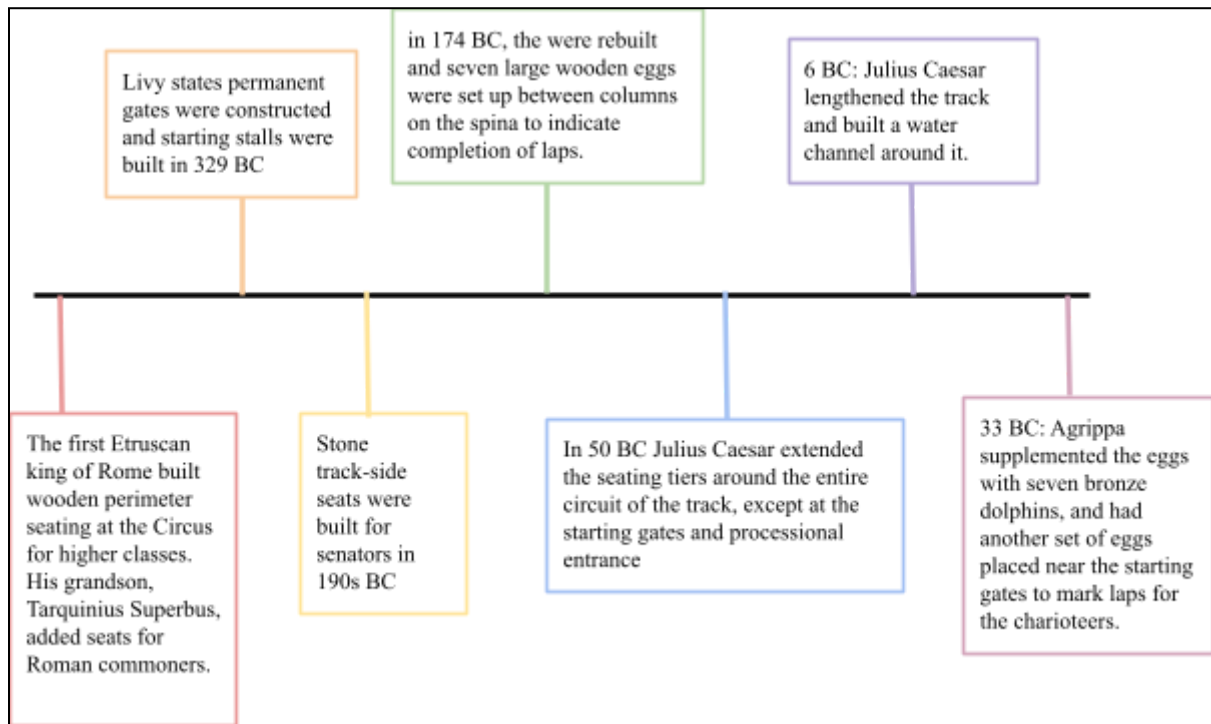


Diving into the Circus: What was the Ancient Roman Perspective on Women’s and Religion’s Involvement in the Events?

The Circus Maximus is a circus stadium that was built in Ancient Rome and it was where chariot races and other mass entertainment shows were held. The Circus Maximus was the first and largest stadium in Ancient Rome, other circuses were modeled around it. In 7 BC Dionysius of Halicarnassus described the Circus as "one of the most beautiful and admirable structures in Rome", he said, ""there are entrances and ascents for the spectators at every shop, so that the countless thousands of people may enter and depart without inconvenience," (*Circus Maximus*, 2019). Here is a brief timeline of the Circus Maximus:



Sources: (*Circus Maximus*, 2019) and (*Circus Maximus - Ancient Rome Circus*, 2023)

Games held at the Circus Maximus were sponsored by Roman aristocrats or the state, they were held as entertainment for Roman citizens and the Gods. As many games were hosted by aristocrats or politicians, hosting games became a political move, and the Circus became a way to impact the Roman perspective of the wealthy members of society, leaders, and aspiring leaders. The game could last from half a day to several days and could consist of racing, religious ceremonies, gladiator shows, and public feasts (*Circus Maximus - Ancient Rome Circus*, 2023). By the time of Augustus seventy-seven days of the year had games, and chariot races were 17 of them. There were ten to twelve races per day, Caligula doubled this number and it became typical to have twenty four races a day (*Circus Maximus*, 2019). In this comparison, the novella *Agrippina Auriga*, a story about a young girl attending a chariot race with her own secret of wanting to be in the arena, will be compared with historical sources of women in the arena; the presence of the Gods and religion in the Circus will also be discussed.

The story *Agrippina Augriga* was following the main character Agrippina, who was a small girl from Spain. Agrippina loved chariot racing and she secretly wanted to be a chariot racer. Agrippina went to watch a chariot race, the spectators at the race that she was at each wore a toga with the color of the racer that they were supporting. The colors that the spectators were wearing were, white, red, green, and blue, however, Agrippina was pleased by all of the teams. Furthermore, each team color represented a God, white represented Zephyrs (air), red represented Mars (fire), green represented Gaia (Earth), and Blue represented Neptune (water). The spectators would exclaim the name of the god of the team that they supported in hopes to get their charioteer to be the winner. At the end of the race, Gaius came out as the victor. However, it was explained that Gaius was not happy because someone had stolen his horse. Agrippina then took his spot as a racer with one of the horses from her family and was able to win the race.

During the race, the spectators had not realized that Agrippina was a woman who was racing. She revealed herself as female after the race and was congratulated and applauded by the crowd. At the very end of the book, it uncovers that Agrippina has a second secret, and depicts an image of her as a gladiator.

There is evidence that in Ancient Rome, women took part in entertainment. Domitian, the younger brother of Titus, is explicitly said to have presented women as gladiators (*Female Gladiators*, 2023). He "gave hunts of wild beasts, gladiatorial shows at night by the light of torches, and not only combats between men but between women as well" (Suetonius, *Life of Domitian*, IV.1) and "sometimes he would pit dwarfs and women against each other" (Dio, LXVII.8.4). Dio, LXVI.25.1 also says, "There was a battle between cranes and also between four elephants; animals both tame and wild were slain to the number of nine thousand; and women (not those of any prominence, however) took part in despatching them".

The biggest theme in all of the primary sources that were reviewed was condemning attitudes towards women working in entertainment, which is in contrast to the attitude of spectators when it was revealed that it was a woman who was the winner of the chariot race. Ancient sources discuss mostly female gladiators, however, it can be assumed that the same attitudes applied to all women who were working in the circus, as chariot racers, as gladiators, etc. In Martial's *Satires*, he gives a primary source insight to the attitudes towards the women who were a part of entertainment in Ancient Rome:

"What sense of shame can be found in a woman wearing a helmet, who shuns femininity and loves brute force....If an auction is held of your wife's effects, how proud you will be of her belt and arm-pads and plumes, and her half-length left-leg shin-guard! Or, if

instead, she prefers a different form of combat [as a Thraex, both of whose legs were protected], how pleased you'll be when the girl of your heart sells off her greaves!....Hear her grunt while she practices thrusts as shown by the trainer, wilting under the weight of the helmet" (VI.252ff).

The quotes that have been historically recorded from Martial give light to the Roman outlook on women's participation in something that was considered to only be respectable for men.

Similarly, Tacitus made remarks saying that many ladies of distinction and senators disgraced themselves by appearing in the Amphitheater (Annals, XV.32). The Ancient Roman perspective on women being lesser than men was seen in the written thoughts about women who were gladiators, racers, etc.

Additionally, Women in Ancient Rome did not receive recognition for their roles.

Contradicting the end of the book where Agrippa was applauded and congratulated, female gladiators in Ancient Rome received little respect. There is no specific word in Latin for a female gladiator or a female form of the word gladiator. The word *gladiatrix*, which is sometimes used is a modern construction and was first used in a translation of Juvenal in 1802. The closest term that can be used to identify a female gladiator is *ludia*, from the word *ludus* meaning a "stage performer", but even this term is used to refer to the wife or lover of a gladiator (*Female Gladiators*, 2023). Ancient Romans viewed women taking part in athletic competitions as a joke. Female gladiators very rarely appeared in Ancient Roman sources, however, when they do, they are "exotic markers of truly lavish spectacle". It is from the sources that we can conclude that Romans found the idea of female gladiators downright absurd. Petronius mocks women fighting

from a cart or a chariot (Wikipedia Contributors, 2019). From the quote seen above, Juvenal does the same thing, mocking female gladiators, making them into a punch line for a joke.

Women as gladiators were very often critiqued by Roman writers and there were attempts made to regulate women working as fighters. Women who chose to live their lives in the arena may have been motivated by their desire for independence, fame, and financial rewards. Although, history shows that a woman would be considered to have given up her respectability when she entered the arena. In 11 CE the Roman Senate passed a law which forbade freeborn women under the age of 20 from participating in the arena. Emperor Septemus Severus (193-211 CE) outlawed precipitation of any woman working in the arena in 200 CE and claimed that the spectacles of women encouraged more of a lack of respect for women in general (Mark, 2018).

As female gladiators were seen as giving up their respect to enter the arena and were criticized by men, female spectators also received poor treatment from men. In his books, Ovid provided examples for the treatment and objectification of female spectators at the Circus (Kline, 2001). As he sits next to a woman that he likes at the Circus he says that he wants the chariot that she is cheering for to win:

“I’m not sitting here studying the horses’ form: though I still pray that the one you fancy wins. I come to speak to you, and sit with you, lest you don’t notice how my love’s on fire,” (Ovid, *Book III Elegy II: At the Races*).

In this quote, the way he centers the male gaze is made apparent. He disregards her intentions of attending the Circus Maximus completely. He mentioned that he goes to speak with her, and he insinuates that she is watching the race as he hopes that the horse she likes wins. He centers

himself and wants to approach her without thinking that she may have attended the Circus with the intention of watching the race and not being bothered. He is centering his male gaze over her experience at the Circus.

Through his books, there is an insight to the way that women were treated by men. There are quotes from Ovid's *Book I Part V: Or at the Races, or the Circus* that portray the way that women were seen as objects rather than people, and their feelings were disregarded in their interactions with men:

“You can sit by your lady: nothing's forbidden, press your thigh to hers, as you can do, all the time: and it's good the rows force you close, even if you don't like it,” (*Book I Part V: Or at the Races, or the Circus*).

“If by chance a speck of dust falls in the girl's lap, as it may, let it be flicked away by your fingers: and if there's nothing, flick away the nothing,” (*Book I Part V: Or at the Races, or the Circus*).

“Don't forget to look at who's sitting behind you, that he doesn't press her sweet back with his knee,” (*Book I Part V: Or at the Races, or the Circus*).

Each of these quotes portray the way that men felt ownership over women. Ovid talks about sitting next to a woman and pressing his thigh to her, saying the rows force them close, even if she doesn't like it or doesn't want him touching her. In the second quote, it mentions flicking away dust, but then says that even if there is nothing to still proceed to flick her lap. The final quote is a clear demonstration of ownership by checking to make sure that no one was touching

the woman that he had “claimed”. Relating back to the idea of women losing their respectability when they entered the area, it gives more of a perspective into the Roman belief that women were supposed to sit and look pretty, and do what men wanted them to, rather than be athletes.

The role of Gods in the novella is similar to the history of the Gods involvement in the Circus that is recorded in historical sources. In the novella, there is a point in which the spectators are chanting the name of the God associated with the team they are cheering for, claiming that the God will help the charioteer run faster. In the Circus Maximus in Ancient Rome, there were shrines and symbols that honored the Gods (McElduff, 2020). Tertullian, *On Spectacles* 8.1-5 records some of the ways that various Gods were symbolized and honored:

“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.[13] The dolphins spout water in honor of Neptune; the columns bear aloft images of Seia, 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,”.

The Circus Maximus honored many deities, as established in the quote provided above, but most especially the Circus honored the sun:

“The Circus is primarily consecrated to the Sun. His temple stands in the middle of it, and his image shines forth from the pediment of the temple. For they did not think it proper to worship beneath a roof a god whom they see above them in the open sky. Those who

argue that the first circus show was given by Circe in honor of the Sun, her father, as they will have it, conclude also that its name is derived from her,” (McElduff, 2020).

The introduction of the novella mentions *De Spectaculus*, or *On the Spectacles* or *The Shows* from Tertullian and connects it to the mention of the Gods in the story. Written somewhere between 197 and 202 the piece of work examines the moral legitimacy and consequences of Christians attending the Circus (Wikipedia, 2022). The novella did not represent the true meaning behind *De Spectaculus*, as in the story the only talk related to religion was the spectators chanting the Gods names. The mention of the *De Spectaculis* was surface level in the work, and most likely a way for the author to show that they had done further outside research. It is important to truly research *De Spectaculis* to understand the further discrimination and debates involved with the Circus Maximus in Ancient Rome. Tertullian makes a number of arguments for why Christians should not be attending the Circus and other shows. In chapter I his first argument is related to obedience to God:

“Ye Servants of God, about to draw near to God. that you may make solemn consecration of yourselves to Him, seek well to understand the condition of faith, the reasons of the Truth, the laws of Christian Discipline, which forbid among other sins of the world, the pleasures of the public shows,” (Wheaton College, 1998).

“That these things are not consistent with true religion and true obedience to the true God,” (Wheaton College, 1998).

In chapter III Tertullian discusses being God's servants and uses verses from the Bible to express why God's servant should not attend the Circus:

“Fortified by this knowledge against heathen views, let us rather turn to the unworthy reasonings of our own people; for the faith of some, either too simple or too scrupulous, demands direct authority from Scripture for giving up the shows, and holds out that the matter is a doubtful one, because such abstinence is not clearly and in words imposed upon God's servants. Well, we never find it expressed with the same precision, ‘Thou shalt not enter circus or theater, thou shalt not look on combat or show;’ as it is plainly laid down, ‘Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not worship an idol; thou shalt not commit adultery or fraud,’” (Wheaton College, 1998).

Related to chapter III, in chapter XIII Tertullian goes further to explain why the Circus Maximus is unsuitable for Christians, and in this specific chapter he denounces the idols from the Circus:

“We have, I think, faithfully carried out our plan of showing in how many different ways the sin of idolatry clings to the shows, in respect of their origins, their titles, their equipments, their places of celebration, their arts; and we may hold it as a thing beyond all doubt, that for us who have twice renounced all idols, they are utterly unsuitable” (Wheaton College, 1998).

In chapter XVI Tertullian gives another reason for the Circus Maximus being unsuitable for Christians, and discusses the ways in which God forbids enemies, and the presences of enemies and absence of mercy in the Circus:

“God certainly forbids us to hate even with a reason for our hating; for He commands us to love our enemies. God forbids us to curse, though there be some ground for doing so, in commanding that those who curse us we are to bless. But what is more merciless than the circus, where people do not spare even their rulers and fellow-citizens? If any of its madneses are becoming elsewhere in the saints of God, they will be seemingly in the circus too; but if they are nowhere right, so neither are they there,” (Wheaton College, 1998).

For the final example from the letter, in chapter XXIX, Tertullian mentions the pleasures that have been bestowed by God, and says that nothing is more delightful than God:

“Even as things are, if your thought is to spend this period of existence in enjoyment, how are you so ungrateful as to reckon insufficient, as not thankfully to recognize the many and exquisite pleasures God has bestowed upon you? For what more delightful than to have God the Father and our Lord at peace with us, than revelation of the truth than confession of our errors, and pardon of the innumerable sins of our past life?” (Wheaton College, 1998).

De Spectaculus gives a great insight into the Christian perspective on the Circus. It provides a primary source to document why the religion was against attending Circus Maximus events, as well as a further insight to religion in Ancient Rome.

There were a number of fantastic primary sources that discussed the treatment of females who worked in the Circus that would have been fantastic to mention in the novella. De Spectaculus, while mentioned in the beginning, was not fully portrayed in the novel. Further reading of primary sources and outside research alters the original perspective from one's reading of the novella. It is important that novella's such as this one continue to bring to light ancient sources. De Spectaculus still played a role in the novella as there was mention of Gods in the Circus. The author is most likely to have engaged with this specific ancient work as it provides an insight to the Gods in Ancient Rome, which played a huge role in many of the lives of Romans. Further research of primary sources such as Satires by Martial, Tertullian, Ovid, and various other Roman authors that made comments about female entertainers, provided a deep insight into Ancient Roman history that was not portrayed in the novella. When reading the novella, the ending of the book implies that Roman women who were athletes were celebrated just as men were, when in reality, history shows us that is far from the truth. The author made it seem like the Circus was a positive, extravagant experience for all, when primary sources demonstrate the female athletes, nor female spectators, received the same treatment as men.

The novella is still a great resource for those who are beginning conversations about ancient perspectives on women, female gladiators, or the treatment of women in Ancient Rome. However, if this novella is being used to start these types of conversations, it is important to include outside research and primary sources to study the historical treatment. Furthermore, a second idea for the novella that would incorporate a number of primary sources from this paper

would be the experience of Agrippina racing if the spectators knew she was a woman from the start, or to edit the ending of the novella to make it more historically accurate.

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