CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rome’s seat of passion: An assessment of the archeology and history of the Circus Maximus

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Abstract: It is a place where the general public can gather communally to watch ludi, provisionally erasing invisible boundary lines which sharply divide one social class from another. The Circus is also a location which has the capability to eradicate personal and societal perceptions potentially rendering a crowd in an intoxicated, wanton state. The association existent between society and its predetermined allocation of space in many venues (e.g. hippodromes, theaters, amphitheatres, etc.) which exhibit sports and spectacles, more generally, is well attested to in the Circus Maximus’s history. Using this as the conceptual framework, this article attempts to assess the recurrent, measured, and far-ranging evolutions and interdependencies between the aristocracy and the Circus they constructed. The construction methodology, I argue, was constantly being adapted to suit specific political agendas beginning with its legendary foundation under the Etruscan kings in the sixth-century BCE and ending with its usage during late Empire in the fifth-century CE. The fictional rape of the Sabine women, for example, relates Roman notions of losing self and spatial awareness as a hazardous mistake which can be purposely leveraged by manipulating a predestined, popular situation “monstra.” The organization of this article which traces the Circus’s transitions will begin with the Regal Period, move to the Republican Period, then to the Empire. The variations and modifications the

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Cody Scott Ames’ desire to study the Circus Maximus’s reception in terms of Greco-Roman religion, entertainment, and politics is rooted in two master’s theses which included how Greco-Roman architecture (principally the Hippodrome) commissioned by the Judean (and Roman) aristocracy was received during the first-century CE in Coesarea Maritima, Judea. During Ames’ studies of Herod’s building program, Ames learned the complexities of the past can hardly be exacted by investigating one discourse.

Cody Scott Ames’ background in Classics, Classical Archaeology, and Early Christianity has instilled and fostered a desire for a deeper understanding of the complex identity of early first-century Roman society. Ames’ passion for Roman spectacle is a multifaceted situation (i.e. Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Jewish, Christian, pagan, etc.). As a result, first-century Greco-Roman sports and spectacles has cast a large shadow that dramatically helped craft the complexion of modern religion, entertainment, politics, and western identity.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The aims of this paper were to highlight the means by which the Roman Aristocracy intertwined Religion and Entertainment within the confines of the Circus Maximus. The scope of the paper will span the Sixth-Century BCE Etruscan Foundations through the end of the Late Roman Empire (476 BCE). A main focus will be Architectural Constructions and Modifications throughout the Circus’s history in an effort to draw out the Roman Political interconnections with Sports and Spectacles in the Ancient Roman World. This paper will also make mention of the Impetus of the Imperial Cult and how the Circus progressed its sphere of influence.
Circus Maximus has undergone since the sixth-century BCE—architecturally and usage wise—serves as evidence to both the flexibility of public spaces and usages by the aristocracy from pre-Roman times through the Roman Empire.

**Subjects:** Archaeology; Classical Studies; Cultural Studies; History; Religion; Translation & Interpretation

**Keywords:** Circus Maximus; Rome; sports and spectacles; entertainment-religious agency; archeology

1. Introduction

For more than 1,000 years there has been horse racing in Rome. The most popular venue facilitating the spectacle is also widely considered to be the place where the rape of the Sabine women took place. Livy (who lived during the end of the first-century BCE and beginning of the first-century CE) tells us it was not by coincidence that Romulus chose the Circus as the location for the Roman attempt at harvesting women (see Figure 1):

> The Roman state had become strong enough to hold its own in war with all the peoples along its borders, but a shortage of women meant that its greatness was fated to last for a single generation ... Romulus, to gain time till he found the right occasion, hid his concern and prepared to celebrate the Consualia, the solemn games in honour of equestrian Neptune. He then ordered that the spectacle be announced to the neighbouring peoples. He gave the event great publicity by the most lavish means possible in those days. Many people came ... from Caenina, Crustumunim and Antemnae; the entire Sabine population came, wives and children included ... they marveled that Rome had grown so fast. When it was time for the show, and everybody was concentrating on this, a prearranged signal was given and all the Roman youths began to grab the women. Many just snatched the nearest woman to hand, but the most beautiful had already been reserved for the senators and these were escorted to the senators' houses by plebeians who had been given this assignment (Livy, *History of Rome*, Chap. 1.9, section 13).

This article addresses the continual, deliberate, and far-ranging transitions and relationships between the aristocracy and the Circus they built up or adapted to suit their agenda beginning with its legendary foundation under the Etruscan kings in the sixth-century BCE (Livy, Chap. 1.35) and following to its modern usage as a municipal park. In order to track the Circus’s transitions most effectively, this argument will begin with the Regal Period, move to the Republican Period, then to the Empire, and finally end with its modern treatment tracing the architectural reconstructions and modifications along the way. The variations the Circus has undergone since the sixth-century

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*Figure 1. Jacques-Louis David’s depiction of the rape of the Sabine women.*

BCE—architecturally and usage wise—serves as a testament to both the adaptability of public spaces and uses by the aristocracy from pre-Roman times through the Roman Empire.

The agency present between man and space, which is extant in every venue featuring spectacles to a certain degree (i.e. hippodromes, theaters, amphitheaters, etc.), is well attested to in the history of Rome's Circus Maximus. On one hand it is a place where people of every class can gather collectively, more or less (Suetonius, Claudius, Chap. 31.3; Tacitus, Annals, Chap. 15), to watch ludi and temporarily erase invisible boundary lines which sharply divide one person from another. On the other hand, the Circus has the capability to remove personal and societal cognition which renders a person and those around them in an intoxicated, uninhibited state. The Circus Maximus was the only venue which allowed men and women to sit together (Ovid, Ars Amatoria, Chap. I.135, section 252). In the case of the fictional rape of the Sabine women, Romans relate that losing self and spatial awareness can be a dangerous thing which can be purposely leveraged by pre-arranging an awesome diversion “monstra.”

2. The Circus Maximus under the Tarquins: foundations
The foundation of the Circus Maximus predates the rise of Rome's supremacy in the Italian peninsula. According to legend, Lucius Tarquinius Priscus (said to be the fifth king of Rome who reigned from 616–579 BCE) was regarded to have commissioned the hippodrome during a time when Etruscans enjoyed dominion over Rome “vae victis” (Livy, Chap. 1.35.8, section 9). The Etruscan foundation story for the Circus does not fit with Livy's account, however, he had an agenda which was bent on political goals which were not confined by an actual account of history (if it was even known to him). In any event, Tarquinius or his grandson, also named Tarquinius (Superbus), allowed the aristocracy to construct raised seating “pulvinar” to facilitate a better view of the horse races and boxing competitions. Both events were supposedly transported from Etruria during the early goings of the Circus. The elder Tarquinius is widely believed by current scholarship to be pure conjecture (Potter & Mattingly, 1999, p. 290), but the younger Tarquinius almost certainly existed and finished the Circus sometime before the conclusion of the Roman Regal Period which ended c. 509–500 BCE (Humphrey, 1986, pp. 60–61; Potter & Mattingly, 1999, p. 290). Livy's account of a relatively early construction date suggests that Romans thought the Circus was in operation before the Republic started (Tarquinius Superbus was the last king of Rome). This early date stands up archeologically based on a permanent stone seat which had an inscription dating to 494 BCE (Insc. Ital. 13.3). The inscription stated the seat was reserved for a certain magistrate, Manius Valerius Maximus, in the private seating section around the shrine to Murcia (Festus 464l). Inscriptions enjoy a great respect by archeologists in terms of chronicling early Roman history as dating Roman magistrates is generally accurate to within a year (Potter & Mattingly, 1999, p. 290) (Figure 2).

The location of the Circus was positioned in the valley of Murcia (either a surname of Venus or an ancient name for the Aventine Hill itself or both (Apuleius, Metamorphosis, Chap. 6.8)) between the Aventine and Palatine Hills and measured 621 m (2,037 ft.) in length and 118 m (387 ft.) in width. During the initial stages of the Circus Maximus, the Murcian Valley was a rich agricultural land in part because of the flooding Tiber River and in part because the stream dividing the valley (Richardson,
The ancient name of the stream is lost; however, Pope Calixtus II Guy de Bourgogne re-dug it and called it Acqua Mariana which was used to run a mill at the eastern end of the area (Torre Moletta). It was also used to water crops in and around the Circus Maximus (Landart, 2015, p. 189). The Romans probably bridged the stream early on at the two points where the racetrack had to cross. As a result of the rich agricultural area and the agrarian lifestyle the Romans lived (Claridge, 2010, pp. 1–7), the earliest contests must have been against an agricultural backdrop “with nothing more than turning posts, banks where spectators could sit, and some shrines and sacred spots” (Humphrey, 1986, 11). Through the Circus’ first years, the stream and any Tiber flood water probably would have been drained, but the temporary, wooden structures (stands and seats) must have been under the constant threat of rot, necessitating constant refurbishments and opportunities for aristocratic gifts to the people “munera.” The turning posts “metae” located on the banks of the stream, which may have been named after Murcia, were each comprised of three conical stone pillars and in all probability were the earliest permanent circus features. An open drainage canal between the posts could have served as the earliest dividing barrier (known later as the spina or euripa) (Humphrey, 1986, 67; Ovid, Metamorphosis, Chap. 7) (Figures 3 and 4).
3. The spectacle and religious affiliations of the Circus Maximus: from the regal period to the empire

As mentioned above, the origins of the Circus has much to do with the political agency between cultic ritual and deity worship and sports and spectacles (Kyle, 2012, pp. 243–288). I have placed this section here (between the Regal period and Republican period) to not only serve as a segue between different governments but also demonstrate that even though the system of government changed, the political undertones present in the different forms of entertainment and worship changed only nominally. The following section will detail transitional religious aspects which were expressed during the variable iconography of the aristocracy. The early date of the Circus and the complexion Roman pietas reflected, I argue, may correspond with each other. The presence of shrines and holy places found in the Circus Maximus, “the representation of Roman passion” (Landart, 2015, 180), may have safeguarded the common people “turbs” from extracting entertainment from worshiping the gods through entertaining experiences—removing rite and ritual from religious festivals like the ludi circenses producing a purely ludic activity. “And there is nothing so damaging to good morals as to hang around at some spectacle. There, through pleasure, vices sneak in more easily” (Seneca, Letters, Chap. 7.2, trans. A. Mahoney). Perhaps as a result of synchronizing similar passionate obsessions (religion and entertainment), early Romans forged a way of life which was conducive to granting munera which served a more political purpose. The common citizenry could enjoy the gifts which in turn spurred appreciation and support for public officials (Juvenal, Satires, Chap. 10).

As a result of the politically induced religious-entertainment interdependence exhibited within the Circus Maximus in particular, the southeastern turn of the course went between two shrines which may have preceded the Circus’ more permanent features. One shrine was located toward the outer southeastern edge and was dedicated to the valley’s goddess Murcia. As discussed above, Murcia is an obscure deity associated with Venus, the myrtle shrub, a sacred spring, the stream that divided the valley, and the lesser peak of the Aventine Hill—It seems, to this student at least, that the less we know about a deity, the more “sacred things” we associate with them. In any event, the other shrine was found at the southeastern turning-post.

Underneath the turning-post, there was a subterranean shrine to Consus who was a minor god usually associated with granaries. Consus also bears connections to Ceres and the underworld. According to the account of Livy (Chap. 1.8.4, section 5) concerning Roman tradition, Romulus learned about the shrine shortly after founding Rome. Romulus proceeded to develop the Consualia festival, a sacred scheme for assembling his Sabine neighbors at the festival which included horse races and heavy drinking. The Consualia (held in both August and December) was in honor of Consus whose festival included reverencing horses, donkeys, and mules perhaps as a thank you for all their agricultural work. Romans placed flowers instead of saddles on their backs, and rather than making them work, made them race (Landart, 2015, 188). Romulus’ Consualian plan used entertaining religious events to help establish Rome as a political power in Italy through violence and sports—two characteristics closely associated with the Circus Maximus and Roman culture in general.

Even during this factually hazy period in Roman history, archeology has helped establish that horse races were held at the Circus site since at least the sixth-century BCE. Keeping with religious (and in this case pragmatical) overtones, the track width could conceivably have been determined because the distance between the shrines of Murcia and Consus at the southeastern end and its length based on the distance between the two shrines and Hercules’ Ara Maxima. The Ara Maxima is purportedly older than Rome and is located behind the Circus’ starting place (Humphrey, 1986, p. 62) (Figure 5).

In later expansions detailed below, the altar of Consus who was regarded as one of the Circus’s patron deities was incorporated into the permanent architecture on the southeastern meta. When the stream dividing the valley was rebuilt, which monumentalized the dividing barrier between the turning posts, Murcia’s shrine was either retained or rebuilt to reflect the venues growing importance. In fact, through the Late Imperial period, both the southeastern turn and the Circus Maximus itself were sometimes referred to as Vallis Murcia (Humphrey, 1986, pp. 61–62; Skutsch, 1961, pp. 252–267).
Along with the numerous sacred spaces physically attached to the Circus, several other deities enjoyed temples overlooking the hippodrome on the Aventine and Palatine Hills reflecting the personal preference of those who appended the Circus. Most evidence of these temples is lost, however the temples to Ceres and Flora were thought to exist close together on the Aventine, on the opposite side of the Circus’ starting gate. Going in a southeasterly direction beyond the previously mentioned shrines along the Aventine was a temple to Luna, the moon goddess. Temples along the Aventine consisted of Venus Obsequens, Mercury, and Dis (or Summanus) mounted on the slopes overlooking the southeastern turn (Humphrey, 1986, pp. 61–62). The opposing Palatine hill, opposite to Ceres’s temple on the Aventine, housed a temple to Magna Mater and, across from Luna’s temple, there was a temple to the sun god Apollo (Tacitus, Annals; Woodman, 2004, p. 367).

The Circus probably represented Sun and Moon cults from its earliest period. The solar and lunar rites and rituals only grew in importance with the “introduction of Roman cult to Apollo, and the development of Stoic and solar monism as a theological basis for the Roman Imperial cult” (Sorabella, 2001, p. 75). The initial celestial associations changed during the Imperial era as the Sun god (Sol/Apollo) was seen as the divine patron of the Circus and its games. His obelisk overlooked the arena as the crown of the spina which was near his temple and the finishing line. The Sun god was depicted as the greatest charioteer who drove his four-horse chariot “quadriga” through the heavenly circuit from sunrise to sunset (representing daytime). To complete the analogy, Luna drove her two-horse chariot “biga” to symbolize nighttime. Sol and Luna represented the observable movements demonstrated in space (cosmos) along with the passage of time—analogized by the Circus track (Levi, 1944, p. 287). Using circus games as a theoretical construct for understanding the Imperial cult, we are asked to see the emperor as Sol with Luna representing the empress (Halsberghe, 1904, p. 144). The temple to Luna was probably built before Apollo’s, however, it burned down in the Great Fire of 64 CE and was not replaced (Tertullian, De Spectaculis, Chap. 9). Luna’s cult then became closely recognized with Diana’s, who may have been featured in the processions that started games “pompa circenses.” After Luna’s temple was destroyed, her cult was focused in Sol’s temple on the dividing barrier, or beside it (Smith, 1873, p. 816). They both would have been open to the sky allowing for better atmospheric observations (Humphrey, 1986, pp. 61–64, 92–94, 270–273).
4. Republican period

Taking the religious associations and their political importance into consideration, the next section looks primarily at the architectural changes made during the Roman Republican Period (509 BCE–29 CE). The games’s sponsor “editor” continued to enjoy the games next to surrogates of attending gods after the pompus circenses on the pulvinar, but seats at the track’s boundary (floor seats we might call them) offered the best views. The editor would have been seated in a place where everybody could see them, not necessarily where they could see the games best. However, as is mentioned above for dating purposes, in 494 BCE Manius Valerius Maximus and his descendants were allowed to add permanent stone seats at the southeastern turn which would have featured an excellent viewpoint for the “thrills and spills of chariot racing” (Humphrey, 1986, p. 61). As a result of the desired intensity featured within the race track and the popularity of the races among the fervent supporters in the stands, a stone track-side seating section was constructed for senators in the 190s BCE (Livy, History of Rome, Chap. 35). The addition of the stone seating suggests the growing popularity the games achieved which necessitated expansion. This makes sense because the triumphant route—a course which traced through important sites of Rome—was granted as a Triumphal Procession to victorious generals. The route started in the Circus Flaminius, continued past the Temples to Fortuna and Mater Matuta (located to the southeast of the forum and northeast of the Circus Maximus), then through the Circus Maximus before ending in front of the Temple to Jupiter Optimus Maximus (see Figure 6). Triumphant processions help us contextualize the Circus Maximus’s importance because victorious generals routinely built commemorative arches along the proces- sional way establishing links, or suggesting superiority, to previous victorious generals. This practice is particularly important to our investigation evidenced by L. Stertinius (second century BCE) who built a fornix on the eastern portion of the Circus which also functioned as the exit during the procession. All the subsequent men who were granted a triumphal procession were forced to pass under Stertinius’s fornix, thereby paying homage to his accomplishments by passing under his arch (Ballantyne, 2009, p. 99).

In 329 BCE permanent wooden gates “carceres” were built into the Circus which included a gate painted in bright colors (Livy, Ab Urbe Condita, Chap. 8.20.1). This is also when the Circus engineers staggered the gates to equalize the distance from each starting line to the spina. According to the calculations of width and sizes of four-horse racing teams, the track may have been able to hold up to 25 quadrigas, and when team racing was introduced they were widened, and the number of teams reduced. Toward the late Republican or in the early parts of the Imperial period, there were 12 stalls. The partitions of the stalls were faced with herms that served as stops for spring-loaded gates, so that 12 light-weight, quadrigas or bigas could expect a fair, simultaneous start. The herms, which were first used to protect travelers on roads in Greece with good luck, eventually found their way into the Circus Maximus around the same time they were introduced in the equestrian games of Delphi in 272–271 BCE (Humphrey, 1986, p. 135). Hermes, who was closely associated with the horse races in Greece, seems to still have held a place of honor in the circenses ludi Romani. The association is further established as Hermes was the patron god of dice (or lots), and that is how the stalls were allocated (Ripley & Dana, 1883, p. 40) (Figure 7).

Normally, a race consisted of seven laps. Since c. 174 BCE, the laps were marked using large sculpted eggs. The late Christian apologist, Tertullian (who lived c. 200 CE), tells us the eggs symbolize Castor and Pollux, who were born from eggs. Legend states these twins were patron gods of horses, horsemen, and the equestrian order “equites” (Tertullian, de Spectaculis, Chaps. 8–9). In 33 BCE, an additional system of bronze dolphin-shaped counters was added, positioned high above the spina for maximum discernibility (Humphrey, 1986, pp. 261–265). Dolphins were considered the swiftest of all animals and sacred to Poseidon.

Around 50 BCE, Julius Caesar took advantage of his growing power and put his stamp on the Circus. During this volatile time in Roman history, Caesar and Pompey were at odds which proved very lucrative for the people of Rome in terms of ludi. While Pompey Magnus built a permanent, monumental theater, Caesar looked to renovate the Circus Maximus to gain political support. He
extended the seating levels to run nearly the entire area of the racetrack in addition to barring the starting gates and the processional entrance at the semi-circular end (Humphrey, 1986, 69; Livy, History of Rome, Chap. 45.1.7) (Figures 8 and 9).

The track at this time measured approximately 621 m (2,037 ft.) in length and 150 m (387 ft.) in width (Pliny, Natural History, Chap. 36.102). A canal "euripus" was cut between the track perimeter and its seating to safeguard spectators and assist with draining the track (Humphrey, 1986, p. 75; Suetonius, Lives of Caesars, Chap. 39.2). The inner third of the stands were fashioned into track-side seats "cavea." Its closest and best sections along the central straight were earmarked for senators with the seats directly behind them reserved for the equites—just like the Colosseum. The outer two-third tiers housed the common Roman people and foreigners. They were made of wood and had wooden facilities, shops, and entrances beneath (until a fire in 31 BCE). An accurate number of seats is unknown, but was probably around Dionysius’ (3.68) estimate of 150,000 (Humphrey, 1986, p. 126).
5. Imperial period

Moving toward the Circus's prime in terms of monumental architecture and attendance, most scholars suggest the capacity of the hippodrome could hold around 150,000 spectators at its peak during the Empire in the first-century CE (Humphrey, 1986, p. 213; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Roman Antiquities, Chap. 3.68), but some ancient sources contest it could facilitate up to 250,000 (Pliny the Elder, Chap. 36.102). Pliny, however, probably did not factor the pragmatic features like access stairways and corridors (Humphrey, 1986, p. 126). Pliny’s exaggerated estimate for capacity might also represent a per foot seating estimate, or his approximation might have included those areas around the hippodrome which allowed watchers from the nearby hills a good vantage point.

Using the fire of 31 BCE as a transition from the Republic to the Empire, Augustus probably repaired the damage and built up the hippodrome’s seating capacity soon after effectively leveraging the Circus Maximus’ potential for political gain. Along with repairing damages, he claimed responsibility for an obelisk and pulvinar at the site (Res Gestae, 19). The Egyptian obelisk, quarried during Seti
I’s reign (approx. 1279 BCE), promoted sun worship. Augustus, as we observed before, used this in the Imperial cult iconography depicting the emperor as the sun who is worthy of worship. The progression of the imperial cult was greatly advanced through some of the iconography featured throughout the Circus. This is another example of how the aristocracy, in this case the emperor, leveraged architecture to fit his imperial agenda. For example, Augustus paid great money for bringing the obelisk from Heliopolis, so he gave it a prominent place midway on the spina. The Circus Maximus could be considered a de facto museum as it housed the first obelisk brought to Rome—an exotic, sacred artifact and a perpetual reminder that Augustus triumphed over his Roman and Egyptian enemies during the Civil War. The symbolism associated with the obelisk suggests the movement from the Republic into the Empire, and I argue would have made a great impact on the other members of the aristocracy. I think Augustus purposefully used a symbol expressing an ideology of imperial worship and placed it in a public place to advance his ambitious program. The public would have contextualized the symbol within the Circus thereby instilling and fostering the acceptance of the novel religious and political system—rite and ritual corroborating political endeavors (Figure 10).
Similarly, the *pulvinar* was built on a magnificent scale, with temples “aedes” raised high above the highest seating section. It is Augustus’s Circus Maximus that Dionysius of Halicarnassus described as “one of the most beautiful and admirable structures in Rome ... with entrances and ascents for the spectators at every shop, so that the countless thousands of people may enter and depart without inconvenience” (3.68). Even at this point in its history, the site remained prone to flooding. Claudius (41–54 CE) saw the need and made improvements to fight flooding. In ironic fashion however, the danger of fires in the largely wooden structure proved a far greater reality. A fire of 36 CE seems to have ignited in a basket-maker’s shop under the stands on the Aventine side. The emperor Tiberius compensated various small businesses for their losses. In addition to that, he added either a stone or marble façade face to the starting stalls along with new *metae*. In 64, a great fire broke toward the semi-circular end, and destroyed most of the Circus along with much of Rome (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, Chap. 25.2). Games and festivals continued at the Circus even through its reconstruction (Dio, 62.20; Humphrey, 1986, p. 101).

The late first-century CE Circus Maximus saw improvements to the *spina* which included a series of water basins, or perhaps a single watercourse open in some places and bridged over in others. It also offered emperors more opportunities for political influence through artistic expressions favoring the imperial cult. Furthermore, the *spina* included temples and statues of various deities along with fountains and recesses for those stationed around the track who were indispensable during *venationes* and chariot crashes (Humphrey, 1986, pp. 293–294).

Toward the end of the first century, Trajan (98–117 CE) decided to rebuild the Circus entirely in stone after another fire, possibly in 80 CE (Grout, 2015), along with providing a new *pulvinar* where the emperor could be seen alongside certain gods (Suetonius, *Claudius*, Chap. 21.3; Tacitus, *Annals*, Chap. 15). It is under Trajan that the Circus Maximus found its ultimate, permanent form. Additions by later emperors included changes such as rebuilding the starting gate under Caracalla and more general upkeeps and restorations to existing features. However, some repairs were unexpected and far ranging like when a seating section collapsed killing around 13,000 people during Diocletian’s reign (Humphrey, 1986, p. 80) (Figures 11 and 12).

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**Figure 11.** This image contextualizes the Circus within its central location, suggesting its importance to the Roman landscape.

Source: [http://www.indiana.edu/~class2/c102/net_id/images/L011.JPG](http://www.indiana.edu/~class2/c102/net_id/images/L011.JPG)
6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Empire formally ended in 476 CE but the Circus Maximus’s events fell out of popularity with the largely Christian aristocracy and general population. The decay exhibited in the Circus reflects a shrunken and economically weakened Rome. Furthermore, the city of Rome faced continual military threats during the late Empire pulling attention away from the games in the hippodrome in favor of the threat of invasion. As a result, the Great Circus is reported to have been quarried for its stone and metal to be used in other buildings, but this is speculative as there is no evidence for this and there was not much going on during this time in Rome which would have needed additional building materials. Additionally, because of the Circus’ perpetual battle with flooding, the track is now buried under six meters of alluvial soil and accumulated debris. Some of the monumental features which accentuated the spina, like Augustus’s obelisk from Heliopolis, were removed and used in different parts of the city. Pope Sixtus V removed two of the obelisks and relocated them in other parts of the city—Augustus’s obelisk in now in the Piazza del Popolo. The modern site, however, still facilitates great Roman spectacle. In 2007, for example, Genesis performed to an estimated 500,000 people! It was also the location for country-wide victory party when Italy won the World Cup in 2006 (Figure 13).

Even though the monumental architecture has come and gone, the true spirit and intention of the Circus Maximus lives on in modernity. The Circus had a distinctive ability to express the essence of the city and Roman culture, “The people have long ago shed their anxieties—since we stopped selling our votes. That sovereign people, who once disposed of everything—power, fasces, the legions—now restrains itself to two objects of prayer: the grain dole and the shows in the circus” (Juvenal, Satires, Chap. 10.77, section 81). But the absence of the architecture can also provide a powerful message in and of itself, “… mayor Ignazio Marino is hoping to use the [Rolling Stones] concert as a...
springboard for an entire weekend of cultural events that will raise his profile and boost spending by tourists ... ‘The passionate chords of their [Rolling Stones] rock in the archaeological heart of the city [Circus Maximus] will be yet another demonstration of the great beauty of Rome’” (Marino on Dailymail.com 2014). The once sacred space and seat of Roman passion still is perfectly apt to handle hundreds of thousands of people for many different purposes, and is still very much on the minds of the Roman aristocracy.

Figure 13. Celebration of Italy’s 2006 World Cup victory in the Circus Maximus.


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