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# ROMAN SPECTACLE BUILDINGS AS A SETTING FOR MARTYRDOM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES IN THE CHRISTIAN ARCHITECTURE

**Abstract:** In the framework of the study of Christian buildings in the ruins of amphitheatres, theatres, stadiums and Roman circuses, becomes appropriate to develop some reflections mainly aimed helping to explain the symbolic dimension acquired by the ludic background in which a far from negligible part of the Christian martyrdoms took place, as outlined on the preserved sources. Although this ludic substrate is not the only factor to be considered, it's the one that allowed the hagiographers composing stories – some with more historical veracity than others – with architectural settings charged with symbolism, where the victory of the martyrs as “athletes of Christ” was equated to the victory in secular games. All this greatly contributes to explain the subsequent relationship between Christian building and playful architecture occurred from the late 4th and early 5th centuries, and detected in the late antique and early medieval topography of some Roman cities. However, this issue has gone relatively unnoticed for Archeology, and when the two key elements – building and church – appear, with few exceptions, they are considered separately in case of being subjected to some kind of study.

**Keywords:** Roman spectacle buildings; Martyrdom; Christian edifice; Hagiography; Late Antiquity

## 1. DECADENT SPECTACLE BUILDINGS AND A FLOURISHING RELIGION<sup>1</sup>

The slow decline of entertainment buildings caused by the crisis that affected local evergesies was greatly encouraged by the progressive decadence of gladiatorial games and for the actions undertaken by the Church<sup>2</sup>. That declining also entailed – from late fourth century as the earliest – the construction of Christian buildings in arenas and into the structures of some of these public buildings, most of which had fallen into gradual abandonment as a result of the lack of use for which they were originally intended<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> This study has been developed in the framework of a postdoctoral contract held in Universitat de Barcelona. This contract has been possible thanks to a scholarship grant Beatriu de Pinós (mode A) of the *Direcció General de Recerca de la Generalitat de Catalunya*, and is inserted in my research project *Christian edifice in Roman buildings for public spectacles: historical genesis and archaeological implications*, and also in the research projects HAR2010-15183/HIST of the *Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación* and 2009SGR-1255 from the *Agència de Gestió d'Ajuts Universitaris i de Recerca*, both projects led by Prof. Josep Vilella Masana (Universitat de Barcelona).

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive and profound vision of the role played by Christianity in relation to Roman spectacles, see the interesting monographs: JIMÉNEZ SÁNCHEZ 2006a; ID., 2010.

<sup>3</sup> In Italy, for instance, the archaeological documentation points out that most of the abandonments

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14795/j.v1i3.57>

ISSN 2360 – 266X

ISSN-L 2360 – 266X

Despite the outstanding repair works of the Pavia amphitheater undertaken by Theodoric<sup>4</sup>, the “re-opening” of the Arenas of *Lutetia* in the midst of the sixth century at the behest of Chilperico<sup>5</sup>, and the repairs carried out on the Colosseum<sup>6</sup>, among others<sup>7</sup>, the fact is that most of the expensive entertainment buildings erected during the centuries of splendor of the Empire were now abandoned to their fate or, in the best case, to the fate of the bishops, new patroni of most late antique cities<sup>8</sup>. With his new role as a local leader, the mitred also is going to be, in many cases, the manager of the shattered public goods and the main sponsor in case of construction or repair, both actions used now to benefit the Christian building industry at the expense of the old and expensive infrastructure that had defined the profile of the Roman city. These new Christian buildings often reused and/or occupied some of the old public buildings no longer in use, whether for architectural convenience, whether by a religious significance, or for both reasons at the same time. Following this model, it is well documented the Christianization of buildings or the construction of Christian architecture in pagan temples, civil basilicas, libraries, granaries, baths<sup>9</sup>, etc.

Something similar happened with entertainment buildings, but unlike the previous ones, their huge and particular building structures were not always the most suitable to be reused for raising other buildings<sup>10</sup> – Christian in our case – into them with a few arrangements. Therefore, although we will see examples of adaptation and superposition of Christian buildings to the structures and the bleachers – *cunei* and *cauea* – thus taking advantage of existing structures, we will also see *ex nouo* construction of

of spectacles buildings take place between the last decades of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, BASSO 2003: 901; the same what HEIJMANS 2006: 38-39 finds in Gaul. For the rest of the Empire, the data are not very divergent.

<sup>4</sup> PINON 1990: 105; GREGORI 2011: 159. Theodoric had also ordered the repairing of the Pompeius Theater (Rome). Note the presence of an amphitheater in the representation of the city of Ravenna contained in the mosaic of San Apollinare Nuovo. Theodoric himself commissioned this mosaic, thus we can infer that the Ostrogoth city had an amphitheater in good condition in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, or it was at least worthy of appearing among the most significant monuments of Ravenna.

<sup>5</sup> FIERRO/LAFFONT 1996: 16.

<sup>6</sup> *CIL*, VI, 32094.

<sup>7</sup> SEE BASSO 2003: 902.

<sup>8</sup> This applies mainly to amphitheatres and theaters. We know that circuses and hippodromes escaped for a time from this trend, partly because of its close association with the scenography of imperial power, see JIMÉNEZ SÁNCHEZ 2011: 181-193, in part because their spectacles did not pose an excessive moral conflict for the new Christian (chariot racing, despite being also criticized by the Fathers of the Church, were not very problematic compared to other types of entertainment such as gladiator fights). Even in some places new circuses were constructed during the late Roman period, while in other, the sources still state their anecdotal and punctual use in the sixth century. Such is the case of the one in Arles, HEIJMANS 2006: 39, and maybe the one in Zaragoza, if there was any – some *ludi circenses* are documented, but no circus has been found so far: JIMÉNEZ SÁNCHEZ 2006b: 99-113. On the contrary, they could still be used to celebrate coronations of barbarian kings, like that of the circus Adaloald which took place in the circus of Milano in 604, PAVLVS DIAC., *Hist. Long.*, IV, 30; see CAGIANO DE AZEVEDO 1969: 44. Except for these cases, once the Western Roman Empire fell, circuses lost their political significance, and suffered the same fate than the rest of entertainment buildings. Meanwhile, in the East *pars* many circuses survived until Islamic incursions, and that of Constantinople remained in use until the invasion by the Crusaders in 1204, that left it in such disrepair that it was never again used for racing, NOVARA 2001: 193, 197, n. 3, 11; JIMÉNEZ SÁNCHEZ 2010: 18.

<sup>9</sup> See JIMÉNEZ SÁNCHEZ/SALES CARBONELL 2004: 185-201.

<sup>10</sup> HEIJMANS 2006: 38.

some of these churches in the spaces of the *arenae* and *spinae*.

But unfortunately for the history of the Roman world, the most common fate of these ludic buildings will be its slow dismantling in order to supply material to other buildings, both private and public. Being part of the public constructions – basically ramparts but also, as we have said, churches – we will find plundering materials coming from circuses, theaters, stadiums and amphitheatres, which document the bishop’s control over local buildings and public works. In this way, for instance, the Flavian amphitheatre in Rome has become a really rich source for contributing to the construction, among other types of buildings, of churches such as San Giovanni in Laterano and the new building of the Basilica of San Pietro. In fact, it was customary to use of the formula “*a cauar marmi a Coliseo*” on papal payment records<sup>11</sup>. In Milan, some of the material of its amphitheater was used as a quarry for the construction of the Basilica of San Lorenzo Maggiore in the fourth century<sup>12</sup>, when the ludic building, apparently, could still be functioning<sup>13</sup>; an ambivalent use that has also had for a time the Flavian amphitheater<sup>14</sup>. In *Tarraco*, material from the circus is employed to build the *episcopium*<sup>15</sup>. And in Teramo, the twelfth-century cathedral was built in part with material from its former theater and amphitheater, as happened in several churches of Catania, Bolsena or Venosa (SS. Trinità), among other cities<sup>16</sup>. Bishop Hilary of Arles commissioned a deacon named Cyril the building of a basilica, and the deacon injured his foot when a marble block dropped down while they were dismantling the *proscenium* of the theater to get materials for the new construction<sup>17</sup>. In 570, some of the blocks of the *Gerasa* hippodrome were used to build a church in the city dedicated by Bishop Mariano, in a moment in which, again, it seems that the building still maintained its recreational use, at least in a small part of its structure<sup>18</sup>.

The phenomenon of churches specifically implemented within the perimeter of recreational buildings, especially amphitheatres, is already detected in Late Antiquity, even though we have mostly medieval<sup>19</sup> and modern examples, the chronology of which could be delayed in many cases. Be that as it may, the presence of most of these churches that we found located in entertainment buildings, regardless of the establishment of an accurate chronology of their foundation, connects with the times of persecution, when some of the followers of the new monotheistic religion found death precisely in the sands of these buildings, as developed in the following section. In fact – and avoiding, for now, the martyr factor – during the first centuries of our

<sup>11</sup> BASSO 2003: 904-905.

<sup>12</sup> Whole blocks of the Milanese amphitheater form the spectacular foundations of Sant’Aquilino chapel and also those of the chapel of Sant’Ippolito, FIENI 2005: 201, 218-219.

<sup>13</sup> BASSO 2003: 904, although other studies have called into question this dual functionality of the Milanese Circus, see FIENI 2005: 219.

<sup>14</sup> SANTANGELI VALENZANI 2012: 118.

<sup>15</sup> DIARTE BLASCO 2012: 288.

<sup>16</sup> BASSO 2003: 904.

<sup>17</sup> HONORATVS MASS., *Vita s. Hil. Ar.*, 20; PINON 1990: 105.

<sup>18</sup> ROUECHÉ 2007: 60.

<sup>19</sup> P. Pinon places the general chronology of the presence of churches in amphitheatres from the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries, PINON 1990: 110, but in our investigations we have seen, as will be amply seen below in this article, that actually it is a much more primitive phenomenon that can be traced to Late Antiquity in a not negligible part of the cases.

era, Christian apologists flatly rejected the world of Roman spectacles, and the Hebrew world showed the same attitude before Christianity began to take positions. The Hebrew opposition reached such an extent that the construction of the amphitheater and the theater of Jerusalem led to a conspiracy against Herod<sup>20</sup>. Nevertheless, the conflictivity of first Christians in relation to entertainments – and even, in certain cases, with the martyrdoms themselves<sup>21</sup> – posed no prejudice so that the magnificent ludic buildings, once fallen into disuse, pass to swell the heritage of certain local churches, and even were claimed and turned into sacred places by building Christian edilia inside. If the martyr's tomb, before the Peace of the Church, was the first logical place where martyrial worship was detected, in a second moment, they already could proceed to the sacralization of the precise place where the martyr had been confined or had found death. And so they did in some Roman entertainment buildings.

Indeed, once the emperor Theodosius I established Christianity as the only religion officially allowed in the Empire in the late fourth century, these unique architectural frameworks, although initially could have generated some reluctance among Christians (and indeed is observed as many of them are even used as garbage dumps<sup>22</sup>) what appears certain is that, once calmed the rough waters of the martyrdoms, this places had the perfect substrate to become ideal and idealized settings for certain local Christian communities who kept the memory of their martyrs. A value that, on the other hand, these places had already achieved since the time of the persecutions but that could now materialize and made specific – and enhanced by the episcopal authorities – with the construction of temples in remembrance and memory.

Some modern authors have considered that Christians hated entertainment buildings for involving memories of suffering and pain, while other authors believe they acquired a high and positive symbolic value. Current authors do not reach an agreement on this issue, but most likely this divergence of views and especially about feelings and sensations, already has existed between the Christians of those days<sup>23</sup>. So that, to our knowledge, to go deeper into this discussion is useless as everyone has in all probability his share of reason and the two situations, judging by the archaeological evidence, must have occurred in the different

communities depending on the particularities and local idiosyncrasies. However, it is true that the passing of time heals all wounds, and thereby we see logical that generations of Christians of the late fourth and fifth century onwards, more distanced from the events, had idealized these scenarios of blood and horror more easily than those who were contemporaries to Christian martyrdom or heard about them in detail from their direct ascendants. Actually, the chronologies of implementation of Christian edilia in recreational buildings agree with this evolutionary idea, with the easing and the mythification of memories that the passage of time confers to them. Moreover, what does appear indisputable is that, little by little, the entertainment buildings were losing the recreational use for which they were initially conceived, according to economic and structural changes that took place from late Romanity. And with this state of affairs the pragmatism of local leaders – often bishops – probably played a decisive role in seizing these quarries of construction material and the urban space they occupied, transforming, with time and the right strategy (composition of *passiones* and *uitae*) some of these ancient horror stages into triumph scenarios by constructing churches inside, perhaps for religiousness, maybe for economic interests, or maybe for the combination of these and other factors.

Amphitheaters are certainly the preferred recreational buildings for implementing inside them Christian buildings, judging by the documented percentages (*vid. infra*), but the construction of churches also proliferated, although to a lesser extent, in the sands of circuses and in the structures of theaters, the other quintessential entertainment buildings of the Roman classical world. But, as we will see, the meaning of these latter constructions is very different than the significance of the churches built in amphitheaters. Firstly, the golden era of construction in circuses comes at the beginning of the fourth century<sup>24</sup>, coinciding with a period in which most of the amphitheaters of the empire had already fallen into decline. But it is also true that in some cases, such as the Vatican circus we will see below, some of them were closed earlier, fostering an early Christian use of its space. Moreover, due to the large size of circuses and amphitheaters, a curious phenomenon took place: churches were erected into ludic buildings that were still functioning – though on a smaller perimeter.

The example of Tarraco present a great part of the identifying ingredients of the matter we are dealing with: the structures of an amphitheater in a fairly optimal state of conservation; acts of martyrdom of undeniable historical truthfulness referring explicitly that the martyrs perished in the amphitheater of the city, and a first early Christian church or chapel of martyrial nature bearing witness of the cult shortly after the time when the amphitheater was abandoned as a recreational place. The antiquity and authenticity of the acts of martyrdom of Fructuosus of Tarragona and his deacons, expressly detailing his execution in the amphitheater of the city, coming along with the archaeological evidence of the chapel built in its sands, constitute the paradigm of this historical reality, but unfortunately, such explicit evidence of the phenomenon that we are studying have not always been preserved. This

<sup>24</sup> See specific chapter in HUMPHREY 1986: 579-638.

<sup>20</sup> FLAVIUS IOSEPHVS, *Ant. Iud.*, XV, 267-291. It appears that when Flavius Josephus talked about this amphitheater he was actually referring to the hippodrome, excavated between 1982 and 1988, cf. PATRICH 2011: 177, n. 2.

<sup>21</sup> DUNDERBERG 2013: 419-440.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, WILMOTT 2008: 183-184 for the British case, and DIARTE BLASCO 2012: 288-289 for the Hispanic.

<sup>23</sup> Augustine responded to the mourners of the ruin of the amphitheaters that such monuments were witnesses to the times when evil reigned, and that they were built by the Lust: *attendite enim, fratres, et uidete amphitheatra ista, quae modo cadunt. Luxuria illa aedificauit*, AVGVSTINVS, *Serm.*, 113 A, 13; while Isidore of Seville advised the Christians to stay away from the circuses (no longer in use at that time), because this places were possessed by abominable divinities: *alienus erit tibi locus quem plurimi Satanae spiritus occupaverunt*, ISIDORVS, *Etym.*, XVIII, 41, 3. Then the point, perhaps, is to consider the personal value that every Christian gave to these testimonies of Augustine and Isidore, and if based on them, the spectacles building was eventually perceived as something to dignify and sanctify – Christian edilia – or as something to despise and forget – dumps and other purposes: domestic, industrial, etc.

case in point, quite unique, will be useless for us when intending to unambiguously demonstrate the fact that all the Christian constructions built into certain ludic Roman buildings are linked with the martyrdoms occurred during the first centuries: the prevailing archaeological reality is that we have many other examples of Christian architecture, basically medieval, also built within recreational framework where, *a priori*, and lack of direct textual data, this relation with martyrdoms is not as clear nor as accepted by historians.

Therefore, we should delimit and weigh up what it really meant to the early Christians dying in the arenas, and which impact could it have on the imaginary of Christians born after the Peace of the Church. Such reflections, along with the critical archaeological study we are developing – a little extract of which is included below – will maybe lead us to accept that there were actually many more cases of primitive martyrial chapels hidden in the remains not only of medieval churches, but also into modern ones, present even today in the ruins of amphitheaters, theaters, circuses, and stadiums, and how unnoticed have do they passed to archeology eyes, to judge from scientific literature.

## 2. CHRISTIAN MYTHS GESTATED IN PAGAN SCENERIES

From the pragmatic perspective of pagan Roman society, the executions of Christians where only a modality –and not necessarily the most appreciated<sup>25</sup>— of the varied shows that were offered to the *plebs*<sup>26</sup>. Meanwhile, ancient Christian literature, based on the eschatological ideology of sacrifice founded on the Pauline paradox “to die in Christ is to live”<sup>27</sup>, specifically and proudly referred to the “spectacle of martyrdom”<sup>28</sup>. In addition to this particular vision of death held by Christian was the obsession to collect the remains of bodies, the ashes and the blood of the martyrs, as often described in detail in the texts<sup>29</sup>. This obsession, beyond the desire to give a proper burial as was required, was the germ of the veneration of martyrs and most likely can be interpreted also as a Christianized version of the old pagan practice of collecting the oil from the athletes and the blood of gladiators, fluids supposed to heal fever and epilepsy<sup>30</sup>, respectively. The Christian martyr, then, was a sort of gladiator of the faith to Christian eyes, a *gladiator perfectissimus*<sup>31</sup>, “an athlete winner in every battle of the sacred games”<sup>32</sup>, and therefore if the body of the Gladiator

<sup>25</sup> KYLE 1998: 242.

<sup>26</sup> See a status of the issue in POTTER 1996: 53-88. A very illustrative and recent study of the media context surrounding the martyrdoms occurred during amphitheater games, in CARFORA 2009.

<sup>27</sup> HEFFERNAN/SHELTON 2006: 217.

<sup>28</sup> Of course, the fact that in the end the winning party was Christianity further reinforced the idea of the martyr's victory, see KYLE 1998: 242-243.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. LACTANTIUS, *De mort. pers.*, 21, 7-11, or EVSEBIVS CAES., *Hist. eccl.* V, 1, 57-60. Interesting remarks on that subject in KYLE 1998: 170-171, and in CARFORA 2009: 120-123.

<sup>30</sup> CELSVS, *De medicina*, III, 23. PLINIVS, *Hist. Nat.*, 28, 4. For magic and supernatural properties attributed to the martyrs, not only by Christians, but also by pagans, see SALISBURY 2004: 58-62.

<sup>31</sup> TERTVLLIANVS, *Ad mart.*, 1, 2.

<sup>32</sup> EVSEBIVS CAES., *De mart. Pal.*, 11, 19. Reached this point, it should be borne in mind that one of the first Western passions, the future martyr Perpetua, becomes an amphitheater athlete in one of her premonitory visions, and she is even rubbed with oil before starting a boxing match: *et coeperunt me faisores mei oleo defricare, quomodo solent in agonem, Passio Perpet. et Felic.*, 10, 7.

had thaumaturgic properties for the pagan *plebs*, it is logical to think that it had also the body of the martyr for Christian *plebs*. Thus, both heroes of Antiquity – gladiator and martyr – shared supernatural properties, but often shared also the place for their death. And the setting provided by the circuses, hippodromes, amphitheaters, stadiums, and theaters, in the case of the martyrs, along with the trial and tortures (*summa supplicia*) did nothing but amplifying the previously acquired notoriety<sup>33</sup>.

Due to this status of entertainment inherent to executions, there were many Christians – some of them famous, some anonymous – who perished in the arenas of spectacles buildings, basically amphitheaters – few circuses and hippodromes, and no theater directly documented, although most likely there have been cases<sup>34</sup> – under the modality *damnatio ad bestias*<sup>35</sup> – *Christianos ad leonem!* Was the cry uttered by the crazy audience<sup>36</sup> – and indeed it seems that among the candidates for martyrdom this was the preferred way of dying<sup>37</sup>, a modality for which an arena was essential, as we will develop later. Though it is true that the texts also document many other forms of martyrdom for which this architectural framework was not essential, but recommended if the number of spectators was large, as used to be common: the crucifixion, the

<sup>33</sup> CARFORA 2009: 103, 47-49. A recent synthesis of the meanings and implications which involved the concept of “martyrdom” in Roman society, in DI BERARDINO 2012: 41-50.

<sup>34</sup> Though it may be assumed that the theater could have been the setting for martyrdom in those localities that did not have any other spectacles building. By way of example, it is surprising but significant verifying how in the theater of Clunia, in the second century, were held spectacles not exactly associated with comedy or tragedy, such as games with bulls, as pointed out of epigraphy; all of this in a framework of “conversion” of the building to hold in it all type of spectacles, DE LA IGLESIA/TUSET BERTRÁN 2012:62-63; DIARTE BLASCO 2012: 272. On the other hand, we should bear in mind the terminological confusion of late antique writers when referring to the different entertainment buildings, especially in Late Antiquity, when hagiographers began to refer to these places as a framework for martyrial executions, see QUACQUARELLI 1963: 121, therefore those references to certain circuses and amphitheatres could hide also references to theaters. Eusebius of Caesarea, for instance, uses interchangeably the terms “stadium” and “theater” to refer to the amphitheater, *De mart. Pal.*, 6, 3-5. Nor we can forget that many of these spectacles buildings were reformed and could be reconverted, for example, from hippodrome to amphitheater, or from theater to amphitheater, and this further complicates the semantics issue. In the Middle Ages, this terminological confusion is heightened, and so, for instance, the amphitheater of Verona is mentioned in two different ways when a fugitive takes shelter “*in circum, quod Arena dicitur*”, and later appears drawn in a codex of the tenth century under the heading *theatrum* BOLLA 2012: 57, 58.

<sup>35</sup> KYLE 1998: 184-187.

<sup>36</sup> TERTVLLIANVS, *Apolog.*, 40, 2. The lion appears associated with the Christian martyrs from almost the beginning, though not always as the executor of the torture: in *Hist. Rom.* 67, 14, Cassius Dio tells how Domitian executes the (possible) Christian Glabrio, who had previously killed a great lion, by order of the emperor himself. On the other hand, the Biblical story of Daniel in the lions' den was influential in Christian literature referred to the martyrdom – by way of example, EVSEBIVS CAES., *Hist. eccl.*, VIII, 2-5 and in the iconography of martyrdom itself, SALOMONSON 1979: 79-90, so surely this story would be very present in the last thoughts of many Christians condemned to the beasts.

<sup>37</sup> COLEMAN 1990: 57.

quicks throat-cutting and decapitation<sup>38</sup>, the hanging<sup>39</sup>, the instantaneous dismemberment by mechanical methods, and the *uiuicomburium* (cremation in life), especially abhorred by a religion believing in the imminent arrival of the final judgment and which therefore, had the burial as a precept to ensure the resurrection of the bodies. Other forms of particular cruelty as *poena culllei*, for which was essential the presence of the sea or a river, took place outside the recreational architectural frameworks we are dealing on. In fact, we have no sure documentary evidence of any Christian martyrdom carried on under this system, what is really not a surprise considering that the *culleus* was reserved for parricides<sup>40</sup>.

Even though the executions of Christians were often publicized<sup>41</sup>, most of these martyrs remain anonymous to the eyes of History<sup>42</sup>. We only have specific news from a few of them, through the hagiographic literature preserved<sup>43</sup>. Following is a brief list of those who died in the specific context of entertainment buildings, listing that doesn't claim to be exhaustive but illustrative of how this type of martyrdom occurred in a so specific architectural frame:

- Peter, according to the tradition, was crucified under the reign of Nero (67 C.E.) in the circus of Caligula and Nero located on Mount Vatican<sup>44</sup>. This would be the first documented Christian martyrdom in the context of a recreational building.
- Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, suffered martyrdom in Rome (107 C.E.), where he was expressly conducted for his execution<sup>45</sup>. According to some authors, he was probably one of the earliest Christians who died in the Colosseum<sup>46</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> That was the case of Paul, beheaded for being a Roman citizen, and of the martyrs of Scillium (near Carthage), throat-cut, GÄRTNER 1989, 9, 11, or that of Irenaeus of Sirmium, RUIZ BUENO 1996: 1030. However, being a Roman citizen may not have been guarantee of a quick death in some rare cases, see CARFORA 2009: 38, who refers, within the context of Christian martyrdom, to the "social downgrading" of the *honestiores* tortured in the arenas.

<sup>39</sup> EVSEBIVS CAES., *Hist. eccl.* VIII, 5.

<sup>40</sup> CANTARELLA 2005: 215-234.

<sup>41</sup> CARFORA 2009: 31.

<sup>42</sup> Christians who suffered martyrdom during Antiquity were thousands, but according to the subjective and biased nature of a significant part of the sources, it's still problematic to reach a consensus even to get a rough approximation to the real figure, see CARFORA 2009: 26-28.

<sup>43</sup> For a comprehensive view of Christian hagiographic literature in Antiquity, see the recent and splendid monograph MONACI CASTAGNO 2010.

<sup>44</sup> TACITVS, *Ann.*, XV, 44, describes the execution of many Christians by Nero as a result of the burning of Rome, but, as we know, at no point refers specifically to Peter. As regards to Paul, the early Christian tradition unanimously places his death in Rome unanimously, but the writings of the New Testament do not include the event. The *Acts of the Apostles* ends his story referring to the status of prisoner of the Apostle, who nevertheless could receive all those who visited him (cf. Acts. 28, 30-31). Only in the second epistle to Timothy we find these premonitory words: "For I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time has come to deploy the sails" (2 Tm 4, 6; cf. Flp 2, 17). His martyrdom is narrated for the first time in the *Acts of Paul* (cf. 9, 5), written in the late second century, where is told that Nero condemned him to beheading. The execution took place far away from any ludic space, but it's still curious and opportune the expression (used in the original) "to deploy the sails" – *uela erunt* – used by Paul when his death was near, as this was also the formula used for advertising amphitheater spectacles, SABBATINI TUMOLESI 1980.

<sup>45</sup> As told by Ignatius himself during his trip: "for God's wheat, ground by the teeth of the beasts" – *Ad Rom.*, 4, 1.

<sup>46</sup> LUCIANI 1993: 208-209. The obstinate silence of the sources, which report no nominal martyrdom in the Flavian amphitheater arenas, is well known.

- Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, in the stadium (or maybe in the amphitheater<sup>47</sup> or in the theater<sup>48</sup>) of the city (155 C.E.). He died burned at the stake because, as the *uenationes* time had finished, the Asiarch Philip could not release the lion that Jews and pagans demanded<sup>49</sup>. Polycarp's martyrdom was particularly important and influential for contemporary Christian writers and for the ones who wrote on the centuries immediately subsequents to the event<sup>50</sup>, so we can presumably assume that the elements of his narrative, including the scenery of the spectacle building, would constitute a genuine paradigm, which would condition the entire subsequent hagiographic literature.
- Carp, Papilus and Agathonice, bishop and deacon the first two (161-180 C.E.). Sentenced to the bonfire in the amphitheater of Pergamon<sup>51</sup>.
- Martyrs of Lyon and Vienne (Blandina, Maturus, Sanctus, Attalus, Alexander, Pontic and others), in *Lugdunum* (capital of *Gallia Lugdunensis*) (177 C.E.): there were many, about fifty<sup>52</sup>, and they represent the quintessential model of the Christian martyrdom in the amphitheater. It's specified that those who survived the prison and interrogation were conducted to the amphitheater as it is constantly referred in the source (in all probability talking about the preserved amphitheater of Trois Gauls, located in Lyon), and they were executed during the *ludi* by using various forms of torture, including the recurrent *damnatio ad bestias*.
- Perpetua, Felicity and others<sup>53</sup>, in the amphitheater of Carthage (capital of *Africa Proconsularis*) (203 C.E.<sup>54</sup>). They suffered martyrdom *ad bestias* using a leopard, a bear and a wild cow. It is explicitly stated in the sources that they were executed during some *munera castrensia*<sup>55</sup>.
- At Caesarea in Palestine, Priscus, Malchus and Alexander were delivered to the beasts (most likely in its well-documented hippodrome, been converted in amphitheater<sup>56</sup>), in times of Valerian (253-260 C.E.<sup>57</sup>).
- Fructuosus, bishop of Tarragona, and his deacons Augurius and Eulogius, die burned at the stake, in the amphitheater of Tarragona, capital of the Hispanic *Tarraconensis* (259 C.E.)<sup>58</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. ROBERT 1940: 35; THOMPSON 2002: 27-52.

<sup>48</sup> RONCHEY 1990: 151, note 23.

<sup>49</sup> *Letter from the Church of Smyrna to the church of Philomelium*, summarized and included in EVSEBIVS CAES., *Hist. eccl.* IV, 15; they are also preserved complete copies of the letter, *Mart. Polycarp.*; BURINI 1998: 35-993; RUIZ BUENO 1996: 263-279. See also CARFORA 2009: 106-111.

<sup>50</sup> MOSS 2013: 417.

<sup>51</sup> *Acta Carpi, Papili et Agatonicae*, 36.

<sup>52</sup> THOMAS 1978: 94. The martyrdom is referenced in the *Letter of the Churches of Lyon and Vienne to the churches of Asia and Phrygia*, written by Irenaeus, and included in EVSEBIVS CAES., *Hist. eccl.* V, 1, 37.

<sup>53</sup> *Passio Perpet. et Felic.*, 10; 18-21. An interesting and comprehensive analysis of this *passio* in CARFORA 2007.

<sup>54</sup> FREND 1978: 167.

<sup>55</sup> This information has led some authors to propose that the martyrdom occurred in the military amphitheater of Carthage, CHARLES-PICARD 1965: 200, different from the civil amphitheater which has reached our days – see status of the issue in CARFORA 2009: 46-47.

<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the Herodian hippodrome had been converted into amphitheater in the early or mid-third century, PATRICH 2011: 107, 177-204.

<sup>57</sup> EVSEBIVS CAES., *Hist. eccl.* VII, 12. Presumably, in 258, PATRICH 2011: 260.

<sup>58</sup> *Passio Fruct.* See FRANCHI DE'CAVALIERI 1959.

- Germanus, according to tradition, was martyred in the amphitheater of Pula (Istria, Croatia) during the reign of Numerian<sup>59</sup> (284 C.E.).
- A *passio* composed in the fifth century situates the martyrdom of Sebastian beated to death with sticks (which took place in Rome in the late third or early fourth century) in the *hippodrimo palatii duci*<sup>60</sup>, traditionally interpreted as the Circus Maximus.
- During the Tetrarchy, Augentius was cast out to the beasts somewhere in Palestine<sup>61</sup>. Hadrian and Eubulus, from Batanea, were thrown to the beasts in Caesarea<sup>62</sup>.
- Also during the Tetrarchy, Silvanus, Bishop of Emesa, in Phoenicia, perished in the jaws of the beasts in the same Emesa<sup>63</sup>.
- Agapius and Thecla, in Gaza, eaten by the beasts (c. 304). Concerning Agapius, it is specified that he was taken into the amphitheater and tortured by a bear during the celebrations offered by Maximinus Daya<sup>64</sup> on occasion of his birthday.
- Maxima, Secunda and Donatela, martyred in the amphitheater in *ciuitatem Turbitanam*<sup>65</sup>, one of the African *Thurburbo Maius* or *Thurburbo Minus*<sup>66</sup> (304 C.E.).
- Tarachus, Probus and Andronicus, martyred in Cilicia (304 C.E.), are thrown into a battle of beasts that was already scheduled prior to their sentence<sup>67</sup> in the amphitheater located one mile from an indeterminate town (Mopsuestia?)<sup>68</sup>. Various beasts, a bear and a lioness, attacked them but at last they perished by the sword.
- Alban, the first martyr documented in Britain (called “protomartyr of England” by historiographical tradition), was executed during the persecutions of Diocletian or perhaps earlier, in 287<sup>69</sup>, in the *harena of Verulamium* (St. Alban’s), according to Bede’s late account<sup>70</sup>.
- In the amphitheater of *Salona* (Solina, Croatia) several Christians were martyred, to cite the most famous: the priest Asterius, four soldiers of Diocletian’s personal guard (Antiochianus, Gaianus, Paulinianus and Telius) and the bishop Domnius, successor to Venantius. All they martyred in 304<sup>71</sup>.
- Although the martyrdom of Agnes occurred in the mid-third century or during the persecutions of Diocletian, it is known for Damasus’ epigrams and Ambrose treaties. Is tradition who states Agnes was martyred in the stadium of Domitian (Rome)<sup>72</sup>.
- Though Acisclus of Cordoba’s *passio* is late and the

historical veracity of the facts narrated there is zero —except the own martyrdom, which occurred in the tetrarchic period and was reported by Prudentius<sup>73</sup>— the hagiographer mentioned his death in the amphitheater of the city<sup>74</sup>.

- Finally, we should mention the late case, singular, and certainly legendary, of Almachius, later known as Telemachus, an oriental monk who, between the late fourth century and the early fifth century died in Rome when he came down to the sand to avoid the fight between gladiators and try to talk sense to his congeners<sup>75</sup>.

From this list of martyrdoms reported by hagiography as been held within the framework of Roman entertainment buildings, we can infer a number of assessments that will affect our archaeological argument and help its understanding. Firstly, the literary sources usually indicate that many of these martyrs were “eaten by the beasts” or “delivered to the beasts”, which means – even though this aspect is not always explicitly mentioned in the texts – the presence of a closed infrastructure which would confer minimum security guarantees for the spectators<sup>76</sup>: that is, basically, an amphitheater or any other entertainment building previously adapted to this task. Moreover, despite the *damnatio ad bestias* was already a common punishment in time of Augustus<sup>77</sup>, it is obvious that not all cities had wild animals<sup>78</sup> available at any moment – lions, basically – so the executions could be carried out with other methods, as was the case of Tarragona (through the stake), where also its chronology of mid-third century leads us to a not so glorious days of the Empire, when it became more difficult to stock up wild beasts and organizing the splendid games held in the first and second centuries. However, the sentence was carried out in one of the three spectacle buildings of the city, as specified by the source. Further, the execution of the martyrs of Tarragona, relatively late (259 C.E.) seems to take place outside the framework of any other ludic event, or at least the Acts do not mention it at all, but that fact did not stop a large crowd, composed of both Christians and pagans, who were testimony of the martyrdom and even the pagans, or so it seems, showed great respect towards the figure of Fructuosus<sup>79</sup>. Thus, although in this case there might not

<sup>73</sup> *Corduba Acisclum dabit*, PRUDENTIVS, *Peristeph.*, 4, 19.

<sup>74</sup> *Sanctum uero Acisclum in anfiteatrum decollari precepit, Passio Aciscli et Vict.*, 17, 1-2.

<sup>75</sup> THEODORETUS, *Hist. eccl.*, V, 26. See JIMNCHEZ, 2008: do como Tely la prohibici yen raza que se tratlaza un amfiteatro siglo III e inicios del IV, que un autor como ÉNEZ SÁNCHEZ 2008: 89-165.

<sup>76</sup> COLEMAN 1990: 51-52.

<sup>77</sup> VILLE 1981: 236. In the last century of the Republic, the leading role of the spectacles with wild animal was growing significantly, COLEMAN 1990: 51 and that role would be strengthened with the establishment of the Empire.

<sup>78</sup> Carefully observing the martyrs list included above, we see that, from the third century onward, Christians eaten by wild beasts are primarily Africans and Orientals, *id est*, martyrs from geographies closer to the natural habitat of lions and large felines (a further sign of the decrepitude of the economy and the major trade routes, particularly maritime). On the other hand, from the third century it appears to be more frequent the presence of bulls, bears and wild boars, to the detriment of felines, which, in fact, had almost become extinct in the previous centuries due to their excessive demand. Thus, the various forms of martyrdom on each of the times and places can also be an indicator of the economic and ecological pulse of the Empire.

<sup>79</sup> *Et quum ducerentur Fructuosus episcopus cum diaconibus suis ad*

<sup>59</sup> CUSCITO 1977: 150.

<sup>60</sup> *Passio S. Sebast.*, 104

<sup>61</sup> EVSEBIVS CAES., *De mart. Pal.*, 7, 4.

<sup>62</sup> EVSEBIVS CAES., *De mart. Pal.*, 11, 29.

<sup>63</sup> EVSEBIVS CAES., *Hist. eccl.* VIII, 13, 3-4.

<sup>64</sup> EVSEBIVS CAES., *De mart. Pal.*, 3, 1; 6, 3-7.

<sup>65</sup> *Passio Max. Sec. Et Donat.*, 6.

<sup>66</sup> LEAL 2009: 362.

<sup>67</sup> RUIZ BUENO 1996: 1119, 1126, 1129, 1132.

<sup>68</sup> This would be the most likely hypothesis, RUIZ BUENO 1996: 1133, given the fact that the last of the interrogations of the martyrs was held in this city.

<sup>69</sup> TESTORE 1961: col. 659-660.

<sup>70</sup> BEDA, *Hist. Eccl.*, I, 7, 4-5.

<sup>71</sup> BULIĆ 1916: 126-139; WILKES 1969: 429; MACKIE 2003: 214-215, 218-219.

<sup>72</sup> FRANCHI DE'CAVALIERI 1899.

have been any *ludi* as a frame for the execution, nor beasts available, neither a crazed mob of pagan audience, and even if there was no need to have a large infrastructure to carry on the cremation, yet the architectural framework and the reference point for the execution of Christians continued to be the amphitheater.

But leaving aside the case of Tarragona, the fact is that a significant portion of the martyrdoms celebrated in entertainment buildings was part of a *ludi* program. We could take for instance those of Lyon and Vienne, which took place within the frame of a great show offered on the occasion of the annual festival of the Three Gauls<sup>80</sup>, or the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity, as part of some *munera castrensia* held to celebrate the birthday of Geta<sup>81</sup>, or that of some martyrs of Palestine to commemorate the birthday of Maximinus<sup>82</sup>, or the death of Dasius, executed during the *Saturnalia*<sup>83</sup>. In short, all of these martyrdoms were held as a part of “the usual spectacles”<sup>84</sup>. Thus, we have evidence of a far from negligible number of witnesses of Christians’ executions carried out in the arenas, so that, in a context of mass spectacle, the then known as the “minority sect of Christians” was gaining visibility with every martyrdom, often with the spectacles building as a backdrop. A fine example of the internalization of this idea of the arena as the setting for the quintessential Christian heroic death would be the suicide of Peregrinus, a doubtful Christian who, in 165, after having been released from prison (precisely because he was not recognized as a Christian nor the local community, neither by the authorities), in a desperate act of self-reaffirmation decided to throw himself to the flames at the end of some *ludi* held near a town of Olympia<sup>85</sup>, an act which comes to demonstrate that it was well-known by everyone what was the place and the occasion most suitable for the sacrifice of a Christian martyr.

In addition, we can also see how some hagiographers are very interested in putting on record how the spectacles building were an inherent part of martyrdom. This is seen both in historical records (*acta*) as in those sources considered most distant from the facts, as well as in *passiones* and *uitae*. In our opinion, the no-strict historicity of some of these documents, even the fantasies and interpolations in certain cases, are even more valuable to our argument, since the so recurrent *topos* consisting in mentioning the Roman spectacles building as the main setting for the martyrdom —albeit by way of an interpolation subsequent to the facts — would suggest that not only during the persecutions, but also in the centuries immediate aftermath of them, they attached great importance to recreational buildings

*anfi-theatrum, populus Fructuoso episcopo dolere cepit, qui talem amorem habebat non tantum a fratribus sed etiam ab ethnicis, Passio Fruct., 3.*

<sup>80</sup> EVSEBIVS CAES., *Hist. eccl.* V, 1, 47.

<sup>81</sup> *Passio Perpet. et Felic.*, 7, 9.

<sup>82</sup> EVSEBIVS CAES., *De mart. Pal.*, 6, 1.

<sup>83</sup> In the story of the martyrdom of Dasius, occurred after 304 in *Durostorum (Moesia Inferior)*, MUSURILLO 1972: xl-xli, 272-279, nothing suggests that it occurred in a spectacles building, except for the fact that he was executed at the end of the pagan celebrations, and therefore, most likely, before a large audience, and that would require a building with enough. Indeed, the celebration of *ludi* while the *Saturnalia* were been held is documented, GARRIDO MORENO 2000: 58, 76-77, therefore we can assume that the celebration of martyrdoms, like Dasius’ would not be odd for this festivity.

<sup>84</sup> EVSEBIVS CAES., *De mart. Pal.*, 3, 2

<sup>85</sup> LVCIANO, *Dialogi*, 68, 14-21; CARFORA 2009: 126-136.

as martyrial settings, regardless, we insist, whether the topographical data of the death were true or not. By way of example, the Maxima, Secunda and Donatela *passio* suffered several interpolations and refractions, as part of the struggle between Catholics and Donatists<sup>86</sup>, but this was not a problem when determining the symbolic value of the amphitheater that appears in this *passio*: if the building was already included in the original acts, we have a positive datum, and if it was later interpolated, this information continues to be positive for us as the interpolation would show an explicit interest in including this scenario, what is the truly important to explain and justify the presence of Christian edilicia in entertainment buildings.

Let us now see more examples of texts where this scenic value is highlighted throughout the history of persecutions. In Smyrna, at the time of Decius, the martyr Pionius, after going through the forum and the atrium, had to be conducted to the theater so that the plebs could attend sitting to his trial for professing the Christian faith, a process that was running for far too long<sup>87</sup>. Later, at the Pionius’ refusal to sacrifice, the director of the shows threatened to claim him to the authorities for gladiatorial combats (amphitheater?), although in the end he was sentenced to the stake, penalty that runs on the stadium<sup>88</sup>. As can be observed, the narrative that has reached our days<sup>89</sup> seems not to skip any of the places across which has passed the process and the martyrdom of Pionius. And, simultaneously, it can be seen as holding trials against Christians in ludic spaces was also recurring, since these buildings, due to its large capacity, permitted to accommodate the huge crowd who gathered in such kind of events.

Even when the execution of the martyr occurred in another location, some writers did not fail the opportunity to include some recreational building in the narration. So, also very significantly in our opinion, in the *Vita Cypriani* written by his own disciple, the deacon Pontius, he mentioned that the bishop of Carthage passed through the stadium of the city when he was transferred, to stand trial, from the house of the officer designated by the proconsul to the palace. The datum gives us legitimacy to think that, most likely, the writer of the *uita* was fully aware of the high iconic value accorded to these settings, dedicated for *humiliores* executions but which paradoxically conferred an unexpected prestige to martyrdom. So although *honestior* Cyprian is finally beheaded in a wooded valley —a type of execution according to his social status—, Pontius, in a way maybe a little forced to our knowledge, did his best to make very clear the relationship of the martyrdom of the bishop with the stadium (note that the detail is not in the two reviews of the Acts of Cyprian) maybe wanting the deacon thereby confer greater legitimacy to the clean and rapid

<sup>86</sup> LEAL 2009: 364-365.

<sup>87</sup> *Sed cum populus ad theatrum ire disponderet, ut in consensu caeae multo melius beati martyris uerba posset audire, Mart. Pionii*, 7. Eusebius of Caesarea wrongly date the martyrdom of Pionius in times of Polycarp, RUIZ BUENO 1996: 611.

<sup>88</sup> *Ad Asclepiadem uero munerum editor ait: Ego te quasi damnatum ad gladiatorum certamina reposcam [...] cumque ad stadium peruenisset -Mart Pionii*, 18; 21.

<sup>89</sup> It is a Greek text that followed some acts seen by Eusebius and which he used to compose his work *Ancient martyrdoms*, now lost, RUIZ BUENO 1996: 611-612.

execution of the illustrious Carthaginian bishop<sup>90</sup>. A similar process of later inclusion of an entertainment building in the narration might be suspected in that conveyed by Bede on the beheading of Alban in the *Verulamium harena* (vid. *supra*). We also documented one case, that of Rufina, whose lifeless body is brought to *Hispalis* amphitheater to be burned after having been executed in an unspecified location<sup>91</sup>.

Potamiana, one of the so-called “martyrs of Alexandria” documented under the reign of Severus, died in an unspecified location and by means of a torture that does not necessarily imply a spectacles building (by pouring down her body melted pitch), and yet, as Eusebius reports, she was threatened by the judge to be handed to the gladiators so they could dishonor her<sup>92</sup>. Six young people whose name is unknown come before the governor Urban, in the amphitheater of Gaza, to claim martyrdom<sup>93</sup>. Philip, bishop of Heraclea in times of Diocletian, was executed in the bonfire, in an undetermined place of Adrianople, but in his acts it is described how during his captivity in Heraclea together with some local Christians, he received in the theater the crowds that visited him<sup>94</sup>. And even in the dreams and visions of the future martyrs are also recurrent the apparitions of circuses and amphitheatres as premonitory venues of their death: for instance, while she was still imprisoned, Perpetua has a vision of her close combat *ad amphitheatrum (...) in media arena*<sup>95</sup>.

At a more legendary level, but yet no less interesting for the issue at hand, there is preserved a story according to which Saint Columba of Sens was led to a cell in the amphitheater of the homonymous city where prostitutes were confined, and she managed to escape from there before being beheaded on the outskirts of the town<sup>96</sup>. Likewise, in the apocryphal *Acta Pauli et Theclae*, the saint from Iconium escapes unscathed an amphitheater where she had been thrown to the beasts, while Paul escapes from Ephesus stadium, together with a baptized lion, thanks to the help of a hailstorm<sup>97</sup>.

Further ahead, the executions of Christians within the framework of entertainment buildings continued to be held, although very rarely, in the Middle Ages. One example is the burning of two hundred Cathars in Verona’s amphitheater in 1278<sup>98</sup>.

### 3. A BRIEF ARCHEOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

In archaeological terms, the will of symbolically link the cult of martyrdom with a ludic scenario seems to be seen in certain cases, judging from the choice of location of the

<sup>90</sup> PONTIO DIAC., *Vita Cypr.*, 16, 4: *Eunti autem interfuit transitus stadii. Bene uere et quasi de industria factum, ut et locum congruentis certaminis praeteriret, qui ad coronam iustitiae consummato agone currebat.*

<sup>91</sup> *Cuius corpus in anfiteatrum deferri mandauit, ut illic flamis atrocibus cremaretur, Passio Iuste et Rufine*, 8.

<sup>92</sup> EVSEBIVS CAES., *Hist. eccl.*, 6, 5.

<sup>93</sup> EVSEBIVS CAES., *De mart. Pal.*, 3, 3.

<sup>94</sup> RUIZ BUENO 1996: 1070. The prison where Heraclea Christians stayed was attached to the theater by a tunnel, and it seems that the imperial authorities were, as usual, permissive in allowing meetings between prisoners and visitors, RUIZ BUENO 1996: 1073.

<sup>95</sup> *Passio Perpet. et Felic.*, 10, 4. An analysis of these visions in CARFORA 2009: 211-123.

<sup>96</sup> RÉAU 2000: 325-326.

<sup>97</sup> PERKINS 2005: 54, 60-61.

<sup>98</sup> BOLLA 2012: 59.

Christian buildings. What is really interesting for us, and what we are working on, are the Christian buildings constructed within the perimeter of the spectacles buildings, as witness in many cases of the martyrdoms celebrated in their sands. The following is a preview of some of the most relevant data of our research. Thus, in relation to the list of martyrs provided before, and following the same chronological order, we review very briefly some documented cases of the implementation of Christian commemorative buildings within entertainment buildings where these Christians were executed, again according to the hagiographic tradition.

It is quite paradigmatic the case of the martyrdom that took place in Tarragona in 259, which, three centuries later, led to the construction of a chapel in the arenas of its amphitheater to commemorate the death of Bishop Fructuosus and his deacons. The amphitheater of Tarragona was the last of the Iberian Peninsula in losing its original functionality<sup>99</sup>, and it did in the mid-fifth century. Already in the sixth century, made of reused materials from the same amphitheater, a first basilica is documented in all likelihood built to commemorate the martyrdom<sup>100</sup>. A second church in use until not long ago, that of Santa Maria, built in the Middle Ages, amortized the late antique church, under a different invocation to the most primitive (San Fructuosus). This second church is emerging as significant and highly illustrative, since it shows how many medieval churches erected in ludic buildings might be hiding not only an older church, but also a previous patronage of martyrdom nature. This information, which always passes unnoticed, has profound implications to the issue we are dealing with.

Regarding *hippodrimo palatii duci*, where Sebastian’s martyrdom took place, we have already pointed that this site has traditionally been interpreted as the Circus Maximus, but maybe some other possibilities should be considered. In particular two others: it could be the private *ludus* belonging to the Domitian’s palace (nowadays still visible but which maybe we can rule out as a potential place of martyrdom in the light of recent interpretations of the site as imperial gardens), and a small amphitheater built also within the Palatine by Valentinian III<sup>101</sup>, which location is currently unknown. Indeed, about 150 m away from the debated structures of the time of Domitian, stands a church dedicated to the martyr: San Sebastiano al Palatino, documented since the tenth century and pointed out by the tradition as the exact place of Sebastian’s death. Given that the church commemorates the place of martyrdom, or at least so claims local tradition, we wonder if it would be very risky to think that in the subsoil of the church there could be a ludic building, be that of Domitian – if we rule out the structures today deemed to be gardens – whether it be the entertainment building that Valentinian III erected by mid V century during his stay in Rome. With regard to this second possibility, though it is true that Sebastian’s martyrdom befell prior to the date of the alleged construction of the Valentinian III’s amphitheater, what is important in this case

<sup>99</sup> DIARTE BLASCO 2012: 284. For *Hispania*, see also DIARTE BLASCO 2014: 25-38; SALES CARBONELL in press.

<sup>100</sup> The literature on the amphitheater of Tarragona is huge. See, among the most interesting references for our argument: TEDA 1990 and GODOY FERNÁNDEZ 1994: 181-210.

<sup>101</sup> CARANDINI 2012: 263-264.

(considering right the hypothesis that the church is set on an amphitheater) is that the *passio* would have been composed at a time – in the mid fifth century at the earliest<sup>102</sup> – when the amphitheater already existed, and therefore the writer, as so often happened in hagiographic literature, would not stick with the historical reality or would be picking the place indicated by some local tradition. However, in this case, the construction of memorial Christian edilia would be located in the place indicated by the *passio*, and this fact would show once again the power and influence of hagiographic narratives in the society at the time. All this, we repeat, only whether it's correct the hypothesis saying that under the church of San Sebastiano al Palatino there is a spectacles building. Therefore, as usual, we have no choice but to entrust to future archaeological works.

In the amphitheater of the Roman city of *Salona* were discovered in 1911 some frescoes attributed to the installation of Christian cult of martyrdom nature<sup>103</sup> in one of the corridors originally used as a worship chapel to Nemesis. These frescoes, dating from the early sixth century by the style of the clothing of the characters appearing<sup>104</sup> (date also considered that of the foundation of the chapel<sup>105</sup>) contained the representations of some of the martyrs killed in the same amphitheater, with their names inscribed thereon. Unfortunately, the frescoes disappeared in 1987 due to conservation problems<sup>106</sup>. The amphitheater of *Salona* was the setting for most of the martyrdoms documented in the town, so we are facing again a martyr's memory space, but also facing a case of Christianization of pagan religious space, since as mentioned before, the precise location of this entertainment building where Christian cult is detected was originally the chapel where gladiators entrusted themselves to Nemesis before heading out to the arena.

The amphitheater of *Corduba* – which was known through the epigraphy and from the *passio* of the martyr Acisclus written in medieval times – has been discovered and excavated in the early twenty-first century. The first signs of re-use or re-occupation (as its excavators prefer to say), different from the original recreational function are detected at the beginning of the fourth century<sup>107</sup>. Recent archaeological works have revealed the presence of a late antique architectural complex consisting on which its excavators described as “two sets of buildings belonging to the same building process”. The complex is dated between the early fourth century and early fifth or at the beginning of the sixth century, and entails the following: a) the fragments of two buildings with an undefined floor plan settled on the sand, and b) three buildings showing identical floor plan, settled on the *proedria* and the *ima cauea* consisting each one of them in a apsidal structure of c. 8.30 m in diameter attached to the podium and a rectangular body of over 12 m wide and an indeterminate length<sup>108</sup>. Another structure of

the amphitheater is identified as a possible early Christian cult building: it would be the adaptation of a room beside a *uomitorium* with access from the corridor<sup>109</sup>. All this gives shape to a very complex and primitive worship center, although recently the Christian nature of these structures has been questioned<sup>110</sup>.

The case of the *Dyrrachion* amphitheater (Durrës, Albania) is outstanding from the point of view of structural conservation. There we find two chapels: the first one consists of an apse attached to the podium and a nave settled onto a *uomitorium* of *ima cauea*, while the second one stands in the middle of the *cauea* and displays decoration with frescoes. Maybe there is a third chapel, but it's still undergoing identification<sup>111</sup>. Furthermore it is documented a possible baptistery and a vast necropolis occupying the sand and other parts of the amphitheater. Despite the difficulties of an archeological excavation which seems to have suffered from many shortcomings, this whole Christian building program is attributed to the last quarter of the fifth century and is set in relation to the city restoration undertaken by the emperor Anastasius I, who was born in this city. The chapels would be consecrated to the bishop *Astion*, to Saint Stephen and to a local martyr whose name is not stated.

As concerns to Saint Agnes, we have already referred above to her martyrdom at the Stadium of Domitian, where it is located currently a baroque church, designed by Borromini, occupying part of the stadium bleachers, in the same place where before the twelfth century was already a church. Indeed, in 1123 the Pope Calixto II enlarged a chapel<sup>112</sup> built in one of the vaults (*de cryptis agonis*<sup>113</sup>) of the stadium. This chapel was erected in Late Antiquity or in the Early Middle Ages, and would appear already referenced in the second half of the eighth century in the Itinerary of Einsiedeln<sup>114</sup>. Actually, in the stadium there are documented some tombs of about the sixth century, which in all probability could be related to the presence of an oratory in these earlier times<sup>115</sup>.

Unique is the example of great Flavian amphitheater in Rome, where many Christian executions are assumed – the first and actually the only nominally known would probably be that of Ignatius of Antioch, mentioned above, and never confirmed by the sources— and wherein the construction of Christian edilia appears to be very late. After the Colosseum was turned into residence of noble families, in the fourteenth century the Senate donated one third of the building to San Giovanni Hospital<sup>116</sup>, but such an act of generosity on the part of government was not devotional but occurred for the sake of the prosaic purpose of cleaning the area of thieves, prostitutes and thugs<sup>117</sup>. In 1675 Clement X consecrated the Colosseum to the persecuted Christians<sup>118</sup>, and in 1749 it

<sup>102</sup> GORDINI 1968: 778.

<sup>103</sup> BULIĆ 1914: 22-23; MARIN 1994: 80. The space where we find this trace of Christian worship has also been defined as the “east chapel of the gladiators”, MACKIE 2003: 214, 221.

<sup>104</sup> BULIĆ 1914: 222.

<sup>105</sup> NIKOLAJEVIĆ 1980: 59-70.

<sup>106</sup> MACKIE 2003: 214-215, 221-222.

<sup>107</sup> MURILLO/GUTIÉRREZ/RODRÍGUEZ/RUIZ 2010: 286-287.

<sup>108</sup> MURILLO/GUTIÉRREZ/RODRÍGUEZ/RUIZ 2010: 290.

<sup>109</sup> MURILLO/GUTIÉRREZ/RODRÍGUEZ/RUIZ 2010: 286-287.

<sup>110</sup> HIDALGO PRIETO 2012: 249-274.

<sup>111</sup> BOWES/HOTI 2003: fig. 4.

<sup>112</sup> ARMELLINI 1891: 469.

<sup>113</sup> In these terms the church is named in a bull of Pope Urban III, ARMELLINI 1891: 470.

<sup>114</sup> JOSI 1961: col. 399.

<sup>115</sup> SANTANGELI VALENZANI 2012: 119.

<sup>116</sup> NAPOLI 2007: 8.

<sup>117</sup> LUCIANI 1993: 195-196. In memory of this fact, there is still a *stemma* with the image of the Savior in the keystone of the entrance arch on the Lateran side.

<sup>118</sup> BASSO 2003: 908.

was declared a public church by Benedict XIV<sup>119</sup>. Also from modern centuries are the unsuccessful intentions to build-in churches showing certain monumentality: the execution of the project of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, from about 1670, for building a small temple in the center of the arena in honor of the martyrs remained pending<sup>120</sup>. So it did the project of Carlo Fontana, dated in 1725 and consisting in the construction of a *Tempio ai Martiri* at one end of the arena<sup>121</sup>. Nor was achieved, as it was planned, the establishment of a secular congregation who would take charge of building a great temple on the occasion of the Holy Year 1750<sup>122</sup>. Be that as it may, the intention and the advocacy of these projects show, once again, that for Christianity the arenas of the amphitheatres remained marked with a deep symbolic meaning. And in fact there is currently a modern and modest chapel dedicated to Santa Maria della Pietà enabled for worship in one of the vaults below the E sector of the amphitheater, a chapel only referenced in modern documentation but which some authors have traced back as being more than one thousand years old<sup>123</sup>, hypothesis that, for the moment, has no firm archaeological evidence to be supported on<sup>124</sup>.

The case of St. Peter's would remain beyond our argument: although a church was built in the space of the circus of Caligula and Nero, this was not to commemorate the place of the martyrdom, but motivated by the presence of another martyr tomb that, circumstantially, was located in the necropolis adjacent to the circus. That's why when Constantine built his basilica, it invaded much of the circus, which was already in ruins from the second century, and the Emperor was charged to definitely obliterate it before raising the church in honor of St. Peter. Therefore the place where the Apostle was martyred appears to have passed completely unnoticed for Constantine: there was no will to Christianize the spectacles building for being a martyrial scenario, but they simply planned to build a basilica on a holy tomb which, coincidentally, was right next to the ruins of a circus where, in turn, the Apostle had been executed. In any event, the pilgrims originally venerated, and even today still venerate the tomb of St. Peter, not the scene of his martyrdom.

Furthermore, Christian edilia is preserved in at least more than fifty entertainment buildings in Roman cities, which the conserved hagiographic literature does not mention as having been martyrial sites. These are the most common cases, often with churches that were built later, in medieval times (but which may hide a late antique church, as seen in Tarragona): the so-called Old Cathedral in

<sup>119</sup> LUCIANI 1993: 204.

<sup>120</sup> LUCIANI 1993: 203.

<sup>121</sup> DI MACCO 1971: 82-89; LUCIANI 1993: 198.

<sup>122</sup> DI MACCO 1971: 204.

<sup>123</sup> NAPOLI 2007: 8.

<sup>124</sup> While it is true that tombs were installed in the surroundings of amphitheater between the fifth and seventh centuries, MENEGHINI/SANTANGELI VALENZANI 1993: 89-109, this fact might be put in relation with the today disappeared church of St. James, which was located outside the amphitheater, a few meters from the E façade. Even more if we consider that the Colosseum was used as spectacles building until 534, what *a priori* does not seem to encourage the idea of the implementation of Christian edilia inside the perimeter before this date. On the other hand, in 1895 some enigmatic burials were found in the sand, NAPOLI 2007: 9-10, very close to the above-mentioned chapel of Santa Maria della Pietà. We think these burials may be dated under fully medieval chronologies.

the bleachers of the Cartagena's theater, Santa Maria de las Arenas in the hypothetical Barcelona amphitheater<sup>125</sup>, Santa Maria dell'Arena in the amphitheater of Ancona, the convent of San Donato and San Bernardo on the *cauea* of Arezzo's amphitheater, Santa Maria al Circo and San Maurizio al Monastero Maggiore in the Milan circus, the church of St. John's in Chester's amphitheater, the remains of a chapel on the *spina* of the Tyre's hippodrome, or the Chapel in the sacellum of the hippodrome in Caesarea Maritima, to cite just a few examples that we are investigating. Is this an indication that in those amphitheatres and circuses, theaters and hippodromes some Christians were executed, or at least so they believed local traditions? Are we facing the archaeological testimony of martyrdoms that hagiographic literature did not report, or whose texts have not survived?

The construction of these churches within the perimeter of the spectacles buildings are special cases, worthy of being studied not only because of the intense intrinsic significance it has for Christianity to occupy these former pagan spaces, often martyrial, but also because of the implications that this phenomenon entails for Archeology and for the study of ancient urbanism: not a few cases of late antique necropolis and churches that have reached our days due to their prolonged use over time maybe also could have been settled within entertainment buildings now disappeared, or of which is difficult to detect any direct archaeological trace. In this sense, these special churches, still present in our urban landscapes—which is no longer the case of entertainment buildings—could act as indicators, and would be the thread of which start throwing to recover the memory of an earlier pagan constructive reality.

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This symbolic link between ludic setting and martyrdom was also echoed by the Art (and still it does). At first, scenes relating to the martyrdom were represented decontextualized of any architectural setting, mainly in certain luxury tableware such as those made of *Terra Sigillata Africana C* – is renowned the plate in Hayes form 53 A, dated to the second half of the fourth century with a martyr between two lions and the inscription DOMINA VICTORIA<sup>126</sup> –, but also in paintings as shown in figures contained in the outstanding *Thaenae* ara<sup>127</sup>. In Late Antiquity, especially in late Roman times, everyone knew where these particular deaths have been occurred, so they would not even need to represent the background, as evidenced by the examples given.

Later, in medieval and modern centuries, when the architectural remains of the spectacles buildings had progressively disappeared from the skyline of the cities and from the memory of its inhabitants, they began to

<sup>125</sup> SALES CARBONELL 2011: 61-73.

<sup>126</sup> WEIDEMANN 1990: n. 13.

<sup>127</sup> The ara or altar coming from early Christian necropolis *Thaenae* (Sfax, Tunisia), has a cubic shape and four painted sides, two of which are *damnatio ad bestias*, most likely representing Christian martyrs related to the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, according to latest iconographic interpretations, see CACITTI *et alii* 2011: 8, 71-136. Some authors simply interpreted the *Thaenae* paintings as scenes from an amphitheater, but in any event there is unanimity in noting that the *damnatio ad bestias*, were it applied to a pagan or a Christian, occurred in the framework of a spectacles building shows.

be frequent the representations of certain martyrdoms with an amphitheater as background. That is the case of a tenth century illustration representing two lions devouring Ignatius of Antioch in an amphitheater<sup>128</sup>. And even more significant if possible for our issue is the case of two paintings: “The Death of St. Sebastian” (Josse Lieferinxe, 1497) and a curious fresco/mural of the eighteenth century in which appears the martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch preserved in the San Vital church (Rome). Both works represented the martyrdoms outside the perimeter of an amphitheater, which is the Flavian in both cases. We wonder whether it could it be that they represented the martyrdoms in this way so that the viewer, now too distant the facts, quickly identifies the presence and importance of the recreational setting in the composition. Anyway, Roman pagan architecture was no longer the scene and had acquired the category of supporting actor in the compositional scheme of Christian martyrdom.

In contemporary times, the phenomenon was inherited by the historicist painting style of the late nineteenth century, with Jean-Léon Gérôme’s painting depicting the martyrs of Lyon’s prayers before dying in the arena as a paradigm of this iconography. And this setting became popular to the masses through film productions, where it would be really hard not to find an amphitheater background in any Hollywood peplum including Christian martyrdoms scenes.

Thus, by hagiographic literature and through artistic expressions, the physical and symbolic association between martyrdom and amphitheater—the latter understood as generic spectacles building—remained in the collective imagination over the centuries, to the point that even in the nineteenth-century took shape a legend telling that the quintessential amphitheater, the Colosseum in Rome, had been designed by a Christian architect named Gaudentius, who in turn, and always according to the legend, would have died martyred in the sands of his own work<sup>129</sup>.

In conclusion, from the earliest persecutions some trials of Christians, but above all many martyrdoms and executions, were carried out in Roman spectacles buildings. And when it was not so, not a few writers of *acta*, *uitae* and *passiones* took advantage to somehow allude to these evocative scenarios of high symbolic charge in the context of the Christian “fight”: the victory of the martyrs had occurred on and with the arenas, and the myth did nothing but growing from the days of the persecutions and almost to the present day. And this—as it couldn’t be otherwise—had also its impact on the new sacred edilia that pervaded the old Roman monuments<sup>130</sup>.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Prof. Angelo Di Berardino and Prof. Josep Vilella Masana for their always valuable contributions, and also Prof. Carlos Buenacasa Pérez and Prof. Juan A. Jiménez Sánchez for the attentive reading of the manuscript and for

<sup>128</sup> Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana [Vatican Library] (Vat. gr. 1613, f 258).

<sup>129</sup> The legend was originated from the nineteenth-century discovery of the tombstone of a certain Gaudentius in the catacombs of Santa Agnese, whose epitaph was interpreted, so fanciful, as belonging to the Flavian amphitheater, O’REILLY, 1874: 34-37.

<sup>130</sup> Sandra Núñez Fernández has translated this text, originally written in Spanish, into English.

their relevant comments.

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