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The Venue

As with the games themselves, the arena was symbolic of an idealized Rome. Augustus mandated seating by sociopolitical status: the higher up you were in the Roman power structure, the closer you were to the action. Just as the organization of the amphitheaters projected an ideal hierarchy, the structure of the Circus Maximus was touted as a manifestation of cosmic order.

The arena was not just in Rome; Augustus and other emperors deliberately fostered its spread to areas chosen to enhance the effect of the message. Amphitheatrical structures, for example, were established in major centers of Roman world, especially in the west, where there were some 252 amphitheaters.¹ The amphitheater served as a permanent reminder not only of the power of the empire, but of the danger in challenging Rome's supremacy. Amphitheaters were set up in centers of the Imperial Cult, beginning at Lugdunum, which from 12 BCE housed regular ritualized expressions of loyalty to the emperor. The arena went to legionary headquarters as well, to incorporate the immediate defenders of the empire in the celebration of Roman hierarchy.

We rely heavily on archaeological information for our understanding of spectacular venues in the ancient Roman world. The surviving textual sources devote little attention to analyzing the architectural settings for shows. Incidental references give us a bit of the color and the little attentions to detail that sponsors of spectacular venues arranged. There are a few indications of the legal status of these structures, or, rather, the legal controls placed on their builders that guided how the venues could be used, in the interests of audience security and of maintenance of political order. Exploring the development of formal spectacle structures tells us a bit about the expectations that shaped them, from the use of cemeteries for funeral games, to the rise of urbanization and the planning of the Circus Maximus, to the negotiation of public space in the *fora* of Rome, to the standardization of specific building types to enhance the impact of the games. The long-term reluctance to build

a permanent theater or amphitheater in Rome can be tied to the importance of shows in political competition in the late Republic; even in the early Principate, emperors found it expedient to limit this kind of construction, at least in the capital city. Outside Rome, the first century saw the building of many amphitheatres in the Roman world, to accommodate the spread of spectacle supported by the imperial government. The Flavian Amphitheater was the most sophisticated expression of this architectural form and was a major accomplishment in crowd management and spectacle.

Republican Arenas

The original venue for funeral games was probably the cemetery, located typically outside the city walls where contests may have been held in any open area near the grave. This seems to have been the custom for the Etruscan and the Campanian spectacles that may have served as original models for the Roman institution. Those attending the obsequies would have stood around a cleared space, some possibly seated on the ground or on folded or improvised seats. The backdrop for the events would have been the landscape and vegetation of the extra-urban environment, with the addition of built tombs and monuments framing the action.

Source: Ausonius Griphus 36–7: The sons of Junius sent the three first combats of Thracians in three sets to the underworld at the tomb of their father.

Source: Tertullian, *On the Spectacles* 12: when they had trained them in the weapons which they then used and they were as well disciplined as they could make them, inasmuch as they were taught to die, then on the day set aside for the dead, they killed them at the tombs.

Source: Servius, *On the Aeneid* 10.519: Indeed, it was the custom to kill captives at the graves of powerful men; because this, in later days, seemed cruel, it was decided to have gladiators fight before the grave, gladiators who were called “Bustuarii” for the tombs (*busti*).

Prior to the imperial period, gladiatorial games in Rome were held in the area set aside for public congress: the forum. According to Valerius Maximus, the first public *munera* took place in the old cattle market near the Tiber, the Forum Boarium. Some advantages of the location include its ability to handle blood spillage, given its ordinary function as a meat market, as well as the

presence of an old Temple of Hercules, often claimed as a deity of particular importance to the combats.

Source: Valerius Maximus 2.4.7: For gladiatorial games were first given at Rome in the Forum Boarium during the consulship of Appius Claudius and Marcus Fulvius (264 BCE). Marcus and Decimus, the sons of Brutus Pera, gave them as funeral games to honor the memory of their father's ashes.

In 216 BCE, the year of the second known set of gladiatorial combats in Rome, the *munera* settled in to their regular Republican location, the Forum Romanum. The Forum was more spacious than the Forum Boarium and laid claim to more prestige as the heart of Roman political, cultural, and religious life. Romans exported the custom of *munera* to their colonies in Italy and abroad, which influenced the shape of Roman fora outside of Rome proper. Vitruvius explains the details of forum design specific to the holding of games: the allowance of space for visibility and the rectangular forum shape.

Source: Vitruvius 5.1.1–2: But in the cities of Italy, the construction plan is not the same (as in Greek-style *fora*), in that the custom of holding gladiatorial *munera* in the forum has been handed down from our ancestors. Therefore around the spectacles, the colonnades should be given wider intercolumniations . . . have balconies on the upper floor arranged so as to be convenient . . . The magnitude of the forum should be appropriate for a large gathering of people, lest the space be too small for use or, because of a lack of people, the forum seem huge. But the dimensions should be such that when the length is divided into three parts, two are assigned to the width. For thus the plan will be oblong and the arrangement suitable to the holding of spectacles.

The general configuration of the Forum Romanum was established by 170 BCE as a roughly rectangular area, bounded by basilicas with colonnaded porches, which would be used as seating areas during the presentation of shows. The forum's central area had tribunals at either short end that also would serve as seating; the curved form of the tribunals made the space look a bit like a small stadium area. There is some evidence that certain landmarks were claimed by individuals and families as desirable viewing space in an area limited in size and likely to be crowded for spectacles. Access to this privilege was granted for a variety of causes, from a sort of "right of way" guaranteed in a sale of property to a public honor bestowed by the Republic.

Source: Pseudasconius, *On Cicero's "On divination"* 50: Maenius, when he sold his house to Cato and Flaccus, the censors [of 185 BCE], so that they could build a basilica there, claimed the right to one column for himself, where he and his descendants could view the gladiatorial combats, which were even then held in the forum.

Source: Cicero, *Philippics* 9.7: Since such a man died while a legate for the Republic, it is the Senate's decision that a bronze statue on foot be erected for Servius Sulpicius on the Rostra, and around that statue there be a space of five feet on all sides reserved for gladiatorial games for his children and descendants, because he has met death in service for the Republic.

As a performance space, the forum had certain limitations, including a diminished seating capacity; even if sponsors erected temporary bleachers, the presence of monumental public buildings restricted the height and capacity of these structures. Granted, the audience could (and did) make use of balconies in private residences to view the shows. The presence of buildings and memorials also could block visibility for some spectators, as acknowledged by Vitruvius in his recommendations for forum design. Even so, the dimensions of most fora made it hard for people at one end of the improvised arena to catch the action at the other end. There was much competition for good seats, a situation capitalized on, apparently, by some sponsors. Improving visibility for one's political constituency became a strong declaration of loyalties for Gaius Gracchus, who was tribune of the plebs 123–122 BCE with a broad agenda of social and political reform.

Source: Plutarch, *Gaius Gracchus* 12.3–4:² It so happened that at this moment he had also given offense to one of his fellow-tribunes for the following reason. A gladiatorial display had been arranged for the people to watch in the Forum, and most of the magistrates had had seats built around the arena, which they intended to rent to the spectators. Gaius insisted that these should be taken down so that the poor could watch the show without payment. But since his orders were ignored, he waited until the night before the event and then took all the workmen whom he had under his orders for public contracts and dismantled the seats, so that by the morning he was able to show the people a completely empty space. The people thought him a man for this, but his fellow-tribunes were furious and regarded it as a piece of interference of the most presumptuous and violent kind. In fact, it was generally believed that this action cost him his election to the tribunate for the third time, because although he won a majority of the votes, his colleagues falsified the returns and the declaration of the result.

The difficulty of guaranteeing spectator safety also restricted the use of wild animals to small numbers of relatively docile and diminutive types for Forum shows, if they were present at all. A demonstration of this was seen at Pompeii (chapter 1), when Aulus Clodius offered bulls as part of the *Ludi Apollinares* presented in the Forum during his first magistracy. In his second magistracy, the relative security of the amphitheater space enabled him to expand the show to include boars, bears and other kinds of animals. Without this kind of built protection, sponsors might choose to severely limit the movement of animals at a public show, in order to guarantee the public's safety. Oppian refers to a *venatio* in which the large feline was contained in a cage, viewing the *venator* through "the edge of sharp iron"; despite the zesty description by Oppian, such a spectacle has relatively less excitement, being more akin to shooting the proverbial fish in a barrel.

Source: Oppian, *Fishing* 2.350–356:³ As when a man skilled in the work of slaying wild beasts, when the people are gathered in the house-encircled marketplace, awaits the leopard, maddened by the cracking of the whip and with long-edged spear stands athwart her path; she, though she beholds the edge of sharp iron, mantles in swelling fury and receives in her throat, as it were in a spear-stand, the brazen lance.

The perceived drawbacks of the forum space persuaded many towns and cities in the Roman world to expend financial and human resources on the construction of a formal arena. The vast majority of Roman amphitheaters are in the western empire, where eventually there would be some 252 of these spectacle structures. But not, for a long time, in Rome.

During the Republic and into the early Principate, there was resistance in Rome to the construction of permanent buildings to house Rome's increasingly opulent shows. This resistance can be placed alongside the other efforts to control ostentatious displays by Rome's fiercely competitive ruling class. The political tension underlying these disputes, however, focused on providing permanent and formal seating for a large number of Romans, when discussing the problem of building. Tacitus, as a means of registering disapproval of a new set of games inaugurated by the emperor Nero, resurrected the heated discussion over the establishment of a formal venue for such games generations before, and how this constituted a threat to Rome on the basis that luxury and the laziness of sitting were damaging to the people's morals and traditional austerity. These claims were countered by an appeal to imperial power and financial pragmatism.

Source: Tacitus, *Annals* 14.20–21:⁴ There were some who declared that even Gnaeus Pompeius was censured by the older men of the day for having set up a fixed and permanent theater.⁵ “Formerly,” they said, “the games were usually exhibited with hastily erected tiers of benches and a temporary stage, and the people stood to witness them, that they might not, by having the chance of sitting down, spend a succession of entire days in idleness” . . . Many people liked this very license, but they screened it under respectable names. “Our ancestors,” they said, “were not averse to the attractions of shows on a scale suited to the wealth of their day, and so they introduced actors from the Etruscans and horse-races from Thurii. When we had possessed ourselves of Greece and Asia, games were exhibited with greater elaboration . . . even economy had been consulted, when a permanent edifice was erected for a theater, in preference to a structure raised and fitted up yearly at vast expense. Nor would the magistrates, as hitherto, exhaust their substance . . . when once the State undertakes the expenditure.”

Temporary structures in Rome

To get around this resistance to permanent spectacle buildings, most *editores* of shows put together temporary arrangements. At first these were probably fairly simple: bleachers, a cleared and leveled performance area, rudimentary fencing for blood events. Over time, however, the temporary structures became opportunities for lavish expenditure; the fact that they were ephemeral only enhanced the depth of the public generosity involved.

Gaius Scribonius Curio constructed an unusual theater for his spectacles of 52 BCE, a double theater capable of rotating to form the two halves of an amphitheater; the spectators could even remain in their seats while the rotation was in progress, or so the story goes. Scholars today are not in agreement as to whether ancient engineering was capable of crafting a mechanism to support such a structure. Pliny’s description of it also carries a definite critical tone that seems to focus on Curio’s irresponsible exposure of his audience to such danger, and the audience’s thrill-seeking attitude in riding Curio’s amphitheater. Pliny compares the risk to a national disaster (the battle of Cannae) and clearly links the whole spectacle to the dangerous politics of the late Republic and Curio’s demagoguery in particular.

Source: Pliny, *Natural History* 36.15.117–120:⁶ Curio, therefore, had to exercise his ingenuity and devise something else. It is worth taking the trouble to learn what he conceived and be glad of our modern moral code and, reversing the usual terminology, to call ourselves “older and better.” Curio built two vast wooden theaters side by side, each balanced on a revolving pivot. Before midday, a performance of a play was staged in both; the theaters faced in opposite directions so that the actors should not drown each other’s lines. Then suddenly

the theaters revolved (it is agreed that after the first few days this happened while some of the audience actually remained in their seats), and their corners came together to form an amphitheater. Here Curio staged fights between gladiators – although the Roman people found themselves in even greater danger than the gladiators, as Curio spun them round. It is difficult to know what should amaze us more, the inventor or the invention, or the sheer audacity of the conception. Most amazing of all is the madness of a people rash enough to sit in such treacherous and unstable seats! What contempt for human life this shows! How can we justify our complaints about Cannae! What a disaster this could have been! Here the whole Roman people, as if put on board two ships, were supported by a pair of pivots and watched themselves fighting for their lives and likely to perish at any moment should the mechanism be put out of gear! And the aim of all this was merely to win favor for the speeches Curio intended to make as tribune: he wanted to be able to continue to sway the undecided voters. On the speaker's platform he would stop at nothing in addressing those whom he had persuaded to participate in this dangerous activity.

Caesar made some effort to enhance the Forum as a venue for spectacles. Subterranean tunnels with openings to the pavement floor were added, apparently to allow for some minimal special effects, such as sudden entrances of performers or props or scenery.

Source: Dio Cassius 43.22:⁷ [Caesar] built a kind of hunting-theater of wood, which was called an amphitheater⁸ from the fact that it had seats all around without any stage. In honor of this⁹ and of his daughter he exhibited combats of wild beasts and gladiators; but anyone who cared to record their number would find his task a burden without being able, in all probability, to present the truth.

Even the spectators at the dictator's quadruple triumph were treated lavishly: Caesar erected an enormous silk awning along an important chunk of the parade route. While moderns might interpret such shades, even silk ones, as more practical provisions, offering minimum relief from the sun's glare, Romans could and did regard the awnings as special effects, altering one's perceptions of the world. Lucretius was a contemporary of Julius Caesar; his description of the effect is lyrical.

Source: Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 4.75–83:¹⁰ . . . awnings, yellow, scarlet and maroon, stretched flapping and billowing on poles and rafters over spacious theaters. The crowded pit below and the stage with all its scenery are made to glow and flow with the colours of the canopy. The more completely the theater is hemmed in by surrounding walls, the more its interior, sheltered from the daylight, is irradiated by this flood of colour.

Even after the Theater of Pompey had broken the barrier on stone spectacle venues, sponsors still chose to build temporary facilities. The advantages were still there: sponsors could still impress spectators and the general public by constructing something completely new and highly decorative for a specific set of games. In 57 CE, Nero built a notoriously lavish, huge wooden arena in the same general vicinity of the Campus Martius, northwest of the Pantheon. Calpurnius' description of Nero's amphitheater fills in the details in a tone of near wonderment, emphasizing the glittering costliness of the fabric used as well as the mastery of nature through special effects.

Source: Calpurnius, *Eclogues* 7.23–24:¹¹ I saw a theater¹² that rose skyward on interwoven beams and almost looked down on the summit of the Capitoline. Passing up the steps and slopes of gentle incline, we came to the seats, where in dingy cloaks the baser sort viewed the show close to the women's benches. For the uncovered parts, exposed beneath the open sky, were thronged by equestrians or white-robed tribunes. Just as the valley here expands into a wide circuit and, winding at the side, with sloping forest background all around, stretches its concave curve . . . the sweep of the amphitheater encircles the level ground, and the oval in the middle is bound by twin piles of building. Why should I now relate to you things which I myself could scarcely see in all their many details? So dazzling was the glitter everywhere . . . "Certainly, we rate all cheap we saw in former years and shabby every show we once watched." Look, the begemmed *balteus*¹³ and the gilded portico vie in brilliance; . . . Bright too is the gleam from the nets of gold wire which project into the arena hung on solid tusks, tusks of equal size; and . . . every tusk was longer than our plough . . . Oh, how we quaked, whenever we saw the arena part asunder and its soil upturned and beasts plunge out from the chasm cleft in the earth; yet often from those same caverns the golden leaves and branches of wild strawberry sprang amid a sudden fountain spray (of saffron).

Amphitheaters

Nero's arena utilizes the design for spectacle structure that came into being more than a century earlier; the amphitheater as a building type was developed south of Rome, in Campania. The amphitheater at Pompeii is among the oldest such structures in stone, dating to 70 BCE. All the basic features of the classic amphitheater type are in place: the arena, elliptical in plan, surrounded by a podium wall, to separate the bloody action from the spectators, whose seats, supported by a series of barrel vaults, surrounded the performance area on all sides of the ellipse (see figure 2.1). Tucked into the southeast corner of the city, Pompeii's amphitheater also makes use of the city wall as part of the support fabric for the building. Its easy access to two city gates, the Porta Nocera and the Porta Sarno, was convenient for the movement of animals



Figure 2.1 Pompeii, interior of amphitheater

and other special equipment into the facility. It is remarkable, too, in that the dedicatory inscription survives. The sponsors of the new building were public officials of the new colony at Pompeii, established by the soon-to-be-dictator Sulla after the Italian war. Pompeii had been on the anti-Roman side in that conflict, and the placement of a colony in this old Graeco-Italian town served both as punishment and as a guarantee of future security. The singling out of the colonists here as the recipients of this gift likewise points to the political exclusion of the former, still-untrustworthy, residents of this town.

Source: *CIL* 10.852: Gaius Quinctius Valgus, son of Gaius, and Marcus Porcius, son of Marcus, the quinquennial duumvirs of the colony, because of the honor of holding public office, saw to the construction of the spectacle building with their own money and gave reserved seating to the colonists in perpetuity.

The first permanent amphitheater in Rome was built in 27 BCE by Statilius Taurus, a friend and solid supporter of Augustus in the struggle against Antony. This seems to have been a smallish structure, possibly run by the Statilii as a semi-private facility. Even so, the political value of this structure is indicated by the honor granted in acknowledgment of this public service.

Source: Dio Cassius 51.23: In the fourth consulship of (Augustus) Caesar, Statilius Taurus constructed a stone hunting theater in the Campus Martius at his own expense and celebrated its completion with gladiatorial combats. Because of this he was allowed by the people to choose one of the praetors every year.

The Statilian Amphitheater was not much used, however, and *munera* continued to be held in the Forum and, from around 9 BCE, in the Saepta Julia, a large and relatively open public square located on the Campus Martius. The Statilian Amphitheater may have been too small, or lacked the prestige of the Forum, or was otherwise not amenable to the lavish productions sponsored by the emperor.

Disaster and control

The catastrophic collapse of a “temporary” amphitheater during the reign of Tiberius is documented by both Tacitus and Dio Cassius. Tacitus blames the disaster on shoddy construction but also connects it with the social status of the builder and his inappropriate motives for offering such a spectacle, i.e. in order to profit from it. The legislation that resulted to prevent future accidents likewise set a class stipulation on such initiatives. The huge number of casualties (50,000) resulting from this collapse points to a truly (even unbelievably) enormous temporary structure; the Flavian Amphitheater, not yet in existence at this time, would have a maximum seating capacity of around 50,000. Note also how the authors do manage to blame Tiberius for the disaster, indirectly at least, because his parsimony had deprived the people of “their” games.

Source: Tacitus, *Annals* 4.62–63:¹⁴ In the year of the consulship of Marcus Licinius and Lucius Calpurnius¹⁵, the losses of a great war were matched by an unexpected disaster, no sooner begun than ended. One Atilius, of the freedman class, having undertaken to build an amphitheater at Fidenae for the exhibition of a show of gladiators, failed to lay a solid foundation and to frame the wooden superstructure with beams of sufficient strength; for he had neither an abundance of wealth, nor zeal for public popularity, but he had simply sought the work for sordid gain. Thither flocked all who loved such sights and who during the reign of Tiberius had been wholly debarred from such amusements; men and women of every age crowding to the place because it was near Rome. And so the calamity was all the more fatal. The building was densely crowded; then came a violent shock, as it fell inwards or spread outwards, precipitating and burying an immense multitude which was intently gazing on the show or standing round. . . . For the future it was provided by a decree of the Senate that no one was to exhibit a show of gladiators, whose fortune fell short of four hundred thousand sesterces¹⁶, and that no amphitheater was to be erected except on a foundation, the solidity of which had been examined. Atilius was banished.

Source: Dio Cassius 58.1a:¹⁷ [Tiberius] wasted the lives of men both in the public service and for his private whim. For example, he decided to banish the hunting spectacles from the city; and when in consequence some persons attempted to exhibit them outside, they perished in the ruins of their own theaters, which had been constructed of boards.

As noted, the senatorial decree stemming from the Fidenae disaster stipulated that only the wealthy elite were to build amphitheaters. Aemilius Macer, a third-century jurist, discusses other limitations placed on new construction, particularly spectacle buildings. This legislation recognizes the power of public generosity in providing public architecture and the potential danger represented by certain kinds of buildings. It was in the emperor's best interests to maintain close control of the public figures who might put up such popular structures, an interest inscribed in Roman law.

Source: *Digest* 50.10.3: From Macer's second book on Official Duties: New construction privately funded may be built without authorization from the *princeps*, except when it leads to rivalry with another city or offers the opportunity for sedition or is a circus, theater, or amphitheater. But it is proclaimed by law that new construction built with public funds may not go up without imperial authorization. Nor may any name be inscribed on any public work, excepting only the emperor and the person who paid for the construction.

*The Colosseum*¹⁸

The Flavian Amphitheater was the crowning example of the building type. Shining with marble that faced the brick-and-concrete fabric of the building, the Amphitheater made use of the latest advances in crowd control and materials technology, becoming a model of design for arenas empire-wide. It had the largest seating capacity in the Roman world, hosting a maximum number of spectators estimated at 50,000 to 80,000.¹⁹ More importantly, it became a tremendous public relations statement for the Flavian dynasty, which succeeded the Julio-Claudian imperial family after more than a year of civil war in 69 CE.

The Flavians selected this area of the city for a series of public buildings, devoted to the pleasure and well-being of the Roman people. This was in deliberate contrast to Nero, who had converted this area to his own personal use, constructing a palace with sophisticated architectural refinements, placed among carefully landscaped gardens with statuary, fountains, even a lake, all created to enhance his personal happiness. One particularly lavish dining room incorporated a rotating ceiling studded with stars; the emperor

diverted the universe towards his personal pleasures. The Flavians, particularly Vespasian, presented themselves as both simpler and more civic-minded than Nero, using their less-than-blue-blooded ancestry to their advantage to strengthen their connection to the population of Rome. Nero's lake was drained; the greatest amphitheater in the Roman world was built in its place. Where before the cosmos served the emperor, now the emperor deployed the massive resources of the Roman world to serve the pleasure of the people. The contrast between the Flavians and Nero is celebrated by Martial, eye-witness to the amphitheater's construction, while the tremendous achievement of Titus, especially, is touted centuries after the event by the late imperial author Cassiodorus.

Source: Martial, *Spectacles* 2:²⁰ Where the starry colossus²¹ sees the constellations at close range and lofty scaffolding rises in the middle of the road, once gleamed the odious halls of a cruel monarch, and in all of Rome there stood a single house. Where rises before our eyes the august pile of the Amphitheater, was once Nero's lake. Where we admire the warm baths, a speedy gift, a haughty tract of land had robbed the poor of their dwellings. Where the Claudian colonnade unfolds its wide-spread shade, was the outermost part of the palace's end. Rome has been restored to herself, and under your rule, Caesar, the pleasantries that belonged to a master now belong to the people.

Source: Cassiodorus, *Variae* 5.42:²² [The Colosseum] was conceived by the power of imperial Titus, spending a river of gold, to display the chief of cities. And since a viewing place is called in Greek a theatre, which is a hemisphere, when two are, as it were, joined into one, it must rightly be termed an amphitheatre. Its arena is shaped like an egg: thus there is a fit space for runners, and the spectators may see the more easily, since its vast circle has gathered them all in.

A relief requisitioned by members of the Haterii family, who were involved in construction in the capital city, shows the exterior of the Colosseum as it appeared during the rule of Titus (see figure 2.2). The three levels of the arcade then present (Domitian added another level of seating) are visible, with the upper two levels decorated by heroic statues and eagles, symbols of imperial power. On the bottom level, one can glimpse a stairway leading into the interior, a feature of the building meriting much celebration. The system of access into the Flavian Amphitheater was tremendously sophisticated and enabled relatively speedy and safe movement in the structure. Each arched entranceway was numbered; each spectator held a ceramic *tessera* that gave the number of the exterior entrance, as well as that of the *maenianum* (a horizontal section of seating), the *cuneus* (a wedge-shaped subdivision of



Figure 2.2 Tomb of Haterii relief. Scala/Art Resource, NY



Figure 2.3 Colosseum vaulting



Figure 2.4 Colosseum arena

the *maenianum*), the *ordo* (or row) and the *locus* (the seat). Once the spectator entered the building, a series of passages, stairs, and ramps directed him toward the specific area of his seat, easing up on crowding tremendously. At the top of the relief, a compressed view of the interior can be seen, at this time probably a wooden wall; there is no indication, as yet, of the awnings that would eventually be maneuvered to maximize the shade for the crowd in the Colosseum.

The Flavian Amphitheater in its current state of preservation tells us much about the fabric of the building, the concrete, masonry and brickwork and the intersecting barrel vaults capable of supporting the weight of the structure and the weight of thousands of spectators (see figure 2.3). The visitor today



Figure 2.5 Puteoli, arena of amphitheater

may be most impressed by the interior of the Colosseum, confronting the exposed substructures underneath what would have been the arena floor in antiquity (see figure 2.4). There would originally have been trap doors through which animals, *bestiarii* and props would have sprung forth into the performance space; these trap doors are still in situ in the amphitheater at Puteoli, which was built not long after the Colosseum (see figure 2.5). Selective choreography of movement, to distract the audience's attention from a given trap door, would have enhanced the surprise element, giving the impression that a fierce beast had suddenly materialized from nowhere. Originally invisible to the spectator were the substructures; these are probably the most elaborate surviving facilities from the Roman world and represent the pinnacle of a process of development. The substructures are organized around passages on line with the major axis of the amphitheater. Stairs to the imperial box lead from a smaller passage along the minor axis, allowing the *editor* to get to his

seat promptly after the opening procession for the games, while the performers took their places in the substructures to prepare for their entrances. Storage rooms opened onto the passage and the annular gallery encircling the substructures, providing much-needed space for props, containment for animals and prisoners, and waiting areas for performers.

Military amphitheaters

Many arenas were built in militarized areas, such as the Rhine–Danube frontier, and in association with legionary headquarters. Others acknowledge the agency of military and ex-military personnel in their construction. Military amphitheaters were probably multifunctional, serving as a venue for drill and weapons practice as well as a morale-boosting facility for spectacle performances. The imperial mandate was also served by military amphitheaters: the lessons about Roman power, about conquest and control, taught by spectacles would be considered appropriate for those on the limits of Roman authority. The pleasure involved in such shows would likewise ease the process of assimilation to Roman practices.

Roman legionaries were a tremendous labor resource. The soldiers were trained in construction as key to Roman strategy; Roman troops built highly sophisticated camps whenever they were on the march, camps that provided a secure fall-back position, should such be necessary, or that could be easily converted into more permanent headquarters. These construction skills were frequently deployed on Imperial projects, especially those of strategic value, such as roads, aqueducts, and amphitheaters. Direct evidence of this activity can be found in inscriptions from the amphitheater at Caerleon, documenting labor crews drawn from the legions at work.

Source: *Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, hereafter *RIB*, 339: The century of Rufinius Primus, from the third cohort, built this.

Source: *RIB* 343: The century of Flavius Julinus, from the tenth cohort, built this.

Source: *RIB* 345: The century of Fulvius Macer built this.

Inscriptions from Tomen-y-Mur document activity of military work crews in competition with each other, as to which group could finish more construction in specific period of time. These are associated with a more informal arena.

Source: *RIB* 422: The century of Mansuetus built 39 feet.

Special features

Security was a consideration for the spectacles. Although the gladiatorial armature did not, for the most part, include missile weapons that might damage unwary spectators, the *venationes* did present a real hazard, especially when they featured large, possibly leaping, felines. The podium wall that was a requisite part of any amphitheater varied in height from two to four meters or so, which falls within the jumping capacity of big cats. Evidence for additional safety features can be found associated with many *podia*: a fence with a net or grill between the posts was fixed atop the wall at, for example, Carthage, to safeguard the audience from leaping beasts. In the Flavian Amphitheater, this protective netting may have been placed a few meters inside the podium wall, allowing for a passageway between the fence and wall that could be patrolled by guards, to prevent the escape of animals as well as convicts, if need be. Nero's temporary amphitheater combined some kind of fence and netting with the ingenious device of rollers mounted on the horizontal, which would not allow the claws of a leaping feline to find purchase (and might also present the amusing, if dangerous, vision of a frantically-scrambling cat).

Source: Calpurnius, *Eclogues* 7.50–56:²³ And just where the edge of the arena reveals the spectacles next to the marble podium wall, wondrous ivory is inlaid on connected rods and unites into a cylinder which, gliding smoothly on well-shaped axle, could by a sudden turn throw off any claws set upon it and shake off the beasts.

Privately owned *ludi* and *familiae* were barred from the capital during the empire; their proven utility in violently competitive politics was too much of a risk to imperial interests. Aside from the threat of civic disruption posed by private *ludi*, the economics of the issue were undesirable. The emperor controlled the giving of extraordinary *munera*; he could hardly be dependent on an outside source of supply. The imperial *ludi* were formed under the auspices of the emperor as part of the expanded bureaucracy, each to be run by an imperial procurator.

Circuses

The Circus Maximus was the most important venue for chariot racing in the Roman world, with a building history that stretched back into the earliest



Figure 2.6 Circus Maximus: view from Palatine

days of urban development in Rome. Early chariot racing in Rome was probably done on improvised tracks; any flat length of land would serve the purpose. Spectators could be accommodated on a nearby hillside or perhaps wooden bleachers. This is in line with relatively simple arrangements made for horse racing in the Greek world; the hippodrome seems typically to have been an improvised setting with little monumentality. The elongated depression between the Palatine and the Aventine Hills is the *Vallis Murcia*, the “Murcian Valley,” the home of the Circus Maximus (see figure 2.6). Its convenient size and location next to slopes, for seating, meant that it saw use as a venue for events since the earliest days of Rome. Although Rome’s founder, Romulus, was credited with the first circus games here, actual construction in this location, in the form of enclosing the track, establishing turning posts, building shrines, was remembered as part of the urban development in the late regal period. Over the course of the Republican period, few innovations were made to the area: sculptural decoration to the barrier and rudimentary lap-counting devices were added. The real monumentalization of the structure came with the end of the Republic and the rise of the Principate. The circus as a formal building type was thus developed by the Romans over time, with innovations devised for the Circus Maximus providing a model for other such structures in the empire.

The Tarquin dynasty, in Roman tradition, was notorious among the early kings for its troubling “tyrannical” efforts to create a political standing outside

the Roman aristocracy. Much money was expended on remaking the urban landscape with massive projects, which would, ideally, carry the stamp of the Tarquins for generations to come. The Circus Maximus was part of that; an added advantage was the fact that repeated shows in this venue would present a continuous reminder of King Tarquinius Priscus' leadership and generosity. Livy's account of its formal construction notes Tarquin's efforts to outshine all other Roman leaders, asserting that his political talents and successes were likewise unprecedented. His description of the seating organization differs from that in Dionysius of Halicarnassus; the latter's presentation also casts the audience in a political light, but not one so overtly class based.

Source: Livy 1.35:²⁴ [After Tarquin's first victorious campaign] he celebrated public games on a scale more elaborate and opulent than any of his predecessors. It was on this occasion that our Circus Maximus was originally planned. On the ground marked out for it, special places were assigned to Senators and equestrians to erect their stands in – or “decks” – as they were called. These stands were supported on props and raised twelve feet from the ground. Horses and boxers, mostly from Etruria, provided the entertainment.

Source: Dionysius of Halicarnassus 3.68:²⁵ Tarquinius also built the Circus Maximus, which lies between the Aventine and Palatine Hills, and was the first to erect seats around it on scaffolding, the wooden stands being supported by beams, for till then the spectators had stood. And dividing the places among the thirty *curiae*²⁶, he assigned to each *curia* a particular section, so that every spectator was seated in his proper place.

Julius Caesar spearheaded a grand reconstruction of the Circus Maximus, straightening the long sides of the course and adding tiered seating at the curved end. He is also credited with the construction of the twelve covered starting pens or *carceres* at the straight end of the Circus; this allowed the races to have a more formal beginning with all the horses being released at once. It also added to the excitement of the race by creating the impression that the horses exploded simultaneously from the starting gates. These improvements were undertaken for the huge triumphal celebrations of 46 BCE, for which Caesar had also constructed a stadium, a *naumachia* facility for the holding of naval performances, a “hunting theater,” and subterranean facilities at the Roman Forum, meant to enhance the special effects of the *munera* regularly held there (see chapter 1). As with all of Caesar's projects, viewers were supposed to be awestruck by the magnificence, the huge size, the opulent materials, all transmitting the message of Caesar's own generosity,

success, and tremendous leadership. Suetonius' description highlights the flexibility of the Circus as a performance area, able to accommodate the visibility needs of a variety of events.

Source: Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 39:²⁷ A broad ditch had been dug around the race-course²⁸, now extended at either end of the Circus, and the contestants were young noblemen who drove four-horse and two-horse chariots or rode pairs of horses, jumping from back to back . . . Wild-beast hunts took place five days running, and the entertainment ended with a battle between two armies, each consisting of 500 infantry, twenty elephants, and thirty cavalry. To let the camps be pitched facing each other, Caesar removed the central barrier of the Circus, around which the chariots ran.

Augustus added the *pulvinar*, the platform supporting the imperial box, to the Circus Maximus. To some extent, this was a monumentalization of one of the formal honors received by Julius Caesar as dictator, and although its construction is in line with the performance of hierarchy that Augustus consolidates for spectacle audiences, the emperor himself also was known to ostentatiously avoid the exaltation of the imperial box by sitting with friends in the circus stands (see chapter 1). Still, the visibility of the box and the aggrandizement of the Circus overall, combined with the presence on the Palatine Hill of Augustus' residence and the Temple of Apollo, drew a powerful link between the emperor and spectacle in Rome.

Source: Augustus, *Res Gestae* 19: I built the Curia [Julia] and the Chalcidium attached to it, and the Temple of Apollo and its porticoes on the Palatine Hill, the Temple of the Deified Julius, the Lupercal, the portico at the Circus Flaminius, which I let be called the Porticus Octavia after the name of he who had built an earlier portico on the same spot, the imperial box at the Circus Maximus, the Temple of Jove Feretrius and Jove Tonans on the Capitoline Hill, the Temple of Quirinus.

Dionysius's description of the Circus Maximus dates to his time of residence in that city, under the rule of Augustus. The Circus has by that point assumed its fully monumental form, with multi-level seating supported by both the hillsides and vaulting. The exterior facade of the structure resembled the highly decorative scheme of Roman theaters and amphitheaters, i.e. a series of columned archways that allowed for spectator access and movement. The reconstruction in the modern model of Imperial Rome gives an impression of what this must have looked like in antiquity (see figure 2.7).



Figure 2.7 Model of Rome with Colosseum, Circus. Scala/Art Resource, NY

Source: Dionysius of Halicarnassus 3.68:²⁹ [The Circus Maximus] was also destined to become in time one of the most beautiful and most admirable structures in Rome. For the circus is three *stades* and a half in length and four *plethra* in breadth.³⁰ Round about it on the two longer sides and one of the shorter sides a canal (*euripus*) has been dug, ten feet in depth and width to receive water. Behind the canal are erected porticos three stories high, of which the lowest story has stone seats, gradually rising, as in the theatres, one above the other, and the two upper stories wooden seats. The two longer porticos are united into one and joined together by means of the shorter one, which is crescent-shaped, so that all three form a single portico like an amphitheatre, eight *stades* in circuit and capable of holding 150,000 persons. The other of the shorter sides is left uncovered and contains vaulted starting-places for the horses, which are all opened by means of a single rope. On the outside of the Circus there is another portico of one story which has shops in it and habitations over them. In this portico there are entrances and ascents for the spectators at every shop, so that the countless thousands of people may enter and depart without inconvenience.



Figure 2.8 Relief with Circus Maximus. Scala/Art Resource, NY

Trajan expanded the seating capacity of the Circus Maximus and was celebrated for this act of generosity, as seen earlier (in chapter 1) in Pliny's *Panegyric* to that emperor and as demonstrated by an inscription set up by representatives of the voting tribes in which all Roman citizens were enrolled. Here again, then, the connection is made between the spectacles and the citizenry, with the implication that the circus served the interaction between ruler and ruled.

Source: *CIL* 6.955: To the Emperor Nerva Trajan Augustus Germanicus Dacicus, son of the deified Nerva . . . holder of the tribunician power for the seventh time³¹. Set up by the thirty-five tribes because their advantages have been increased by an addition to their seats, due to the generosity of the best of emperors.

A relief from Ostia, dating to the reign of Trajan, depicts the Circus Maximus in action (figure 2.8). The piece was a funerary monument, honoring one or both of the couple standing on the left of the figural frame. The featured action depicts a racing *quadriga*, moving across the foreground away from the couple. The chariot is paced by an outrider and a *sparsor* in front of the horses sprinkles water to keep the dust down. The eye is drawn, however, to the detailed reconstruction of the barrier's key features, the rounded cones of the *metae* at either end, an obelisk on the left of middle, a pair of female statues, possibly Victoria figures, atop columns, and the dolphin lap-counters. Behind the barrier, back to the viewer, waits a helmeted figure with a victory

palm, ready to declare the victor. On the far right are the *carceres*, turned sideways and shallowly carved, to give the impression of perspective. The double doors of each starting gate are separated from the next by pilasters with *herms* set before them. The relief may have originally honored someone affiliated with the races, possibly one of the faction leaders, possibly a magistrate/producer of a fine set of *ludi circenses*. The fact that only one driver is depicted may suggest a close connection to the male deceased; perhaps everyone in the relief belonged to the same color (see chapter 6).

Features of the Circus Maximus

A circus was an enormous stadium; like the stadium, it needed a track that was spacious enough for the racing events and yet maximized visibility for the spectators. The resulting performance area was an elongated horseshoe shape, accommodating most of the seating on the long sides. Since horses were racing in the circus (as opposed to humans in the stadium), the size was much greater, with the largest circuses stretching some 550 meters or so in length.³² The *carceres* or starting boxes were on the short straight end, each closed off by a set of wooden doors all held in place by a single torsion mechanism. Once the presider let fall the *mappa* or cloth signal, circus personnel pulled a cord that released the controlling bolt for the *ostia* or gates of each box, making them suddenly and simultaneously spring open. The shining marble of the *carceres* combined with the anticipation of the race and the fast start to heighten the emotional intensity of the experience.

The arena was divided lengthwise by the central barrier of the track, typically referred to as the *spina* in modern scholarship, but usually called the *euripus* in antiquity.³³ In the Circus Maximus, the barrier was an 8-meter-wide wall, on which accumulated a number of special features. This was where the eggs and dolphins were, platforms with monumental frames that held lap-counters sculpted in these distinctive shapes, one egg or dolphin for each of the seven laps of a standard race. Eggs, raised on individual spikes, had been used for this purpose since the early second century BCE; as the lead chariot finished each lap, an egg would be lowered to mark the progress of the race. Dolphins were of course known by the Romans as a racing animal, due to their behavior around ships at sea. They were also associated with the god Neptune, patron of horses. The addition of dolphins in 33 BCE would also serve indirectly as a victory monument, as the recently-defeated Sextus Pompey, one of Octavian's major rivals, had made much use of such sea symbolism.

Source: Dio Cassius 49.43:³⁴ And seeing that in the circus men made mistakes about the number of laps completed, [Agrippa] set up the dolphins and egg-shaped objects, so that by their aid the number of times the course had been circled might be clearly shown.

The central barrier was ornamented with an Egyptian obelisk, removed to this location from Heliopolis during Augustus' reign; as with a number of Egyptian artifacts imported at this time, this served to remind people of that exotic new addition to the empire of the Romans, as well as the victory over its last ruler.³⁵ This message of Egyptian victory and domination was reiterated by the inscription Augustus added to the base of the obelisk.

Source: *CIL* 6.701: Emperor Caesar Augustus, son of the god,³⁶ chief priest, after Egypt had been returned to the power of the Roman people, gave this gift to the sun-god.

The obelisk in the Circus Maximus became a landmark and a model feature for circus design. While its general connection to the cult of the sun, both in Egypt and in Rome, was recognized, the specific meaning of the original inscription by Seti I was not. Pliny understood the obelisk as a document of the ancient Egyptians' famous wisdom.

Source: Pliny, *Natural History* 36.71:³⁷ The obelisk set up by the late Emperor Augustus in the Circus Maximus was quarried for King Psemetnepserphreus³⁸ who was king at the time that Pythagoras was in Egypt; it is 85 feet high, excluding its base which is an integral part of the obelisk. The monolith in the Campus Martius³⁹ is about ten feet shorter; it was quarried for Sesothis. According to learned Egyptians, both carry hieroglyphs that give an account of natural science.

White lines, painted on the track in designated spaces, organized the chariot races. Lines that led from the starting gates or *carceres* toward the first turn laid out lanes to keep the chariots separated from each other at the outset of the race. Cassiodorus describes a line that goes all the way across the performance space, crossing the track on both sides of the central barrier.

Source: Cassiodorus, *Variae* 3.51:⁴⁰ Not far from the gates, a white line has been drawn, straight as a ruler, to either parapet: when the *quadrigae* set out, their contest begins from that point, lest, while they try to smash each other in their excessive speed, the people should lose the pleasure of its spectacle.

The implications of Cassiodorus' statement are a source of some dispute. His reference to the beginning of the "contest" has been taken as an allusion to the "break" line, a line across the track at the first *metae*, from which point the chariots could start jockeying to get to the faster inside position. The matching line on the other side of the barrier is more of a puzzle. Some have identified this as the finish line, to be crossed by the lead chariot after

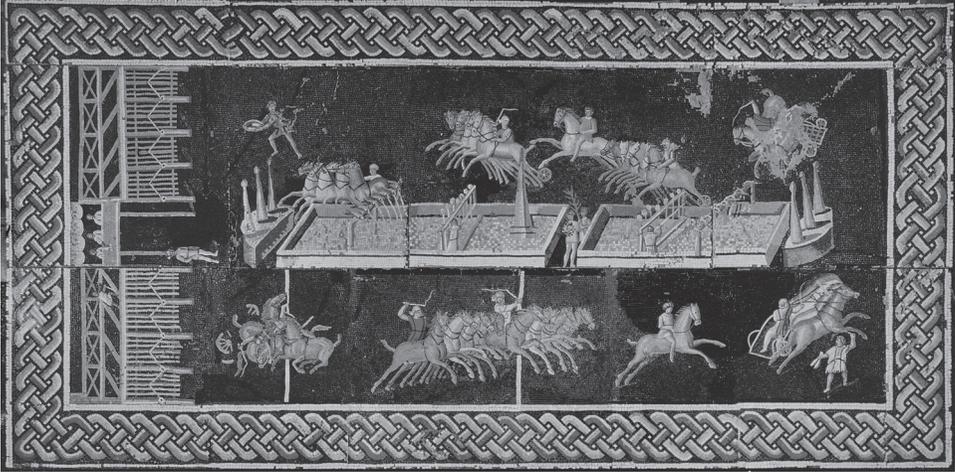


Figure 2.9 Gallo-Roman mosaic of circus race. Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY



Figure 2.10 Circus beaker with race and acclamations

the seven laps. Others place the finish line on the same side of the barrier as the break line, close to the farther turning point, a reconstruction that fits some visual renderings of races from antiquity, such as a Gallo-Roman mosaic from Lyons (figure 2.9).

This piece depicts eight *quadrigae* racing in a circus from a modified bird's-eye viewpoint. On the left are the wooden *carceres*, with three presiding magistrates in a shaded box above the central entryway into the track. The central barrier of the circus is quite clearly a series of basins; *metae*, eggs, dolphins, and a low obelisk decorate the feature, with the four eggs in a lowered position suggesting that the race is a bit more than half over. A serious accident has occurred on the left, directly after the turn (always the most dangerous part of the race), and bits of wreckage are scattered over the track. The artist has indicated two white lines, the break line and the finish line, presumably, in the foreground, on the same side of the racecourse.

A glass beaker from the first century CE, found in Colchester, depicts a race between four teams in three registers of blown relief work (figure 2.10). The top range is inscribed with cheers of the spectators, rooting for their favorites.

Source: *RIB* 2419:⁴¹ Go Hierax! Go Olympus! Go Antilocus! Hail Cresces!

The lower two ranges are punctuated by a representation of the *metae* or turning posts that extends over both levels. The lowest register has the four *quadrigae* of the racers, rendered in their essentials. The middle range shows the monuments and features of the barrier, a few in some detail. The eggs and dolphins, for example, are clearly marked, with the spikes of the seven eggs clearly visible.

Shrines were embedded in the earliest circuses in Rome, as the legendary first races were dedicated to the god Consus. By the time of Tertullian, the barrier was crowded with religious ornamentation; Tertullian views this as part of the inherent evil of spectacle, corrupted by the presence of the (demonic, to his way of thinking) Graeco-Roman pantheon.

Source: Tertullian, *On the Spectacles* 8.3–6:⁴² Every ornament of the circus is a temple by itself. The eggs are regarded as sacred to Castor and Pollux by people who do not feel ashamed to believe the story of their origin from the egg made fertile by the swan, Jupiter. The dolphins spout water in honor of Neptune; the columns bear aloft images of Sessia, so called from “*sementatio*” (“sowing”); of Messia, so called as deity of “*messis*” (“reaping”); and of Tutulina, so called as ‘tutelary spirit’ of the crops. In front of these are seen three altars for the triple gods: the Great, the Potent, the Prevailing. They think these deities are Samothracean. The huge obelisk, as Hermateles maintains, has been set up in honor of the Sun. Its inscription which, like its origin, is Egyptian, contains a superstition. The gathering of the demons would be dull without their Great Mother, so she presides there over the ditch. Consus, as we have mentioned, keeps in hiding underground at the Murcian Goals (*metas Murcias*).

Circus as cosmos

For some Romans, the Circus was a manifestation of the cosmos. The reasons behind this are embedded in the links between religion and architecture, going beyond the specific meanings attributed by ancient authors to the features of chariot races and circuses. The rituals of city founding, for example, were a means of drawing the heavens down into the landscape, infusing the urban environment with the power and protection of the divine. The specific connections between spectacle and imperial power made by prominent emperors likewise contained these links between divine order and the experiential reality of the Roman games: the emperor was the agent of the gods, and all he created was blessed and sanctified.

Source: Cassiodorus, *Variae* 3.51:⁴³ But Augustus, the lord of the world, raised a work equal to his power, and laid out a construction [the Circus Maximus] in the Murcian valley that is a marvel even to the Romans. A vast mass, firmly girded in by hills, encloses a space which contains images of the universe. Hence, they placed twelve gates for the twelve signs of the zodiac. These are opened suddenly and together, by ropes let down from small herms . . . The *biga* was invented as an imitation of the moon, the *quadriga* of the sun. The outriders' horses, on which the circus attendants announce the heats to be run, imitate the speed of the morning star, the sun's fore-runner . . . The whole race is run with seven goals, an image of the week's recurring seven days. The goals themselves, like the zodiacal divisions, have three peaks, around which the swift *quadrigae* wheel like the sun. They signify the limits of east and west. The central *euripus* gives an image of the glassy sea; hence, marine dolphins there pour in the waters. Moreover, lofty obelisks are raised to the heights of heaven; yes, and the taller is dedicated to the sun, the lower to the moon, while the mysteries of the ancients are marked on them by Chaldaean signs, as though by letters . . . Nor is it by chance that the rule of the contest is for a decision in twenty-four heats, as the hours of day and night are assuredly summed up in this number.

Naumachiae

Recreations of famous naval battles were presented in association with a number of major extravaganzas, including the quadruple triumph of Julius Caesar in 46 BCE and the dedication of the Temple of Mars Ultor by Augustus in 2 BCE. Building a facility to house them was a challenge: there had to be some sort of water-proof container, large and deep enough to host sufficient ships and men to hold the audience's interests, and yet also of a size that allowed visibility for the audience, whose seating would also need to be provided. Specialized structures that offered all these features were called *naumachiae*, using the Latin word that means "sea battles."

The *Naumachia* of Julius Caesar seems to have been the first formal facility for water battles built in Rome. Part of the lavish accommodations prepared for Caesar's quadruple triumph in 46 BCE, the *naumachia Caesaris* was an artificial basin that could accommodate a sizeable naval battle, with thousands of participants, both rowers and marines. Appian documents the enormous size of this spectacle, which would of course require an equally large venue to allow space for maneuvering.

Source: Appian, *The Civil Wars* 2.102:⁴⁴ [in Caesar's quadruple triumphal celebration] There was . . . a naval engagement of 4,000 oarsmen, where 1,000 fighting men contended on each side.

Source: Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 39:⁴⁵ The naval battle was fought on an artificial lake dug in the Lesser Codeta,⁴⁶ between Tyrian and Egyptian ships, with two, three, or four banks of oars, and heavily manned. Such huge numbers of visitors flocked to these shows from all directions that many of them had to sleep in tents pitched along the streets or roads, or on roof tops; and often the pressure of the crowd crushed people to death. The victims included two senators.

This may not have been intended as a permanent facility: Caesar soon had other plans for the space.

Source: Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 44:⁴⁷ His first projects [following his completion of civil war fighting] were a temple of Mars, the biggest in the world, to build which he would have had to fill up and pave the lake where the naval sham-fight had been staged.

Although Caesar never progressed with the Temple of Mars project, his artificial lake was indeed filled in. The size of the *naumachia* might have been a problem for Caesar anyway; such an expanse of water, unless continuously in use, presented a risk of disease. During the years following Caesar's assassination, military expenditure channeled the funds of Rome's leaders away from lavish construction. In 43 BCE, the *naumachia Caesaris* was filled in.

Left with a gap in the spectacular venue, Augustus provided an even more lavish facility for sea battles than Caesar's: located in the Campus Martius, this artificial lake was large enough to contain an island. Augustus noted the measurements in his *Res Gestae*: this would be an area larger than the combined performance space of the Circus Maximus and the Circus Flaminius.

Source: Augustus, *Res Gestae* 23: I presented a *naumachia* to the people across the Tiber where the grove of the Caesars is located, having had an area 1,800 feet long and 1,200 feet wide dug out for the purpose. In this spectacle thirty ships with rostra, either triremes or biremes, fought, along with a large number of smaller ships. There were about 3,000 combatants on these ships, in addition to the rowers.

Determining the location of each event is sometimes a bit tricky; the Circus Flaminius described by Dio as the site of Augustus' crocodile hunt was not an enclosed space. How was the water contained?

Source: Dio Cassius 55.10:⁴⁸ [In 2 BCE] There was a gladiatorial combat in the Saepta, and a naval battle between the “Persians” and the “Athenians” was given on the spot where even today some relics of it are still pointed out . . . Afterwards, water was let into the Circus Flaminius and thirty-six crocodiles were slaughtered there.

The question becomes more controversial still when considering the Flavian Amphitheater. The accounts of the dedicatory games to celebrate the opening of this facility in 80 BCE refer to a number of water events, including synchronized swimming by “Nereids,” a water *venatio* with specially water-trained bulls and horses, as well as several recreations of Greek naval battles (see chapter 3). But were these water spectacles housed in the Colosseum? And if so, how?

Source: Dio Cassius 66.25:⁴⁹ For Titus suddenly filled this same theatre with water and brought in horses and bulls and some other domesticated animals that had been taught to behave in the liquid element just as on land. He also brought in people on ships, who engaged in a sea-fight there.

Source: Suetonius, *Titus* 7:⁵⁰ At the dedication of his Amphitheater and the Baths, which had been hastily built beside it, Titus provided a most lavish gladiatorial show; he also staged a sea-fight on the old artificial lake, and when the water had been let out, used the basin for further gladiatorial contests and a *venatio*.

Source: Martial, *Spectacles* 27:⁵¹ If you are here from a distant land, a late spectator for whom this was the first day of the sacred show, let not the naval warfare deceive you with its ships, and the water like to a sea: here but lately was land. You don't believe it? Watch while the waters weary Mars. But a short while hence you will be saying: “Here but lately was sea.”

Source: Suetonius, *Domitian* 4:⁵² Domitian presented many extravagant entertainments in the Colosseum and the Circus. Besides the usual two-horse chariot races he staged a couple of battles, one for infantry, the other for cavalry; a sea-fight in the amphitheater.

Dio specifically says that the Colosseum was flooded; Suetonius' narrative is contradictory, with the Augustan basin as the venue in one emperor's

biography and the Flavian Amphitheater itself in another. Martial's more poetic account refers to sudden changes between land and sea in the spectacle; the rapid flooding and draining of the performance space implied by this is in accord with Suetonius' description in the Titus biography. Whether, and how, the Flavian Amphitheater was flooded remains a topic for debate. The event took place before Domitian added the arena substructures: was there a *hypogaeum* or water basin underneath the arena floor in the original phase of the Colosseum? How deep was this basin? Could it have accommodated large numbers of men on relatively shallow-drafted boats? Could it have been drained (and if so, how?), or perhaps permit the arena floor to be returned to its place while water was still present? Minimal material evidence for watertight design in the performance area has created doubt for other scholars, who place the major water shows in the *naumachia Augusti*, the usual venue in the first century. Perhaps, they suggest, a shallow and brief flooding of the arena created the impression of a sea and allowed for some splashy events. More serious demands would be placed on a facility hosting naval battles, amply provided by the vastly-larger basin of the official *naumachia*.

Stratification and Seating

As early as the second century, organizers of spectacle were concerned that prime seating be reserved for Rome's elite. Despite the fact that shows were perceived as populist, as a primary method of attracting the favor of the Romans at large, the strong tradition of marking and preserving social status by visible means was carried over into the venues for spectacle. Livy traces official enforcement for this privilege to the early second century, the period when games became a prominent feature of Roman public life.

Source: Livy 34.54.⁵³ At the *Ludi Romani* [for 194 BCE] the senate for the first time looked on segregated from the common people, and this caused gossip, as every novelty usually does, some thinking that this distinction, which should have been granted long before, was at last bestowed upon a most honorable body; others taking the view that whatever was added to the majesty of the senate was subtracted from the dignity of the commons, and that all such discriminations, which tended to draw the orders apart, were dangerous to impartial concord and liberty . . . This was a novel and arrogant caprice, never desired nor practiced by the senate of any other people. It is reported that in the end even Africanus had repented that in his consulship he had suggested the innovation.

Despite Africanus' regrets, the practice continued. Less controversial than seating by rank was seating set aside for those who had performed significant public service. Recipients of the civic crown, the highest military honor,

granted for the saving of the life of a fellow citizen, were entitled to special seating at the games, and repeated acknowledgment of that honor by applause.

Source: Pliny, *Natural History* 16.6:⁵⁴ When a man has received this wreath, it is his privilege to wear it for the rest of his life. When he makes his appearance at the celebration of the games, it is customary for the Senate even to rise from their seats, and he has the right of taking his seat next to the senators. Exemption, too, from all civic duties is conferred upon him as well as his father and his father's father.

Augustus' major program of social reform was touted as the revival of Roman tradition and the resurrection of Roman values, after the chaos of the civil war. Part of the package was the restoration of the Roman hierarchy, now purified of decadence, and rededication to the rebuilding of Roman piety and prestige. Restricted seating in the spectacles was demanded by the *lex Julia theatralis*, a highly visible sign of Augustan restoration of Roman order.

Source: Suetonius, *Augustus* 44:⁵⁵ [Augustus] issued special regulations to prevent the disorderly and haphazard system by which spectators secured seats for these shows; having been outraged by the insult to a senator who, on entering the crowded theater at Puteoli, was not offered a seat by a single member of the audience. The consequent Senatorial decree provided that at every public performance, wherever held, the front *ordo* of stalls must be reserved for senators. At Rome . . . other rules of his included the separation of soldiers from civilians; the assignment of special seats to married commoners, to boys not yet come of age, and close by, to their tutors; and a ban on the wearing of dark cloaks, except in the back rows. Also, whereas men and women had hitherto always sat together, Augustus confined women to the back rows even at gladiatorial shows: the only ones exempt from this rule being the Vestal Virgins, for whom separate accommodation was provided, facing the praetor's tribunal.

The display of proper clothing, in accordance with class and traditional practice, seems to have been observed in Flavian Rome as well, as suggested by Martial, who notes that a dark cloak is out of place at the shows, where spectators dazzle just as the performers do. Given the weather, the *munera* here could be the ordinary gladiatorial combats in December.

Source: Martial, *Epigrams* 4.2:⁵⁶ Horatius was watching the show just now in a black cloak, the only one in the entire assembly, while the plebs and the lesser order and the greatest⁵⁷ sat dressed in white together with our revered leader. Suddenly snow fell from the whole sky. Horatius watches in a white cloak.



Figure 2.11 Colosseum, preserved seating

Domitian is credited with renewed enforcement of the *Lex Roscia*, a law originally passed during the Republic that reserved the fourteen front rows for equestrians; remnants of this section, faced with marble, are preserved in the Colosseum (see figure 2.11). That this constituted a change is indicated by Martial, who also notes the presence of ushers to check for qualifications of claimants, which might include the proper stripe on the toga or the proper ring to symbolize elite status.

Source: Martial, *Epigrams* 5.14:⁵⁸ Nanneius, who always used to sit in the front row in the days when squatting was allowed, was roused and moved camp twice and thrice. Finally he sat down behind Gaius and Lucius, right between the seats, almost making a third. From that position he peered out with a hood over his head and watched the show with one eye in no seemly style. Dislodged from there too, the wretch moves to the aisle and half-supported by the end of a bench, where he is ill-received, he pretends to the equestrians with one knee that he is sitting and to Leitus⁵⁹ with the other that he is standing.

Aside from numerous poems that document the violation of the law in spectators' attempts to sit closer than their genuine status allowed them, Martial also asserts that contemporary elites had abandoned the austere moral rectitude espoused by Augustus, a morality particularly to be shown by the elites as justification of their privilege.

Source: Martial, *Epigrams* 5.41:⁶⁰ Although you are more emasculate than a flabby eunuch, and softer than the concubine of Celaenae,⁶¹ whose name the gilded priest of the Mother howls, you talk of theaters and rows and edicts and purple stripes and Ides and clasps and property qualifications, and point at poor men with your manicured hand. Whether you have the right to sit on the equestrian benches I shall consider Didymus; you have none to sit on the husbands'.