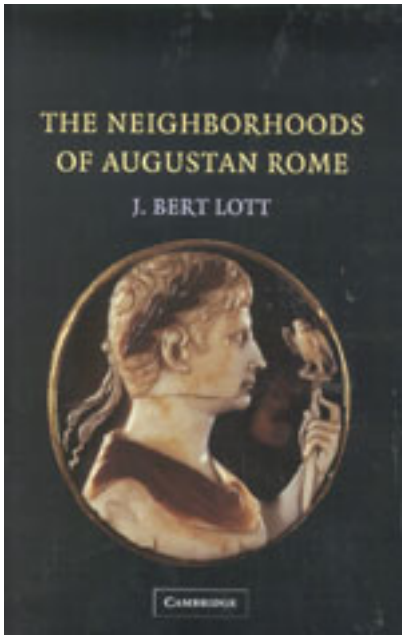


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Lott, J. Bert

The Neighborhoods of Augustan Rome

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At first impression, *The Neighborhoods of Augustan Rome* would seem to be of much interest to classical studies scholars and of little relevance to biblical scholars. First impressions often need reconsideration. Classical scholars soon will find, I am sure, Lott's volume appearing as a standard entry in bibliographies and studies treating the city of Rome in the early imperial era. *Neighborhoods*, however, offers significant insights into the civic and social structure of Augustan Rome that have high potential for unpacking the social and cultural context of nascent Christianity.

Scholars of classical studies and ancient history have long known that Octavian/Augustus "developed" the notion of Roman Empire/emperor from his unique combination of previous, indeed conservative, titles, powers, and legal precedents. "Emperor," under Augustus, was unique in its conglomeration of preexisting, endoxic legal and social propositions that were aggregately well-rooted in a conservative Roman national identity. Further, Augustus initiated a series of cultic, welfare, administrative, and bureaucratic reforms alongside systemic development and enhancement of Roman infrastructure (roads, aqueducts, temples, shrines) that solidified his popular base and rule. Despite the rather widespread acceptance of these aspects of Augustan rule, there are still surprising moments when our understanding of some aspect of the early Roman Empire (and

Augustan projects in particular) remains stubbornly reticent at appropriating or even articulating *how* these elements of Augustan rule emerged or functioned.

One example is Augustus's reform of the structure and administration of the city of Rome itself. Rome as a city was divided into discrete *vici* or "neighborhoods." Augustus reinvigorated local neighborhood shrines and municipal infrastructure and revitalized local religions. He revamped political offices and created certain recognizable "districts" or regions while engaging in an aggressive program of public building and remaking "zoning" laws relevant to nonpublic construction. While these reforms have, in part, been explored by Lily Ross Taylor and, more recently, Diana G. Favro, Lott places his own study in its scholarly context by noting:

[D]espite their importance to the social and physical fabric of the city, there is no comprehensive modern treatment of Rome's neighborhoods and neighborhood society during this crucial period in the cultural and spatial development of the imperial capital. . . . [T]he present book aims first to enable further work on the *vici* by calling attention to the extent and limits of our knowledge of the *vici* as social communities and not just physical places within the city. . . . The nuanced interaction of imperial honorific and personal promotion on a local scale was a hallmark of the political culture of the early Roman Empire that has only recently come to be recognized and investigated, mostly in connection with the boom in municipal construction in communities like Pompeii that accompanied the advent of the new imperial regime. . . . Recent work on the neighborhoods has not investigated the *vici* as communities in their own right, distinct from one another and from the new imperial regime. This oversight has been by a long-standing misunderstanding of the nature of the religion that was practiced at the heart of each neighborhood. (6)

Lott argues (both pervasively and persuasively) that Augustus's reforms were not simple bureaucratic, administrative, or inconsequential reforms; further, they were not radically innovative in their departure from conservative civic forms and structures. Instead, Augustus used existing motifs and conventions as precedents to his reforms, and these reforms were designed deliberately to produce civic cohesion and to ensure loyalty as much as they might streamline administrative needs.

Lott's description of "neighborhood" is critical for his thesis. As he notes, "according to antiquarian texts, a neighborhood was a group of dwellings fronting on a stretch of a

single road and containing one crossroads where the inhabitants worshipped their Lares¹ and celebrated Compitalia” (14). These neighborhoods proved remarkably static, at least in administration and order. “[I]n the fourth century, Rome still comprises first and foremost, the fourteen Augustan regions divided into neighborhoods and administered by neighborhood officers” (18). Modern studies in urban development and planning have produced four models of neighborhood organization: the “face block” (a largely unplanned grouping of residents who share little other than geographic proximity), the “defended neighborhood” (which he defines, quoting from Kent Schwirian, as “a residential social system that shuts itself off from other areas and nonresidents through some social or physical mechanism”), the contrived neighborhood (one particularly planned and often exclusive, à la modern “gated communities”), and a community of “limited liability” (a community whose boundaries are “imposed and maintained by outside agencies”; 19–20). He concludes:

In every instance, neighborhood communities are enabled and strengthened by factors such as a common language or common membership in an ethnic, religious, or political group that encourages shared participation and viewpoints. . . . The strength of a neighborhood’s identity and community is usually proportional to the degree to which these enabling factors intersect in one geographic space. A corollary of this is that not all residents with the physical compass of a neighborhood participate equally in the neighborhood’s social community—and some individuals who live outside the physical area of a neighborhood participate equally in the neighborhood’s social community. In short, since neighborhoods are usually grounded in factors of social homogeneity beyond simple propinquity, the degree to which any one resident shares these factors determines largely his or her participation in the neighborhood community. (20)

Lott returns to ancient Rome, cautiously drawing some analogies between current urban/civic theory and antiquity, noting the danger of anachronism and that actual data from Rome is replete with potential exceptions. However, in general terms, Augustan reforms tended to move “face-block” neighborhoods toward “defended neighborhoods” by refocusing local interest in certain ethnic, trade, and rejuvenated participation in local religious rituals (strengthening interest in local Lares often by the sponsorship of cult statuary and locus), all of which built neighborhood cohesion. Further, his “bottom up” municipal administration and distribution of charitable funds lessened the sense of

1. On “Compitalia” and “Lares” as aspects of Roman domestic religion, particularly for notions critical to Lott, see Mary Beard, John A. North, and Simon R. F. Price, eds. *Religions of Rome, vol. 1: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

external controls. By recasting the administrative governments, by facilitation of trade/ethnic/local continuity, and by the fostering of “voluntary organizations”² of citizens representing trades and other civic interests, Augustus remade and reintegrated the city of Rome and, in doing so, enhanced his own power and influence (while, conveniently, leaving local power diffusely decentered). Lott concludes:

Reorganization of the neighborhoods on a massive scale permitted Augustus to create a more uniform neighborhood ideology. It is important to note that rather than bringing the residents together in the Forum, Augustus went out to the individual neighborhoods, at least symbolically, to place gifts there. The maintenance of the neighborhoods as decidedly noncentralized communities—but still communities concerned with city-wide issues and administration—became one of the central aspects of Augustus’ neighborhood reforms. By making each gift to a specific neighborhood, Augustus acted as a local patron and resident of that *vicus* might. (80)

Lott develops his thesis first by an exploration of the *vici* in the republican era (28–60); then he turns to the interstitial generation of the “dictatorship of Julius Caesar through the early years of Augustus’ reign down to the reforms of 7 B.C.E.” (61–80); and, finally, he offers a specific enumeration of the reforms enacted by Augustus (81–127). He reinforces the project by an analytical and extended discussion of the “artifacts of neighborhood culture” (128–71) which is, itself, complemented by a sixty-eight item anthology of inscriptions and texts (most in Latin) demonstrating Augustan reforms, programs, and administration (180–219).

Neighborhoods certainly offers insight into the administration of Rome that will make it a significant boon to classical studies and to scholars of the history of ancient Rome. Yet what are the opportunities that Lott provides for biblical and early Christian scholars? Lott suggests that “the transformation of the urban administration” undertaken by Augustus “continues throughout the Empire” (173). Further, “the division of the city into *vici* was not unique to Rome” (174). These factors make *Neighborhoods* quite relevant, I think, to the study of nascent Christianity and invite a series of questions that biblical and early Christian scholars are uniquely posed to address. In particular, I find intriguing the

2. By “voluntary association” Lott means “groups in which membership is not based wholly on matters such as kinship, citizenship, or location, but is at least in part a matter of personal choice” (24). A bit later, he explains: “[V]oluntary associations tend to have all or most of the following characteristics: an explicit purpose; an elaborate social hierarchy of status and/or rank; a ritual or ceremonial aspect; a clear distinction between members and nonmembers; and an aim of securing benefits either for the membership, a groups of sponsored nonmembers, or both. . . . One can add that voluntary associations tend to become more politically active over time in connection with a specific issue or agenda” (24).

possible intersections between Christian evangelism, protest (i.e. martyrdom), and Roman civic structure.

Several clusters of questions or insights are inspired by Lott's work. First, the *vici* provide a more acute understanding of precisely how early Christian missions may have spread through and been initiated in most urban contexts. Nascent Christian evangelism was highly urban and was often mediated through ethnicity, trade associations, or "house churches" and family groups. How might this have been helped or hindered by the neighborhood structures that Lott describes? To what extent did the *vici* facilitate—or, more fundamentally, even create—the possibility of this expansion? Second, an awareness of Augustan civic reforms can deepen our awareness of the "local imperative" of the veneration of the Roman emperor. Work by Simon Price and Steve Friesen has examined the relationships of power and reciprocity involved in provincial worship of the Roman emperor; Lott may be unveiling the same dynamics on the level of civic structure. Third, I can not completely avoid viewing Christian communities themselves as a form of "voluntary organization." As such, what models of hierarchy, administration, and organization were provided to early Christian communities by other, Roman voluntary organizations? How much might the structure of communities found in 1 Timothy and Titus reflect *vici* administration? How might these voluntary organizations as models for Christian communal structure intersect with Roman patronage and household administration? Fourth, what may yet be gleaned from the lexicon of the Roman neighborhood? How might we now understand the social status of Erastus at Corinth? How would Christian rhetoric of "sameness" and "otherness" (not to mention adoption, household, family, or even "neighbor") be heard in the Roman *vici*? Fifth, to what extent would an understanding of *vici* as described by Lott intensify the sense of social marginalization for Christian communities who are "opting out" of neighborhood religion? To what extent, realistically, *could* Christians opt out of neighborhood religion? How acute was Christian nonparticipation as a threat to the entire neighborhood's status within the city? How might this potential threat have intensified social pressures against conversion? Sixth, and finally, Lott awakens particular attention to the social, religious, and physical implications of space and community. How might these issues underlie tensions found, for example, in 1 Cor 6 or 8–10? How might they affect issues behind certain scholarly reconstructions of the Roman church.³

Neighborhoods is, in places, difficult reading. It will not, I suspect, find its way into very many course syllabi for classes devoted to the understanding of the New Testament or

3. Found, for example, in James Walters, *Ethnic Issues in Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1993).

early Christianity. It very much could, however, offer a beginning place for many intriguing reconstructions of the world of nascent Christianity. Serious scholars who have a determined interest in a plausible cultural history of the context of the early church will find much in this book that enhances their work.