



Power and people in ancient Rome

Spectacle

Integral to the experience of theatre, amphitheatre and circus was what was seen – the shows and races.

Yet the structures themselves are limited in what they tell us about the events for which they were constructed. The arenas stand empty.

At the Circus Maximus the starting gates are gone, the lap counters have disappeared, the Augustan obelisk has been removed. It is an empty, featureless space.

The sheer scale of the race track is evocative, but it is through other sources – literature, sculpture, mosaics and inscriptions that it is brought to life.

The same is true of the theatres and amphitheatres. The exteriors may impress, but the interiors are lost, fragmented or stripped bare.

Even a reconstructed theatre, such as that found in nearby Ostia can give us only a limited impression of the interaction between audience and performers.

At the Colosseum we can now see beneath the arena. A view that the original audience would not have experienced. The tunnels, substructures and chambers suggest the inner workings.

Here were the cells for men and for the animals who could be raised in cages and released into the arena through trap doors.

But to know where the animals came from, or how the gladiators fought or how prisoners were executed we need to look elsewhere and draw on a variety of sources.

The structures remain impressive – symbols of wealth, power and benefaction, but the people who used them, who were entertained in them, who raced, fought and died there, remain more elusive.