

Chapter 5

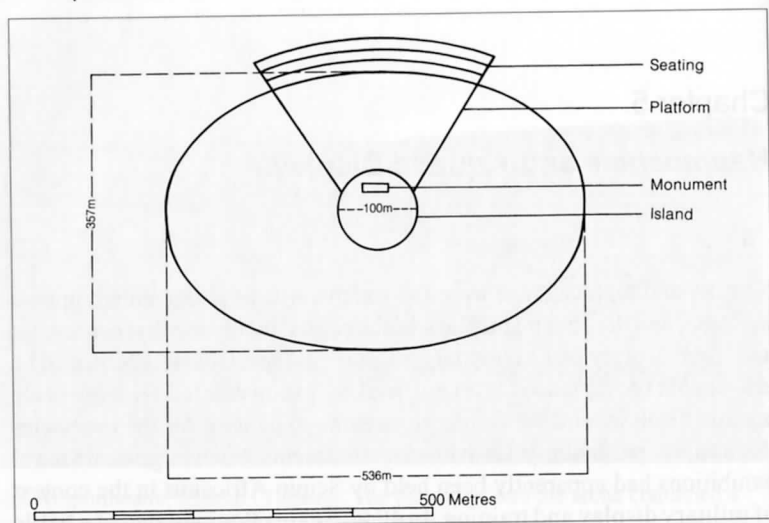
***Naumachiae* and Aquatic Displays**

Novelty and extravagance were the watchwords of public entertainment in Rome, and the aquatic displays of the capital in the late first century BC and first century AD supremely capture its spectacular essence. The *naumachia* or *stagnum* was an artificial basin constructed for large-scale aquatic displays, and the former term came to be used for the spectacles themselves, particularly sea-battle re-enactments. Such large-scale naval exhibitions had apparently been held by Scipio Africanus in the context of military display and training. In 40 BC Sextus Pompey staged a battle at sea off the coast at Rhegium in southern Italy for the entertainment of his troops, involving a fight to the death between prisoners of war (Dio 48.19). Nevertheless, such large-scale spectacles were unusual and became the preserve of the capital. There were also smaller-scale displays involving water ballets, not necessarily of a high cultural calibre.

Aquatic displays in Rome

The first recorded public *naumachia* was staged by Julius Caesar in a specially built basin in the Campus Martius in 46 BC (Suetonius, *Julius* 39.4). The basin was filled in after the event and nothing now survives to give any indication of size. However, to judge from the numbers of ships and men involved, it was a construction on a very large scale. The battle was between two fleets representing Tyre and Egypt, a characteristically plausible context although not based on an actual historical event. The fleets comprised a variety of ships, with two, three and four banks of oars manned by prisoners of war numbering some 6,000 (Dio 45.17).

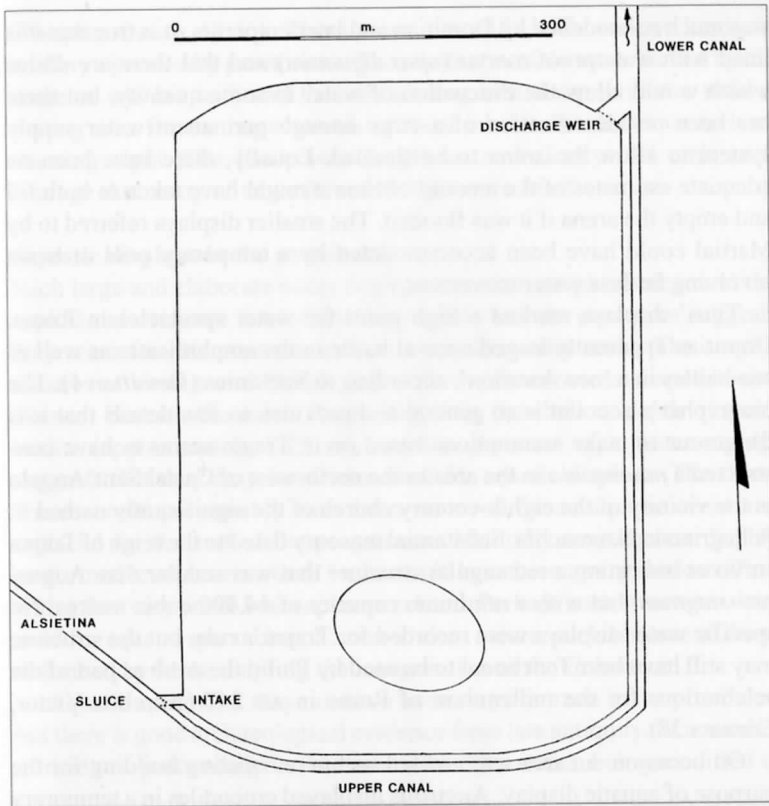
In 2 BC, as part of the celebrations for the inauguration of the Temple of Mars Ultor in his new Forum, Augustus staged large-scale water displays. For these he built a huge artificial lake, referred to in the sources as a *stagnum* (Dio 55.10.7). This was located on the right bank of the Tiber, in the area of what is now Trastevere. The *Res Gestae* (23) provides colossal dimensions of 1800 x 1200 Roman feet (approximately 536 x 357 metres). These dimensions give a figure of somewhere in the region of 270,000 cubic metres of water which was provided by a new and largely



19. Suggested reconstruction of Augustus' *stagnum* in Rome (Rabun Taylor).

subterranean aqueduct, the *aqua Alsietina* (Frontinus, *Aqueducts* 11.22), drawn from a lake to the north-west of the city, Lake Martignano (the ancient Lake Alsietinus). The water inside must have been at least 1.7 metres deep to allow for the use of oars as well as realistic drowning! It is clear that the *stagnum* had an island but the overall shape is not certain. It may have been planned as an ellipse, giving maximum all-round visibility for the spectators, but close examination of the orientation of modern buildings in the area has suggested that it had a more rectangular shape (Figs 19 and 20). Ships were brought into the basin by a canal which connected to the Tiber. The Augustan display was a re-enactment of the Battle of Salamis and involved 30 ships, both biremes and triremes, all with battering rams, plus a number of smaller vessels. Three thousand soldiers and a commensurate number of oarsmen took part in the battle.

The basin continued in use certainly until the time of Titus, when it was used for some of the larger displays staged for the inauguration of the Colosseum in AD 80. According to Martial a number of mythological re-enactments involving water were accommodated in the Colosseum, for example Leander's midnight swim (actually probably an execution in the pretence of a re-enactment) and water ballets, effectively displays of synchronized swimming Roman style which might have included nudity and themes of love and sex. However, there were also larger-scale sea-battles; according to Suetonius these were held 'on the old *nauma-*



20. Reconstruction of Augustus' stagnum in Rome, according to Rabun Taylor.

chia' (Suetonius, *Titus* 7.3), that is Augustus' *stagnum*, and he made no mention of aquatic performance held within the Flavian amphitheatre.

Dio (46.25.2-4) also mentioned use of Augustus' *stagnum* for a naval battle between the Syracusans and the Athenians. This was a large-scale and complex spectacle which became a land battle when an assault was made on a structure on an island within the 'sea'. However, he also claimed that 'Titus filled the above mentioned theatre [he meant the Colosseum] suddenly with water ... He introduced also men in boats who engaged in a sea-battle there, impersonating the Corcyreans and the Corinthians.' This has created heated debate among scholars about whether or not the Flavian amphitheatre really was capable of supporting large-scale water spectacles at the time of inauguration. Despite recent architectural and archaeological work on the substructures beneath the arena, there is still no consensus on the subject. This area of the building

was much re-modelled by Domitian and later emperors. It is true that it is lined with waterproof mortar (*opus signinum*) and that there are drains which would allow the evacuation of water in some quantity, but there has been no identification of a large enough permanent water supply system to allow the arena to be flooded. Equally, there have been no adequate estimates of the amount of time it might have taken to both fill and empty the arena if it was flooded. The smaller displays referred to by Martial could have been accommodated by a temporary pool or basin involving far less water movement.

Titus' displays marked a high point for water spectacles in Rome. Domitian apparently staged a naval battle in the amphitheatre as well as sea-battles in a 'new location', according to Suetonius (*Domitian* 4). The biographer's account is so general and provides so few details that it is dangerous to make assumptions based on it. Trajan seems to have constructed a *naumachia* in the area to the north-west of Castel Sant'Angelo in the vicinity of the eighth-century church of the significantly named S. Pellegrino in Naumachia. Substantial masonry dated to the reign of Trajan survives indicating a rectangular structure that was smaller than Augustus' *stagnum*, but with a minimum capacity of 44,400 cubic metres. No specific water displays were recorded for Trajan's rule, but the structure may still have been functional to be used by Philip the Arab as part of the celebrations for the millennium of Rome in AD 247 (Aurelius Victor, *Caesars* 28).

On occasion, an area was created within an existing building for the purpose of aquatic display. Augustus displayed crocodiles in a temporary basin constructed in the Circus Flaminius and Caligula excavated and filled with water a basin in the Saepta Julia in order to display a single ship (Dio 59.10.5). Nero also staged several *naumachiae*. Although the sources are contradictory about the details and venues, it is clear that none of the latter were purpose-built. According to Suetonius (*Nero* 12) he staged a sea-battle on an artificial saltwater lake with sea monsters swimming in it. It may be the same event that is referred to by Dio (61.9.5), which involved flooding one of the theatres (which is unclear), with sea water and sea monsters and a battle between the Persians and the Athenians, presumably the Battle of Salamis. Nero then drained the structure and enacted land battles and other displays.

An extraordinary example of a natural setting for such displays took place in AD 52, when the emperor Claudius orchestrated a massive naval battle to commemorate the completion of a canal that would drain the Fucine Lake into the River Liris. This involved almost full-sized triremes and quariremes, with 19,000 combatants, most if not all of them criminals

(Tacitus, *Annals* 12.56). There were also rafts with various kinds of artillery operated by praetorians. The whole spectacle was watched by the emperor and his wife and the surrounding hillsides provided a natural seating area for the huge crowds of local inhabitants drawn to such an amazing sight. The battle was fought so realistically and with such courage that many of those forced to fight were freed.

Aquatic displays in the provinces

Such large and elaborate water displays were more a phenomenon of the capital and evidence from elsewhere in Italy and the provinces suggests they were far less common and on a much smaller scale. The amphitheatres at Verona and Mérida had shallow, almost cross-shaped basins (*fossae*) beneath the arena floors (Fig. 21); the shallow depth of these basins (approximately 1.25 m), and the presence of a water-supply, suggests that they may have been used for aquatic displays. The floor-boards could presumably have been removed for an aquatic event and replaced for the rest of the programme. Naturally, any aquatic display performed in such a restricted basin would have been a very modest affair, with a few very small boats accommodated. Perhaps such structures were used for aquatic spectacles of a non-violent nature, such as some of those described by Martial during the inauguration of the Colosseum.

Aquatic spectacles may not have been very common in the provinces, but there is good archaeological evidence from late antiquity for a number of theatres, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean, being modified to



21. Amphitheatre, Mérida (Spain) 15-8 BC. View of arena with *fossa*.

allow the orchestra to be flooded. In the theatre at Paphos (Cyprus), in the later third century AD a wall was built at the base of the *cavea* seating around the orchestra so that it could be flooded. The theatre had already been modified with facilities for *venationes* and gladiatorial games. Similar modifications for water displays were carried out in other structures (see the next chapter).

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