Nice theatre, but didn’t they kill Caesar here?

Ewan Coopey

Built by Pompey{a capable military figure} in 55 BC, the theatre of Pompey and its surrounding building complex (*fig. 1*) is considered one of Rome’s greatest monuments, both by its contemporaries and modern scholars. Testament to the complex’s significance is the fact that, despite being the location of Caesar’s murder on the Ides of March 44 BC, it was restored by his adopted son Augustus in 32 BC. The complex underwent numerous repairs, restorations and reconstructions in its life time, remaining in use right up until the 6th century AD @GagliardoPacker, always functioning, at least partially, as a ‘public’ space.

# The Complex

Dio Cassius [(Cass. Dio. 39.38)](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius_Dio/39*.html#38) and Plutarch [(Plut. *Pomp*. 52)](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Pompey*.html#52) inform us that the building was finished in 55 BC during Pompey’s 2nd consulship. Thanks to Cicero’s oration against Piso [(Cic. *Pis*. 27.65)](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0020%3Atext%3DPis.%3Achapter%3D27); @GagliardoPacker, the opening of the whole complex by Pompey can also be dated to 55 BC.

The building was located on the Campus Martius (*fig. 2)*, a name given to the large area of public land north-west of the geographic centre of the city. Thanks to archaeological remains (*fig. 3)*, the shape of the modern city of Rome (*fig. 4)*, and Severan Marble Plan of Rome (*fig. 5)*, we know exactly where it was located (*fig. 6*).

Pompey combined multiple traditional Roman structures within his building complex (*fig. 1*) @Temelini; These were a temple, a theatre, and a *quadriportico* (a four-sided portico). The structure was also home to a garden and a *curia* (a Roman building typically used for senatorial meetings). The structure faced east; something Vitruvius [(4.5.1)](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Vitruvius/4*.html) tell us was typical for Greek and Roman temples of the time.

# Archaeological Remains and other evidence

Besides the written evidence, our understanding of the complex of Pompey is largely derived from the archaeological remains of the structure, and the Severan Marble Plan of Rome (*Forma Urbis Romae*).

The archaeological remains of the complex are mostly underground or have been integrated into the modern city-scape. For instance, remains of the Portico and Curia have been found underneath the *Largo di Torre Argentina* (*fig. 3*), and housing on the *via di Grottapinta* follows the curve of the ancient theatre (*fig.* *4*).

The *Forma Urbis Romae* [(The Stanford Digital Forma Urbis Romae Project, 2002-16: s.v. ‘Slab Map’)](https://formaurbis.stanford.edu/docs/FURslabmap.html) is a plan of Rome from the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus (AD 193 – AD 211) with a scale of 1:240 that was 18.22 m x 12.87 m. Since the first pieces were found in AD 1562, 1,186 fragments have been recovered. The complex of Pompey is preserved in several fragments from [Slabs III-11](https://formaurbis.stanford.edu/slab.php?slab=110) and [IV-6](https://formaurbis.stanford.edu/slab.php?slab=96) of the plan. A photo of the surviving fragments (*fig. 5*), as well as some renaissance drawings of lost fragments, are available for viewing on the ‘Stanford Digital Forma Urbis Romae Project’ website [(Carettoni)](https://formaurbis.stanford.edu/plate.php?plateindex=31).

# The Theatre of Pompey

Pompey’s theatre was the first permanent theatre in Rome, as permanent seating was traditionally banned in the ancient city [(Tertullian Tert. *de spect*. X)](http://www.tertullian.org/lfc/LFC10-13_de_spectaculis.htm) and Pliny the Elder [(Plin. *NH*. 8.7.20)](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plin.+Nat.+8.7&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1919.02.0137) tell us that Pompey validated his theatre by dedicating it as a Temple of *Venus Victrix[[1]](#footnote-1)*. According to Plutarch [(Plut. *Pomp*. 42.4)](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Pompey*.html#42.4),Pompey drew inspiration for his theatre from that of Mytilene in Greece, asking for detailed drawings to be made of its plan.

The theatre was 35 m tall and 150 m in diameter [@Temelini]. It was semi-circular in shape andconsisted of five major components: the *cavea* (seating), the *orchestra* (circular space in front of the stage), the *pulpitum* (stage), the *scaenae frons* (architectural backdrop)*,* and the Temple of *Venus Victrix*. The *cavea* is thought to have seated at least 20,000 people [@Temelini]. Some modern reconstructions, including those by Canina and Blazeby, split the seating in the *cavea* into two sections, as is seen in the *Forma Urbis Romae* (*fig. 5*) [(Canina’s reconstruction)](http://www.pompey.cch.kcl.ac.uk/Canina.htm); [(Blazeby’s reconstruction)](http://www.pompey.cch.kcl.ac.uk/blazeby_files/blazeby3d04.htm). However, others have included three sections of *cavea* in their reconstructions [(Burge’s reconstruction)](http://www.pompey.cch.kcl.ac.uk/burge_files/burge3d01.htm). This illustrates how modern reconstructions of the theatre are based largely on speculation.

Besides the temple, the focus of the theatre was the *pulpitum* and the *scanae* *frons*. The *pulpitum* was the main stage where the many theatrical performances would have taken place. The *scaenae frons* was situated right behind it, as backdrop. The enormous permanent *scanae frons* seen in the *Forma Urbis Romae,* and thus most modern reconstructions (e.g. *figs. 1 & 7*), is from the reign of Septimius Severus. As Gleason notes, it is very possible that the theatre’s original *scaenae frons* were temporary, constructed primarily from wood [@Gleason]. Once made permanent however, as argued by Sear, there is evidence that the theatre’s *scaenae frons* were copied at other sites across the empire [@Sear].

# Temple of Venus Victrix

Besides the fact that it sat at the top of the *cavea* and was dedicated to the goddess *Venus Victrix*, not much is known about the temple in Pompey’s theatrical complex. The common consensus among scholars is that it was very large and ornate, rising above the roof of *cavea*, and protruding out the back of the theatre (*figs. 1 & 8*). However, Richardsonargues that the size and form of the Temple has been exaggerated, largely due to misinterpretation of the *Forma Urbis Romae* fragments [@Richardson]. He claims that the rectangular structure protruding from the back of the theatre on the plan is in fact a street (*fig. 5*), and that the temple was instead of modest architecture, harmonious with the rest of the *cavea* [@Richardson]*.* This disagreement in modern scholarship illustrates the need for caution when using modern reconstructions. How about ([@Richardson], 2006: 42)

# The Curia

The Curia of Pompey was located at the eastern end of the complex, at the end of the *quadriportico* (*figs.* *1* & *9*). It is thought that the space would have been able to accommodate 600 senators as well as visitors. Plutarch tell us that it was structurally incorporated into the *quadriportico* itself, and that it housed a statue of Pompey [(Plut. *Brut*. 14)](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Brutus*.html#14).

After the *curia* in the *forum* {the traditional socio-political and economic centre of Republican Rome} was destroyed by a fire in 52 BC, the Curia of Pompey became a place for the senate to hold meetings [@Temelini]. Suetonius [(Suet. *Caes*. 80, 81)](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Julius*.html) and Plutarch [(Plut. *Brut*. 17-8)](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Brutus*.html#17) tell us that it was here, during one of these senate meetings in 44 BC, that Julius Caesar was assassinated. Suetonius [(Suet. *Aug*. 31.5)](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Augustus*.html#31) and Cassius Dio [(Cass. Dio. 47.19)](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius_Dio/47*.html#19) inform us that during the reign of Augustus (27 BC – AD 14) the space was closed off, and the statue of Pompey was removed upon Augustus’ orders;.

# The quadriportico

The *quadriportico* (*figs. 1 & 10*) was an immense enclosed space, approximately 180 m long and 135 m wide [@Temelini]. The *quadriportico* consisted of a double colonnade outlining a large open space, which was most likely a ‘park’ consisting of a number of gardens [@Temelini]. As recorded by Vitruvius [(Vitr. 5.9.1)](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Vitruvius/5*.html#9.1), the exterior colonnade was entirely sheltered from the elements, allowing for the space to be used all year-round. There were also a series of rooms connected to this exterior colonnade, with various social, administrative and economic uses. For instance, some rooms were given to local guilds, and others acted as storage units for grain [@Temelini].

The interior colonnade surrounded a large peristyle ‘park’, consisting of several gardens*.* The colonnade was also embellished with a great number of artworks, namely paintings and sculptures. The paintings were typically of mythological or historical figures. For instance, Pliny states that there was a painting of mythological hero Cadmus and his sister Europa [(Plin. *NH*. 35.37)](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plin.+Nat.+35.37&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137), as well as another “*very fine*” painting of Alexander [(Plin. *NH*. 35.40)](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D35%3Achapter%3D40). The sculptures within the gardens and their surrounding *quadriportico* depicted similar scenes. Pliny [(Plin. *NH*. 36.4)](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plin.+Nat.+36.4&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1199.02.0137) and Suetonius [(Suet. *Nero*. 46)](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Nero*.html#46) tell us that within the porticos there were fourteen statues personifying the nations conquered by Pompey. A statue of a group of muses has also recently been found in the archaeological record [@Gleason]; [@Russel], as well as a gilded bronze statue of Hercules (*fig.11*).

We are told by Propertius [(Prop. II.32.11‑12)](https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/PropertiusBkTwo.php#anchor_Toc201112289) that within the gardens there were densely arranged parallel *plane-trees*, statues and running water features, effectively imagined in *Figure* *10*. The Garden was also the only garden outside the religious boundary of Rome which was opened to the public by a private donor{Pompey} [@Russel]. Furthermore, peristyle gardens were a very common feature of private villas and mansions. As such, this public peristyle would have provided the average Roman with a glimpse into the private villas of the elite [@Russel].

People could thus walk amongst these beautiful gardens under the shade of trees and admire the surrounding art, or perhaps choose to socialise, surrounded by greenery and the sound of running water. As [@Temelini] effectively summarises, “*The porticus-garden was intended to provide the Roman community with a formal setting for rest, relaxation, and quiet contemplation.”*

# Restorations and alterations

The complex underwent numerous restorations and alterations during its life. For instance, we are told that Augustus [(Aug. *RG*. 20)](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Augustus/Res_Gestae/4*.html#20) and Claudius [(Suet. *Claud*. 21)](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Claudius*.html#21) rebuilt sections of the theatre. Additionally, Cassius Dio [(Cass. Dio. 62.6.1‑2)](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius_Dio/62*.html#6) claims that Nero gilded the entire theatre as well as stating that he placed purple curtains above the theatre for shade. While the first claim may be an exaggeration, the second illustrates that the theatre was sometimes shaded.

# The Theatre of Pompey: Home of the performing arts, religion, leisure, politics and murder.

The Theatrical complex of Pompey on the Campus Martius was an impressive structure. It incorporated several different buildings and architectural styles to create a multi-purposed and aesthetically pleasing complex. The structure provided a large public space for leisure activities. A Roman could enjoy a walk through its beautiful peristyle gardens, admiring a well-crafted bronze statue of Hercules whilst physically isolated from the clamour of the city. Alternatively, they could take a seat in the *cavea* along with thousands of others and watch a Greek tragedy under the shade of Nero’s purple curtains. However, what they could not do, was visit the site of Julius Caesar’s assassination.

# **Further Reading:**

A good amount of information used in this blog has been sourced from:

Temelini, M. A. (1993), [*The Function of Pompey’s Building Complex in the Campus Martius*](http://dx.doi.org/10.20381/ruor-11398) (master’s thesis), Ottawa: University of Ottawa.

[The ‘Pompey Project’ website](http://www.pompey.cch.kcl.ac.uk/index.htm), created by King’s Visualisation lab (KVL), provides a great overview of the structure. It covers topics such as the theatre’s history and its excavations, as well as providing some 2D and 3D reconstructions of the theatre.

The [surviving fragments of the *Forma Urbis Romae*](https://formaurbis.stanford.edu/index.html) are published as part of the ‘Stanford Digital Forma Urbis Romae Project’.

1. Victorious Venus [↑](#footnote-ref-1)