 27 BCE after his restoration of the republic, and successive emperors, especially the imperial contenders of 68, had struck coins associating their reigns with a clypeus inscribed by Victory. Vespasian, however, developed this iconographical programme further, by linking Victory and the clypeus with his successes in Judaea, and in doing so effectively linked his successes there with his programme of restoration of Rome itself. This we can see on a coin struck in 71 CE where Victory inscribes a clypeus with the legend ob cives servatos, mounted on a palm tree (symbolic of Judaea), against which leans a mourning Jew, with the inscription, VICTORIA AUGUSTI (Figure 10). Here the mints link Vespasian with the Julio-Claudian era and associate Flavian success in Judaea with Roman restoration. We can take measure of the popular reception of this imagery by tracing its migration to far-flung corners of the Empire and onto the military costume of Flavian soldiers.22 We find it at Sabratha in North Africa, where it appears on the cuirass of a statue of Vespasian

(Figure 9) Rome 80-81 CE: Reverse: View of Coliseum, showing the front from the outside and the back from the inside

(Figure 10) Rome 71 CE: Reverse: VICTORIA AUGUSTI Winged Victory, naked to waist, inscribes ob cives servatos on clypeus mounted on palm tree; mourning Jew r.
it recurs on legionary scabbards and checkgards retrieved from imperial frontiers (Figure 12). All of this, then, represents an iconographical counterpoint to Flavian achievements on the ground and the dispersal and popular reception of its claims.

At home in Rome, there is further evidence of enthusiastic reception. The reliefs on the tomb of the Haterii, freedpersons living in the late Flavian period, depict a variety
of Roman monuments of which the most famous is a representation of the coliseum as well as a crane (Figures 13a and 13b). The reliefs have been variously interpreted, but the most widely held interpretation is that they depict building projects participated in by the contractor and freedperson of the Haterius family, Quintus Haterius Tychicus. If true, we have here a celebration from the perspective of everyday – albeit most probably nouveau riche -- viewers of Flavian Rome whose family takes pride not only in the accomplishments of a family member, but in the construction and renovation of the city itself. Flavian numismatic iconography representing the renovation of Rome would have found and in turn helped to shape the enthusiastic reception amongst people like the Haterii who benefited from the emperor’s patronage and building projects.\textsuperscript{23}
Attention to Flavian iconography wins a remarkable imperial valence for Hebrews’ representation of seeking an eternal city, the city that is to come, even its coding of Jesus as a Melchizedek who is “king of Salem, that is, king of Peace” (Heb. 7.2), and its depiction of Jesus, who like Flavian coinage bears the “stamp” (character) of the divine image (Heb. 1.3), crucified outside the gates of that other “eternal” city, Jerusalem. Whatever motivation occasioned these descriptions, at least at the level of reception it is more than possible that a Roman audience already primed by the ambitious imperial building projects all around them, at the centre of which was a temple to pax, erected to reinforce a notion of an enduring civic order in this world, would have been invited to view their context with a different point of view than the one promoted by their imperial masters. And if the Flavian world was in a process of transformation, so the writer of Hebrews encouraged his audience to live out their own transformation, inviting them to conceive of themselves as strangers and exiles (xenoi kai parepidēmoi) on earth, imitating the endurance of Jesus the author and perfecter of their faith (Heb. 12.2), seeking an everlasting “fatherland [patrida]” (Heb. 11.13), which is in fact a city (polis, v. 16). On this reading, we can see that the letter of the Hebrews both belongs to and resists Flavian ideals: it plays in the contact zone of a celebrated civic transformation, while at the same time marking itself away from and in distinction to its pagan political environment. As such living out its own celebration of an anticipated moral transformation it is recognizable in Flavian Rome, even in its opposition to it. This is the immediate imperial backdrop to the civically oriented language and metaphors of the Epistle to the Hebrews.
conservatori caerimoniarum publicarum….25

Vespasian and his successors were not only builders, they were also priests in the official rites dedicated to the promotion and preservation of a sacral civic order. Indeed, they believed and hence promoted in the public visual media available to them the belief that the security and prosperity of Rome depended upon the correct and regular offerings of traditional civic cults. Even as Aeneas established the foundation of a new people on Latin soil by a ritual sacrifice of sow (Aen. 8.36-89), so their city and its eternal reign was to be guaranteed through repeated ritual enactments that at once recalled founding rituals and made them present and active in contemporary sacrifice.26 They represented their reigns as sacred and they dedicated themselves – or at least made sure that they were perceived to dedicate themselves -- to a daily round of ritual designed to make manifest the sacral foundation of their statecraft, and to promote the idea that their power came to them by divine appointment.27

The Augustan era is remarkable as a program of cultural renewal a central aspect of which was the revival and restoration of traditional cults that had fallen into disuse and neglect.28 Augustan poets were careful to link the good of the imperial order with the elimination of scelus – sin – through the legislation and ritual offering of the emperor.29 Horace captured the spirit of this renovation and the sacred foundation of Rome’s right to rule the world, as well as the ritualistic foundation of government when in the Carmen saeculare he linked Rome’s recent near destruction with neglect of traditional religion: “You will remain sullied with the guilt of your fathers, Roman, until you have rebuilt the
temples and restored all the ruined sanctuaries with their dark images of the gods, befoiled with smoke” (Carmen 3.6).

The Ara Pacis taking the architectural form of course of an altar, celebrates the reign of Augustus an overcoming of degeneracy and the return of the Golden Age and expresses the latter in its Tellus relief with images of abundance fertility, reinforced by the vegetation reliefs that surround the exterior walls (Figure 14). Alongside Tellus is also

(Figure 14) Tellus Relief, Ara pacis =
http://www.ugr.es/~fmunoz/jpgs/Ara_Pacis_Tellus_Relief.jpg

(Figure 15) Aeneas Relief, Ara pacis =
http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/italy/rome/arapacis/0083.jpg

Aeneas sacrificing the sow to his household gods beneath the oak tree at Lavinium (Figure 15). An interior frieze depicts an annual recurring sacrifice, with a temporary
wooden altar with garlands and fruit strung between bucrania (*Figure 16*). An exterior one refers to a sacrificial procession of priests at the center of which are Augustus, 

![Figure 16] Ara pacis interior sacrificial relief

Agrippa, and members of the imperial family (*Figure 17*). Taken together this imagery 

![Figure 17] Ara pacis sacrificial procession, Agrippa veiled, centre r.

conspired to celebrate the sacrificial and ritualistic foundation of a restored Republic under the Principate, and the religious means of preserving it through the observance of right ritual and priestly sacrifice.

While the altar by means of dating of the exterior frieze has been pinpointed to historical celebrations and sacrifices, as Jan Elsner has argued its impact is not so much to rehearse a single event, as the recurring religious life of Augustan Rome, centred around sacrifice and civic ritual; the altar –whatever its historical markings -- helped to
form viewers to consider the order around them as a sacred one upheld by imperial sacrifice and devotion. And as such, it urged its viewers to use its reliefs as a means of vicarious participation in the processions, historical sacrifices, and legends of Rome’s foundation they depict. On this reading, imperial iconography was not only a means of dynastic propaganda, but a way of forming viewers as participants in a sacred divinely appointed order in which each played his or her part. Imperial monuments and coins, then, represent the care imperial iconographers took to create an image of the emperor as exercising the preeminent virtue of Roman government – *pietas* – as a means of reflecting back to themselves ideals viewers themselves were expected to imitate and promote.

This iconography celebrates Augustan renovation of religion and neglected cults of sacrifice. In this the emperor took a leading role. Under the principate, ranks of depleted old priesthoods were filled; cults some of whose names only were remembered were renewed or recreated, furnished with all the accoutrements of statuary, ritual, religious costume, and even newly minted prayers in an archaic form. Augustus renovated old temples and built new ones, taking special care to lavish the most attention on those dedicated to the gods associated with his own regime: the temple of Apollo on the Palatine and Mars Ultor in his newly erected Forum of Augustus. In due course he accumulated membership in all or Rome’s priestly colleges.

Most significant of Augustus’ priestly offices was that of *pontifex maximus* to which he was elected in 12 BCE. The *pontifex maximus* was obliged to live in the priest’s official residence, which stood in the Forum next to the precinct of the Vestal Virgins. Augustus however moved its official residence to his own house on the Palatine,
acclaiming part of it public property and so living as his office required in a public residence. This innovation signaled an important shift in orientation toward the emperor in now associating the preeminent sacred symbol of Rome, the patron deity Vesta and the sacred flame believed to have been brought by Aeneas from Italy, and by Romulus to Rome, with Augustus himself, descendant of his mythic ancestor. In doing this, the public hearth of Rome became fused with the private hearth of Augustus, and by extension, the hearth of all the emperors living in the now public residence of the Caesars that followed.  

Imperial mints and sculptors rehearsed the emperor’s pietas by portraying him veiled in a toga, in a stance of sacrifice. This programme was continued by successive emperors and like Augustus before them, continued to offer their viewers a sense of vicarious participation in an enduring world of right sacrifice and ritual devotion for the preservation of the common order. The Ara Gentis Iuliae, completed by Claudius as a monument to his pietas and dedicated toward the Julian family represents the suovetaurilia (Figure 18), as well as sacrifices before the Temple of Magna Mater and the Temple of Mars Ultor (Figure 19a and 19b). In the suovetaurilia relief, we perhaps encounter Augustus and Tiberius who closed the lustrum or ritual of purification in 14
Iconographers were careful to accompany sacrificial representations with depictions of temples restored and rebuilt by Augustus, thus maintaining an instructive link between renovation of monuments and contemporary ritualistic practice. On one level – that of dynastic propaganda – the altar was a public token of dedication of Claudius to his deceased relative, especially the recently deified Livia, and thus helped to promote an image of his pietas. But on another level – that of the social construction of the viewer – it absorbed viewing audiences as sharing with the emperor the continuation and benefits of a renovated imperial religious order and imbued the civic monuments around them with a sacred aura.

A renovated religious order furnished many occasions for Roman inhabitants to be active participants as well as passive observers. Augustus’ reorganization of Rome into fourteen districts and 265 wards was accompanied with shrines to the Lares (seen by some ancients to be deified spirits of the dead) erected at the crossroads of every ward, where sacrifices were offered on the old festival date of 1 May and the new one, instituted by Augustus, on 1 August when the magistrates of each ward took up office. Under Augustus these annual sacrifices became cults of the Lares Augusti and the Genius
Augusti – festivals to honour the emperor’s ancestors and the Spirit of Augustus himself. These gave the emperor pride of place at the most significant crossroads of the city, sacralised by annual sacrifice, and allowed for grassroots participation in the pietas of the Augustan Age. As important as the shrines was the iconography that accompanied them. Here we discover reliefs marking annual sacrifice, or associating annual

(Figure 20a) Left: Altar of the Lares 7 BCE; two Lares with Genius of Augusti
(Figures 20b and 20c) Centre and Right: sacrifices of two vicomagistri

(Figure 21)
Left:
The Belvedere Altar
a) Sacrifice at ward altar; ward magistrate r.; attendant l. offering two images of Lares;

Right:
Aeneas’ discovery of sow at foundation of Alba Longa
sacrifices with Rome’s mythic past and the figure of Augustus himself (Figures 20a, 20b and 20c; Figure 21; Figure 22), as well as the self-portraiture of the ministri (Figure 23) who served as officials of the neighbourhood shrines.

Numbered alongside these district shrines were those of local guilds. Here trades people wishing to express their own religious devotion erected votive altars to deities to help secure the success and prosperity of their collegium. Surviving iconography shows votive altar reliefs depicting the emperor as patron donating statues of deities, or displaying
inscriptions linking deities associated with political security and peace to Augustus (Figure 24).  

Like Augustus before him, Vespasian was careful to represent himself as dedicated to the exercise of the civic religious duties of his office. And we can expect that as in instances of Augustan iconography, so in Flavian Rome, monuments and iconography served similarly to fashion viewers who would consider themselves active participants in the renovation and renewal of Rome Vespasian styled himself as championing. Imperial
reliefs are fragmentary but suggestive: they show Vespasian and Titus as chief officiates in the daily round of imperial sacrifice and imperial priestly duties. The so-called Nollekens Relief is representative of the picture language of surviving fragments (Figure 25). Manufactured under Domitian it shows the emperor – most probably Domitian – making sacrifice in the company of Roma or Virtus and the Genius Senatus. It is amongst this iconographical repertoire that we should include Vespasian’s Templum Pacis. Its conspicuous geographical location adjacent to the Forum Augustus wins an immediate association with the Ara Pacis even if in architectural design it was laid out as a forum. Its exhibition of the spoils of war is reminiscent of the ideological foundation of the Ara Pacis, especially in its representation of recently Romanized barbarian children.

More direct iconographical representations of the sacrificial foundation of Flavian rule are from the imperial coinage. We have already considered coins representing Vesta offering Vespasian the Palladium. Other issues present on reverse Vesta, or the temple of Vesta, with the portrait of the emperor obverse (e.g. Figures 26a and 26b). Throughout
his reign the imperial mints issued a number of coins advertising Vespasian’s chief
priesthoods. Most notable of these, and closely associated with the imagery of reception
of the Palladium, was representation of him as pontifex maximus. A denarius minted in

(Figure 27) PONTIF MAXIM Rome 73 CE
Reverse: Vespasian, togate, seated r., feet on stool, holding vertical scepter in r. hand and branch in l.

(Figure 28) AUGUR above PON MAX below Rome 69/70 CE
Reverse: Simpulum, sprinkler, jug and lituus.

73 and 74 CE depicts Vespasian togate, seated on a curule chair, with the legend PONTIF
MAXIM (Figure 27). Another minted in 70-71 and then successively bears the priestly
symbols of the office of augur (whose office was responsible for diving the will of the
gods) -- sprinkler, jug, lituus and simplum – with the inscription AUGUR above and
PONMAX below (Figure 28).

The eruption of Mt Vesuvius, together with a fire reminiscent of the Great Fire of
64 CE, as well as plague resulted in special services voted by the senate of prayer and
expiatory sacrifice led and conducted by Titus. The mints recorded this in so-called
pulvinar issues (Figure 29); pulvinaria or sacred couches of the gods were set out with
attributes or emblems associated with deities when disaster signaled the need to make
peace with heaven. These images together formed an image of the imperial state as
resting on divine favour and the emperor’s role in preserving it through the dutiful exercise of priesthood and sacrifice. The picture language of Roman imperial coinage helped to keep sacrifice and ritual the daily coin of imperial discourse and to fashion its users as the beneficiaries of a state upheld through the emperor’s right conducting of the religious affairs of state as the chief intermediary between the Rome and the gods.⁴⁰

“Thou art diseased; thy mania is to build…”⁴¹

Postcolonial study shows that fantasy and extended counter- or double-narratives are amongst the repertoire of means available to subjugated groups seeking to express dissent from political domination.⁴² Some took a more direct option: Suetonius records that Domitian erected so many gateways and arches (arci) that someone punned on one of them in Greek, “That’s enough [arkei]” (Suetonius, Domitian 13.2-3). Christians we may imagine preached sermons, sang hymns and invoked Psalms uncannily reminiscent of imperial Triumphus and apotheosis, and celebrated their once and for all, perfect
sacrifice of their High Priest, pontifex maximus, as the establishment of an unending city, that better country (11.16) they hoped for as foreigners and resident aliens (xenoi kai parepidēmoi – 11.13) amidst the squalor and urban poverty of an imperial capital with the signs of their domination displayed everywhere around them – on their buildings, their neighbourhood crossroads, even on the smallest currency of their daily commerce.⁴³

What if we imagined Hebrews as a double narrative of the sort Homi Babha describes when he describes émigrés meeting on foreign territory, nevertheless deploying their own foreign tongues?

I have lived that moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees; gathering on the edge of ‘foreign’ cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos of cafes or city centres; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another’s language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual revival; gathering the present.⁴⁴

Babha urges a reading of the colonial subject alive “to the metaphoricity of the peoples of imagined communities – migrant or metropolitan” that requires a kind of “‘doubleness’” when writing and speaking of themselves. On such a reading, Hebrews is no abstract metaphysical, or Platonizing, sermon laying out the full and perfect sacrifice of Jesus for sins of the world.⁴⁵ Certainly, as Peter Lampe has demonstrated through a careful sifting of Roman epigraphy, it is precisely amidst the “half-light” of foreign tongues, in the city of Rome’s slums and ghettos that the Christian community in Rome at the end of the
first century had taken root, even if our author of the Hebrews crafted his text ‘in the uncanny fluency of another’s tongue.’

On this account, Hebrews’ invitation to its listeners to imagine the holy mountain of God with angels in festal garments (12.22-24) takes on the striking features of Scott’s “hidden transcript,” assaulting an imperial order with the non-violence of a striking counter-narration of enthronement and forgiveness, of welcome of strangers, and mercy and succour of prisoners (13.2-3). Pliny the Elder’s ekphraseis, training his upwardly located audiences to notice the world around them with the visual grammar of empire, meets its match with a wily alternative grammar of seeing, an ekphraseis (11.1-12.2) that recites a pilgrim people longing for a better city brought through a superior sacrifice. A political reading of Hebrews offers a means of locating our text amidst the vast repertoire of imperial sacrifices and imperial monuments affirming the divinely appointed role of the Flavians as builders and restorers of public, especially religious, monuments. Once interpreted in this light, the Davidic Psalms of enthronement cited near the start of our discussion take on a striking new valence. Not only are these then provocative dissenting voices for a community that has suffered the recent political harassments listed in Heb. 10.32-39 as they look to the crucified one as a pointedly alternative path toward apotheosis, they take their place in the monumental and religious culture of a renovated Flavian city.

On this reading, then, it is no accident then that even as Jesus suffered outside the gate of the city, his messianic priesthood reflects a cultus dwelling in tents (8.2,5; 9.2,6-9,11; see 13.11-13), along a journey of Exodus exile, toward an alternative polis,
expressing a civility that is to contrast that of the present (and passing) political order (Heb. 13.1-6). The wilderness traditions that also, it could be argued, form the backdrop for counter-imperial Christological developments elsewhere in the New Testament, furnish Hebrews’ listeners with a means of embracing an alternative sacrificiary to the one on offer in the Empire’s capital. Here Jesus the High Priest after the order of Melchizedek, offering his perfect sacrifice in the heavenly tent offers listeners a model that is an alternative to the round of imperial sacrifice as the means of securing, promoting, and preserving a common good. Unlike imperial sacrifices in the innumerable temples “made by hand” (hence, 9.11, 24), the heavenly tent of meeting offers listeners a counter-civic imaginary.

Hebrews is, in other words, the means of a community marked by the Flavian enterprise and with living memory of imprisonment and suffering to say, in as many words, “That’s enough.” It does so, however, by speaking the language of insufficiency, by way of a lampooning of the traditional hierarchy of priests and the need for a repeating round of sacrifices to maintain a prior social order. This allows for a potent, if veiled, political cross-examination of the existing civil order — a kind of Christian “semiotic disturbance” to the Flavian city — that rests on a whole repertoire of priestly offices and sacrifices as means of continuing mediation between the gods and the emperor’s subjects. This suggests that Hebrews’ representation of Jesus as mediator (8.6; 9.15; 12.24- mesitē) while of course presented in relation to Jewish sacred tradition, points toward a broader political critique. Jesus’ high priesthood, unlike the honour bestowed upon the imperial pontifex maximus, is no political appointment motivated by the imperial desire for self-
promotion; rather he is enthroned and wins priesthood by a path of imperial humiliation (Heb. 5.5,8-10). We might say that on this account that where Hebrews appears to be most supercessionist, is where it also expresses itself most anti-imperially.

What an iconographical treatment of Hebrews teaches us, especially in attending to imperial pictorial representation of sacrifice, is that in representing Jesus as high priest whose sacrifice wins an enduring city, the sermon/letter speaks a language in a modality entirely recognizable to an imperially situated audience. It is not sacrifice per se that is the problem, it is the right kind of sacrifice, by the right person, at issue in this text. For such a right sacrifice makes for an alternative citizenship of strangers and exiles and invites consideration again of Klaus Wengst’s challenge in another imperial setting of the Cold War to the contemporary reader: what it might mean amongst our own signs of imperial presence, the gleaming edifices of contemporary commerce which in these latter weeks are showing their age, tarnished and worn and as fragile as those that once graced another imperial capital, to follow the suffering and enduring One in solidarity with the suffering of the world outside the gates of our cities of God with their fully realized eschatologies of capital and growth, to long for, and in our longing express, an alternative civitas of sacrifice and love.\textsuperscript{47}

It is an invitation to a complex social formation. For in its celebration of Jesus as priestly mediator, whose self-sacrifice brings about its own form of “lustration,” even as it looks to an alternative city that will endure whatever marble edifices the Roman emperor and his supporters may erect for themselves, it nevertheless finds some temporary home in that order, if only by invoking its grammars of civic assent. This then
brings our text full circle to a contemporary exegesis alive to the possibilities of politics I
am arguing under girds the whole sacrificial formulation of Hebrews.


3 See, for example, the characteristic (and excellent) exegetical treatment of Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), ad loc. In what follows my aim is not to supplant or question these parallels, but to contextualize them through a reading that attends to socio-historical considerations of these texts “on the ground,” as it were.

4 Thus Josephus, *contra Apionem* 2.77,193; with a view to political concord, 2.179; *JW* 10.2.4; Philo. *Leg.* 2.356-57; see, 152-69, 311-320 for imperial patronage of the sacrificial cult; also, *Ep. Arist.* 44-46, 185-86.

5 For adoptionist Christology in Hebrews and its antecedents in royal Psalms of enthronement, see Christopher Tuckett, *Christology and the New Testament: Jesus and His Followers* (Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox, 2001), 92-100;

6 For Flavian apotheosis, Kenneth Scott, *The Imperial Cult under the Flavians* (Stuttgart/Berlin: Kohlhammer, 1936, especially, 25-36 for apotheosis iconography on the imperial coinage; J Rufus Fears, *PRINCIPS A DIIS ELECTUS*: The Divine Election of the Emperor as a Political Concept at Rome (Rome: American Academy at Rome, 1977), 121-52 for a more general backdrop, but also with specific reference to the Flavians.


9 “There is nothing more wonderful in all the earth” Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 36.121 commenting on Flavian water works.


21 For example, *ILS* 252: conservatori caerimoniaurum publicarum et restitutori aedium sacrarum: 250: templum Matris deum terrae motu conslapsam restituit

22 For the geographical dispersal of this iconography, Kousser, *Sculpture*, 66-80.


ILS 252 (see above).

For discussion of myth, place, and sacrifice in marking and preserving Rome as sacred site, and the re-enactment of ancient drama through civic ritual, see Beard, North, Price, Religions, 167-210; Elsner, “Cult.”


Elsner, “Cult,” 52.

For the conversion of the imperial residence as public vestibule and its implication for Roman religion, Beard, North, Price, Religions, 189-91.


For Augustan renovations as backdrop, Kleiner, Sculpture, 141-45.

For background and general discussion, Galinsky, Culture, 301-9; Beard, North, Price, Religions, 184-86.

For the reorganization and association and reorganization of the compitales to accompany Augustus’ transformation of his household into public space and hence the extension of his own household titulary deities to encompass the city of Rome as a whole, see Ryberg, Rites, 43-44.

For discussion of iconography, Ryberg, Rites, 56-63; Zanker, 129-36.

For discussion of votive altars in guilds, Galinsky, 309-10; Zanker, 133-34.

For disasters under Titus’ reign, see Suetonius, Divus Titus 8; Dio Cassius 66.24.2

For discussion of these issues as well as their symbols see Mattingly, CRE, pp. lxii-lxxiii.

Beard, North, Price, Religions, 252-63 offer excellent discussion of the role of the emperor as intermediary, public festivals, and the place of lower orders in the daily round of religio-civic duties.

Plutarch, Publ, 15.5, on Domitian: “Thou art diseased; thy mania is to build; like the famous Midas thou desirest everything become gold and stone at thy touch.”

See James C. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 17-44, who, aptly writes of “a politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning…” (19).

For a good overview of the political and sociological valences of this text in the light of ancient civic realities, de Silva, Hebrews, 394-405; Koester, Hebrews, 489-50.
44 Homi Babha, *The Location of Culture* (London/ New York: Routledge, 1994), 139, 141.

45 As Kenneth L. Schenck suggests in *Cosmology and Eschatology in Hebrews: The Settings of Sacrifice* SNTSMS 143 (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 115-43.


47 For cities of God, Graham Ward, *Cities of God (Radical Orthodoxy)* (New York/ London: Routledge, 2001), especially 25-78 for the contemporary city as realized eschatology.