

# The Role of Water in the Functioning of Roman Entertainment Buildings

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A topographical analysis concerning the position of buildings for public spectacles has shown that a substantial number of them was built near water features, such as rivers or the sea. In several cases, the distance was approximately one hundred meters, or even less. Hence, the presence of running water must be considered as a determining factor for Roman architects in the choice of a site for a building dedicated to entertainment.

When thinking about water in connection with buildings for a *spectacula*, the first thing that comes to mind is the ancient *naumachia*. Therefore, we may suppose that one of the reasons why these buildings are often erected close to rivers is that the water-course may be used to fill the structure with water in an easy, cheap and fast way for this type of games.

In spite of what has been argued by modern scholarship,<sup>1</sup> *naumachiae* were not common in the Roman world. Priority must have been given to many other water-connected needs, rather than to the representation of naval battles.

In the past, it has been argued, for example, that the amphitheatres of Cyzicus and Pergamon may have been used for *naumachiae*. According to the scholars who studied these buildings, the arena might have been flooded using the river running below them.<sup>2</sup> However, as H. Dodge wrote: “No commentator gives any idea how this might have been achieved!”<sup>3</sup> Both structures are built following the steep slopes of a valley to support the *cavea*, which is the main reason why these amphitheatres were built over a river: the same also happened at Saintes (Mediolanum Santonum) and Italica.<sup>4</sup>

At El Jem, it was assumed that *naumachiae* were performed in this amphitheatre because the arena is partially covered with mortar. Gadrat, as early as 1909, understood that it was just an embellishment for the arena:<sup>5</sup> it is not hydraulic mortar, but the preparation for wall paintings. Gadrat’s argument was ignored until 2015, when Montali confirmed his hypothesis.<sup>6</sup>

In the city of Nysa, a river flows through the centre of a building used for entertainment purposes, which has the appearance of a hybrid between an amphitheatre and a stadium.<sup>7</sup> In this case as well, the river must have functioned as a big sewer, and was not used to flood the arena. Due to the size of the building, it would have taken several weeks to fill the arena and let it dry at the end of the performance.

In the case studies presented so far, there is a clear and direct relation between entertainment buildings for leisure and watercourses, but watercourses are not connected to water games at all. Should we agree with those who argued that *naumachiae* never happened?

We know from ancient literature that *naumachiae* were staged in the Colosseum. Suetonius, Cassius Dio and Martial wrote that performances involving the use of water

had been offered during the 100-days of games for its inauguration.<sup>8</sup> These shows were staged inside the amphitheatre and there is no reason to believe the sources to be unfounded: fragments of hydraulic mortar have been identified on some occasions on the arena walls.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, it is true that, apart from the inaugural games, these spectacles are never mentioned. Probably, as Coleman<sup>10</sup> wrote, when the Colosseum was inaugurated, the basements had not completely been excavated, and in such a simple structure it was possible to arrange *naumachiae* and *shows* with Tritons and Nereids. So, *naumachiae* were actually staged in the Colosseum, but when the structure of the arena was much simpler. It is essential to bear in mind an often-neglected point: this amphitheatre had been built over the lake of Nero's *Domus Aurea*. This was not a malarial swamp; it was a splendid lake, a place of "Otium" and consequently was already equipped with a complex system for the supply of water and for its outflow into the Tiber. An exceptional situation from several different points of view.

These examples confirm that there often is a close connection between buildings for public entertainment and water features. Water, however, almost never had an active function, as it was mostly used for cleaning and, sometimes, to keep the drainage system clean and efficient. Moreover, these structures had several other water-connected needs, related to the games and with the people involved; an article concerned with these matters is forthcoming.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> e.g. Rea 1988, 36 f.

<sup>2</sup> Golvin 1988, 202 f.

<sup>3</sup> Dodge 2009, 36.

<sup>4</sup> Golvin 1988, 124. 200.

<sup>5</sup> Gadrat 1909, 107–111.

<sup>6</sup> Montali 2015, 495 f.

<sup>7</sup> Strabo XIV, I, 43.

<sup>8</sup> Suet. *Tit.*, 7,3.; Dion. Cass. 66, 25; Mart. *Spect.*, *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> Coleman 1993, no. 50. 58.

<sup>10</sup> Coleman 1993, 59 f.

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