



Power and people in ancient Rome

Audience

Benefactors gave Rome great entertainment buildings, which were landmarks and monuments in their own right.

Every time these were used for a show further renown was associated with the names of their founders, even long after they were dead. The spectacles for which these theatres and arenas were the backdrop were another form of benefaction.

The shows, plays and races were often extravagant and expensive. They were a method of entertaining and impressing large numbers of people.

Exact numbers in attendance are debated, but the Circus Maximus could seat in the region of 150,000 spectators, the theatre of Pompey around 11,000, the theatre of Marcellus around 14,000, and the Colosseum around 50,000.

It is difficult to recreate the experience of the audience, people as individuals become lost in the crowd.

The physical remains alone tell us little about what it was like to be present at a show. We can imagine the heat, dust, noise, colours and smells but find little trace of them.

We can, however, see some evidence for managing the logistics of such large spaces and numbers of people.

Numerous entranceways into the Colosseum, which were individually numbered, helped to disperse the crowd. People were then channelled by corridors and stairways to their seats.

Stone posts outside the Colosseum have been interpreted as part of the rigging mechanism for a large awning that sheltered the arena, providing the spectators with protection from the elements. But an alternative explanation is that these bollards were part of a system for crowd control. Chains may have been strung between them or wooden barriers may filled the gaps.

We also know that a sense of order dictated the seating arrangements.

Where you sat reflected who you were and how important you were perceived to be.

Legislation introduced in the late Republic and extended by Augustus controlled the seating in the theatre and most probably in the amphitheatre as well. The best seats were reserved for the best people.

The presiding magistrates or the emperor and his retinue would have sat in a seating box, known as the tribunalia. In the theatre this was close to the stage. In the Colosseum it would have been on one of the short axes which had the most advantageous view, approximately where the Christian cross has been placed. This Imperial box was accessed by its own ornately decorated entrance.

The Senators sat in the rows closest to the stage or the arena. Behind them were the equites.

After these came the ordinary citizens. At the back were non-citizens, slaves, the poor and women.

The women probably had the worst seats right at the back of the auditorium or arena, far removed from both the action and the men of power.

The seating in the theatre and amphitheatre reflected the social hierarchy and gave the privilege of the best view to the most favoured people. Equally, the more important you were the closer you were to the seat of power.

At the Circus Maximus seating may not have been so closely regulated until later in the empire. But from the time of Augustus the emperor sat in the pulvinar with or near the statues of the gods. The emperor was thus the object of attention and veneration. The spot offered a good vantage point since it was located opposite the finishing line which was two-thirds of the way down the track.

From the Flavian period the Imperial palace on the Palatine overlooked the Circus Maximus. The emperor had a personal, bird's eye view of the ancient racetrack, which was now dominated by a symbol of Imperial power. The audience was left in no doubt as to who was their ultimate patron and benefactor.