

## **Power Play in the Roman Forum: Felix IV and the Founding of Cosmas and Damian**

Dennis Trout  
University of Missouri, Columbia

From one point of view Pope Felix IV's (526-530) foundation of Cosmas and Damian in the Roman Forum is simply another episode in the story of burgeoning Christian real-estate development in late ancient Rome. That tale had begun two centuries earlier with a Constantinian church building program that set a ring of basilicas and imperial mausolea around the city. It continued in the fifth century with the construction of such intra-mural foundations as the privately funded *titulus Pammachii* (SS. Giovanni e Paolo) and Sixtus III's S. Maria Maggiore (430). A century later, then, the establishment of Cosmas and Damian along the Forum's venerable Via Sacra merely brought the Christian "conquest of space" up to speed with that religion's more rapid victory over the rhythms of civic time.

But Felix's plan to wedge the cult of two eastern saints into the ceremonial center of old Rome may also have directly targeted certain uncooperative and differently minded members of the city's nobility. In the 520s Rome's senatorial aristocracy was divided along several lines. Despite the end of the Acacian schism in 519, for example, political and ecclesiastical tensions continued to hum between Rome, Ravenna, and Constantinople. Moreover, as both Pope Gelasius' letter on the Lupercalia (494) and the case of the learned Boethius' alleged treachery and execution (524) suggest, cultural allegiances also helped to mark the differences between some Roman nobles and the papal establishment and court at Ravenna. Against this background the foundation of a new church on royal (once imperial) property in the Forum by a pope, Felix, who was himself an Ostrogothic appointee to a disputed papal cathedra (*LP*, Duchesne, p. 106 and Cass. *Var.* 8.15) becomes an act of party politics as well as an expression of papal piety.

Topography and iconography concur. Not only did Felix's new church arise on a Via Sacra specifically identified by Augustine as the scene of the Lupercalia (*CD* 18.2), but also the medical saints Cosmas and Damian challenged another pair of long-tested patron deities from the east, Castor and Pollux, whose former temple was close by and whose continuing appeal is equally vouched for by Gelasius' letter (18). Similarly, the church's well-preserved apse mosaic, with its phoenix and astral imagery, seems designed both to confront and to appeal to the esoteric tastes of a Christian elite who apparently saw little contradiction between their Christianity and their respect for Roman tradition. The vigorous self-assertion of Felix's appearance in his church's mosaic program and dedicatory inscription is, then, only a further papal deployment of the language of power and patronage in old Rome's historical heartland.