

The discovery of a monumental circus at *Valentia* (Hispania Tarraconensis)

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The identification of a circus beneath modern Valencia is the most unexpected discovery to have been made in this Roman town.* There were no historical, epigraphic, toponymic or archaeological indications that a circus existed in the town; further, scholars had seen *Valentia* as of modest importance in the High Empire,¹ and a monumental circus was already known at *Saguntum* only some 25 km distant.² Thus, one would not have expected that *Valentia* could have managed to construct such a building. Circuses in Spain are relatively few (fig. 1), at least those built of stone.³ Circuses are known at *Tarraco*, *Emerita*, *Mirobriga*, *Toletum*, *Saguntum* and *Calagurris*; probably to be added are *Caparra* (not excavated)⁴ and *Corduba*.⁵ We know from inscriptions of *ludi* in other towns, such as *Balsa*, *Zafra*, and *Castulo*.⁶ But other great towns, such as *Caesaraugusta*, *Karthago Nova*, *Hispalis*, *Barcino* and *Clunia* have produced no firm evidence for circuses, and this is why it would not have been expected that a small town like *Valentia* would have had one. It also helps explain why it took 8 years after the discovery of the first traces of the circus for it to be recognized as such. A further difficulty was the fact that it was concealed beneath the modern city.⁷

The first discovery was made in 1987 (Calle Barón de Petrés): it relates to the zone of the *carceres*. In 1988 the first stretch of the exterior wall on the W side was found (calle Palau); it was first identified as part of a warehouse since only the two perimeter walls were preserved, the inner section having been emptied in the mediaeval period. In 1990 the first stretch of the exterior wall on the E side was found (calle de les Comedies), much better preserved, but it was taken for the Imperial city wall. These two excavations permitted the date of construction to be fixed in the 2nd c. A.D. In 1993 some other traces, rather damaged, of the inner (calle del Miracle) and outer (calle Trinet de Cavallers) walls were found. This was the first clear indication that there were two parallel walls, though they were first erroneously associated with the city wall and then, in a broader study of the urban topography of the Republican town,⁸ identified as large terrace walls, associated with a steep slope.⁹ In 1994 the town Municipality prepared a project to reconstruct the Plaza de Nápoles y Sicilia and the municipal archaeological service (SIAM) made an archaeological intervention. For the first time all of the scattered walls were mapped and measured accurately, and for the first time the hypothesis that they belonged to a circus, similar to that of *Saguntum*, was developed. Prior to the construction works in the square excavation revealed a new short stretch of the W wall. A little later, in 1995, a large part of the arena was dug in a plot in the square, and later again in the same year

* This article is dedicated to Santiago Brú i Vidal.

1 M. Tarradell, "Valencia, ciudad romana: estado actual de los problemas," *Papeles del Laboratorio de Arqueología de Valencia* 1 (1962) 5-34.

2 S. Brú, "Datos para el estudio del circo romano de Sagunto," *Archivo de Prehistoria Levantina* 10 (1962) 207-26.

3 There may well have been circuses in wood but they are very hard to identify.

4 J. H. Humphrey, *Roman circuses: arenas for chariot racing* (London 1986) 378.

5 F. Murillo proposes 2 circuses at Corduba: an urban circus, on the east side, and a second, on the west side, related to the palace of Maximian (R. Hidalgo and A. Ventura, "Sobre la cronología e interpretación del palacio de Cercadilla en Corduba," *Chiron* 24 [1994] 221-40).

6 P. Piernavieja, "Los circos de Hispania," *Segovia. Symposium de arqueología romana* (1977) 309-21.

7 Circuses have been discovered beneath other great cities (e.g., Milan, Trier, Thessaloniki) earlier this century but in those cases a circus was assumed to have existed.

8 A. Ribera, *Estudi arqueològic de València a l'època romano-republicana* (Thesis doctoral, Valencia 1993).

9 By this point the concept of a large double circuit wall of the 2nd c. A.D. seemed most unlikely.