Chapter 2

The Circus and Chariot Racing

Equestrian sports in Greece and Etruria

Chariot racing was one of the most popular sports in the Greek and Roman worlds; more importantly, it was the one that enjoyed the greatest longevity. In the Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic periods, racing on horseback was popular with the Greeks as well as the usual two- and four-horse chariot races; however, although horse racing continued into the Roman period, other than in the eastern part of the empire it never found as much favour as the racing of chariots.

The earliest description of a chariot race can be found in Homer's *Iliad* (23.287-650) in the context of the funeral games of Patroclus. Here a group of heroes competed against each other in four-horse chariots on a flat plain which served as an improvised race course. They raced in an anti-clockwise direction with only one turning post; there were no starting gates and they drew lots to determine their starting position, clearly a key factor in their success or failure. This is how chariot and horse racing effectively took place before the Roman period, with no monumental, purpose-built venue or elaborate facilties provided. The only pre-Roman hippodrome for which we have any evidence with regard to form is that at Olympia; Pausanias described an *aphesis*, a set of starting gates (*Description of Greece* 6.20.10-15). He made no mention of the number of chariots it accommodated, but he says that each side was 400 feet in length. The mechanism to start the race was set into an altar and seems to have been quite a spectacle in its own right, causing the statue of an eagle to jump up, while that of a dolphin dived downwards; the competitors then set off stall by stall. The whole process would have raised the pre-race tension as well as increasing the spectacle.

Chariot racing and other equestrian events were equally popular in Etruria, to judge from sixth-century BC tomb frescoes and vase paintings. Two-horse chariots (*bigae*) are depicted, as well as horse racing, but there is also evidence for special three-horse chariots (*trigae*). While chariot racing remained important in Rome, horseback-racing was never prominent, except in very specific religious contexts. For example, in March, the Equirria took place on the Campus Martius; this was a festival of horse

racing traditionally started by Romulus in honour of Mars. Another equine contest, the Ludus or Lusus Troia, an obscure and very ancient event held in the Circus Maximus, involved a parade of highborn youths on horseback in armour who carried out various complicated manoeuvres, a kind of equestrian military tattoo. The most important contest for chariot racing, however, was the Ludi Romani, held in honour of Jupiter and dating back to the foundation of the Republic.

According to Strabo (*Geography* 5.3.8), the extraordinary size of the Campus Martius permitted it to accommodate not only chariot races but also every other type of equestrian event. However, the main venue for chariot racing in the city was the Circus Maximus, though it did not begin to acquire any kind of monumental facilties until the late Republic. By this time the circus as a building type had taken the shape of a hairpin and was the largest class of entertainment building, used first and foremost for chariot races, although it was the venue for other types of spectacle as well. In their canonical and monumental form circuses were a later architectural development than theatres and amphitheatres, although the spectacles for which they served as venues have a much longer history.

Although the Circus Maximus was the largest and most prominent location for chariot racing in Rome, there were other structures and areas which were used for equestrian displays. A rather ambiguous one was the Circus Flaminius, an area established in 220 BC in the southern part of the Campus Martius by Gaius Flaminius Nepos, champion of the people. This never adopted the shape and facilities of a circus, but remained an open piazza. Horse racing took place here on occasion, for example, the Ludi Taurii, the Taurian or Tarentine Games, were held there every five years on the occasion of the census. Caligula constructed a circus on the slopes of the Vatican Hill, which was further monumentalised by Nero. Both these emperors were fanatical supporters of the circus, and this was essentially a private venue, built so that the two emperors could practise their driving skills. Caligula had placed an Egyptian obelisk on the central barrier of this building where it stood until it was moved in the late sixteenth century to become the central focus of the Piazza San Pietro. This circus was almost certainly the site of the execution of St Peter. Circuses were favoured locations for spectacles of judicial execution.

The Circus Maximus in Rome

The largest of all Roman circuses was the Circus Maximus in Rome, situated in the valley between the Palatine and the Aventine Hills. Traditionally, it was the Tarquins who developed this area for equestrian events; it was the location of many cults and the oldest recorded games,

the Consualia, associated with the rape of the Sabine Women, which were held by Romulus at the altar of Consus near the far turning post. For a long time the structure was fairly insubstantial, resembling the Greek hippodrome, with seating either directly on the hill slopes or in the form of timber bleachers. There were no proper starting gates until 329 BC (Livy 8.20.2); their form and how they functioned is unknown. It was probably not until the early second century BC that the circus started to acquire other more definite facilities. The central barrier at this time took on a more permanent form with turning posts (*metae*) at both ends, each consisting of three adjacent markers. In 174 BC the first of two sets of lap counters was provided in the form of seven eggs, each one presumably lowered as each lap was completed (Livy 41.27.6). These were refurbished in the late first century BC by Agrippa, who also provided a second set in the form of dolphins (Dio 49.43.2), apparently because mistakes were being made in counting the laps.

By the time of Augustus the central barrier or *spina* was also adorned with a number of statues and trophies in addition to the lap counters. Most of these do not survive and the details of their appearance and relative locations are supplied only by literary and artistic evidence. Two monuments do survive, two Egyptian obelisks, although they have since been moved from their original location. They were found and recorded in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries where they had fallen on the spina. The first obelisk, originally set up at Heliopolis by Ramses II in the thirteenth century BC, was erected by Augustus in 10 BC and now stands in the Piazza del Popolo. This set a pattern for obelisks in circuses in Rome and around the Roman world, for example in the Vatican Circus and the Circus of Maxentius in Rome, and at Tyre, Caesarea Maritima, and Constantinople in the east. In AD 357 Constantius II followed Augustus by erecting a second obelisk with hieroglyphs of Tuthmosis II (fifteenth century BC) in the Circus Maximus; this now stands in Piazza San Giovanni in Laterano. Other monuments on the central barrier included fountains and water basins, a number of towers, statues on columns, and statuary groups, the most important of which was Cybele riding on the back of a lion.

Julius Caesar had carried out some modifications, providing the lowest tier of seating in stone and adding a channel (*euripus*), 3 metres wide, which separated the track from the spectators; and Claudius rebuilt the *carceres* in marble. However, it was not until the reign of Trajan that the biggest transformation occurred (see Fig. 29). The whole building was given a monumental aspect with increased seating and massive supporting substructures of brick-faced concrete at the curved east end (*sphendone*). To commemorate this event, a number of coins were issued with an angled

3. Sestertius of Trajan commemorating his renovation of the Circus Maximus (*RIC* 571; *BMC* 853).

bird's-eye view on the reverse so that both the interior and the exterior are visible (Fig. 3). The form of the circus is very clear, with an arcuated exterior façade. The central barrier and its monuments are also visible, including the turning posts, the lap-counters and the Augustan obelisk. By this time the overall length of the building was about 600 metres (track length about 540 metres) with a width of 150 metres. Modern estimates of seating capacity vary from 150,000 to 350,000, with the latter quite credible for the Trajanic building. Along the northern side of the circus, on the slopes of the Palatine, Augustus built the *pulvinar*, a sort of imperial box. This was a sacred area reserved for those presiding over the games and is clearly depicted with a hexastyle façade with a pediment on a mosaic found at Luni in Northern Italy.

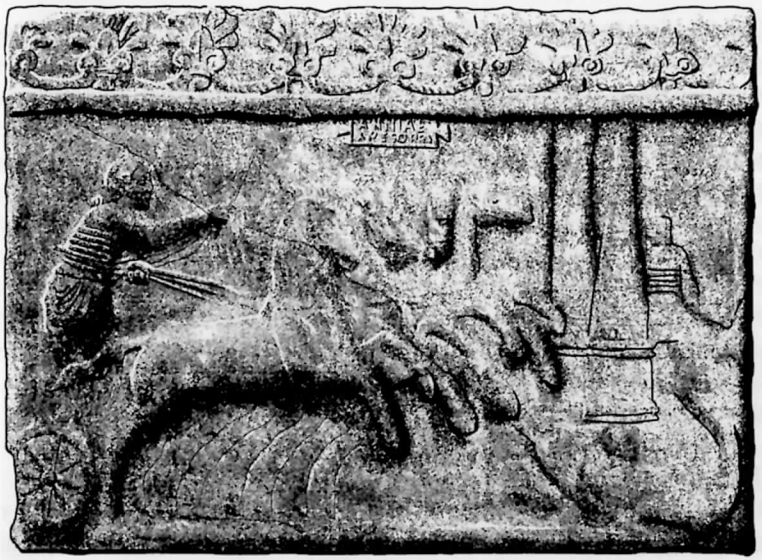
Chariot racing at Rome

The development of chariot racing was very closely connected with the physical development of the main venue. Chariots raced in multiples of four and never more than twelve, the number which could be accommodated by the *carceres*. Already by the second century BC there is evidence for stables owned by prominent individuals which trained and provided horses and charioteers for the circus. From the principate of Augustus to the twelfth century AD, four factions, or professional stables (*factiones*), are attested, each team identified by its own colours: white worn by the Albata, red by the Russata, blue by the Veneta and green by the Prasina. Domitian added a further two, gold (Chrusa) and purple (Purphyria) (Dio 67.4.4), but they were short-lived. Where any imperial favour was shown it was usually towards the Greens or Blues. The Reds were often paired with the Greens and the Whites with the Blues, and by the sixth century the organisation of chariot racing had become so thoroughly institutionalised that the Blues and Greens were considered the major factions. This

pairing may have stemmed from a particular type of race, the *diversium*, in which the winner from an earlier race would swap teams with the driver from a related faction. Such a test of skill guaranteed added excitement and enjoyment for the crowd, and even greater acclamation for the successful charioteer. By the time of Augustus, the circus games had become big business. The *factiones* were essentially companies under the emperor's patronage, which supplied teams to the magistrates giving the games and generated revenue from prize-money. The stables (*stabulae*) for each of these teams were located in the Campus Martius.

For the staff of the *stabulae* an inscription from the time of Domitian (*ILS* 5313) gives the structure of the *familia quadrigaria* of Titus Ateius Capito of the Red team, one of several groups of that colour. Capito was the faction master, a Roman citizen of high status, and other individuals of the *familia* are mentioned by name and function. A certain Docimus is named as the overseer and Chrestus as the *conditor*, presumably responsible for establishing the stables. At least six charioteers are mentioned by name. Then there was the *tentor* (actually three individuals apparently performed this function) who operated the starting gates; the *morator* who held the horses within the starting gate; the *sparsor* who threw water at the horses to keep them cool while they raced; and the *hortator* who rode on a horse either behind or in front of the chariot giving encouragement and advice on the best course to take (Fig. 4). There was also a doctor and a blacksmith. In addition, there must also have been coaches, trainers and grooms.

The number of races in one day presumably depended on the context of the games and who was funding them, but in Rome it may have been as many as 24 (Dio 60.23.5; 27.2), emphasising again the high level of organisation required. A day would start with a procession into the Circus which would include the charioteers and a chest for sacred objects (*tensa*). Even though by the imperial period many of the spectacles of Rome had become much more secular in context, their religious origins were never completely lost. The procession would be cheered by the crowd and would give the spectators an opportunity to check out the competitors and decide on their bets. A trumpet would blow to draw the attention of the crowd and the presiding magistrate would signal the start of the race by dropping a napkin (*mappa*) (see Fig. 5). When the starting gates flew open the race had begun (see Fig. 6). The *carceres* were placed on a curve, effectively creating a staggered start. The chariots sprinted in straight lines towards the break line at the first turning post and were not allowed to cut across each other. The chariots raced anti-clockwise completing seven circuits of the central barrier; the finish line was halfway down the track just before



4. Campana plaque depicting a charioteer approaching the *metae* (turning posts). The mounted figure to the right is presumably a *hortator*, whose job was to scout out the best route for the charioteer to steer.

the far turning-post, in exactly the same position as the finish line on a modern athletics track. The race therefore was at least 3 miles (5.2 km), in length, requiring huge stamina and strength on the part of both the horses and the charioteers. The race would have lasted a thrilling eight minutes with speeds of up to 45 miles an hour on the straight. To overtake on the inside as one approached the turn was a tactic particularly admired, because it was extremely dangerous! Interestingly, the chariot race in the most famous film version of *Ben Hur* (USA 1959), which for all its inaccuracies and flaws, managed to capture the tension, excitement and dangers of the sport perfectly, lasts 8 minutes and 20 seconds, giving a very good idea of a Roman spectator's experience. Crashes were extremely common, particularly at the start and the turning posts, as the charioteers tried to make sharp and tight turns at high speeds. These are a staple of both literary and visual circus imagery. A particularly detailed account of a race in which the charioteer named Consentius claimed an exciting victory by coming up from behind can be found in a fifth-century AD poem by Sidonius Apollinaris (*Poems* 23.323-424).

In the intervals between the races it was important to keep the crowd entertained, and it became the practice to stage other types of spectacle in the Circus for this purpose. Novelty races might be staged to add variety.

Teams of up to ten horses, for example, might be used, or there might be exhibitions of trick-riding. The *desultores*, attested in 169 BC (Livy 44.9.3) rode two horses reined together, jumping from one to the other. They are also mentioned by Suetonius (*Julius* 39.2) in the context of Caesar's extensive games and spectacles of 46 BC, during which unusually high-ranking young men were the performers. It was in this context of interval entertainment that athletic displays were staged for the first time in Rome in 186 BC, as part of the games of Marcus Fulvius Nobilior (Livy 39.22.1-2), which also saw the first wild beast displays. A sixth-century AD circus programme on a papyrus found at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt (*POxy.* 2707), one of only three extant examples, lists mimes, athletic displays, a hunt, and singing rope-dancers, the latter obviously very popular as they appeared twice. At the end of the games, the victors received a victor's palm, crowns and other prizes (Fig. 5).

The charioteers

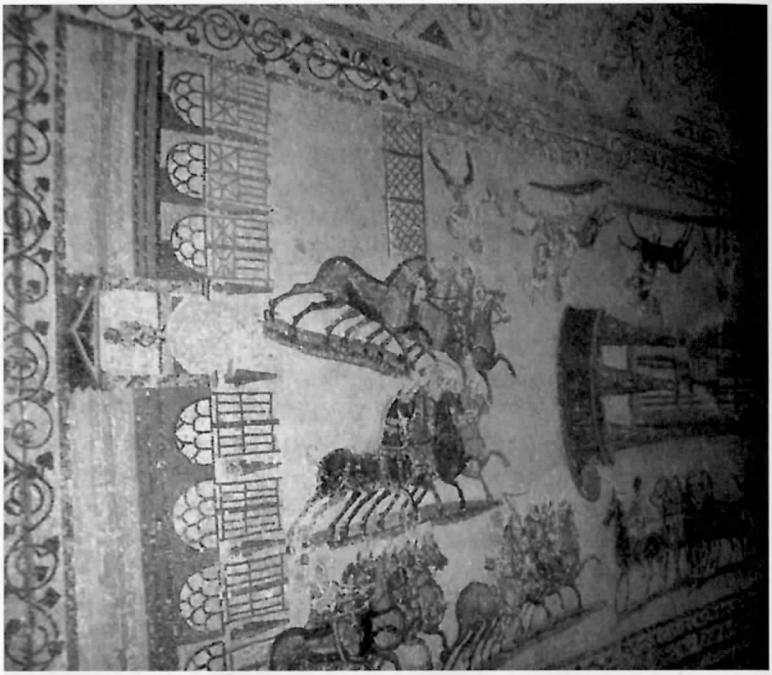
In Greek contexts charioteers were aristocratic in status, but this gradually changed, and by the Roman period they were drawn from the lower social classes, freedmen and slaves. As with gladiators, those who were successful could achieve major celebrity status, being idolised by the public. Some were able to earn enough in prize money to retire as wealthy men. In many of the inscriptions relating to chariot racing, the names of charioteers often indicate a mix of nationalities, though many have Greek, but few Roman names. A particularly successful charioteer was Gaius Appuleius Diocles who came from Lusitania (*CIL* 6.10048). In his career spanning 24 years he appeared in 4,257 races, winning 1,462. He drove for three different factions, indicating that at least by the second century AD charioteers could be free agents, rather like modern jockeys. As well as mentioning single-entry races, involving competition between four chariots, one drawn from each faction, and double entry races, involving two from each, this inscription also attests triple entry races, where three chariots from each faction took part. They acted as a team and the point was to have one of them cross the line first; the rest wreaked havoc among their opponents. A number of general observations can be made from this inscription. It specifically mentions that 110 of Diocles' first-place finishes were in the opening race; this was obviously a major and signal event to win. The races with larger fields were not considered the premium events; spectators wanted to see champions racing each other. Diocles won 815 races leading from the start, emphasising the importance of gaining the poll position in the initial sprint. Rarely did a charioteer win from behind, although Diocles managed it in the final stretch 502 times. He is also described as having made nine horses hundred-race winners,

and one horse a two-hundred-race winner, indicating that horses could achieve fame just as the charioteers did (many are named in artworks). Diocles' career winnings came to a total of 35,863,120 *sestertii*, estimated somewhere in the region of £1.5-2 million. He died at the age of 42, having enjoyed a lengthy career of 24 years. A number of other charioteers are known from their tombstones, and although they were clearly successful, none achieved the heights of Diocles apart from Porphyrius in Constantinople in the late fifth/early sixth century AD.

Circus mosaics

Circus and chariot racing was a favoured theme in Roman art, appearing on sarcophagi and in mosaics. The circus was a popular motif for mosaics in the western provinces and North Africa, and a number of very fine examples survive from the late third and early fourth centuries (Figs 5 and 6). They depict a race in progress, at all stages, in remarkable detail, and provide the best evidence for the appearance of the central barrier of a Roman circus. Some of these provincial mosaics, it has been argued, reflect the arrangement of the Circus Maximus in Rome. The two most informative examples are the pavement at the villa of Piazza Armerina on Sicily (Fig. 5), and the Barcelona circus mosaic.

5. Great Circus Mosaic, Piazza Armerina (Sicily). Victorious charioteer including the trumpeter, important at both the start and end of the race to get the crowd's attention.



6. Circus Mosaic, Silin (Libya). Detail of the starting gates.

The mosaic at Piazza Armerina depicts the chariots racing anti-clockwise around the central barrier, with the starting gates at the right-hand end. Behind the gates, several drivers are shown preparing to race. At the left-hand end, spectators are sustained by a youth carrying loaves of bread on a tray (an example of early fast food). The central barrier monuments most likely reflect the arrangement in the Circus Maximus. Among several colonnaded pavilions, there is an obelisk, a statue of Magna Mater on horseback and the lap-counters in the form of eggs, showing three still raised. A crash has occurred at the far turning post, and in the upper part of the mosaic the victor, wearing a green tunic, is being declared and presented with a palm-branch.

The Barcelona mosaic is similar in overall design, although the details on the central barrier are better preserved. Four charioteers are shown, each representing one of the four stables (Reds, Greens, Blues and Whites). The Blue team has crashed and the Green team is victorious. There are two further figures shown near the right-hand turn; one carries a small *amphora* and is probably a *sparsor*, intent on cooling the horses with water. The other figure seems to be waving a piece of cloth, although

his function is rather obscure. A particularly noteworthy feature of the mosaic is that the horses are named in inscriptions, whereas the charioteers are not. It has been suggested that the owner of the house in which this mosaic was laid was involved in the breeding and training of horses, for which Spain was famous in the Roman world.

Circuses and chariot racing in the Roman empire

As a result of their vast size none of the many circuses in the Roman world has been completely excavated. Compared to amphitheatres and theatres they are relatively rare, were generally provided at a later date (second century onwards) and marked a city out from others as a centre of power. One of the best-preserved and most thoroughly investigated is at Lepcis Magna in modern Libya. The structure lay outside the city limits next to the shoreline. To the south was an amphitheatre built in AD 56, and when the circus was completed in the mid-second century AD the two were connected by open passages and tunnels carved through the hillside. The unification of these two entertainment buildings in a single architectural complex is unparalleled elsewhere in the Roman world. The arena of the circus was almost exactly 450 metres in length, making it one of the longest after the Circus Maximus in Rome. The starting gates were placed along a shallow arc so that all the chariots had the same distance to travel to the near turning-post. The good preservation of the starting gates at Lepcis Magna is unique and sufficient to allow reconstruction of the opening mechanism by which the races were started. An attendant pulled a lever that activated a catapult system, which in turn jerked out the latches of the gates of each stall, allowing the gates to fly open. It is assumed that something similar would have been provided in the Circus Maximus.

Over a dozen circuses are physically known in the Iberian Peninsula. Two particularly well-preserved examples can be found at Mérida in the south-west and at Tarragona on the north-eastern Mediterranean coast. Both are second-century in date, but they differ in terms of location. The circus at Mérida is located outside the walls, while at Tarragona the circus was built on a terrace very much within the urban centre in association with the Temple of the Imperial Cult. Recent work has identified much of the substructure to the seating preserved in the lower storeys of later buildings. The curved end has been cleared of modern buildings and is now open to view. The position of this circus emphasises the important ideological connection between Roman spectacle and the imperial cult. In 2004 the first circus to be identified in Britain was found at Colchester.

In the East, where equestrian events were already well-established, monumental circuses do not appear as uniformly as in the West. A number

of eastern cities are known to have had chariot racing at one period or another, but fewer cities are known to have possessed a large monumental circus, and these tend to be major Roman cultural and administrative centres.

There were essentially two types of circus structure built in the region, The larger type of building (such as Tyre in Lebanon, Antioch-on-the-Orontes in south-east Turkey and Bostra in southern Syria) had close similarities with circuses built in the West in terms of overall proportions. The smaller type (for example at Jerash in Jordan, Corinth in Greece and Caesarea Maritima in Israel, all three excavated and published in the last two decades) were much shorter at about 300 metres. It seems to have been a development and reflection of the complex cultural mix of the eastern Mediterranean, one which was intended to be multifunctional from the outset or was later modified to accommodate other types of spectacle. Very few monumental circuses have been identified in Greece and Asia Minor. At Anazarbus in Cilicia (southern Turkey), an unexcavated circus is still visible outside the city walls. It was 410 metres long, 64 metres wide, and had a central barrier. The circus at Thessaloniki in northern Greece was built as part of the Tetrarchic palace by Galerius, an indication of the important relationship in later antiquity between imperial palace and circus, a relationship which had been established in Rome between the Palatine palaces and the Circus Maximus, and was later emulated at the late Roman capitals of Constantinople, Sirmium (Serbia) and Milan.

This lack of monumental circuses may perhaps be explained by a continued preference for Greek-style horse and chariot racing at a local level, which did not require the scale of facilities demanded by Roman-style racing.

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