



Power and people in ancient Rome

Roman amphitheatres

By the end of the first century ce the city of Rome was peppered with large stone structures dedicated to mass entertainment.

This had not always been the case. Until the mid first century bce only horse and chariot racing had permanent designated spaces in the city and these were not monumentalised.

Rome's oldest and largest circus, the Circus Maximus, was a hairpin-track designed for chariot racing. Tradition suggested that it was created around 600 BCE, originally as an informal race-track that took advantage of the natural terrain.

Today's visitor sees a large broad area set out as a park which preserves the outline shape of the circus.

During the Republic other types of spectacles – stage shows and gladiatorial combats – were held in the Roman Forum.

Temporary stages and stands were erected to accommodate performers and audience; although the politically charged backdrop and historically significant landmarks must have added to the atmosphere.

In September 55 BCE Pompey dedicated Rome's first stone theatre.

Unfortunately none of Pompey's theatre remains visible above ground today, although it is possible to see part of its outline in the shape of some modern streets and buildings.

Another theatre, planned by Julius Caesar, was completed by the emperor Augustus and dedicated to the memory of his nephew, Marcellus.

The theatre of Marcellus is preserved in part. Just under a third of the outer perimeter of the theatre's semicircular bank of seating, is visible. The upper storeys were converted to apartments in the post antique age.

Rome's first stone amphitheatre, that of Statilius Taurus, also dates to the reign of Augustus. It was destroyed in the great fire of CE 64.

Its replacement was the Colosseum, or Flavian amphitheatre, dedicated by the emperor Titus in CE 80.

The outer southern walls of the Colosseum have collapsed, but much of the exterior survives. The brick and concrete structures of the interior are clearly visible, but the marble seating and the original arena floor are gone.

In addition to these theatres and amphitheatres we know of other entertainment structures constructed during the late Republic and early empire:

A small circus or race-track built by the emperor Gaius; the theatre of Balbus dedicated in 13 BCE;

Artificial basins constructed for large scale aquatic displays; an odeum, or roofed theatre, and a stadium for athletic competitions both built by the emperor Domitian.