The Fusion of Spectacles and Domestic Space in Late-Antique Roman Architecture

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Abstract

This article argues that as a display of Roman authority in the provinces, aristocrats imitated the late-antique imperial trend of including public spectacles in palatial architecture by evoking the events in their provincial villas. Emperors had long asserted their power through the spectacles, particularly those housed in circus arenas, such as chariot races, wild animal hunts, and triumphal parades. By the fourth century, emperors increasingly fused the architecture and symbolism of the circuses with their palaces to underscore their patronage of the spectacles and their authority over the empire, which ultimately redefined the architectural language of Roman identity and power. In response, Rome's aristocrats soon adopted this new architectural language for their own provincial villas, as exemplified in the Piazza Armerina in Sicily, creating imperial microcosms where the elite could display their Roman identity and authority in the provinces.

Keywords: Rome, Architecture, Palaces, Spectacles, Circuses, Identity, Villas

1. Introduction

Beginning with Augustus, emperors maintained a personal residence on the Palatine hill, creating a palatial complex that included both the palace and the adjacent Circus Maximus. The proximity of the two structures allowed emperors to demonstrate their authority through the display of spectacles in the arena, such as the chariot races and the execution of criminals (Hopkins, 1983; Hopkins and Beard, 2005; Auguet, 1972; Nosov, 2009; Fora, 1996; Edwards, 2007). The imperial residence on the Palatine was a sort of living monument to the history of the city from its legendary founder to the reigning emperor, and in the arena below, the violence that created and maintained the state was reenacted under the sovereign's watchful eye (Coleman, 1990; Futrell, 1997; Kyle, 1998; Plass, 1995; Wiedemann, 1992; Barton, 1993; Köhne, Ewigleben, and Jackson, 2000). By the time Diocletian took the throne (284 CE), the Palatine's palatial complex had become such a powerful symbol of Roman supremacy that he and successive emperors built complexes imitating it throughout the empire in an effort to underscore their authority. During the fourth century, the inclusion of circus arenas into imperial domestic architecture became such a prominent trend that as emperors constructed or renovated palaces, they began physically connecting the circuses to their domiciles. The results were domestic complexes that emphasized imperial authority through an intricate network of public and private domestic spaces (Humphrey, 1986; Beacham, 1999; Wolf, 1997; Viscogliosi, 1996; Letzner, 2009).

In response, Roman villa architecture also underwent a significant transformation in late antiquity as aristocrats redefined their notion of *paideia*, which was the cultural and learned background shared among Rome's elite. Because of their common educational and cultural background, aristocrats were able to understand a complex system of visual codes that created a unified identity among the diverse world of the empire's upper class (Elsner, 1998; Brown, 1992). Consequently, the late-antique imperial incorporation of circuses into villa architecture evolved into a new expression of *romanitas* that aristocrats mirrored in their provincial homes, which served as imperial microcosms where the elite displayed their Roman identity and regional authority. While some architectural historians have examined the shifts in late-antique domestic building trends, no scholar to date has addressed the new designs and functions of the Roman villa that emerged at the beginning of the fourth century within the context of evolving palatial trends of the same period. Architectural historian Simon Ellis (2000) has convincingly argued that the shift from the atrium house to the peristyle house that occurred toward the end of the third century was the result of the changing political climate of late antiquity and its attendant economic challenges. What he and other architectural historians, including J.T. Smith (1997) and A. B. McKay (1975) have not addressed, however, is the heightened emphasis on the games and violence of the circuses that infused the new architectural trends the aristocracy so rapidly adopted and incorporated into their late-antique provincial villas.

Therefore, this essay presents a rationale for the aristocratic domestic architectural shifts of late antiquity, arguing that the building designs of the late-third and early fourth centuries represented the solid manifestations of an ever-changing Roman *paideia* that had long served emperors in maintaining imperial authority. Additionally, it will demonstrate how aristocrats exported the late-antique notion of *romanitas* to the Roman provinces via villa architecture focusing on the Sicilian villa known as the Piazza Armerina as a sort of case study. The Piazza Armerina, built c. 320-330 in Sicily, is a prime example of the elite overtly mirroring late-antique palatial architectural trends in their provincial villas as they asserted their Roman authority in the provinces. For example, the Piazza Armerina incorporated grand audience halls and stibadia, or dining rooms, for important public gatherings, echoing the design and function of the circus arenas. Like the emperor who faced his public in the circuses, the aristocrat met with his clients in the audience chambers and feasted with them in the stibadia. In addition, mosaics of hunting scenes and circus events were placed in the most prominent public spaces of the home, reminding visitors of the provincial aristocrat's regional influence. Consequently, the Piazza Armerina demonstrates how the aristocratic villa served as a conduit for the exportation of Rome's late-antique palatial architecture to Sicily. Furthermore, the visual representation of the games in the villa was an overt assertion of Roman authority in the Sicilian province.

2. *Circuses and the Palatial Complexes*

Since the Republic, Rome's great leaders had employed the circus arenas and the spectacles they housed to display their authority to the masses. Augustus, however, was the first to equate his private dwelling with circus games, building his home on the Palatine directly overlooking the Circus Maximus. Later, Caligula (r. 37-41) incorporated a racetrack into his gardens on the Vatican Hill, which Nero (r. 54-68) eventually turned into an official circus. Following suit, Domitian (81-96) expanded the Palatine palace to great proportions and incorporated a hemicycle gallery for overseeing the games in the Circus Maximus. Domitian also added a stadium to the south side of his palace on the Palatine, even though the palace already directly overlooked the Circus Maximus. During the third century, the emperor Elagabalus (218-222) placed a circus next to his own elaborate palace complex in Rome on a site known as the Sessorian Palace. Thus, since the beginning of the empire, there had been a long established connection between the emperors and the circuses, and Rome had more circuses than any other city in the empire.

It was not until beginning of the fourth century, however, that circuses became a standard feature for imperial dwellings throughout the empire. Beginning with the construction of Diocletian's circus in Nicomedia in 304, emperors built five circus arenas adjacent to imperial palaces in a variety of urban venues, and they did so in less than thirty years (Claridge, 1998; Humphrey, 1986; Jallet-Huant, 2003; Facchini, 1990; Wolf, 1997; Moseneder, 1985). This building spree culminated in the completion of the circus at Constantinople between 324 and 330. Constantine constructed three of these five circuses during those thirty years, including the circuses at Trier, Sirmium, and Constantinople. Also, current evidence suggests that no chariot races took place at the Nicomedia, Sirmium, Milan, Thessoloniki, and Via Appia circus sites prior to the fourth century (Humphrey, 1986). As archaeologist John Humphrey (1986) has noted, Diocletian and Constantine built circuses that were physically incorporated into their imperial palaces in a manner that is not true of any earlier circuses except for the circus at the Sessorian Palace, meaning the fusion of circuses and palatial complexes had taken a decidedly different turn by the fourth century.

In response to the empire's over expansion, Diocletian created the tetrarchy and restructured numerous aspects of imperial rule in effort to central imperial authority. Likewise, he employed architectural signifiers of power to underscore the emperor's might, which included the addition of the circus to his palatial residence. Just as he adopted the title of Dominus Noster, which further emphasized the emperor's divinity via the imperial cult, Diocletian also added a mausoleum to his palatial complex at split where he hoped to be honored in the afterlife. Because it was not until the tetrarchy that the representational space of the circus became so closely equated with domestic architecture, this author believes that the symbolic space of the circus that had long been associated with the quasi-divine nature of the emperor is the key to understanding the arena's unique role in late antiquity. According to the third-century Carthaginian exegete Tertullian, the entire circus reflected the order of the cosmos. The arena shape embodied the *circulus anni*, or cycle of the year, while the starting gates signified the twelve months or signs of the zodiac, and the four *quadrigae* representing the seasons competed in twenty-four heats per day, which symbolized the hours of the day, with each heat comprising seven laps and equaling the days of the week (Dunbabin, 1982; Tertullian, 9.5).

In addition, the *quadrigae* (four-horse chariots) were dedicated to the Sun and the *bigae* (two-horse chariots) to the Moon, and they both orbited the two poles that were represented by each end of the arena's central barrier, or *euripus* (Tertullian, 9.1.3). The enormous obelisk dominated the *euripus* as an emblem of the Sun with the demigods of the heavens and the sea surrounding it along the barrier. Meanwhile, circling the barrier as it raced around the track, the victorious charioteer in his *quadriga* was an image of the *Sol Invictus*, or Victorious Sun, (in late antiquity) symbolically circling the cosmos as protector and overseer. Just as the emperor oversaw his empire in microcosm from his imperial seat in the arena, his presence was symbolically represented in the arena in the personification of the *Sol Invictus* who maintained the cosmos.

The cosmic symbolism of the circus that Tertullian had described nearly a century earlier still held true when Constantine came to power. Over the centuries, emperors continually added their own decorations, including altars and statues lining the walls of the Circus Maximus's *euripus*. For example, Constantine's son, Constantius II, placed his own obelisk on the barrier just northwest of Augustus's original obelisk. Constantine had originally intended to move the monolith to Constantinople but was only able to get the massive structure as far as Alexandria before his death, where it continued to rest until Constantius transported it to Rome in 357 (Humphrey, 1986). Once the obelisk was relocated to the Circus Maximus, Constantius dedicated the new monolith to the Sun and rededicated both the original and the smaller obelisk of Augustus to the moon (Humphrey, 1986). Undoubtedly, Constantius intended for his subjects to equate him with the *Sol Invictus* and, therefore, placed the obelisk at the center of the Circus Maximus, which was directly in front of the imperial box rather than in the center of the *euripus*. Recognizing the importance of the emperor and his symbolic mastery over Rome's imperial past, Constantius simply rededicated the obelisk of Augustus rather than remove the ancient object all together. Like his predecessors, Constantius understood the necessity of underscoring his divine authority by equating himself with the victorious symbols in the arena. The ancient site of the Circus Maximus was intrinsically tied to the founding of the city under Romulus's protection on the Palatine, and Constantius effectively placed himself in line with the triumphant beginnings of the empire next to Augustus. Thus, the lived space of the circus arenas was well-established by late antiquity.

It was within this cultural context that the tetrarchic emperors sought to connect themselves physically to the arenas through an architectural language of power in an effort to bolster their authority over an increasingly problematic empire. At the beginning of the third century, Dio wrote:

> The royal residence is called Palatium, not because it was ever decreed that this should be its name, but because Caesar [Augustus] dwelt on the Palatine and had his military headquarters there, though his residence gained a certain degree of fame from the mount as a whole also, because Romulus had once lived there. Hence, even if the emperor resides somewhere else, his dwelling retains the name of Palatium (Dio, 53.16.5).

Thus, even if the emperor was elsewhere, the physical connection of the palaces to the circuses reminded the immense crowds of spectators that he was still their quasi-divine patron. The panopticon created by the domestic complex situated over the circus imposed his rule even in the emperor's physical absence. This was certainly not a new concept to Romans who had burned incense at the base of imperial statutes for centuries, assuming the celestial presence of their imperial protector. Within the first few decades of the fourth century, the spectacles of the circus had become almost synonymous with the imperial presence. In fact, Maxentius's circus on the Via Appia in Rome was literally connected to his villa by a lengthy corridor, which led to the imperial box in the arena. Furthermore, Maxentius had a mausoleum built adjacent to the complex. Thus, the emperor followed Diocletian's model of the palace/circus/mausoleum complex and emphasized his authority over his empire through his semi-divine nature. As third- and fourth-century emperors increasingly fused their domestic spaces with the representational space of the circus, they employed the traditional symbolism of the empire to transform Roman *paideia*, creating a new architectural language of power.

3. The Aristocratic Imitation

Because their careers depended on imperial favor, upper-class men willingly participated in the increasingly idealized image of the emperor and the elaborate rituals of imperial ceremony that accompanied his presence, such as the *adventus*. As late-antique historian Peter Brown (1992) states, "ceremonious behavior was not only imposed from the imperial court down, but it also depended for its effectiveness on appealing to precisely the ideals of harmony and self-control associated with *paideia*."

In response to the reformulation of imperial *paideia*, aristocrats began increasing the rigidity of their formal domestic events and employed strictly defined spaces of the home to stress their own power, such as the dining spectacles held in the late ancient stibadia. As they exalted themselves, however, the elite created a narrowly defined realm that restricted their own movements, gestures, and expressions of self, including the order in which they spoke while dinning in the stibadia. Therefore, one had to exhibit new forms of self-control and regulation of bodies in the home to illustrate that the Roman aristocrat still dominated his retinue. In imitation of the imperial circus/palace complexes, circus-shaped spaces that housed the spectacles of the wealthy became increasingly common in the villas of late antiquity, which is particularly evident in the Piazza Armerina. While private banquets had long been a classical tradition, by the fourth century, Romans had begun to move away from the time-honored rectangular triclinium seating arrangement and toward the stibadium structure, which was distinctly shaped like a circus. The use of the stibadium arrangement is indicative of the increasing social stringency that emerged in late-antique Roman society, as it provided a greater spectacle staging area for the exhibition of the elite in their homes (Ellis, 1997).

As the use of stibadia increased, so too did the additions of audience halls (*aulae*) in strategic areas of the home to help funnel guests into appropriate rooms of the domus, which facilitated the patron's show of wealth and prestige. Like other fourth-century Roman villas of the time, the Piazza Armerina even incorporated audience chambers near the street, permitting guests of lower social standing to enter directly rather than venture throughout the home. More elite guests, however, entered the audience hall or stibadium only after they were led through the house into the peristyle courtyard, which granted entry into the stibadium (Ellis, 1997). Like the Piazza Armerina, many aristocratic villas contained a formal route that directed upper-class visitors to the stibadium and an informal route for lower-class guests who were only invited to enter parts of the home appropriate for their social status. The peristyle courtyard served as a sort of indoor garden lined with porticoes for ambulation and allowed for the designation of formal and informal routes throughout the home.

In addition to the stibadia, the elite began adding grand dining halls to their villas, which was a direct reflection of the increased desire for the separation of public and private spaces (Ellis, 1991; Lavin, 1962). The largest dining halls, or triconchs, contained at least three apses and were an expansion of the stibadium designed to allow more room for larger numbers of guests. Also, entrances to both the stibadia and triconchs tended to be located directly adjacent to the large peristyle courtyard, which had replaced the atrium as the central hall by late antiquity. The Piazza Armerina actually had two separate peristyles that preceded the stibadium and the triconch each. Ellis attributes the increased use of audience halls, stibadia, triconchs, and the replacement of the atrium with the peristyle to the increased desire on the part of the aristocracy to define strict boundaries between private and public spaces within the home (1991; 1997; 2000). Ellis also maintains that the shift in architectural designs was a result of the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few aristocrats by late antiquity and the increased patronage on the part of the elite, meaning they had to funnel a larger number of clients than ever to appropriate spaces within the home (1991; 1997; 2000).

In addition, a large number of mosaics depicted hunting or gladiatorial scenes were increasingly displayed in the triconchs and that these mosaics typically portrayed Hercules or some other heroic figure with whom the patron was to be equated (Ellis, 1991; Dunbabin, 1978; Wilson, 1983; Scott, 1997). Ellis (2000) concludes that the patrons' desire to present himself as semi-divine or, at the very least, one who has such preordained strength that he can subdue wild beasts at will, is in direct imitation of the late-antique emperors who emphasized their sacred nature. While agreeing with Ellis's interpretation, this author believes that the distinct divisions of space and artistic representations of power have a far more complex cultural context than has been explored thus far and mirror the palatial building trends of late antiquity that emphasized the emperor's connection to the spectacles. Certainly, the late-antique aristocrats were borrowing the imperial symbols of power to claim their own *auctoritas*, but such a move should be viewed in terms of the reformulation of *paideia* that came about with the rise of the tetrarchy. When the aristocrats began incorporating circus-shaped stibadia, triconchs, and audience halls and replacing the atrium with the peristyle, the palatial complexes that included circus arenas and mausolea were the burgeoning imperial domestic architectural trend. Therefore, the sacred nature of imperial power was expressed in distinctly separate spaces of the same domestic complex, which included the exhibitions of violence in the arenas and the emphasis on the divine cult in the mausolea, an intriguing fusion of domestic and funerary spaces. Thus, the elite followed suit and began developing their own clearly defined spaces within their villas, such as the audience hall and stibadia in the Piazza Armerina that were designed for distinctly different audiences.

During the early empire, the subtle variations that visitors read in the facades of the atrium houses had sufficed to funnel guests into appropriate spaces. In contrast, the reformulated *paideia* of late antiquity that underscored imperial power in the distinctly separate spaces of the circus, palace, and mausoleum, which were all connected under the domestic umbrella, was imitated in the development of specialized rooms, such as the stibadia and audience halls, in the elite villas. Moreover, such an expression of elite Roman authority was of particular importance in provincial villas, such as the Piazza Armerina in Sicily, because they were further removed from Rome, making the aristocratic patron the imperial representative of his region.

In addition to the strictly controlled movements within the home that was dictated by the villa's architectural design, the patron's wealth and social status were further stressed by the décor of the room. Mosaics served as spatial markers, and as reminders of the patron's *paideia* and authority. The mosaics at the Piazza Armerina were so extravagant that they are still the central focus for most modern scholars who study the site (Wilson, 1983: Gentili, 1964; Carandini, 1964; Baum-vom Felde, 2003; Stanley-Price, 1995; Sfameni, 2004). Among the Piazza Armerina's most well preserved mosaics are the many images of Hercules in the villa's tri-conch. Additionally, the Piazza Armerina's grand corridor that ran the width of the villa and served as the entry into the villa's largest audience hall was composed of continuous hunt scenes, which visitors were to equate with the patron's masculine prowess. Moreover, the Piazza Armerina contained numerous mosaics portraying circus games, including those in the double-apsed hall that functioned as the entry into the bath area of the home. The double-apsed hall was 22m long and had a mosaic that explicitly illustrated Rome's Circus Maximus (Wilson, 1983).

The image was so detailed that in addition to the tracks and the chariot race in progress, it portrayed the observers, starting gates, turning posts, and central *spina*, complete with the shrines and obelisks the barrier housed. Furthermore, the mosaic included a scene of the victorious charioteer receiving his hard-won prizes, with whom the patron was to be equated. The number and variety of spectacles portrayed in the mosaics suggest an association between the public benefactions and the munificence of the household patron. Above all, the patronage of spectacles that were represented in the mosaics carried a strong social connotation of power, wealth, and *romanitas* (Kondoleon, 1991). In imitation of the emperors, fourth-century aristocrats also went beyond emphasizing their roles as public patrons, and increasingly equated themselves with the semi-divine, including Hercules. The function of the villa's lavish rooms was equally important for further establishing the aristocrat's *romanitas* and *actoritas* in his provincial realm. While dining in the stibadia, guests experienced a carefully choreographed and controlled realm of activity. Typically, stibadia relied on strategically placed lighting to create a dramatic effect and set the stage for the activity in the middle and seating areas of the room (Ellis, 1997). The center of the room was also filled with the activity of servants and entertainers. Guests would don their most elaborate clothes, and handsome slaves carried large trays of colorful and exotic foods (Ellis, 1997; Ricotti, 1987).

Also, the inclusion of fountains as a part of the middle ground became a common trend of the late-antique stibadia, which surely invoked the memory of the outdoor displays (Dunbabin, 1991). Like the spectacles in the circus, the feasting activities in the stibadia turned the area into a performative space. The apse of the stibadium was the central focus of the dining event. The couches arranged in a crescent shape were placed on a stage-like platform in the apse, and the host of the banquet was seated at the right-hand end of the couch in a position of honor, and others in attendance were arranged in descending social order (1997). Thus, a stage was created that facilitated a two-way spectacle, which expressed the patron's status, *paideia*, and power, while providing the highest pleasures of a privileged lifestyle. The purpose of the architectural layout and décor was to balance the conflicting themes of providing a convivial atmosphere and creating a domestic spectacle that underscored social hierarchy. Wealthy patrons, such as the Piazza Armerina's, employed the hierarchical architectural signifiers of space that upheld the increasingly rigid ceremonial formality of dining in an effort to create a fantastic dining spectacle.

4. Conclusions

Aristocrats latently expressed their own *auctoritas* through the hunting or arena displays in their homes, overtly asserting their provincial authority by evoking the displays of violence that had established and maintained the hierarchy of the empire. Large provincial estates where these villas, such as the Piazza Armerina, were located often served as the hunting grounds for animals that were used in the arenas (Kyle, 1998). Therefore, the late-antique villas continued to be a microcosm of the state, complete with their own killing zoos.

The new imperial formula of *paideia*, which emperors had redefined through the emphasis of spectacles (circuses) and their divine nature (the mausolea and ritualized ceremonies, such as the *adventus*), was overtly mirrored in the villas of the same period. Like the emperor who faced his public in the circuses, the aristocrat met with his empire-in-small in the guise of his clients who were granted access to the audience chambers. Likewise, the emperor patronized feasts prior to games, and the aristocrat dined with a lower social group within his stibadia. Finally, only the most privileged guests were invited to join the *dominus* during his feast in the grand dining hall where he was deified in the spectacles before him, much like the emperor overseeing the games from his palace box. Thus, the grand dining hall was the most elite, privileged space reserved for only those specifically invited by the *dominus*. The palatial complexes were an architectural expression of imperial *paideia* in much the same way as an elite *domus* spoke to the cultivation of its owner. As the tetrarchy faced its political struggles, Diocletian and his successors sensed a heightened need to affirm their strength and legitimacy as Rome's leaders throughout the empire. The late-antique imperial anxiety over maintaining authority manifest itself in an intensified effort to revive the glorified past and to affirm the present via new imperial building programs that employed the most important architectural language of power emperors had at their disposal (*i.e.,* the circuses).

Consequently, late-antique emperors built, renovated, and added necessary components onto existing domestic complexes around the empire in an effort to emphasize their eternal presence at the palatial-circus-mausoleum compounds, creating panopticons from Constantinople to Rome. By the end of the third century, Rome was still a warrior state, but the aristocrats who harbored so much of the wealth were far removed from the *dignitas* that came from military service. Just as the emperors raised the bar to claim their authority in a struggling empire, so too did the elite who could no longer claim active military prowess. Thus, by late antiquity, aristocrats found themselves in a crisis of masculinity and turned to the new definition of imperial *paideia* to lay claims to their own authority (Kuefler, 2001). The result was the vastly changed space of the late ancient villa with strictly divided spaces and closely monitored movements of the bodies that functioned within them. As the Piazza Armerina demonstrates, the aristocratic male maintained the ultimate control over the movement of bodies within his home, and he added separate rooms to guarantee class distinction. Furthermore, the redefined *paideia* added the circus representations to the spaces that specifically suggested an indulgence in the weakness of carnal desires, such as the stibadia. The proper placement of mosaics with heroic and violent scenes negated the undertones of giving in to bodily desires that accompanied the act of feasting and overtly illustrated the masculine notions of *auctoritas* and *romanitas*. Perhaps most importantly, the Piazza Armerina demonstrates how aristocrats imported the imperial palatial building trends of late antiquity to their provincial villas in an effort to assert their Roman authority in the provinces.

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