

## Book Reviews

Humphrey, John H. *Roman Circuses: Arenas for Chariot Racing*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986. Pp. xiv, 703. Illustrations, notes, indexes. \$60.00.

Roman circuses, those “large entertainment buildings used first and foremost for races with four-horse (*quadrigae*) or two-horse chariots (*bigae*)” (p.1), housed the most popular, most expensive, and most spectacular of the Roman spectacles. Attempting “for the first time to collect together most of the available evidence for this peculiarly Roman building form” (p.4), this impressive, systematic study is primarily archaeological and architectural: “It takes as its starting points the buildings themselves and attempts to trace when and where they were built and how they functioned.” (p. ix) Humphrey discusses the monuments physically and then moves to related questions of function and operation; he leaves to others, for now at least, the sociopolitical aspects (e.g., crowd, charioteers, symbolism) of this sport phenomenon. The study includes Rome, Italy and the provinces, and it extends from Greek predecessors and Roman beginnings to the Late Empire; it discusses the tetrarchic capitals of the fourth century but not late antique palaces and Byzantium.

Well qualified by excavation, research and autopsy, Humphrey handles a vast range of evidential materials and problems. He is frank about the dearth and difficulties of his evidence. Largely because of size, no single circus has been completely excavated and published; only four have been sufficiently excavated to give a relatively complete look. Most circuses have been partially excavated and published at best, and Humphrey works with existing publications and what is readily visible on site. Incomplete remains and publications must be supplemented with an array of evidence from literature and epigraphy to mosaics, coins, sarcophagi, the Severan marble plan of Rome, and more. We are fortunate that Humphrey has shown the skill and stamina for the task of piecing together imperfect and disparate evidence to reveal the general workings (plan, decoration, development, and function) of the circus. However, despite the stylistic clarity of the text and the great assistance of some 303 excellent B&W illustrations and plans, this long and moderately expensive volume is not a work for the casual reader. It will be read in libraries for reference, not in living rooms for relaxation. It will be invaluable to students of Roman architecture, and teachers of sport history can no longer simply lean on H. A. Harris and handbooks; traditional assumptions about the operation, terminology and even the existence of various circuses have now been overturned with authority. Reflecting enthusiasm for studies by J.-P. Thuillier, A. Cameron, K. Dunbabin,

S. G. Miller and other fine scholars, Humphrey's fifty-some pages of notes are a gold mine for research but they often cite archaeological reports or European publications not easily accessible to the non-specialist. On specific archaeological points (especially concerning Etruscan influences on early Roman equestrian sport), one should read Jean-Paul Thuillier's review essay, "Les Cirques Romains," in *Echos du Monde Classique/Classical Views* 31, n.s. 6 (1987), pp. 93-111; I will concentrate on arguments and issues of probable interest to sport historians.

The logic of the organization of Humphrey's chapters is not immediately obvious but it works, and the chapters are consistently organized internally, moving from a few clear questions to a lengthy presentation of the evidence (arranged by site or genre) and on to general conclusions, as on the functioning or popularity of chariot racing. An introductory chapter sets the scene by discussing aims and evidence, Greek versus Roman chariot racing, and theoretical principles, canonical ingredients and technical aspects of the circus. Chapter two examines the circus at Lepcis Magna in Libya as the best preserved and most fully published Roman circus (see J. Humphrey, F. B. Sear, and M. Vickers, "Aspects of the Circus at Lepcis Magna," *Libya Antiqua* 9-10 (1972-1973), pp. 25-97). Its starting gates allow an ingenious reconstruction of the starting mechanism; and its plan and decoration show that larger circuses in the western provinces were influenced by the model of the Circus Maximus—that there was a clearly defined building type, a canonical circus, by the second century AD. Chapters four to six discuss the Circus Maximus at Rome including its architectural development, its starting gates, and its barrier (the subject of 120-page chapter six). This information, along with that from Lepcis Magna, allows some conclusions and corrections of misconceptions about the development, form and function of the Roman circus.

The circus underwent a long and gradual evolution from temporary facilities of the Etruscan period to the fully integrated and unified structure of the High Empire. Although there were sites termed "circuses" at Rome probably from the sixth century BC, the circus was a later architectural development than theaters or amphitheaters and it did not reach canonical and monumental form until the early second century AD. Humphrey argues that, while Rome borrowed more of its racing practices from the Etruscans (e.g., costumes, driving techniques) than from the Greeks, the circus and its operation evolved from something along Greek lines. For example, there apparently was no continuous barrier until the early Empire, and arrangements for races were made privately until the emergence of factions at Rome. The Etruscans "built" the Circus Maximus in the sense that they drained the area, altered the course of a stream, and held regular races on the site. During the Republic the circus was more like a simple Greek hippodrome although it probably got some improvements and permanent facilities after the Second Punic War with the increasing popularity of races. The canonical shape was established by Caesar with some continuation by Augustus and some improvements by Claudius (on the starting gates) and Nero (on the moat and seating). Trajan, perhaps continuing work

begun by Domitian, inherited the outline and dimensions, but by 103 AD his massive reconstruction produced the canonical circus in elements, decoration and mechanics. “The Circus Maximus was the circus whose form at any given moment influenced the other Roman circuses, from the early circus at Antioch in 67 BC to the circuses of the late Empire and the hippodrome at Constantino-ple.” (p. 131)

By discussing ingredients of the canonical circus and technical aspects of its operation, Humphrey elucidates how the form of the canonical circus was related to its function and the requirements of the sport. The theoretical principles underlying the architecture of the building were that it provide maximum visibility of the race for the spectators and maximum fairness for the charioteers. The *carceres* or starting gates, twelve in number after the introduction of factions, were arranged in a curve and opened simultaneously by a double mechanism for fairness. Although the race began at the gates and not from some white line, white lines did set lanes and a “break-line” for the earliest part of the race. Humphrey shows that the barrier developed over time; there were turning posts earlier but the permanent and continuous barrier, with its *metae*, pair of walls and decorations, does not appear until Trajan’s soon canonical circus. Humphrey shows that this barrier should be called the *euripus*. Most modern works have followed a lone ancient reference (Cassiodorus) in calling it a *spina*. Most ancient references say *euripus*: the ideas of the early drainage work and of the republican moat (built by Caesar and filled by Nero) (for separating animals from spectators in hunts housed in the circus) were transferred to a barrier with decorative water basins, statues, dolphins and much more. Humphrey feels *spina* refers particularly to the barrier’s narrow side walls on which statues were placed. He shows that over time the *euripus* was designed to be abaxial with the building as a whole to allow greater track width in the early right-hand side and thus more room early in the race at the congested area of the near turn post. Ending widespread confusion, Humphrey has now established that the finish line was roughly halfway down the right-hand side of the barrier (see his restored plan in figure 54). Seating arrangements, with a capacity estimated by Humphrey at approximately 150,000 rather than Pliny’s and modern estimates of 250,000 or more, also were designed to facilitate viewing of crucial and dramatic parts of the race. Other issues, such as the purpose and location of the *pulvinar* (shrine), the imperial box, the monumental arch, and the iconography of decorative elements, are examined in detail as well.

In chapters six to ten Humphrey moves on to other circuses in Rome, Italy and the provinces, using direct evidence (visible or known circuses) and indirect evidence (from mosaics, glassware, etc.) to try to determine the extent and popularity of chariot racing throughout the Empire. Throughout his international and interdisciplinary research Humphrey keeps his focus and continues to be remarkably current and stimulating in his clarifications and corrections. Chapter six on North Africa uses relatively complete information to show that monumental circuses appeared in the second century after the Circus

Maximus established the canonical form. In North Africa circuses were built later than other entertainment buildings, such as baths, because earlier non-monumental sites sufficed; this does not conflict with the famous passion for chariot racing at Carthage as North Africa became an important area for racing and raising horses in the middle and late Empire. In chapter seven on Spain, Humphrey asserts from the indirect evidence of mosaics and the fame of the area for stud farms that there were many more circuses in Spain than the eight found thus far. By contrast, in chapter eight on the northwest provinces, Humphrey accepts the suggestion of negative evidence that Gallic provinces had far fewer circuses and that the sport was less widely popular here (and even less popular in Britain) than in Spain and North Africa. In chapters six to eight Humphrey builds on Cameron's work on circus factions, those self-contained professional organizations which, in return for payment by the giver of the games, would provide the wherewithal for the races (e.g., horses, support staff) (p. 438). He sees the emergence of factions as a matter of economics and efficiency. While they developed in Rome probably after the Second Punic War (but remain unattested until the 70s BC), only major cities with frequent games in Italy or the provinces needed or could support factions economically. In most areas local magistrates made their own local arrangements. Factions appear with the formal institution of regular public funding for races and the need for more efficiency and professionalism in the staging of races.

In chapter nine Humphrey outlines a complex interplay of factors and developments in the eastern provinces. While the west looked to the Circus Maximus, factions and Roman traditions, the east looked to the Olympic games, private participation, the hippodrome, and traditional Greek-style racing. Hellenistic traditions were in decline in the early Roman era but there was a revival of equestrian interest in the second and third centuries AD with imperial patronage: "Circuses made good benefactions." (p. 536) Paradoxically, monumental structures modelled on western circuses were built but they housed Greek-style races. Factions came in only in the early fourth century, as the popularity of racing and the expectations of spectators expanded, to provide frequent, high-quality races on a reliable basis. The east shows a later but a great interest as racing's popularity grew strong in the fourth century, became fanatical in the fifth, and continued into the sixth century. For the later history of the Byzantine hippodrome and its factions we are directed to the works of A. Cameron, W. L. MacDonald, R. Guillard and others.

Chapter ten on other Italian circuses explains the paucity of sites and evidence for circuses in Italy outside Rome as due to the predominance and demands of the games at Rome. There probably were no factions in Italy outside Rome, and other true circuses in Italy are directly linked to emperors at sites associated with their families. There were other "circuses" at Rome but Humphrey shows that, ironically, recent work has demoted the Circus Flaminius from a monumental circus into an enclosed piazza and promoted the Vatican Circus of Caligula and Nero from a hippodrome garden into a monumental circus.

Chapter eleven closes the work, but not the subject, with a discussion on late Roman circuses. Although this is the last and a small chapter, Humphrey presents the early fourth century AD as the most important era for circus construction with five closely dated monumental stone circuses and two others that may be dated to the general period on stylistic grounds (p. 579). He traces a characteristic association between new or enhanced circuses and imperial residences in the late empire. Diocletian established the model at Nicomedia and other tetrarchic leaders followed suit by connecting circuses to imperial palaces as circuses became an integral part of imperial iconography and public relations. In this group, the Circus of Maxentius at Rome represents the final development of the Roman circus design in its most streamlined form.

Humphrey does not leave us with a general conclusion and he had earlier suggested that “the study of Roman circuses is in its infancy” (p. x). One might think that a 700-page work would exhaust a subject (and the author) but Humphrey himself knows that, given the breadth of the phenomenon and the archaeological nature of the evidence, no such work can be totally up to date or definitive. What Humphrey has achieved bears comparison to J. Délorne’s work on Greek gymnasia: this is a remarkably current, thorough and authoritative presentation and analysis of the available information, providing insights into its meaning and hypotheses to be tested by subsequent discoveries (especially concerning the provinces and the late empire). Humphrey might modestly present this as ‘only the beginning’ but this is a masterful beginning indeed. Where once we had very little, we now have a monumental work on a monumental topic central to our understanding of Roman sport and society.

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