2014

Christians in the Amphitheater? The «Christianization» of Spectacle Buildings and Martyrial Memory

Kimberly Bowes
University of Pennsylvania, kbowes@sas.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers

Part of the Architectural History and Criticism Commons, Christianity Commons, and the Classics Commons

Recommended Citation

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers/170
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Christians in the Amphitheater? The «Christianization» of Spectacle Buildings and Martyrial Memory

Abstract
In order to place the site of Sant’Agnese in Agone in its broader late antique and early medieval context, this article presents an overview of the archaeological evidence for Christian spaces inside spectacle buildings – stadia, hippodromes, theaters and amphitheaters. It suggests that the «Christianization» of such buildings was very rare, and in only a few cases linked to martyrial commemoration. The paper concludes by suggesting some reasons why spectacle buildings should have been so infrequently associated with martyrial memory.

Keywords
Rome, Salona, Caesarea Maritima, Tarragona, Sant’Agnese in Agone, spectacle buildings, christanization, churches, temples, archaeology, martyrium

Disciplines
Architectural History and Criticism | Arts and Humanities | Christianity | Classics

This journal article is available at ScholarlyCommons: http://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers/170
Christians in the amphitheater?
The « Christianization » of spectacle buildings and martyrial memory

Kim Bowes*

K. Bowes, University of Pennsylvania, kbowes@sas.upenn.edu

In order to place the site of Sant’Agnese in Agone in its broader late antique and early medieval context, this article presents an overview of the archaeological evidence for Christian spaces inside spectacle buildings – stadia, hippodromes, theaters and amphitheaters. It suggests that the « Christianization » of such buildings was very rare, and in only a few cases linked to martyrial commemoration. The paper concludes by suggesting some reasons why spectacle buildings should have been so infrequently associated with martyrial memory.

Rome, Salona, Caesarea Maritima, Tarragona, Sant’Agnese in Agone, spectacle buildings, christianization, churches, temples, archaeology, martyrium.

Ever since Gibbon, scholars have been fascinated with the re-use of ancient buildings for Christian ritual. As it was for Gibbon, listening to the footsteps of monks rustling over the same stones that used to form the Capitoline Temple but had become the church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli¹, the « conversion » of such buildings (the common use of the term is significant) has signified more than a simple change of function, but rather has served as a physical synecdoche for the far more complex, messier process we term the « Christianization » of the ancient world. So evocative was the notion of Christians literally building their churches atop the temples of the traditional religion that previous generations of scholars tended to gloss over the very different archaeological contexts for such conversions – the state and function of the building at time of its conversion, its date, and the frequency with which such substitutions took place. Instead, all such examples were read as marking the deliberate « triumph » of Christianity over paganism, and it was assumed that such triumphal conversions were the norm².

More recent work has complicated this simple narrative³. More careful studies have paid attention to the archaeological succession of temple to church, finding that the temples in question may have been abandoned for centuries and their stones simply quarried for many projects, including churches. In still densely populated cities, temples may have constituted rare available building plots in prime downtown locations. Some temples were wholly erased by the churches atop them, while others were carefully preserved to broadcast the substitution of one building for the other. Finally, it now seems clear that in most regions of the empire, the vast majority of temples were simply left to decay and nothing was built over or with

* Thanks to Claire Sotinel for inviting me to participate in this conference, and to Rivka Gerst, Ken Holum, Richard Hodges, Bob Oosterhout, Luke Lavan, and Rubina Raja for valuable bibliographic help.

¹ Gibbon 1984, p. 16.
² The seminal article was Deichmann 1939, whose general conclusions were followed by many: Fowden 1978; Trombley 1993; Saradi 1990; Saradi 2006.
Christians in the amphitheater?

Kim Bowes

94

their remains – either a kind of death by snubbing, or simply a disinterest in the kind of pagan-Christian fisticuffs with which modern scholars have been so fascinated.

Those interested in the material culture of «Christianization» have largely focused on temple-church conversions. The use of spectacle buildings for churches has seen less systematic study, but has been assumed to be both ubiquitous and thus pregnant with triumphalist meaning. Amphitheatres, hippodromes, stadia, and theatres – what I shall here shorthand as «spectacle buildings» – are assumed to have been the spaces of Christian martyrdom. Thus, the appearance of later churches in these spaces is often thus interpreted as marking the actual locus where the martyr met his or her death, and thus the elevation of the criminals of one regime to the heroes of another.

This brief essay suggests that the construction of Christian churches in spectacle buildings demonstrates much of the same ambiguity as those built into temples, and rarely conforms with the expectations of modern scholarship. In brief, I will suggest that the re-use of spectacle buildings for Christian functions is far rarer than is typically supposed: the great majority of amphitheatres, theaters, hippodromes and stadia did NOT see Christian buildings constructed in their remains. Sant’Agnese in Agone is thus an exception, both in Rome and empire-wide. Second, I will suggest that we cannot assume that all, or even the majority of these churches are martyria. Rather, churches in spectacle buildings had a variety of functions – to banish the cultic aspects of traditional spectacle or to complement them, to serve as private funerary chapels or as communal neighborhood churches. That spectacle buildings should have so inconsistently connected with martyrs’ deaths points up an important and unexpected disconnect in the late antique imagination between the act of martyrdom, and the place of its happening.

THE CHRISTIAN RE-USE OF SPECTACLE BUILDINGS: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

The many and diverse uses of ancient buildings in the late antique city has been amply catalogued, and ranges from continued use for their original purpose, simple abandonment, quarrying for building stone, sub-division for private habitation or industrial functions, re-use for burials, and of course, conversion to Christian use. The fate of spectacle buildings, on the other hand, has been particularly poorly documented. 19th c. excavators found them irresistible and, keen to expose the Greek or Roman fabric, ripped through the later levels typically without any accompanying documentation. The losses inflicted through this treatment were not limited to late antique remains, but in many cases included nearly a millennia of active re-use. However, even from the poor evidence left to us, it seems plain that spectacle buildings underwent most of the same range of late antique and early medieval transformations as did the rest of the city: for example the stadium of Aphrodisias was converted into an amphitheater in the late 4th/early 5th c. and continued to be used as such for at least a century; the theater at Málaga was built over by fish-sauce factories and houses in the 4th c.; while the amphitheater at El Jem was reused as a part of the urban fortification by the 6th c.

Relatively few spectacles buildings preserve evidence of late antique Christian use. I have assembled about twenty such examples. This number is almost certainly too low to be a perfect representation: the attrition caused by early excavations must have accounted for some, and my own research may have missed one or two documented examples. Nonetheless, among the hundreds of Greco-Roman amphitheaters, thea-


5. The bibliography is now vast and can be best approached through a series of collected essay volumes: Brogiolo - Ward-Perkins 1999; Brogiolo - Christie - Gauthier 2000; Lavan 2001; Krause - Witschel 2006.

6. For example, no mention is made of any post-Roman additions to the Theater of Dionysius in Athens in the early reports, despite the presence of a small funerary church, graves and later cisterns: Pickard-Cambridge 1946; Dörpfeld - Reisch 1896.

7. On the long-term use of the Arles and Nîmes amphitheaters, see Pinon 1979. See also Bowes 2006.

ters, hippodromes and stadia that were visible during late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, even the lacunose data suggests that re-use as Christian space was neither typical nor frequent. Furthermore, only a handful of these examples can be shown to be martyrial commemorations. While it is often assumed, both by the excavators and by scholarship more generally, that churches constructed inside or near spectacle buildings were necessarily martyria, built in late antiquity to commemorate a local martyr who met his or her death in these buildings, the archaeological evidence is rarely so conclusive. Only about three convincing examples have been found, while the function of the majority of others is either unclear or clearly not martyrial.

A late 5th to early 6th c. church in the arena of the amphitheater at Tarragona, Spain, is perhaps the best-documented martyr church in a spectacle building, its situation now even clearer thanks to new excavations\(^9\) (fig. 1). The church was deliberately placed over the arena, where, according to their early acta, the martyrs Fructuosus, Auguerius and Eulogius were burned to death.\(^10\) The single aisled church with horseshoe-shaped apse and adjacent burial annex included a lateral stair leading down to the amphitheater’s substructures, or fossae, which formed a kind of crypt and seemingly commemorated as the actual point of martyrdom. This spot and the church generally attracted dozens of contemporary ad sanctus burials.

A second reasonably, although not wholly convincing example is another amphitheater church, this in the substructures beneath the amphitheater in Salona\(^11\) (figs. 2 and 3). The excavator identified two spaces beneath the podium

\(^9\) The new excavations are summarized in Godoy 1999, p. 177-179.
\(^11\) Dyggve 1933, p. 108-110, 141-146 (dating).
Fig. 2 – Plan, amphitheater, Salona, indicating location of chapels (after E. Dyggve, Recherches à Salone, Copenhagen, 1933, vol. 2, pl. 1).

Fig. 3 – Plans, sections and drawing of frescos, chapel in the amphitheater, Salona (E. Dyggve, Recherches à Salone, Copenhagen, 1933, vol. 2, fig. 56).
and directly accessible from the arena as shrines to Nemesis, although without any conclusive evidence for their religious use. Both of these spaces were later blocked off from the adjacent corridor, and the eastern of these spaces was later covered with frescoed images of standing, nimbate saints, one of whom is inscribed «Asterius». Asterius was a Salonitan martyr who was allegedly martyred under Diocletian, and made famous by Pope John IV who translated his body along with his fellows to the pope’s new chapel off the Lateran Baptistery in Rome. The amphitheater chapel was thus been interpreted as a martyr shrine to Asterius and other Salonitan martyrs, and dated to the mid-6th c. on the basis of similarities between its walls and that of the city’s new fortifications, fortifications which are assumed to have marked the cessation of the use of the amphitheater for spectacles. It should be noted that there is virtually no early information on the Salonitan martyrs besides
their inclusion in the Martyrologium Hieronymianum and the images in John’s Lateran oratory, while their passio is medieval in date. In none of these sources is an amphitheater or any other building named as the place of martyrdom.

The final and most archaeologically rich candidate for an amphitheater martyr’s church is in Caesarea Maritima (figs. 4 and 5). Here the multi-functional «hippo-stadium» built by Herod the Great had, by the early 2nd c. or later, shrunk into an oval amphitheater. In the cavea beneath what may have become the amphitheater’s pulvinar, or main viewing box, on the eastern side, was built a small shrine with three small rooms each with niches cut into the living rock. Sculptural finds including votive feet dedicated to Kore and perhaps Isis, and images of Hecate and Serapis as Hades, all suggest a shrine to chthonic deities, comparable to the shrines of Nemesis that are found in the cavea of western amphitheaters. Even after the amphitheater was abandoned for spectacle use, either in the 3rd c. or later, and a sizeable residential neighborhood began to encroach over the arena, the shrine seems to have been used and even expanded. At some point in the 4th-5th c., a small building was built over the seats and arena: thus far, no plan of the building has been produced, but descriptions suggest it was positioned directly over the earlier shrine. The building preserved remains of painted plaster, some of which was both incised and painted and included images of a nimbate figure, boats and fish. The earlier niches contained 4th-6th c. lamps, suggesting the continued use of these spaces. The excavators interpret this as a Christian chapel that replaced the earlier chthonic shrine. Also during at some point during the 4th-6th c., the southern curve of the amphitheater was covered with a large Christian basilica, although its date is uncertain.

The relationship between the Caesarean amphitheater shrine and nearby basilica is not clear from the preliminary reports. The chapel could represent a conversion of the previous pagan shrine, and the church a neighborhood church that served the immediate population. That one or both might be something more is mostly suggested by Caesarea’s particularly vibrant local martyrial tradition, a tradition due almost entirely to the efforts of Eusebius of Caesarea, who himself survived a local persecution and worked to promote the veneration of local martyrs. Eusebius claims that several of the city’s martyrs died as part of spectacular performance – Timotheus, Theophilus and Theotimus who were condemned to fight in a gladiatorial contest, Auxentius, Adrianus and Eubulus who were condemned ad bestias, and Agapius and Silvanus who were tortured in the σταδίον or stadium. J. Patrich has suggested that as the city’s most venerable place of spectacle, the stadium described by Eusebius, is most likely Herod’s hippo-stadium-turned amphitheater, and that the Christian chapel was thus built to commemorate Agapius and/or Silvanus. Again, the most recent archaeological reports make it impossible to be certain of the presence of martyr cult, let alone who those martyrs might be, but the hypothesis is an attractive one, not least because of the city’s early martyrological tradition.

After Tarragona, Salona and Caesarea, the evidence becomes far murkier. At Thessaloniki, similarly provocative textual connections between church and local martyrologies turn out to be far
more tenuous on the ground. The fragmentary remains of a church, possibly of late antique date, were found built over what appears to be a stadium next to the agora\(^{18}\) (fig. 6). Local tradition identified the church as being dedicated to St. Nestor. One of the 9\(^{th}\) c. martyrologies of Saint Demetrios claims that the Christian Nestor challenged and killed the emperor Galerius’ favorite gladiator in a stadium, a deed which, according one set of 9\(^{th}\) c. passiones, ultimately led to the death of both Nestor and Demetrios in that stadium\(^ {19}\). IF this church were originally dedicated to Nestor, and IF the 9\(^{th}\) c. passio was based on a late antique tradition, this church might be a locus sanctus built over the place of martyrdom. The many uncertainties, however, not to mention the lacunose state of the archaeology, leave more questions than answers.

So persistently is the spectacle building associated with martyrdom in the modern imagination that has proven easy to overlook the many other functions that associated Christian buildings might have. For instance, not far from the above-men-

---

19. The martyrial traditions are late, complex and much debated. Three versions of a shorter passio (BHG 496; BHL 2122; Photius, Bibliotheca, 255) and one version of a longer passio survive (BHG 497), none of which can be shown to be prior to the 9\(^{th}\) c. There is also a 10\(^{th}\) c. version by Simeon Metaphrastes (BHG 498). The shorter, and some say earlier, passiones do not mention the death of Nestor, only Demetrios, at the stadium. Another tradition has Nestor being slain outside the Golden Gate of the city. For two different views of the passiones’ historical veracity and an overview of the problems, see, Skedros 1999; Woods 2000.
Instead, the church follows that of the adjacent road and earlier buildings along side it. Some of those buildings may have been funerary in nature, for the church is sandwiched between two cave tombs of Roman date, re-used for Christian burials. A small single-aisled affair culminating in a small sanctuary complete with altar, reliquary and synthronon, the church is paved in fine geometric mosaics, which include a dedication inscription mentioning the bishop Marianos, and a donor inscription ascribing the work to five people, seemingly laymen. Later additions include a narthex and a small chamber to the north side, identified as a diakonikon. Across the street, the adjacent cave of the hippodrome were also reused at the same time the church was constructed, and received similar, albeit somewhat less fine mosaic floors. These include two inscriptions mentioning donations, and a third that names a deacon Elias. While termed the « house of Elias » in the reports, there is nothing in the archaeology that suggests domestic use and the donative inscriptions on the contrary suggest functions associated with the church – perhaps a place for the collection of chariot donations, a kind of deaconia. Indeed, in the later 6th c. when church was built, the northern half of the hippodrome may still have been in use: the presence of substructures along the building’s axis and a semi-circular enclosure wall forming a truncated oval surely point to this portion being closed off and used as an amphitheater – a relatively common occurrence in Asia Minor and Palestine.

This must have taken place at some point in the later 3rd or 4th c. A mosaic inscription mentioning the Blue racing faction found elsewhere in the city has been dated to 578, and names inscribed into the northern range of seating also seem to be late (i.e. post-4th c.) in date. The southern half the hippodrome, however, had been abandoned for two centuries by the time the church was built,
Gerasa is thus a salutatory reminder that spectacle buildings were large enough both to host multiple late antique functions simultaneously, and to accommodate sizable human populations and thus to constitute neighborhoods in and of themselves. This may also have been the case at a theater/stadium complex at Ainzanoi in Phyrgia, know of Christian ritual spaces in hippodromes. A church was found in the hippodrome at Tyre, located on the spina and dated generally to late antiquity but seemingly still in use in the Crusader period: the dating and appearance are extremely sketchy. See Chébab 1969; Chébab 1970, p. 111ff; Chébab 1973. A similarly positioned (and similarly poorly documented) church was built in the hippodrome at Cherchell, where it seemingly occupied one wall of the spina. See Ravoisié 1846, pl. 21-22, 29-30; Leveau 1984, p. 39-40; Humphrey 1986, p. 310.

25. Two other hippodrome churches should be mentioned in this context, although if only to highlight how little we

and was instead was used for habitations, ceramic kilns, and as a stone quarry. Indeed, the church was built almost entirely of spolia, both from the circus itself and even from some of 4th-5th c. buildings that had begun to intrude into its southern half. The church has thus been assumed to have served the population who lived and worked within the circus’ southern cavea, and indeed, were the circus-cum-amphitheater functioning, there is no reason it might not have served games-goers as well. It may have alternatively or additionally served as a funerary church for the surrounding necropolis25.

Fig. 8 - Plan, hippodrome, Gerasa, southern end, showing Christian church (M. Gawlikowski and A. Musa, The church of Bishop Marianos, in Jerash Archaeological Project 1981-1983, vol. 1, Amman 1986, fig. 1).
in which a late antique chapel was built into the substructures of the stadium’s tribunal, similar to the position at Caesarea.\textsuperscript{26} At Ainzanoi, however, there is no suggestion of martyrrial use; rather, the chapel may have served the adjacent contemporary settlement that grew up around the great stadium. The phenomenon of spectacle building \textit{cum} neighborhood, complete with church, persisted well into the Middle Ages as suggested by the well-documented church of Saint-Martin-des-Arênes at Nîmes, built in the 11\textsuperscript{th} c. to serve that city’s large amphitheater-based community, and a similar chapel dedicated to St. Michael in the Arles amphitheater\textsuperscript{27}.

That spectacle buildings could also take on saintly, but non-martyrial signification is suggested by the probable late antique church of Saint-Pierre-aux-Arênes in the Metz amphitheater. A series of columns arranged stretching over the \textit{cavea} and into the arena are said to mark out a cruciform church, which has been dated to the 5\textsuperscript{th} c. by a collection of associated funerary inscriptions as well as ceramic finds\textsuperscript{28}. According to Paul the Deacon, the first bishop of the city, one Clement, cleansed the amphitheater of serpents, after which he built his residence and oratory to Saint Peter there\textsuperscript{29}. The historicity of this Clement, who is said to have been sent by Christ himself, is dubious, and his deeds as narrated by

\textsuperscript{26} Hoffman 1988, esp. 308.
\textsuperscript{27} Pinon 1979; Formigé 1964, p. 39; Bomgardner 2000, p. 119-20.
\textsuperscript{28} Heitz 1998.
\textsuperscript{29} Paul the Deacon, \textit{Liber de episcopis Mettensibus}, p. 261.
creation of Clement’s legend. In any case, Clement is not said to have been martyred, and the church, if it existed, would thus have marked a spot associated with the saint’s life and miracles. The abandoned amphitheater in Paul the Deacon’s narrative is not a place of Christian martyrdom, but like so many ruins in western early medieval hagiography, a space of demonic possession and thus a proving ground for the Christian holy man

If saints need not necessarily be martyrs, graves likewise need not be *loci sancti*. Two examples of late antique churches built into or beside theaters contain seemingly original graves, but rather than martyr shrines, these seem to be private, probably elite, funerary churches. The two cases are startlingly similar in date, form and positioning. At Priene, a 5th or 6th c. chapel was built into the city’s great theater, placed in the eastern *parados* approaching the orchestra²² (fig. 9). A small, single-aisled structure with eastern apse, sanctuary barred by chancel screens and containing a small altar, the church was entered through a western porch, framed by two columns, that faced out into the orchestra beyond. Beneath the floor of the chapel

---

Fig. 10 - Plan, chapel in theater, Priene (T. Wiegand and H. Schrader, *Priene: Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen und Untersuchungen in den Jahren 1895-1898*, Berlin, 1904, fig. 598).

Fig. 11 - Plan, Theater of Dionysos and associated chapel, Athens (J. Travlos, *Ἡ παλαιοχριστιανική βασιλική του Διονυσιακοῦ θεάτρου*, in *Αρχαιολογική Έφημερις* 2, 1953-4, fig. 2).

---

32. Wiegand - Schrader 1921, p. 60, 85.
was found the complete skeleton of a man: the location of the grave was not indicated. The theater in this phase seems to have been abandoned and already mined for stone to build the large Christian basilica immediately to the south, a building that also contained many burials beneath its floors.

In Athens at the Theater of Dionysos, another single-aisled chapel was placed in an identical posi-

| Fig. 12 - Plan, church in the Theater of Dionysos, Athens (J. Travlos, Ανασκαφαί ἐν τῷ Διονυσιακῷ θεάτρῳ, in Πρακτικά in Αρχαιολογικῆς Εταιρείας, 1951, fig. 1). |

| Fig. 13 - Plan, theater and church, Nicea, showing adjacent second church and part of cemetery (U. Peschlow, The churches of Nicea/Iznik, in Iznik through the Ages, Istanbul, 2004, fig. 1). |
tion in the eastern parados, re-using its northern wall33 (figs. 11-12). Preceded by a narthex rather than a porch, the church contained a vaulted tomb towards its eastern end that reused some ancient architectural elements, and three later Byzantine tombs in the center. The building has been dated variously to the 5th or 6th c. without archaeological basis34, while the state of the theater at this time is similarly unclear: cisterns in the orchestra and other graves are dated to the same generally period without archaeological justification35.

The use of spectacle buildings for private funerary monuments persisted throughout the Middle Ages. In Nicea, a church built over and re-using the substructures of the theater and dated to the Middle Byzantine period seemingly served as a funerary chapel for the nearby necropolis36 (fig. 13). Even more striking are the three chapels built into the amphitheater of Durres, Albania. The largest of these (Chapel 1) was built directly beneath the amphitheater’s main viewing box37. (figs. 14-15) Frescoes, and later three panels of wall mosaics laid at distinct moments covered walls of the previous amphitheater substructures. While the whole project had been generally assigned a late antique date in the 6th or 7th c., and associated with the martyr Aestios, said in a 9th c. passio to have been stung to death by bees in an unspecified location38, new work by the present author have suggested that the project was a small elite funerary chapel of Middle Byzantine date39.

At neither Athens, Priene nor Durres was there any archaeological or textual evidence indicating contemporary martyr cult. Rather, all three appear to be private funerary chapels built for an elite individual or family. In all three sites, intramural burial had become common by the 6th c., and thus the notion of an intramural funerary chapel would not have been unusual. Indeed, at Athens, the chapel appears to be part of a larger cemetery, while at Durres the Middle Byzantine amphitheater had served as a major necropolis for centuries. The position of all three chapels vis-à-vis their respective monument was probably in part liturgically determined: at Priene and Athens, the parados constituted a ready-made longitudinal space with east-west orientation. At Durres, the western pulvinar and its east-west-oriented substructures were likewise liturgically expedient. And yet, at Priene and Athens the chapels were entered not via the adjacent street, which would have been more convenient, but through the orchestra, while at Durres, access was through the arena and thereafter through the half-filled cavea to the chapel. In all three cases, then, the tiers of seating formed the magnificent, if decaying backdrop to any visitor. This departure from expediency, perhaps, may provide a clue to their meaning.

33. Travlos 1951; Travlos 1953-1954.
34. Travlos, 1953-1954, suggested a 5th c. date. For a 6th c. date, Frantz 1965, p. 194, 196.
38. For a critical review of the hagiography, see Bryer 1994.
Christians in the amphitheater?

Kim Bowes


Fig. 15 - Plan, Chapel 1 area, Durres amphitheater (D. Andrews).
formed part of the performance. At Durres, the
collection beneath the main viewing box might have
additionally conjured up memory of the games’
impresarios who would have been seated above.
Through placement which was both liturgically
expedient and mnemonically suggestive, these late
antique elites harnessed the buildings’ properties
both as ancient urban landmarks and as remem-
bered spaces of communal acclamation and redirected them towards their own commemoration.

Perhaps most at deviance with our vision of Christianity and spectacle is the continued popularity
of spectacle, and the maintenance of spectacle
buildings for their original use, right through our
period. While in general spectacle buildings across
the empire ceased to be maintained as such already beginning in the 3rd c., there are important excep-
tions. Hippodromes are best known for having long late antique lives, but other types of buildings,
particularly in major cities, also continued to serve spectacular functions. The nature and popular-
ity of those spectacles naturally changed from the High Empire — from full theatrical dramas to
mime and pantomime, from gladiatorial fights to
wild-beast hunts. The functional specificity that
limited performance type to building — drama in
theaters, human combat in amphitheaters — also
came more fluid. Thus, those spectacle buildings
that continued in use often evolved, sometimes radially: theater orchestras were expanded to
hold beast hunts or were outfitted with pools for
aquatic spectacle, hippodromes and stadia were
shortened into amphitheaters, and hippodromes
and amphitheaters were outfitted with machinery
for hybrid spectacles like the gymnastics-cum-
beast hunts depicted on consular diptychs.

Typically, it has been assumed that the contin-
ued roar of the crowds in these still-active build-
ing took place against the universal condem-
nation of the Christian church. The patristic
refrains against idolatry, adultery and mass-hys-
teria allegedly incited by spectacles are depress-
ingly overwhelming. That the raillery is not quite
what it would seem has been demonstrated by
recent work, which reads the condemnation not as
blanket prohibition, but more properly as a tool for
Christian bishops to think with — about illusion and
the nature of the « real », about the correct Christian
community, and about the nature of conversion.

Indeed, to imagine a Christian « prohibition » of
spectacle is to miss the obvious popularity of spec-
tacles right through our period, as described and
even fetishized by the critics themselves.

A tiny handful of archaeological examples
suggest an even more starkly different picture, one
of Christian ritual collusion and participation in
these spectacles. In Constantinople itself, Justinian
is said to have built a chapel of Saint Michael in
the hippodrome, probably somewhere on the
palace side. The Constantinopolitan hippo-
drome remained not only the venue for beast
fights and other entertainments in the capital, it
was the foremost space of imperial display, linked
to the palace and thus to the most Christian
emperor himself. Nothing remains of Justinian’s
hippodrome chapel, but two relatively convinc-
ing extant examples suggest that this was not
an isolated, imperial exception. In the theater at
Aphrodisias, Christian paintings in the north room
of the scena may date to the early decades of the
6th c., a date when epigraphic remains suggest the
theater was still used for theatrical presentations (figs. 16-17). The room was decorated with images
of the angels Michael and Gabriel, and perhaps
other figures, which were probably positioned on
the back and eastern walls. While some enig-
matic narrow benches line the room, there is no
evidence for cult practice in this room — no altar
and certainly no martyrial functions — and thus
it has been suggested that the images may have
served as votives or for use in personal prayer.

Given the images’ location in a room off the stage,
it is not impossible to imagine a theater performer as their audience or even patron.

The Christian installations in the theater at Side, in Pamphylia may have also taken place in a still-thriving building (fig. 18). Here the Roman-period theater was repaired at some point in late antiquity, perhaps during the 5th or 6th c. when the city was capital of Pamphylia Secunda. Some of the arches and supporting piers of the western façade were rebuilt, mosaics floors were laid in the galleries, and two large inscriptions seemingly place above them, proudly describing the renovations and their donors.  

Two chapels were also inserted into the eastern and western corners of the 

![Fig. 17 - Fresco, image of St. Michael from north scena room (R. Cormack, The wall-painting of St. Michael in the theater, in R. R. R. Smith and K. Erim (eds.), Aphrodisias Papers 2. The Theater, A Sculptor’s Workshop, Philosophers and Coin-Types, Ann Arbor, MI, 1991, fig. 9).](image)

50. Mansel 1963, p 140-141; Mansel 1978, p. 210-213; Mansel 1964. These read, respectively: « This great work, whose praise extends over the whole world, Fronto has rebuilt, together with the proconsul, as ornament to his reign » (+ ἐργὸν ἀπειρέσιον τὸ/ βοώμενον ἐϛ χθόνα πᾶσαν/ Φρόντων ἀνηέξησε μετ’ἀνθυπάτου χλέοϛ ἀρχῆϛ) and « On account of the funds provided by reason of the earlier proconsuls and patricius, the city has reconstructed the piers and the arches, which are found under the inscription » (+ ἡ πόλες ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων χρημά-των διὰ Φρόντωνος κόμ(ητος)/απὸ ἀνθυπάτων) κ(αὶ) παρτ(ιϰίου) τοὺς ὑπο-ἀψῖδα ἐπεσϰεύασεν). Other more fragmentary inscriptions seem to ascribe the repairs to a « thespian » Theodoros and his son.

Aphrodisias, which may or may not be Christian, paralleling those in the north room, might hint at a similar kind of flanking maneuver\textsuperscript{52}. The Christian spaces in both theaters might thus be interpreted as «hot-spots», blanketing the space with Christian projection and thus ensuring God’s sanction for the events within.

**MAKING SENSE OF ABSENCE: SPECTACLE BUILDINGS AS CHRISTIAN NON-SPACES**

Even accounting for the accidents of preservation and the vagaries of early excavation, the examples outlined here are striking both for their paucity and for the absence of evidence consistently connecting the commemoration of martyrs with spectacle buildings. The examples we do have

---

\textsuperscript{52} See n. 49 above.
As the brief tour of the archaeology above suggests, spectacle buildings had particularly long and particularly diverse late antique lives. The use of spectacle buildings for fortifications, potteries, habitations, graveyards, not to mention the continued use for their original purposes, not only suggests that they experienced a diversity of fates in late antiquity, but also that they would have had layered, rather than singular meanings. A building type that might serve as one’s home, the neighborhood shop, or a refuge in times of danger ceased to be a site of specific memory, and instead took on local and/or condition-specific meanings, layered along with their spectacular ones. Martyrial memories, even if they were present, would thus have vied with other kinds of more quotidian or more immediate experience.

We might even go further, however, and suggest that martyrial memory was in general not spatially fixed. The disinterest in a topography of martyrial death, as evident in both the material and the hagiographic records, might seem to indicate that late antique people did not particularly care where precisely martyrs met their death. Put more correctly, we might suppose that the space of death never formed part of the late antique discursive apparatus of «martyr-making».

However, to say that the space of death played no role in martyrial construction is to miss an important spatial component of nearly all late antique hagiography – namely the space of the martyr’s body. It was the body, to the exclusion of that body’s architectural spatial surroundings, that was the spatial vessel into which martyrial meaning was poured. As recent scholarship has noted, it was the body that was used to make a mockery of Roman imperial hierarchies; it was the body that was the site of the gender transformations that martyrs experienced as part of their passage out of the quotidian realm, it was through the martyrial body that Christian arguments about correct sacrifice were written, and it was the martyr’s mobile, even divided body in the form of relics that the universal and ubiquitous power of God was made manifest.

53. Delehaye 1897.
54. Passio S. Polycarpi, 9.1; Passio Ss. Perpetuae et Felicitatis, 18.
memory left the built environment, particularly the spectacle buildings where some martyrs met their death, in something of a lurch. Like modern hospitals or movie houses, spectacle buildings were vessels where material memories may have been made, but which were themselves left untouched by those memories. In respect to Christian martyrial memory, they were not unlike Marc Augé’s non-spaces – vessels that lack the “stickiness” of true spaces and thus fail to accrue their relational, historical and memory-laden qualities. Obviously, spectacle buildings in late antiquity are not true non-spaces; as witnessed by their reuse as graveyards and the particular placement of churches in those graveyards, their histories continued to be relevant and re-imagined. But as specifically martyrial memory sites, they were left spatially “empty” by a thought world that located such spaces instead within the martyr’s body.

I would argue that this emphasis on the martyrial body as the exclusive space of martyrial memory – indeed, it is the body that calls space into being by directing and orienting our perception of the world. The discursive, textually constructed and remembered martyrial body is likewise a space, the physical vessel for collapsed history, containing the Christ of the past and the martyr of the present. The spatial qualities of that memory and history-laden body were made most insistent through its movable and partible qualities: the martyr’s body was a portable holy space whose parts contained the power of the whole. This is why the same hagiographies that are so reticent on matters of urban topography dwell so insistently on the martyrial body – its torture, its eroticized sexuality, and its perambulations after death to grave site and relic distribution – for it is the body which is the true mise-en-scène of martyrdom.

I would argue that this emphasis on the martyrial body as the exclusive space of martyrial memory left the built environment, particularly the spectacle buildings where some martyrs met their death, in something of a lurch. Like modern hospitals or movie houses, spectacle buildings were vessels where material memories may have been made, but which were themselves left untouched by those memories. In respect to Christian martyrial memory, they were not unlike Marc Augé’s non-spaces – vessels that lack the “stickiness” of true spaces and thus fail to accrue their relational, historical and memory-laden qualities. Obviously, spectacle buildings in late antiquity are not true non-spaces; as witnessed by their reuse as graveyards and the particular placement of churches in those graveyards, their histories continued to be relevant and re-imagined. But as specifically martyrial memory sites, they were left spatially “empty” by a thought world that located such spaces instead within the martyr’s body.

58. C.f. Smith 1987, who sees this collapse as occurring through rituals, rather bodies.
If this argument is broadly true for late antiquity, one wonders when things changed, that is, when the spectacle building became, as it is for us, the über-site of Christian martyrial memory. This is a problem that is beyond the scope of this article, but it is probably much later than we think, perhaps not until the early modern period. It is only in the 17th c. that the Colosseum in Rome is reimagined in this way. Similarly, in the Durrës amphitheater, next to the Middle-Byzantine Chapel 1, a small ossuary was built in the 16th c. to hold hundreds of bones, almost certainly from their graves in the surrounding amphitheater necropolis. Why these graves should have been enshrined so is interesting to contemplate: were they regarded as martyrs because of their location in the ruined remains of an amphitheater? Did the recent takeover of the city by Ottomans and the concomitant reversion of Christianity to a minority religion encourage a reimagining of the faith’s persecuted past? It is noteworthy in any case that the best evidence for martyrial commemoration at Durrës is so very late.

CONCLUSIONS: SANT’AGNESE IN AGONE IN CONTEXT

Sant’Agnese in Agone is thus, at least in comparative perspective, both atypical and typical. It is atypical in that it forms one of the few examples of martyrial commemoration inside a Roman spectacle building. It is typical, however, in that this tradition seemingly did not develop in late antiquity, but in the Middle Ages or later, a delay reflected and perhaps in part encouraged by the ambiguous textual tradition naming Agnes’ specific place of martyrdom as the Stadium of Domitian. During that time the stadium had evolved other uses, including, as it is now clear, an intra-mural necropolis. In determining how the stadium came to be specifically associated with Agnes and in what context the medieval oratory was built, the papers in this volume are addressing the genuine complexity surrounding the so-called « Christianization » of spectacle buildings and the construction of martyrial memory.

Bibliography

AASS = Acta Sanctorum quotquot toto orbe coluntur (Anvers, 1643-).
BHL = Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina, éd. socii Bollandiani, 2 vol., Bruxelles, 1898-1901 (Subsidia Hagiographica, 6).

Christians in the amphitheater?
Kim Bowes

Mansi 8 = J. D. Mansi, Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova Amplissima Collectio, Tomus octavus ab anno ccxxii ad annum dxxxvi inclusive, Florence, 1762.
Saradi 2006 = The Byzantine City in the Sixth Century. Literary Images and Historical Reality, Athens, 2006, p. 355-64.
Travlos 1951 = J. Travlos, Ανασκαφαί εν τῷ Διονυσιακῷ θέατρῳ, in Πρακτικά της Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας, 1951, p. 41-45.
A. Gerkan, Das Theater von Priene, Munich-Berlin-Leipzig, 1921.