

# The Roman arena in late-Republican Italy: a new interpretation<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

It is generally agreed by scholars that the amphitheatre was a Campanian invention, and that the *graeca consuetudo* of South Italy somehow informed its architectural development.<sup>2</sup> Two main pieces of evidence are cited to support this position:

1. the earliest securely datable amphitheatre is in Campania, the one at Pompeii (fig. 1), built c.70 B.C.; and
2. the earliest surviving depictions of gladiatorial combat occur in Lucanian tomb-paintings of the 4th c. B.C.

But these two pieces of evidence are three centuries apart. There is no relevant Campanian testimony between the South Italian tomb-paintings and the Pompeian amphitheatre,<sup>3</sup> yet it is alleged that there is a causal link between them.

If gladiatorial shows had been popular in Campania since the 4th c. B.C., one might have expected the stone amphitheatre to have made an earlier appearance, since other public buildings of stone (e.g. theatres) were common. To explain this discrepancy, scholars cite factors such as the cosmopolitanism and prosperity of late-Republican Campania as well as aristocratic competition, which was channelled into building construction. But while wealth and euergetism may explain how monumental amphitheatres were built, they do not explain why these buildings (as opposed to buildings with other functions) were constructed, or where the architectural form of these elliptical structures came from. In short, there is something lacking in the received view of the origin of the Roman amphitheatre.

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- 1 This paper is based on a paper delivered at the colloquium "Spectators and spectacles: the Roman arena" at the 94th Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America in New Orleans, December 28, 1992. I would like to thank R. R. R. Smith, M. Wilson Jones, M. McDonnell, and J. Clayton Fant for their comments; and N. Varoudis, of the Greek Ministry of Culture, for help with drawings.
  - 2 As alleged, for example, by A. Boethius and J. B. Ward-Perkins, *Etruscan and Roman architecture* (Harmondsworth 1970) 170-71; P. Gros, *Architecture et société* (CollEFR, Rome 1978) 43-44; F. Rakob, "Bautypen und Bautechnik," *Hellenismus in Mittelitalien* (Göttingen 1976) 370; J.-C. Golvin, *L'amphithéâtre romain* (Paris 1988) 24, 42 ff.; J.-C. Golvin and C. Landes, *Amphithéâtres et gladiateurs* (Paris 1990) 39 ff.
  - 3 The material evidence for gladiators in Campania before the 1st c. B.C. consists of representations of single combat in South Italian tombs and on vases, all dating to the 4th c. B.C. (see G. Ville, *La gladiature en occident des origines à la mort de Domitien* [Rome 1981] 1-56; and P. C. Sestieri, "Tombe dipinti di Paestum," *RIA* 5-6 [1956-57] 65-110). Livy (9.40.17) and Silius Italicus (*Pun.* 11.51-54) mention gladiatorial combat as a part of 3rd-c. B.C. Campanian banquets. By this time, however, gladiatorial games were not restricted to Campania but were also taking place in Rome (Livy, *Epit.* 16; Val. Max. 2.4.7). The vexed (and probably unanswerable) question of where gladiatorial combat originated has been tackled most recently by Ville, who argued for an Osco-Samnite derivation. One Roman tradition held that it was introduced to Rome by the Etruscan kings (Suet., *De regibus*; cited by Ville 8 n.32); and some aspects of gladiatorial shows do seem to have been Etruscan — e.g., the arena attendant, called *Iovis frater* by Tertullian (*Nat.* 1.10.46), who removed the corpses of gladiators from the arena; this figure carried the attribute of a mallet and has been associated with the Etruscan god Charun (F. De Ruyt, *Charun: démon étrusque de la mort* [Rome 1934] 191-92). It is clear from Athenaeus, *Deip.* 4.153-55, that there was a debate even in ancient times about where gladiatorial games originated; the Romans themselves did not have the answer.