

PIRANESI'S CIRCUSES AND CARCERES: THE NEWLY DISCOVERED FIRST STATE OF THE CAMPUS MARTIUS PLAN AND ITS ANTIQUARIAN CONTEXT

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This essay takes as its starting point the newly discovered first state print of the large topographical plan of the Campus Martius of ancient Rome made by Giovanni Battista Piranesi in the years around 1760. There are significant differences between the first and the more common second state (which was bound into the Campus Martius volume published in 1762) and they concern the form of the circuses, six of which are included by Piranesi in his plan. This essay will investigate those changes and propose a hypothesis regarding the motivations for them by looking at the antiquarian context with which Piranesi was familiar and taking into consideration his enthusiasm for on-site examination of ancient remains. Particularly relevant are the ruins of the circus of Maxentius on the via Appia just outside the city, a site which preoccupied Piranesi at various times throughout his career in Rome. The antiquarian material examined includes earlier writings on circuses, which had a marked effect on the way that Piranesi drew his circuses in the first state of the plan and on the changes he made, clearly visible in the copper plates from which the prints were made. The circus Maximus and circus of Maxentius as described by Pirro Ligorio, Onofrio Panvinio and Raffaele Fabretti are key to the genesis and development of the Campus plan.

Questo saggio prende spunto dalla prima redazione della grande pianta topografica del Campo Marzio di Roma antica, realizzata da Giovanni Battista Piranesi intorno al 1760 e recentemente scoperta. Le differenze tra la prima e la più comune seconda redazione (che fu inserita nel volume Campus Martius pubblicato nel 1762) sono significative e riguardano la forma dei circhi, sei dei quali sono inclusi da Piranesi nella sua pianta. Questo saggio analizzerà questi cambiamenti e proporrà ipotesi sulle motivazioni che li hanno determinati, prendendo in considerazione il contesto antiquario che Piranesi conosceva e tenendo conto del suo entusiasmo per l'esame autoptico dei resti antichi. In questo quadro particolarmente rilevanti sono le rovine del circo di Massenzio sulla via Appia, appena fuori città, un sito che ha interessato Piranesi in diversi momenti della sua carriera a Roma. Il materiale antiquario esaminato comprende scritti precedenti sui circhi, che hanno avuto forti conseguenze sul modo in cui Piranesi ha disegnato i suoi circhi nella prima redazione della grande pianta topografica del Campo Marzio e sulle successive modifiche apportate, chiaramente visibili nelle lastre di rame da cui sono state ricavate le stampe. In particolare il circo Massimo e il circo di Massenzio descritti da Pirro Ligorio, Onofrio Panvinio e Raffaele Fabretti sono infatti fondamentali per la genesi e lo sviluppo grande pianta topografica del Campo Marzio.

¹ Colleagues and friends – and also my children – have enlightened my thinking and assisted my research into the *Campus Martius* plan over the last couple of years; I thank them all for their generosity, their insights and their patience. I thank the anonymous readers and the editors of PBSR for the opportunity to publish here. AMDG.

INTRODUCTION

This essay introduces a previously unknown first state of Piranesi's *Campus Martius* plan (Fig. 1), one of the largest, most complex and most controversial of the Venetian architect's archaeological prints, and presents a hypothesis regarding the motivations behind the radical changes made from this first state to the second. These changes concern the architectural form of ancient circuses, in particular the starting-gates used by the chariots, known as *carceres*. The first state print will be compared with the more common second state, using the two versions at the British School at Rome [BSR]² and the copper plates conserved at the Istituto Centrale per la Grafica in Rome.³ Both the prints examined here were part of the collection of Thomas Ashby at the BSR; the Library also holds a copy of the volume in which the plan is included, *Campus Martius Antiquae Urbis* (Rome 1762).⁴

Before examining the two state prints and their antiquarian context, it is helpful to consider the variable status of perceived truth about the ancient world in the age of pre-scientific archaeology. Johann Joachim Winckelmann remains the 'father of art history' (Harloe, 2019) even though some of his interpretations have proved to be mistaken and he sometimes neglected existing scholarship to press ahead with his analyses of inscriptions or objects.⁵ Piranesi's antiquarianism, despite the condemnation of his errors by those who looked critically at the *Campus Martius* plan, both during his lifetime and in our era (Lumisden, 1797: 252–3; Connors, 2011: 25–31), retains coherence, supported by the vast body of work he undertook in the analysis and recording of the structures and architectural ornament of ancient Rome and its environs. In the years before Piranesi started his four-volume *Antichità Romane* project (Piranesi, 1756), there was constant antiquarian activity in the city that had created a vast hinterland of heterogeneous knowledge; what was judged as correct at one time could later easily be criticized as erroneous, as it often was. Archaeologists now, with the clarity of scientific method and the benefits of technology, are more confident in their conclusions about the ancient world which, however, remain open to interpretation. Piranesi employed antiquarian written and visual material, referenced ancient literary sources and, eventually, incorporated extant physical evidence into his interpretation of the appearance of the circuses, ancient structures which had a

² The first state plan is framed and on display; the second state plan has the catalogue no. XL.611.P.13-08_13; the volume has XL.611.P.13

³ Plate V [top left, dedication]: https://www.calcografica.it/matrici/inventario.php?id=M-1400_425 / Plate VI [middle left, Bustum Hadriani] https://www.calcografica.it/matrici/inventario.php?id=M-1400_426 / Plate VII [bottom left, Tiber island] https://www.calcografica.it/matrici/inventario.php?id=M-1400_427 / Plate VIII [bottom right, Horti] https://www.calcografica.it/matrici/inventario.php?id=M-1400_428 / Plate IX [middle right, Naumachia] https://www.calcografica.it/matrici/inventario.php?id=M-1400_429 / Plate X [top right, compass] https://www.calcografica.it/matrici/inventario.php?id=M-1400_430

⁴ The author is not aware of any other collection that has a copy of each state of the print.

⁵ For example, his mistake regarding the so-called anaglyph of Manthus: Hornsby, 2021.

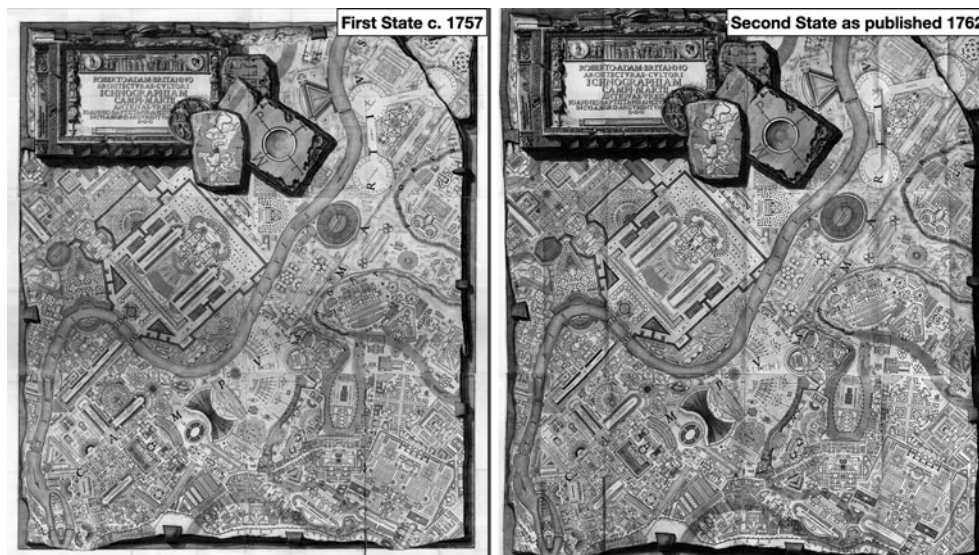


Fig. 1. G.B. Piranesi, *Ichnographiam Campi Martii Antiquae Urbis*, first and second states (Library and Archive, British School at Rome).

particular allure for early modern antiquarians and architects.⁶ Piranesi changed his mind about the form, altering his plan and thus creating a second state. My hypothesis is that this change resulted from the acceptance of a specific piece of archaeological evidence, previously either deliberately ignored by or unknown to him.

Piranesi intended his *Ichnographia*⁷ to be helpful to young or aspiring architects, to give them an expanded vocabulary of forms:⁸

Le piante di tante fabbriche fra loro diverse, che vi si vedranno, e che hanno servito ad elevazioni [alle elevazioni] ... serviranno agli studiosi dell'Architettura di norma nella posizione di qualunque edificio che si proporranno di disegnare, o di costruire...

To an observer who turns to it in order to learn something about ancient Rome, it is the explosive invention of the plan that first strikes, not its potential usefulness to architects, archaeologists or antiquarians; its influence as a concept of a city neither actual nor historic is to be found in twentieth- and twenty-first-century theory and practice.⁹ Yet it has revealed a wealth of precise detail from and

⁶ The circus was not included in Vitruvius's book on architecture: Granger, 1931–4.

⁷ The full title of the plan is *Ichnographiam Campi Martii Antiquae Urbis*; in this essay, the nominative form *Ichnographia* is used as an abbreviation. The bibliography of Piranesi is now vast, and on the *Campus Martius* plan itself very extensive. Relevant to this account see primarily: Wilton-Ely, 1983; 1994; 2006, Connors, 2011; Bevilacqua, 2015; Minor, 2015; Pasquali, 2016; Mariani, 2017; Hornsby, 2023.

⁸ Anon. 1757: 269–70, first published and discussed by Pasquali, 2016:183.

⁹ Dixon, 2005: 115–32; Tafuri, 1980; Eisenman, 2007. These two and others were recently discussed by Pala, 2023, and Tschudi, 2022.

reference to ancient Rome, one example being Piranesi's direct adoption of the graphical conventions from the Severan marble plan (Hornsby, 2023: 149). Indeed, his friend and the dedicatee of the *Campus Martius*, the architect Robert Adam, whilst being aware of Piranesi's tendency to elaborate, took great advantage of the older architect's intimate knowledge of the ancient ruins and adopted many of the ideas from the *Campus* plan and volume, employing them consistently throughout his career:¹⁰ the internal symmetry, the use of interlocking geometric shapes, the love of porticoes. He also borrowed specific arrangements of buildings for one of his own ambitious, unrealized projects (Hornsby, 2023: 157).

1. THE TWO EXEMPLAR CIRCUSES

Two circuses were of crucial importance to antiquarians: firstly, because it is the most important and most often cited by ancient authors, was the Circus Maximus – the 'ur-circus' not only for Rome but for the Roman world as a whole – and secondly the circus on the via Appia, the Circus of Maxentius, because it was largely above ground, therefore visible, although in ruins. Both of these monuments attracted the attention of Piranesi soon after his arrival in Rome and were included in his collection of small *vedute* prints.¹¹ Fig. 2 is a view of the Circus Maximus, showing the rural aspect of the area under the shadow of the substructures on the Palatine hill. Another print is of the Circus of Maxentius (Fig. 3); it was known from the 16th to 19th centuries as the circus of Caracalla due to a misreading of numismatic evidence (Tomasi Velli, 1990: 95). Its *spina* was embellished by an obelisk that lay broken in two pieces above ground until the 17th century and this is now part of Bernini's *Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi* in Piazza Navona.

The theme of circuses was clearly deeply embedded in Piranesi's antiquarian and architectural thinking, thanks to the extant circus on the Appia. A later instance where it is explored is in a beautiful preparatory drawing for an unexecuted view print, *Circo di Massenzio e sepolcro di Cecilia Metella*. Probably this was originally intended to join two other *vedute* showing ruins in the area adjacent to the via Appia, the Grotto of Egeria and S. Urbano alla Caffarella (known at the time as the *Tempio di Bacco*). The view is taken

¹⁰ Robert Adam letter to James Adam of 4 July 1755; National Records of Scotland, Register House, Edinburgh, Clerk of Penicuik Papers, GD18/4777, 2r; with thanks to Colin Thom for kindly providing access to this and other transcriptions, yet to be published: '...so amazing and ingenious fancies as he has produced in the different plans of the buildings I never saw and are the greatest fund for inspiring architecture that can be imagined'; see in general Wilton-Ely, 2006.

¹¹ See Wilton-Ely, 1994 1: 90 for discussion of the composition of various collections of the small views. Figs 2 and 3 here are his nos 58 and 64.



Fig. 2. G.B. Piranesi, *Veduta del Circo massimo, e del Palazzo de Cesari nel Palatino*, pl. 63 from *Varie Vedute di Roma Antica, e Moderna* (Library and Archive, British School at Rome).



Fig. 3. G.B. Piranesi, *Circo di Caracalla*, pl. 6 from *Varie Vedute di Roma Antica, e Moderna* (Library and Archive, British School at Rome).

from the hillside to the north of the site and clearly shows the towers of the *carceres*.¹²

These two exemplar circuses highlight the use of and conflict between two types of evidence used by antiquarians – the authority of the ancient sources (and the ambiguity inherent in their interpretation) and the reality of existing structures; these factors informed the antiquarian discussion and influenced Piranesi.

2. THE *CAMPUS MARTIUS* PROJECT

Since he settled in Rome in the mid-1740s, Piranesi had been working on the four volumes of the *Antichità Romane*, the publication of which in May 1756 caused great interest among scholars and erudites across Europe and earned him the accolade of a Fellowship of the Society of Antiquaries of London (Gavuzzo Stewart, 2014). It has been made clear by Susanna Pasquali (2016), in her work on the genesis of the *Campus Martius* plan and volume between the years 1757–62, that Piranesi was intending to extend that four-volume project, adding a large, illustrated plan of the ancient city, specifically the area north of the monumental centre, the Campo Marzio, heavily built up with porticoes, temples, theatres and other public buildings from the period of Augustus onwards. The project eventually became an illustrated volume with the fold-out plan inserted, the accompanying text being a survey of the historical development of the area. Both the plan and its subsequent incarnation as a volume were dedicated to Robert Adam who had been in Rome from 1755–7, studying architectural drawing with teachers connected with the French academy and with Piranesi (Wilton-Ely, 1978: 21). The Venetian architect intended to capitalize on the fame which his *Antichità Romane* had brought him in Britain by making the dedication of this new project to a British artist on the grand tour.¹³

The plan of the *Campus* in the original project was to have been flanked by bird's-eye perspective views of some of the monuments, placed in adjacent areas of the margins, forming a 'frame' around the plan. Views of the area near to the Mausoleum of Hadrian and the area inland of the Theatre of Marcellus – the middle and lower sections of the left-hand side of the plan – are the only survivors. These were eventually included in the volume, repurposed as its second

¹² Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi inv. 96011. For a photograph, see <https://euploos.uffizi.it/inventario-euploos.php?invn=96011&aut=&cat=&sgti=&mtcm=&mtct=&dtz=&u=1719493583#opimages-46825ng1-1>. Also Bevilacqua and Gori Sassoli, 2007: 128, pl. XXXVII. The drawing may be dated to 1766–7, based on the *vedute* published at this time which depict those adjacent sites: see Robison, 2022: 243, state XIV (those sites are Piranesi's catalogue nos 80 and 81) and Wilton-Ely, 1994: 256–7, nos 213 and 214. Interestingly, this postdates the changes to the circuses in the *Campus* plan.

¹³ One of many references to the dedication of the *Campus Martius* to him is in Robert Adam to Janet Adam, letter of 23 April 1756; National Records of Scotland, Register House, Edinburgh, Clerk of Penicuik Papers, GD18/4805, 2v.

frontispiece (Mausoleum of Hadrian view) and the last plate, no. 48 (a sheet of three separate views including the Theatre of Marcellus and the Pantheon).¹⁴ That first project was abandoned; the Adam letters mention a delay in receiving the desired dedication from Piranesi,¹⁵ no doubt caused by recasting the project into book form – drafting the text and etching the illustrations – and also by changing the plan in one significant way. The six circuses included by Piranesi within the ancient *Campus* area were radically altered in their form by the time the project had changed from an illustrated plan to a fold-out in the volume.¹⁶ In the course of the research for this paper, the two states of the plan have been compared inch by inch and no other differences have been found.¹⁷

3. CIRCUS MAXIMUS CARCERES ANALYSIS IN THE *PIANTA DELL'ANTICO FORO ROMANO*

The intimate connection between the *Antichità Romane* first volume and the idea for a map of the ancient city has been noted by scholars (Wilton-Ely, 1978: 73); Piranesi had stated this intention, referring to the aqueducts diagram:¹⁸

Affine però che non mi possa essere obiettato da chicchessia, che io abbia fatta la detta Tavola a capriccio, stimo a proposito di avvertire, che avendo io, sulla scorta non meno degli antichi Scrittori che degli odierni avanzi delle antiche fabbriche, e de' frammenti dell'antica Iconografia di Roma riportati in principio del presente Volume, formata una gran Pianta iconografica dell'antica Roma, che fra poco darò alla luce.

The *Pianta dell'antico Foro Romano*, pl. XLII of this volume, including the Circus Maximus, employs a graphical language followed directly by the *Ichnographia* and

¹⁴ For the second frontispiece: https://www.calcografica.it/matrici/inventario.php?id=M-1400_419 and Mariani, 2017: 298, no. 97. For plate XLVIII, see: https://www.calcografica.it/matrici/inventario.php?id=M-1400_455a, Mariani, 2017: 330–1, nos 149, 150, 151.

¹⁵ Letter from Robert Adam to Mrs Adam, 9 October 1756; National Records of Scotland, Register House, Edinburgh, Clerk of Penicuik Papers, GD18/4821, 1v.

¹⁶ However, there are a few copies of the volume which include the first state plan; the author is gradually compiling a list of these. Probably, the plan, being so large and costly to produce, even when superseded by the second state with its new form of the circuses, would not have been wasted and so copies that had been printed from the plates before their alteration would not have been discarded but were instead included in some early copies of the volume. The first state prints so far located were probably bought by tourists and added to private libraries in England and elsewhere, then sold to university collections in the 19th century; several of them are online, for example this copy at Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen: <http://resolver.sub.uni-goettingen.de/purl:PPN664846823>

¹⁷ On examination of the copper plates at the Istituto Centrale per la Grafica, many areas of abrasion apart from those located at the circuses can be seen, yet these interventions must have taken place before the first state printing as they are not reflected in any differences between the first and second state prints.

¹⁸ Piranesi, 1756, *Spiegazione della preposta tavola degli acquedotti*, 1, in reference to plate XXXVIII.

its genesis is key to understanding the dates and process of the changes to the circuses in the *Campus Martius* plan. Giovanna Scalonì, in her analysis of the *Pianta* copper plate and prints (Scalonì, 2014: 157–8), noted abrasion in certain areas, principally around the circus, which explains the existence of two states of the print; she has dated these alterations from between 1756 (the earliest prints of the first state) and 1761 (the date of the copy of the second state presented by Piranesi to the Accademia di S. Luca). The photograph of the copper plate (Fig. 4) shows the abraded areas clearly: the ‘rubbing out’ is noticeable as darker, smudged areas around the *carceres* and the *spina*. These changes to the form of the Circus Maximus are the most significant interventions made on this plate and point to the inclusion of a completely different architectural form for this, the most important Roman circus. This change, executed in the years 1757–61, leads to the conclusion that this was the time when equivalent alterations were being made to the circuses in the *Ichnographia*.

Fig. 5 shows the key areas in the first state of the Circus Maximus: a complex *carceres* block perpendicular to the long sides of the circus, a long *spina* and several openings connecting to the neighbouring streets. The second state simplifies these features and closes the openings. It also shows diagrammatic intersecting lines indicating the centre of the circle of which the arc of the *carceres* is a section. This display of geometrical calculation seems to have been made deliberately to show why it was needed; it can be seen in all the circuses in the second state of the *Campus Martius*. In the *Pianta* first state, the separate identity of the towers at the corners of the *carceres* – the *oppida* – and other areas are numbered and included in the index.¹⁹

4. ANALYSIS OF THE CIRCUSES IN THE *ICHOGRAPHIAM CAMPUS MARTIUS*

Turning to the copper plates of the *Ichnographia*, it is clear that the circuses here were altered in the same way as was the Circus Maximus in the *Pianta*. Evidence is present in the areas of abrasion on the plates where the circuses are etched: these darker, rubbed areas are visible notably at the *carceres* and *spina*. These interventions indicate where the first design was removed and replaced, explaining the existence of first and second state prints.²⁰ This section will

¹⁹ Piranesi, 1756, I, located after pl. XLII, *Indice del anteposta tavola del Foro Romano: 125 Ingressi/126 Carceri ove preparano le bighe e quadrighe/127 Torri per l'uso del pretore*.

²⁰ The author first noticed the differences in the circuses on copies of the plan in August 2022 while consulting the Quondam blog. This consists of hundreds of web pages related to Piranesi and specifically the *Ichnographia* created by Stephen Lauf who states that he redrew the plan using CAD technology over 25 years ago. It appears that in 1999 Lauf alerted John Wilton-Ely to his discovery of the two states, but nothing has emerged in the scholarly world about this until now. See: <https://www.quondam.com/e26/2607.htm>, <https://www.quondam.com/e26/2607a.htm>, <https://www.quondam.com/e27/2702.htm>.

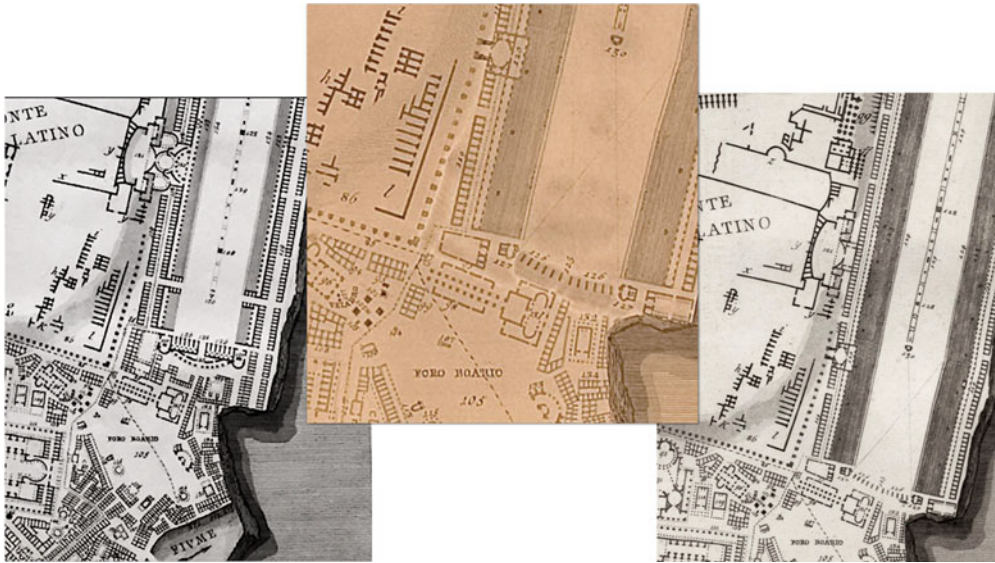


Fig. 4. G.B. Piranesi, Circus Maximus details from *Pianta dell'antico foro romano* from *Antichita Romane* vol. I, pl. XLIII (l-r) first state/copper plate, flipped/second state (Creative Commons via Arachne/Istituto Centrale per la Grafica/Library and Archive, British School at Rome).

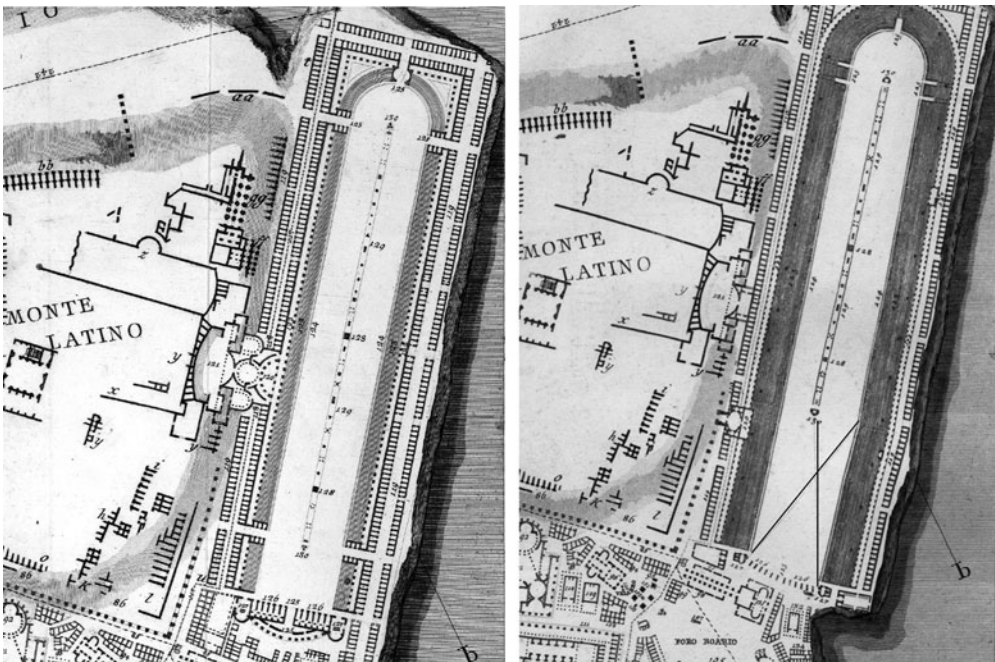


Fig. 5. G.B. Piranesi, Circus Maximus detail from *Pianta dell'antico foro romano* from *Antichita Romane* vol. I, pl. XLIII (l-r) first state/second state (Creative Commons via Arachne/Library and Archive, British School at Rome).

present the visual evidence of the changes for each circus in turn, moving across the plan from the left to the right.

At the far left-hand edge of the plan and only partially visible, is what Piranesi calls *Circus Caii et Neronis* (Fig. 6a), now known as the Circus of Nero; its obelisk is labelled in the first state but erased in the second. In the first state, a temple to Apollo appears on the right-hand flank of the circus, integrated into the structure of the seating areas; in the second state, this connection is severed by a boundary line. The principal changes are that the *carceres* become an arc, the *spina* is shortened and the diagrammatic lines between these two elements are added. These changes are repeated in each of the circuses.

Adjacent to the Mausoleum of Hadrian, Piranesi invented a vast monumental funerary complex, pairing the *Circus Hadriani* with a symmetrical *Circus Domitiae* flanking a triangular *Clitaeporticus* with paths and planting (Fig. 6b). The complex extends from the *Pons Aelius Hadrianus* inland, forming one of the most striking creations within the plan (Connors, 2011: 81). The *carceres* in the first state have a curious segmental form; they are large, subdivided spaces, apparently unrelated to their function. The twin circuses area of the plan in its first state matches the perspective view in the second frontispiece of the volume (Fig. 7). As mentioned above, Pasquali has shown that this perspective view was part of the original *Campus Martius* plan project of 1757. The fact that the structures seen in the view and on the plan correspond in the first, but not in the second, state indicates that the ‘plan with views attached’ idea was predicated on the earlier state of the plan.²¹

On the opposite bank of the Tiber is the *Circus Flaminius* (Fig. 8). As at the Circus of Nero, Piranesi integrates a temple of Apollo into the structure in the first state, separated in the second. It is particularly noticeable in the second state that the circus seating area on the chariot drivers’ left-hand side is shorter.²² The *Circus Flaminius* in the first state also supports the ‘first state/first Campus project’ hypothesis; it is clearly shown in this form in two small maps of the *Campus Martius*, plate IV, figs II and III of the volume (Fig. 9). They depict the *Campus* in eras prior to that used by Piranesi for the large *Ichnographia* – a complex, late Empire-based topography (Dixon, 2005: 117–18) chosen because it offered the richest catalogue of monuments for the architect to reconstruct. These small maps show the area at the time of Augustus (pl. IV, fig. II) and at the time of his death (pl. IV, fig. III). Pasquali (2016: 182, n. 11) has convincingly suggested that these small maps were first intended to flank the plan in the first project, like the bird’s-eye views

²¹ Not observed by Pasquali, 2016: 188. fig. 3.

²² See Humphreys, 1986: 18–24 and Harris, 2014: 296–312. This disparity in the extent of the flanks of the circus was a technical adjustment to accommodate the off-centre arc of the *carceres*, part of the layout that helped to equalize the chances for all competitors. Since the race was run counter-clockwise around the course, the chariots at that end of the starting gates would otherwise have been at a disadvantage.

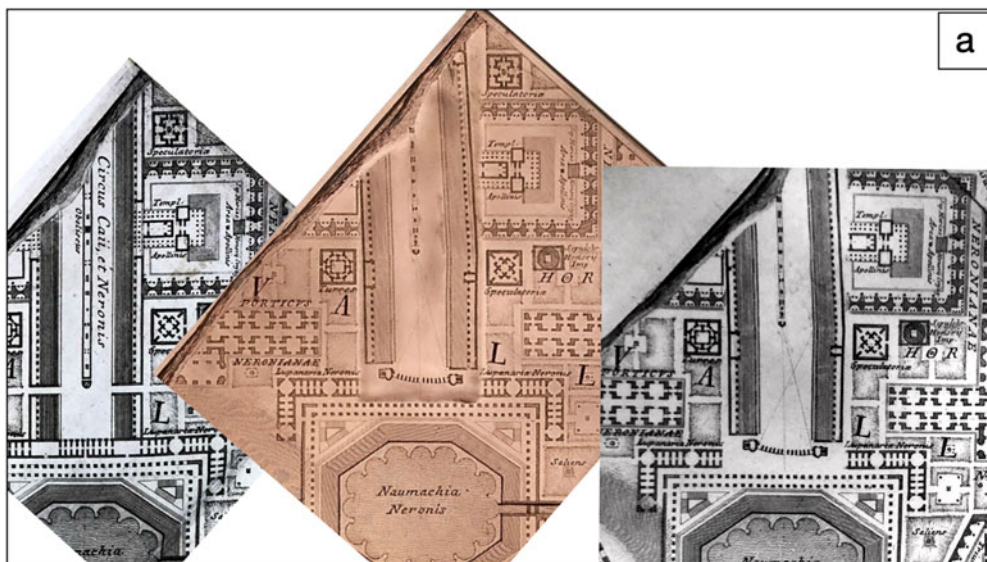


Fig. 6a. G.B. Piranesi, *Circus Caii et Neronis*, details from *Ichnographiam Campi Martii Antiquae Urbis* (l-r) first state/copper plate, flipped/second state (Library and Archive, British School at Rome/Istituto Centrale per la Grafica/Library and Archive, British School at Rome).

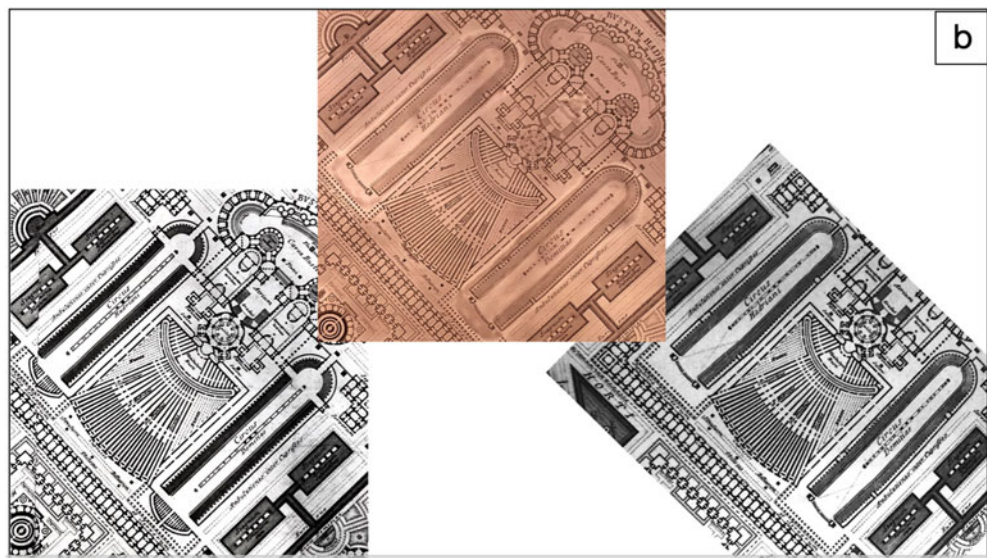


Fig. 6b. G.B. Piranesi, *Circus Domitiae/Circus Hadriani*, details from *Ichnographiam Campi Martii Antiquae Urbis* (l-r) first state/copper plate, flipped/second state (Library and Archive, British School at Rome/Istituto Centrale per la Grafica/Library and Archive, British School at Rome).

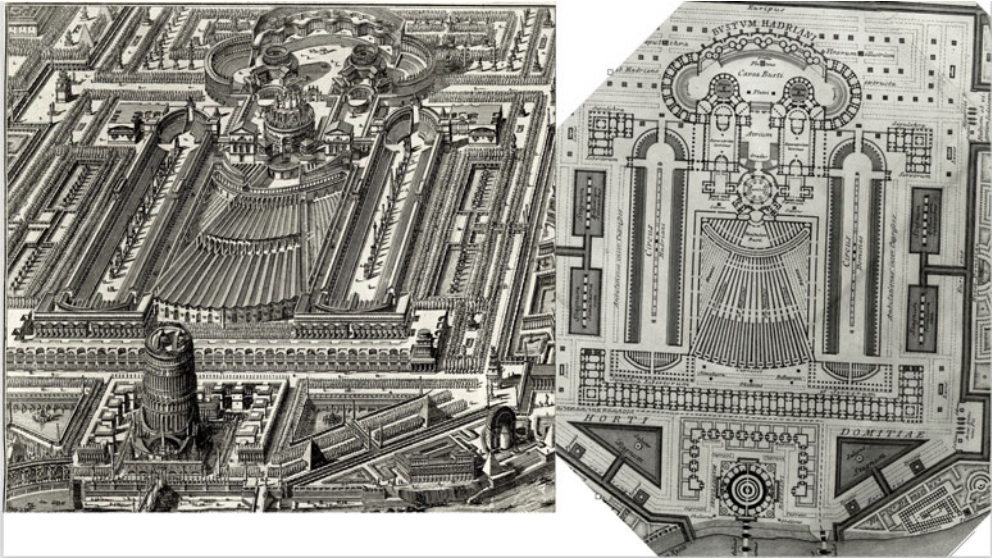


Fig. 7. G.B. Piranesi, *Circus Domitiae/Circus Hadriani*, details from (lhs) bird's-eye view, second frontispiece of *Campus Martius Antiquae Urbis* and (rhs) *Ichnographiam Campi Martii Antiquae Urbis*, first state (Library and Archive, British School at Rome).

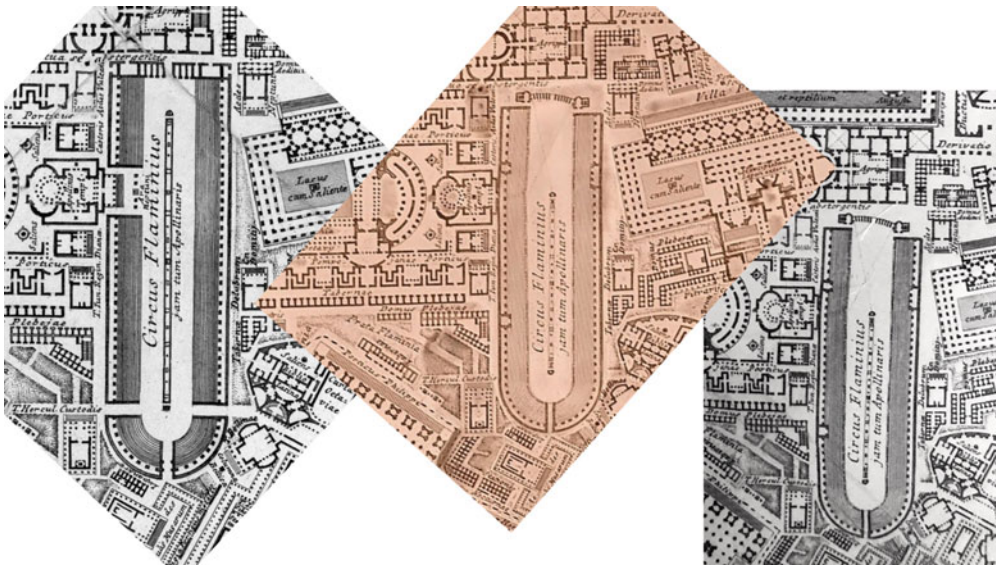


Fig. 8. G.B. Piranesi, *Circus Flaminius*, details from *Ichnographiam Campi Martii Antiquae Urbis* (l-r) first state/copper plate, flipped/second state (Library and Archive, British School at Rome/Istituto Centrale per la Grafica/Library and Archive, British School at Rome).

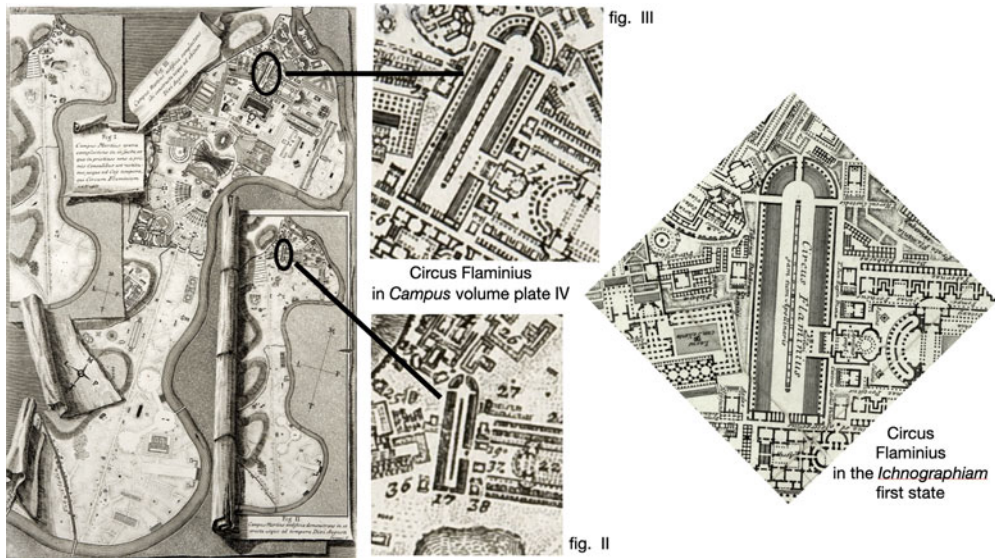


Fig. 9. G.B. Piranesi, *Circus Flaminius*, details from *Campus Martius Antiquae Urbis*, pl. IV and *Ichnographiam Campi Martii Antiquae Urbis*, first state (Library and Archive, British School at Rome).

mentioned above, and were to be placed adjacent to the areas at the top of the plan.

The fifth circus is named as *Circus Agonalis* (Fig. 10a); it is what we know as Piazza Navona, originally the stadium of Domitian. Next to it Piranesi places a temple of Mars, again integrated with the circus in the first state and he labels the *carceres* which have a bizarre and impractical maze-like layout. The last circus is the *Circus Apollinaris*; in the first state, the adjacent baths of Sallust are connected to the structure of the circus (Fig. 10b).

Piranesi originally designed the *carceres* to look different in each of the circuses: some have similar forms, but not ever the same (except in the twin circuses, where all details match). In the second state, however, the *carceres* are identical: they appear to be copied from a model. The other notable difference in the first state is the marked interpenetration of the areas of the circuses with their surrounding urban environment. Piranesi incorporated the circuses into his overall system of viability, using them like the porticoes, gardens and temple areas, available for public access (Hornsby, 2023: 153). But in the second state the circuses are isolated, self-contained structures, the boundaries of which clearly stand out from the rest of the dense network of the plan.

5. THE ANTIQUARIAN CONTEXT OF THE CIRCUSES

In the dedication essay to the *Campus Martius* volume, Piranesi takes up the challenge of those who accuse him of invention by emphasizing his commitment

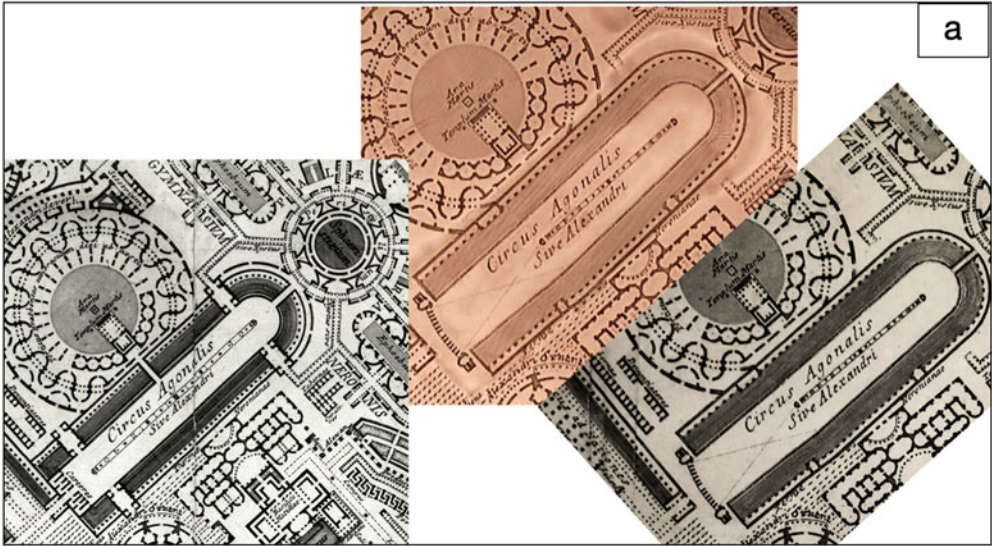


Fig. 10a. G.B. Piranesi, *Circus Agonalis*, details from *Ichnographiam Campi Martii Antiquae Urbis*, (l-r) first state/copper plate, flipped/second state (Library and Archive, British School at Rome/Istituto Centrale per la Grafica/Library and Archive, British School at Rome).

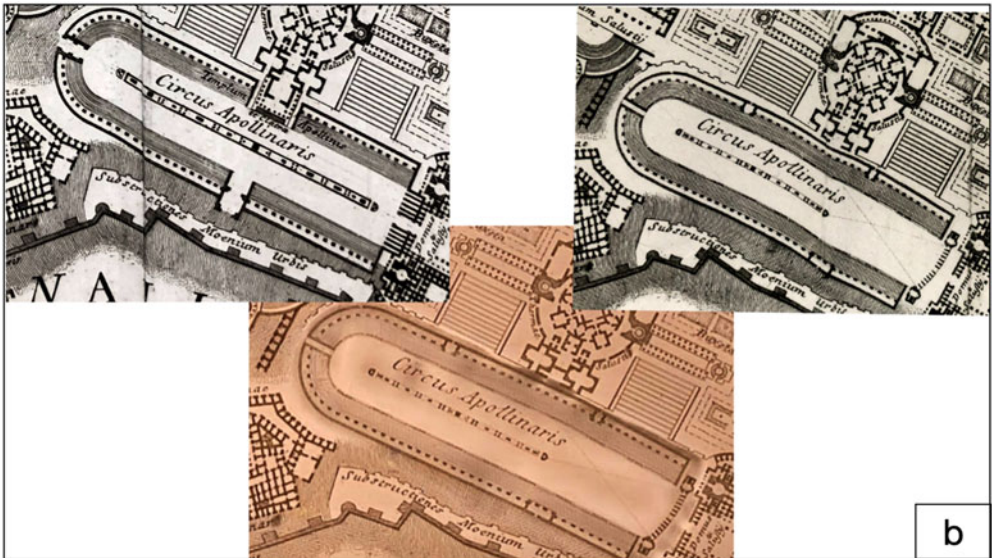


Fig. 10b. G.B. Piranesi, *Circus Apollinaris*, details from *Ichnographiam Campi Martii Antiquae Urbis* (l-r) first state/copper plate, flipped/second state (Library and Archive, British School at Rome/Istituto Centrale per la Grafica/Library and Archive, British School at Rome).

to examining ancient remains on site.²³ Supporting evidence is provided by indices, one of which, *Catalogo delle opere descritte nella grande icnografia del Campo Marzio/Coll'aggiunta degli autori, e de' monumenti da' quali se n'è presa notizia*,²⁴ lists all the references in the *Ichnographia* (each building or area is named on the plan in Latin, and they are not numbered), arranged according to type of structure. This index, like the historical narrative in the text of the volume, would have been drawn up by Piranesi's scholarly collaborator.²⁵ Under the entry for circuses there is an extensive list of sources for each;²⁶ such citations are of course an established part of any scholarly apparatus and their presence sets the *Campus* volume firmly within the antiquarian tradition. The works which directly influenced Piranesi as designer and artist, however, are referenced only once;²⁷ these influences were books and prints published by two of the previous generation of antiquarians, Pirro Ligorio and Onofrio Panvinio. Ligorio's *Libro de' circhi*...²⁸ had associated prints of two circuses (Ligorio, 1553b; 1553c), and his view-map of Rome

²³ *Al Chiarissimo Signore/Il Sig. Roberto Adam/Giovan Battista Piranesi*, title of preface, Piranesi, 1762, Italian text transcribed in Hornsby, 2023: 162–3.

²⁴ Piranesi, 1762: ix–xvii, preceded by the Latin version.

²⁵ Probably Contuccio Contucci; see Bevilacqua, 2023: 25 and De Angelis, 1983. See also Minor, 2015: 83–114.

²⁶ Piranesi, 1762, *Catalogo delle Opere descritte*..., x. Transcription of Italian text by author.

— Circo d'Alessandro Aug. Sesto Rufo nella Regi ix. di Roma. Si riferisce nel Cap. vi. art. xm. Ve ne rimangono le vestigia, che si accennano nella Tav. 11. col. num. 24; nella in.e nell'indice che cade dopo di essa, co' num. 41. 42. e 43. Si dimostrano poi in prospettiva nella Tav. xxxvii.

— Apollinare. Liv. nel lib. 3. Veggasi, Circo Flaminio.

— Apollinare preso la porta Collina. Liv. nel lib. 30. Vene sono gli avanzi, che si accennano nella Tav. iii e nell'indice che le succede, col num. 104. e si dimostrano in prospettiva nella Tav. XLI.

— Di Cajo e Nerone. Plinio nel lib. 16. al cap. 40. e nel lib. 36 al cap. 11. Tacit. nel lib. 14. degli annali, Svet. in Claudio al cap. 21. V'era rimasto in piedi fu la spina stessa del circo, cioè a dire innanzi l'odierna sagrestia della gran Basilica di S. Pietro, interrato nelle rovine l'obelisco Vaticano rammentato da Plinio nel luogo citato 5 da che vi era stato posto, fino a' tempi di Sisto V. Pont. Mass. che indi lo se trasferire, ed ergere in mezzo alla piazza della stessa Basilica ove presentemente si vede e come abbiam dimostrato nelle nostre prospettive de' luoghi i più celebri di Roma moderna.

— Di Domizia. Procopio nel lib. 2. della guerra Gotica. Furono dissotterrate diciotto anni fa le rovine di quello circo nel sito ove l'abbiam delineato, ed ove sono state dinotate dal Nolli nella sua pianta di Roma moderna. Di esse parla il Fulvio, ove dice: Vi resta per anco fuori di porta Castello in quelle vigne vicine, non lungi dalla mole Adriana, una picciola forma d'un circo di pietra nera e dura, quasi affatto rovinato.

— Flaminio. Livio nel lib. 3. ed 8. l'epitoma del libr. 20. del medesimo, Dione nel lib. 55. la sua epist. in Augusto, Plutarc. in Sill., il Fulvio, ed il Ligorio. Si riferisce nel Cap. iv. art. 1. Ve ne rimangono alcune vestigie che si dinotano nella Tav. II. presso il num. 17. nella III. e suo indice col num. 55 e si dimostrano in prospettiva nella Tav. xvii.

— D'Adriano. Dalle vestigie scoperte pochi anni fa nel sito ove l'abbiamo delineato, mentre il Rosati e Canuti pastinavano quella parte di fondo del subborgo.

²⁷ Ligorio is referenced for the Circo Flaminio.

²⁸ Ligorio, 1553a; transcription and commentary in Daly Davis, 2008.

showed them (Ligorio, 1561). In Panvinio's lavish folio volume (1600) dedicated to circuses there are several prints.²⁹ Their focus – and that of other antiquarians and artists in the 16th and 17th centuries – was naturally the Circus Maximus (cf. Dupérac, 1575, pls 8,11); thus their proposals for its reconstructed plan and elevation had a significant part to play in influencing the designs made by Piranesi for the Circus Maximus in the Forum plan and for the six circuses in the first state of the *Campus Martius* plan.

5.1 PIRRO LIGORIO

Pirro Ligorio's book has, in common with much of his vast oeuvre, received considerable scholarly attention.³⁰ The *Libro de' circi* was the only printed book produced from the mass of manuscript notes made by Ligorio (Tomasi Velli, 1990: 65; Daly Davis, 2008: 5). It is possible that the circuses were chosen by him for publication because of the intense interest of the humanists in this well-documented yet uncodified type of structure; Leon Battista Alberti had probably measured the Circus of Maxentius in the late 1400s or early 1500s (Tomasi Velli, 1990: 115). Twenty-four pages of the Ligorio volume concern the circuses; he discusses the important ceremonies – both religious and political – which led to the celebration of games and the competitions held for the entertainment of the ruling elites and the public, his reference point being the Circus Maximus as the earliest and most significant site. The rest of the book is the *Paradosse* in which he sets out to confute the erroneous opinions of previous scholars on the monuments of Rome. Ligorio's polemical, combative stance *vis-à-vis* other antiquarians here is very like that of Piranesi's nearly 200 years later in his tracts such as the *Osservazioni* and the *Parere* (Piranesi, 1765; see Wilton-Ely, 1972). There are other aspects which the two men have in common: neither was particularly gifted in Latin (nor in Greek) (Tomasi Velli, 1990: 86) and both were artists given to fantasy in architectural reconstruction (Connors, 2011: 57–60).

Ligorio lists nine circuses in Rome (1553a: 1r):³¹ 'Erano adunque in Roma nove Circi, da Greci Hippodrome, de' quali il più nobile, & il più bello & prima di tutti gli altri instituito, era il Massimo.' At the same time as the treatise was published, the print entitled *Antiquitatum Studiosis...* (Fig. 11) appeared; it is a reconstruction of the Circus Maximus, viewed from the Palatine towards the

²⁹ Tomasi Velli, 1990: 128 comments on Panvinio's volume: 'Questa mastodontica compilazione sul circo romano supera il precedente libro ligoriano non solo per erudizione ma anche per la novità del taglio.'

³⁰ The extensive Ligorio bibliography cannot be reproduced here; regarding his circuses, the reader is recommended to refer to the book-length essay by Tomasi Velli, 1990, which is the key scholarship on this subject and to which I am heavily indebted. See also Ashby, 1919, and Campbell, 2016.

³¹ They are *Massimo, Flaminio, Salustio, Agone, Vaticano, Hadriano, Caracalla, Castrense, Flora*.

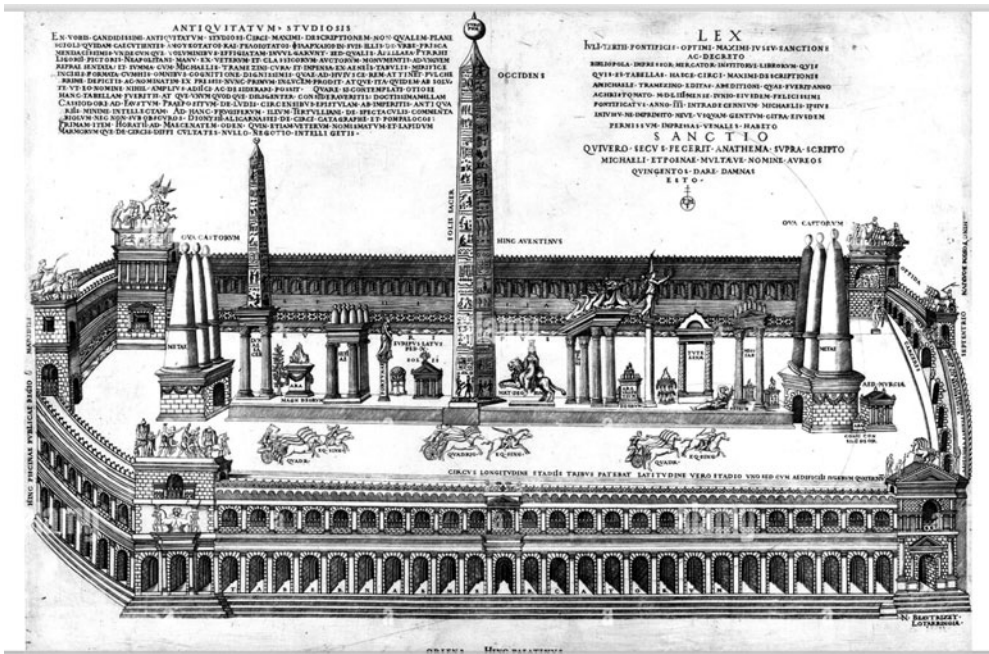


Fig. 11. Pirro Ligorio/Nicolas Bearizet, *Antiquitatum Studiosis...*, Reconstruction of the Circus Maximus (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Creative Commons via Google Arts and Culture).

Aventine hill. The shallow arc of the *carceres* on the right-hand side is visible, with the corner towers labelled *oppida*. Ligorio cites Varro quoting Naevius for this name (Ligorio, 1553a: 7v.). The complex *oppida* constructions which Piranesi designed as the starting gates in the first state of the *Campus* plan have their origins in the Ligorio image. The long caption is his authorship; he includes some phrases in Greek that have been revealed to be obscure or incorrect (Tomasì Velli, 1990: 83). He labels many of the parts and includes items that are mentioned in the ancient sources, such as a statue of Hermes on the extreme top right of the circus, adjacent to the *carceres*; different ideas had circulated about the herms placed by the starting gate and what their role might have been.³²

The second of the two prints that are mentioned in the text of the *Libro de' circi* is a reconstruction of the *Circus Flaminius* (Fig. 12). It has been proven that this circus almost certainly did not have fixed stands for spectators nor a *spina* with the accoutrements like those of the Circus Maximus, as shown in this print (Wiseman, 1974). The *Flaminius* comes second in his list of nine circuses; it is possible that Ligorio originally planned to create reconstructions of all of them.

³² Tomasì Velli, 1990: 78. Discussion of this in reference to the circus at Lepcis Magna: Humphreys, 1986: 25–55 and 157–70.

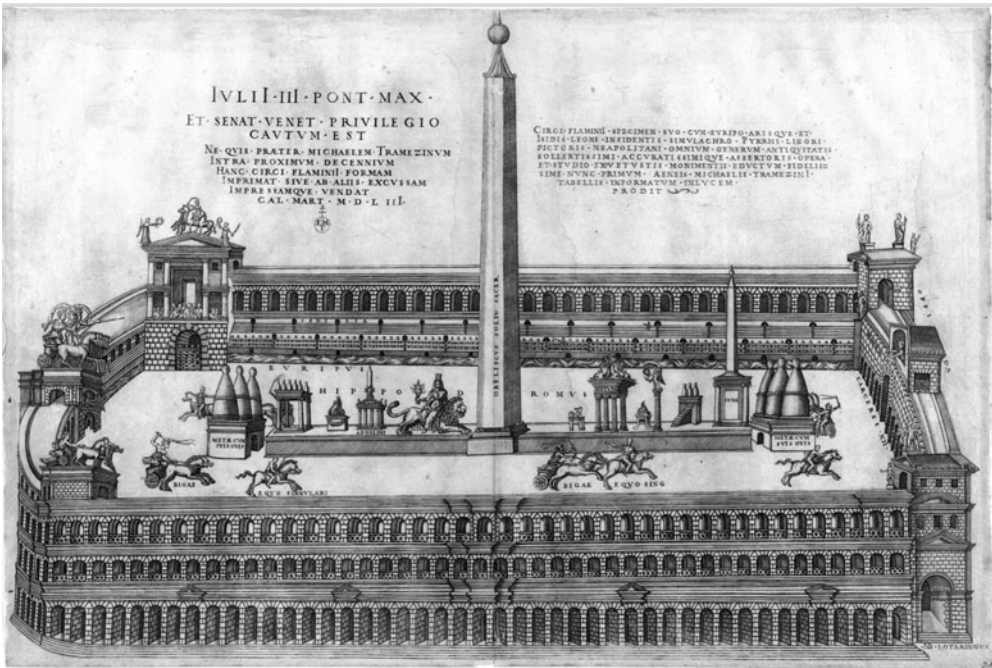


Fig. 12. Pirro Ligorio/Nicolas Beatrizet, *Circi Flaminii Specimen...*, Reconstruction of the Circus Flaminius (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Creative Commons via Google Arts and Culture).

The circuses feature in the famous bird's-eye view of the city of 1561, in which Ligorio gives free rein to his reconstructive creativity.³³ This plan was crucial to Piranesi's visual vocabulary of the *Campus Martius* and its architecture; it also influenced his choices of the location of some ancient sites, although Piranesi's topographical speculations vary from Ligorio's in many cases (Connors, 2011: 59; see Tables 1–2). Of the nine circuses featured in the *Libro de' circi* only the Circus of Maxentius is not included in the map as it is too far outside the walls of the city. It is significant that Ligorio had material evidence for the form of the Circus Maximus, derived from a depiction on an ancient coin. He wrote (Ligorio, 1553a: 9v.):

Penso bene, che la vera [forma del circo] possa vedere nelle medaglie di Traiano imperatore, che fu uno di quelli che lo restaurò, come si legge negli epitomi di Dione.

There is a direct correspondence between the details of the design of the Circus Maximus as shown on coins (Fig. 13) and Ligorio's own reconstruction.

³³ BSR cat. ref. XL.609.2.56.2, online: <https://digitalcollections.bsr.ac.uk/islandora/object/LC-MAPS:16>

Table 1. Circuses in Piranesi

PIRANESI	Forum plan first state	Forum plan second state	<i>Ichnographia</i> first state	<i>Ichnographia</i> second state	<i>Pianta degli avanzi</i> . . . 1780s?
Maximus	<i>Carceres</i> - straight, segmental form <i>Oppida</i> - complex Boundary - open <i>Spina</i> - long	<i>Carceres</i> - curved at angle <i>Oppida</i> - simple Boundary - closed <i>Spina</i> - short			
Neronis			<i>Carceres</i> - straight <i>Oppida</i> - absent Boundary - open <i>Spina</i> - long <i>circus</i> and obelisk named	<i>all six identical with Forum plan second state</i>	
Hadriani & Domitiae <i>twin circuses</i>			<i>Carceres</i> - straight, segmental form <i>Oppida</i> - absent Boundary - open <i>Spina</i> - long <i>as in second frontispiece of CM vol.</i>		
Flaminius			<i>Carceres</i> - straight <i>Oppida</i> - integrated Boundary - open <i>Spina</i> - long <i>as in CM vol. Plate IV</i>		
Agonalis			<i>Carceres</i> - straight, complex <i>Oppida</i> - integrated Boundary - open <i>Spina</i> - long <i>*carceres named*</i>		
Apollinaris			<i>Carceres</i> - straight <i>Oppida</i> - integrated Boundary - open <i>Spina</i> - long		
Caracalla (Maxentius)					<i>Carceres</i> - curved at angle <i>Oppida</i> - simple Boundary - closed <i>Spina</i> - short

Table 2. Circuses prior to Piranesi

PRIOR TO PIRANESI	LIGORIO PRINTS	LIGORIO ANTIQUAE URBIS PLAN	LIGORIO OXFORD DRAWING	PANVINIO PLAN	PANVINIO PRINTS
Maximus	<i>'Antiquitatum Studiosis...'</i> Carceres - slight symmetrical curve Oppida - complex Boundary - closed Spina - long	Carceres - symmetrical curve Oppida - towers Boundary - closed Spina - long, complex		Carceres - straight Oppida - towers Boundary - closed Spina - long w. obelisk	<i>p. 9 plan and p. 49 reconstruction</i> Carceres - straight Oppida - towers Boundary - closed Spina - long, complex, w obelisk
Caii et Neronis		Carceres - straight Oppida - towers Boundary - closed Spina - long w. obelisk			
Hadriano		Carceres - straight Oppida - towers Boundary - closed Spina - long w. obelisk			
Flaminius Apollinaris	<i>'Circi Flamini Specimen...'</i> Carceres - slight curve Oppida - complex Boundary - closed Spina - long <i>modelled on C. Maximus print</i>	Carceres - straight Oppida - towers Boundary - closed Spina - long w. obelisk		<i>all nine identical</i>	
Agonalis		Carceres -v. slight curve Oppida - towers Boundary - closed Spina - long w. tower			
Caracalla (Maxentius)			Carceres - symmetrical curve Oppida - large towers Boundary - w. two integrated structures Spina - long w. obelisk		<i>p. 56 plan and reconstruction</i> Carceres - symmetrical curve Oppida - large towers Boundary - w. two attached structures Spina - short, complex
Flora		Carceres - not visible Oppida - not visible Boundary - open to Temple of Flora Spina - long w. obelisk			
Castrens		Carceres - straight Oppida - towers Boundary - closed Spina - short			



Fig. 13. Sestertius of Trajan, circa AD 103–11, reverse showing the Circus Maximus (Yale University Art Gallery, Creative Commons).

5.2 ONOFRIO PANVINIO

Panvinio's *De Ludis Circensibus* was published in 1600, although it had been prepared earlier, only ten years or so after Ligorio's book and print were in the public domain (Tomasi Velli, 1990: 138); his debt to Ligorio is considerable and obvious and yet goes unacknowledged (Tomasi Velli, 1990: 148–9 and 158). This type of omission is not unusual amongst the antiquarians of the early modern period; Piranesi also often named those whom he wished to criticize and kept silent about those to whom he was indebted. Panvinio puts all nine Ligorian circuses in his map of Rome, which is included at the beginning of the book, extending to the Circus of Maxentius; all are identical in form.³⁴ The plan is oriented upside down as compared with Ligorio's and includes only the main ancient monuments, but it has the same name as his predecessor's map; this adoption of the work of Ligorio and rebranding of it under his own name, with a few but not many variations, occurs throughout this publication.

Focusing on the Circus Maximus, it is instructive to compare Panvinio's solution, dated *c.* 1560, with Piranesi's almost exactly 200 years later (Fig. 14). The former's inclusion of the structures visible on the Palatine is evidence of the state of scholarship at the period, though how reliable it was is unclear (Tomasi Velli, 1990: 130, n. 216). Piranesi benefited from the recent archaeology of Francesco Bianchini; he shows the basilica hall that Bianchini had discovered

³⁴ Panvinio, 1600; the map numbered bottom right-hand corner as *Pag.* 7.

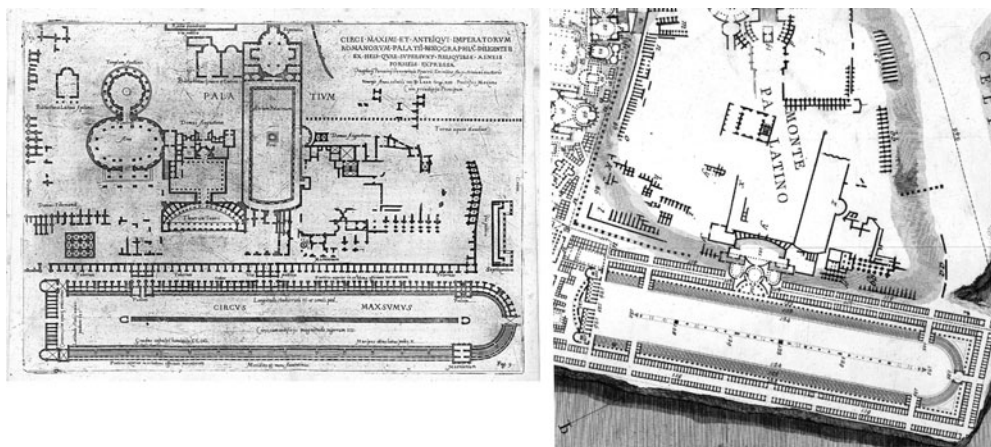


Fig. 14. (l-r) Onofrio Panvinio, *De Ludis Circensibus...*, p. 9. Plan of the Palatine and Circus Maximus/G.B. Piranesi, Circus Maximus detail from *Pianta dell'antico foro romano* from *Antichita Romane* vol. I, pl. XLIII (oriented for comparison) (Public domain via archive.org/Library and Archive, British School at Rome).

(1738).³⁵ The permeability of the circus in Piranesi's first state and the integration of the palace on the hill with the circus itself are features original to Piranesi and are not present in either Ligorio or in Panvinio.

Panvinio's reconstructed view of the circus (Fig. 15) made a notable change from his predecessor regarding the *carceres*, which he labelled on both the plan and the view; they are set in a rectangular not a curved structure.³⁶ The print also reveals an egregious example of Panvinio taking across elements from the Neapolitan scholar's work without re-checking sources, underlining the interdependence of scholars on each other's interpretations. It concerns the presence on the *spina* of a little tree in a pot (the fifth object from the left-hand *meta*), labelled *Surculus*. This feature is included by Ligorio, based on a misreading by him of a text by Tertullian in *Spectacles* where he refers to a tree metaphorically present in the Circus (Tomasi Velli, 1990: 157). Mistakes and all, Panvinio's treatise was a reworking of Ligorio's book and a re-presentation of the ancient sources; with its publication he established the scholarship on ancient circuses for the next 200 years.

6. THE CIRCUS OF MAXENTIUS

The circus then known as the *Circo di Caracalla* naturally interested Ligorio and Panvinio. Ligorio's drawing (not illustrated here) is a curious mixture of analysis

³⁵ Thanks to Joseph Connors for pointing this out and that probably Piranesi took it from Giambattista Nolli, his former collaborator; it appears on the *Nuova Pianta di Roma* of 1748 as no. 930.

³⁶ Panvinio, 1600: VI, 12, mentions the number of *carceres*, not their arrangement.

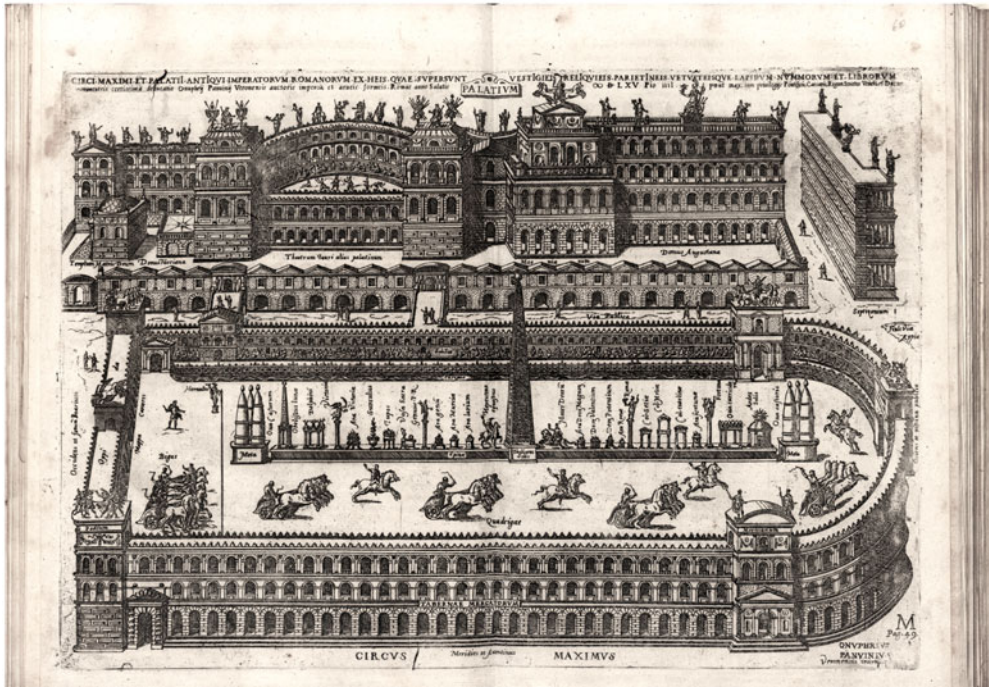


Fig. 15. Onofrio Panvinio, *De Ludis Circensibus...*, pl. M, p. 49. Reconstruction of the Palatine and Circus Maximus (Public domain via archive.org).

in the plan of the seating rows and walls, with a perspective view of what the *spina* could have looked like with the obelisk at the centre.³⁷ It is likely that this drawing was made around the same time as his Circus Maximus print (seen in Fig. 11), since the manner of the depiction of the arc of the *carceres* is similar in both. Despite the fact that the ruins were above ground, it is by no means clear that Ligorio was on site to examine them; had he done so, he might have been expected to notice the off-centre position of the *carceres*.

Possibly Ligorio used Dupérac's print (Fig. 16) as a visual source; it is an aerial view looking towards Rome, showing the ruinous state of the monument, similar to the *Vestigi del Circo Massimo* from the same collection (Dupérac, 1575: pl. 40). This image certainly influenced Panvinio, since in *De Ludis* (1600: pl. Q pag. 56) he includes a very similar view, removing some of Dupérac's artistic touches, such as the animals in the fields, and adding labelling to indicate the identity of the various ruined structures.

³⁷ Pirro Ligorio, *Pianta dell'Hipodromo di Antonino Caracalla* (1550s). This drawing is in the Oxford Bodleian library ms. Canon. Ital. 138 fols 57v, 58r, 58v, see Campbell, 2016: 85–8 for a reproduction. See also Motta, 1999, who very helpfully reproduces over 35 prints and drawings of the Circus from all periods up to the twentieth century, accompanied by a brief survey of the antiquarian material.

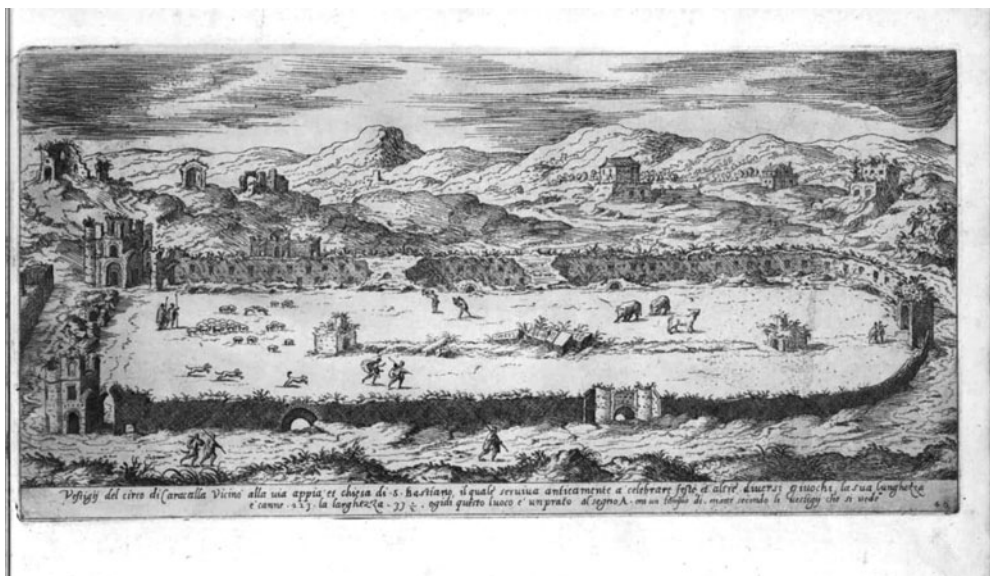


Fig. 16. Etienne Dupérac, *Vestigij del circo di Caracalla* from *I vestigi dell'antichità di Roma* (Library and Archive, British School at Rome).

By contrast, Panvinio's architectural reconstruction in plan and in perspective (Fig. 17) includes a considerable amount of speculative antique detail, more than is present in the 'Oxford' drawing by Ligorio, although the *carceres* shown in plan are very similar. There is evidence here that Panvinio had access to other circus-related drawings by Ligorio, particularly one showing the corridor structure which attached the palace to the circus; this can be seen at the lower edge of his plan, at the bottom of the print, jutting into the inscription.³⁸

7. FABRETTI AND BEYOND

Despite the noted antiquarian credentials of Ligorio and Panvinio and their influential prints and drawings, it was another scholar, from a slightly later generation, who undertook the challenge of the necessary encounter with reality; only personal experience and precise recording of the physical evidence could counter their inaccurate interpretations of the ancient sources and conjectural visual presentations.³⁹ Raphaele or Raffaello Fabretti is the unsung hero of the story of 'la vera forma' of ancient circuses. Fabretti, born in Urbino c. 1620, was a cleric, lawyer and diplomat who had served in Spain and who

³⁸ Humphreys, 1986: 599, fig. 288, is a reproduction of a Ligorio drawing showing this detail, whereabouts not stated.

³⁹ Nardini, 1666: VII, ch. II: 412 discusses the circuses and *carceres* and how the races were run. He cites the usual ancient sources but adds nothing of importance.

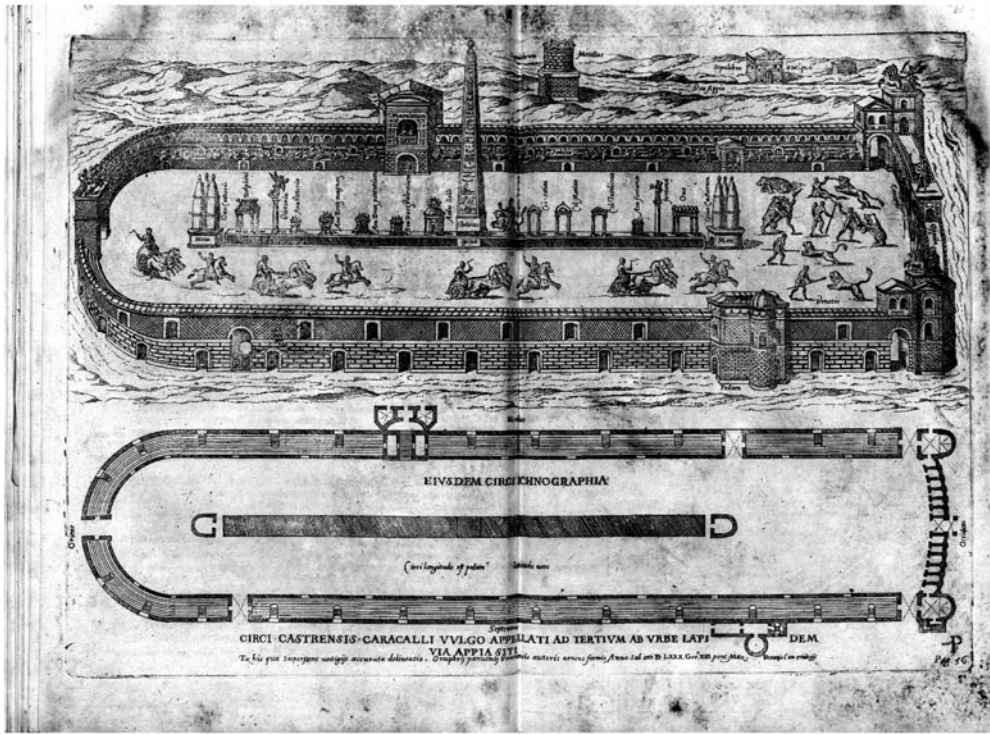


Fig. 17. Onofrio Panvinio, *De Ludis Circensibus...*, *Circus Castrensis Lateritius Caracalla Vulgo Appellatus*, pl. P, p. 56. Reconstruction and plan of Circus of Caracalla (Public domain via archive.org).

developed a great interest in archaeology in his later years, especially epigraphy. His work is less familiar now than that of other antiquarians, yet he was a noted scholar in his time; he died in Rome in 1700 (Evans, 2002: 4–9). He was known in his day for his book on aqueducts, the *De aquis et aquaeductibus veteris Romae dissertationes tres*, three short examinations of the aqueducts around Rome undertaken from 1677–9, with diagrams and maps included. Given the evidence of his detailed measuring of the remains of the aqueducts, it is clear that he came to this site on the Appia with his measuring stick and notebook; in a topographical map included at the beginning of the third dissertation,⁴⁰ the Circus of Maxentius is shown (Fig. 18).

The publication by Fabretti that is relevant to this discussion is *De columna Trajani syntagma* dating from 1683. The title page indicates the intended focus of his study: Trajan's column, specifically in reference to prints published by Giovanni Bellori and Pietro Santi Bartoli when scaffolding was put up around the column between 1665–70 at the request of Louis XIV who wanted casts of the reliefs (Panciera, 2006: 1694). Fabretti's pamphlet, coming just over ten

⁴⁰ Evans, 2002: 22, *Urbis cum vicis ...* from *Dissertatione III*, dated 27 October 1679.



Fig. 18. Raffaello Fabretti, *De aquis et aquaeductibus veteris Romae dissertationes tres*, p. 4. Detail of map of the Campagna showing the area near S. Sebastiano on the via Appia (Public domain via Google Books).

years after Bartoli, is a rebuttal of certain details presented by him and is a historical account of the Dacian wars, illustrated with images and small plans set into the text. His digression on the subject of circuses appears at the beginning of chapter six, *Observanda circa veterum ritus & superstitionem* (Fabretti, 1683: 141–78, esp. 141–51), the context being that of images of processions with animals, based on reliefs, coins and gems. He goes into the sources and current antiquarian opinions on the Circus Maximus, including an image showing a panel with a *quadriga* from Trajan's column. Then, with the illustration on page 148 he turns to the evidence provided by the Circus of Maxentius (Fig. 19), providing a diagram of the *carceres*, *spina* and the *alba linea*. This was either the finishing line or the line at which the chariots were allowed to break out of their starting positions to find an advantage on the inside track (Humphreys, 1986: 20–2). This is the key step-change from anything previously proposed by Ligorio or Panvinio. In the accompanying text, Fabretti criticizes Panvinio for lack of consistency and for creating confusion. Emphasizing his point regarding the *carceres*, he adds the plain statement of fact (Fabretti, 1683: 148): 'non in recta linea sed in orbem collocatis'.⁴¹ The diagram shows that measurements were taken by Fabretti of

⁴¹ He also criticizes the conclusions reached by Bulenger, 1598: 39–40.



Fig. 19. Raffaello Fabretti, *De columna Trajani syntagma*, p. 148, diagram of the *carceres* of the circus of Caracalla (Public domain via archive.org).

the track on either side of the *spina*; it seems that he even undertook some rudimentary excavation, clearing earth from around the end of the *spina* to clarify the form of the *meta*.⁴² His statement indicates that the *carceres* arc was in reality not centred on the *spina* itself, but to a point to the right of it (this makes sense in order to equalize the distance to run for the chariot from the extreme left *carcer* with that on the extreme right). The diagram also shows the shorter seating wing on the competitors' left-hand side and the much greater distance between the end of the *spina* and the *carceres* than appears in either Ligorio or Panvinio.⁴³ Emphasizing the point about the *carceres*, Fabretti cites Ovid in his *Amores* (3.2.65–6), on attending a race at the Circus Maximus:⁴⁴

*Maxima iam vacuo praetor spectacula circo
quadriugos aequo carcere misit equos*

⁴² Fabretti, 1683: 150, and accompanying illustration. A translation of the relevant passage reads: 'and no greater space was left for the last Meta, as the ichnography of Panvinus pg. 56 lit. Q. reveals; and we made an excavation, and the Spina was found, (because from the time of Panvinus the earth there had grown up 4 feet)'. With thanks to Caroline Barron for her assistance with translation.

⁴³ The extra distance was needed for the diagonal movement of the chariots from the left side *carceres* to join their rivals on a line perpendicular with the *spina*.

⁴⁴ Ovid was writing in 18BC. This can be translated as: 'The circus is clear now for the greatest part of the shows / and the praetor has started the four-horse cars from the equal barrier.'

It seems unlikely that this phrase of Ovid could, by itself, be enough to indicate the curve or the angle of the curve that is visible in Fabretti's diagram⁴⁵ – the exact curve that appears in the second state of the Piranesian circuses. Yet Ovid can act as support for the empirical evidence produced by Fabretti: that for the race to be fair, the curve must have been set at an angle. Neither Ligorio nor Panvinio specifically quoted the Ovid text: Ligorio had been inconsistent with it and Panvinio had ignored it; only Fabretti had it right. In his essay he adopted a 'belt and braces/textual sources and physical evidence' approach in his presentation of the form of the *carceres*, yet it was principally his first-hand empirical work of excavation and measurement undertaken on site that enabled him to draft his diagram.

Nearly 100 years later, when Piranesi first drew the circuses for his plan of the Forum and the *Ichnographia*, it appears that either he did not know about these relevant pages of Fabretti – perhaps because the circus evidence is buried within a Latin text on a completely different antiquarian subject – or perhaps he knew of the text, but deliberately ignored it.⁴⁶ Possibly his collaborator, criticizing the 'complex' circuses and *carceres* in the original Forum map and *Ichnographia*, raised this point: that not only was the evidence for the *carceres* of the Circus of Maxentius there for all to see, but it had been published by Fabretti many decades previously. The closeness of Fabretti's diagram to Piranesi's second state *carceres* shows that it must have been his model.

Fifteen years after the *Campus Martius* project, years in which Piranesi had published a series of volumes focusing on the primacy of Roman architectural and decorative genius, he was still concerned with the Circus of Maxentius. Diary entries from 1774 and 1775 by Sir Roger Newdigate, noted English grand tourist and collector – and the purchaser of two important candelabra made by Piranesi, the Newdigate candelabra – reveal that by 1775 Piranesi had made a plan of the Circus:⁴⁷

[1775]

8th March Sre Piranese bt [brought?] his plan of the Circus of Caracalla & explaind it

10th March To Sre Piranesi who lent his plan of Circus of Caracalla went there, saw the Temple & Portico and examined the Circus till past 4

⁴⁵ Ovid using *aequo* as an adjective for *carcere* is in itself ambiguous; it could mean that each stall was equal in size or giving an equal chance because opened at the same time (rather than equal in the sense of being placed in positions of equal advantage). Also, that word could have been added to the line for poetic reasons – for assonance (*aequo/equos*), or for metrical length; with thanks to Christopher Siwicki for discussing this point with me.

⁴⁶ Fabretti's name is cited in the index to Piranesi, 1756, I: no. 230, the *Castello di Acqua Giulia*, indicating that Piranesi's collaborator knew the aqueducts book and that he clearly disagreed with some of its conclusions, thereby setting a precedent for discounting Fabretti's evidence. For Piranesi's collaborating authors, see Bevilacqua, 2023.

⁴⁷ Russell, 2008. See also McCarthy, 1972. There are sketches by Sir Roger in his travel notebooks, examined by this author thanks to generous access granted by his descendant, Lord Daventry of Arbury Hall, Warwickshire. Others are in the Warwickshire Record Office; see Motta, 1999: 82, figs 2–3.

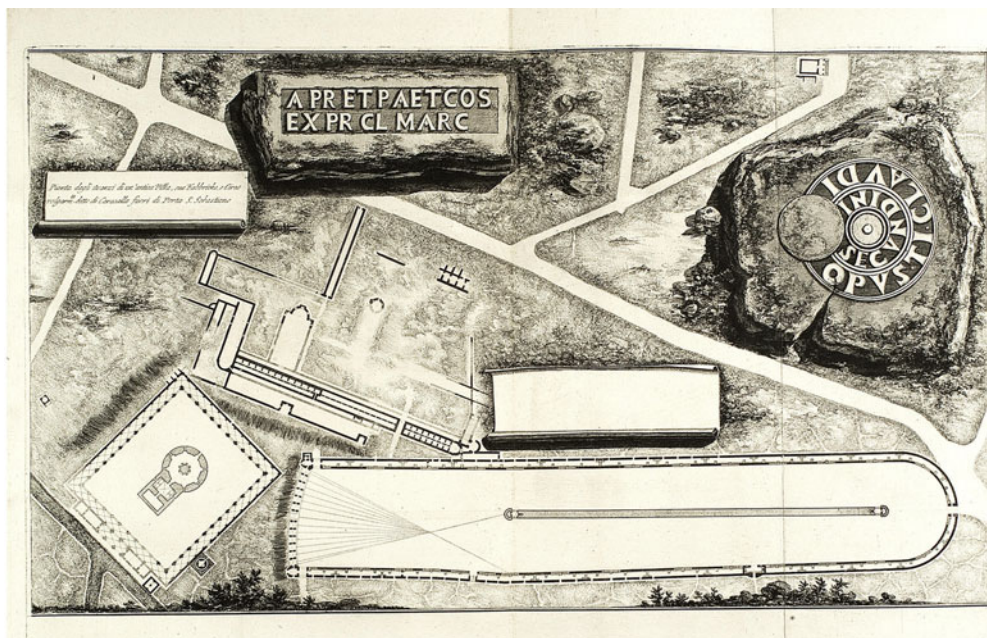


Fig. 20. Francesco Piranesi/G.B. Piranesi?, *Pianta degli avanzi ... circo di Caracalla*, unnumbered last plate of *Antichità Romane* vol. I, 1784 Rome edition (Public domain via Heidelberg University Library).

Piranesi died three years later in 1778 and in the 1784 edition of the first volume of the *Antichità Romane*, published by his son Francesco, a print of the Circus was included at the end, following the *Pianta dell'antico Foro*. Could this print (Fig. 20) by Francesco, presenting the structure of the circus much as Fabretti had drawn it, be based on the 'plan' that Newdigate borrowed from Piranesi and took on site with him in 1775?⁴⁸

Another account of Piranesi's late-stage interest comes in a somewhat ungenerous biography first published in 1779 by his fellow antiquarian, Giovanni Ludovico Bianconi, just after the architect's death (Bianconi, 1802). The citation that follows here refers to Piranesi going to the Circus of Maxentius 'ultimamente' – that is, recently, in his last years – to undertake research and that 'others' (Bianconi is in fact referring to himself) were making the same investigations. Bianconi also emphasizes the importance of this Circus as the only physical evidence of the form (Bianconi, 1802: 137–8):

Stava pure facendo ultimamente alcune ricerche sulle rovine del Circo detto di Caracalla, che si vedono a due miglia fuori della porta Capena, rovine tanto più degne del pubblico, quanto che questo circo è il solo a nostra notizia in tutto il mondo, di cui restino vestigia sufficienti per darci idea dell'architettura circense più composta di quello che si è sinora creduto. Strana

⁴⁸ *Pianta degli avanzi di un'antica Villa...* There is no corresponding copper plate in the Calcofografia of the Istituto Centrale per la Grafica for this print.

cosa, che de' circhi non ci faccia menzione di Vitruvio. Avendo qualche amatore dell'arti antiche e nostro conoscente fatto egli pure indefesse ricerche sopra queste rovine, saremmo ben contenti di rendere qui giustizia agli studi del Piranesi, se di questi non ci fosse stato un mistero.

Bianconi's own investigations on that site were to bear fruit in a volume published with a preface by Carlo Fea in 1789 and with plans and elevations, largely drafted by Angelo Uggeri (Fig. 21). The publication of this book codifies what was then known of that Circus – and circuses in general – more than 100 years after the work of Fabretti. He is credited as the only antiquarian who was correct, as opposed to Panvinio, while Piranesi is castigated (Bianconi, 1789: X). Whereas Bianconi, in his *Elogio*, had merely described Piranesi's studies of the Circus as 'un mistero', Fea, in his preface, ignoring conventional politeness, described the Piranesian solution as (Bianconi, 1789: X): 'piena di sogni, e di enormi spropositi, frutto o di malizia, o di crassa ignoranza, o di storditaggine'. By the 1790s, the forms of the *spina* and the *carceres* and the geometrical relationship between the two in ancient circuses had been firmly established, based on the evidence provided by the Circus of Maxentius (Colaceci and Cianci, 2017).

The analysis undertaken in this essay reveals that Piranesi accepted the need to erase his initial designs – perhaps it was these which Fea criticized so pungently – in order to adopt the correct, albeit less visually compelling, solution. In respect of

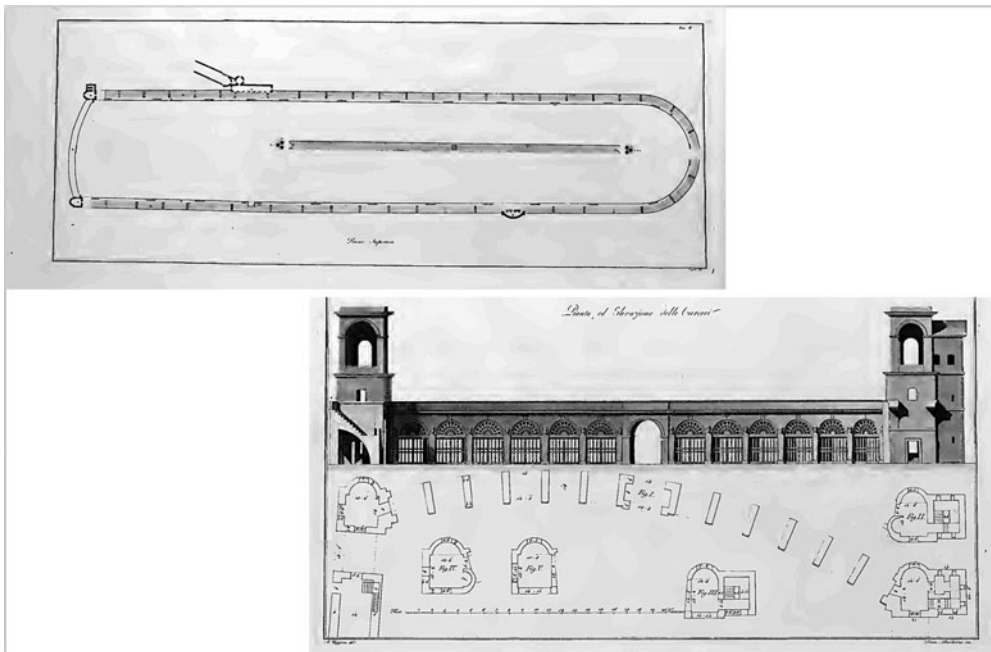


Fig. 21. Angelo Uggeri in Giovanni Ludovico Bianconi, *Descrizione dei Circhi particolarmente di quello di Caracalla e dei Giuocchi in essi celebrati*: (top) p. xci, pl. II, *Piano Superiore* and (bottom) p. xciii, pl. VI, *Pianta ed Elevazione delle Carceri* (Public domain via archive.org).

the form and structure of the ancient circus, if not in other areas, we see Piranesi the creative artist bowing to the inevitability of archaeological evidence – surely a sign of the times.

8. POSTSCRIPT: A COINCIDENCE – OR NOT?

At the end of the 1750s and early 1760s when Piranesi was altering the copper plates of the *Ichnographia* to produce a second state, his mind was much concerned with the theme of *carceres*, but not only those constructed for chariot-racing. Probably the most famous etchings of all of his production are the sixteen ‘fantasy prisons’, the *Carceri d’Invenzione*,⁴⁹ enigmatic architectural creations depicting vast interlocking spaces, soaring stone staircases, looming parapets and terraces, decorated with instruments of torture, that have held an enduring fascination for scholars, artists and writers ever since their first publication.⁵⁰ Like the *Ichnographia*, there are two states of the *Carceri*, the first *c.* 1745 and the second, *c.* 1760; in the latter, the architectural structures have more complex forms. This change between states, from the lighter and more legible to the darker and more complicated, is the opposite of the simplification process that was taking place concurrently with the design of the *carceres* of the circuses in the *Ichnographia*. The facts of archaeology obliged Piranesi to rationalize his design of the *carceres* in his plan, while at the very same time he was adding structural and tonal complexity to his imaginary *carceri*. His use of the term in these two diverse contexts – antiquarian and artistic – should not be disregarded as mere coincidence and it might indicate a new direction for research. The *Campus Martius* plan, in its forms, meanings and historical contexts, has proved to be an enormously fertile ground for study and discovery; like its creator, it resists categorization. It obliges the scholar to set aside disciplinary limitations or preconceptions; it asks us to keep an open mind.

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⁴⁹ The fourteen plates in the first edition were augmented by two others in the second and all the plates were heavily reworked. Wilton-Ely, 1978: 81–91. The *Carceri* can be seen on the University of Tokyo *Opere di Giovanni Battista Piranesi* website: <https://piranesi.dl.itc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/en/search?fc-series=PARTE%20II.%20-%20LE%20CARCERI%20D%27INVENZIONE>

⁵⁰ Yourcenar, 1961; for their influence across the arts in the modern age, see Tschudi, 2022.

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