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*American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 91, No. 1. (Jan., 1987), pp. 123-126.

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*American Journal of Archaeology* is currently published by Archaeological Institute of America.

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# A Note on the Architecture of the *Theatrum Pompei* in Rome

L. RICHARDSON, JR

## Abstract

The commonly accepted reconstruction of the architectural form of the Theater of Pompey and Temple of Venus Victrix with the temple raised on an arcaded base of several stories rests on inadequate evidence. Examination of our sources and the Severan Marble Plan indicates that behind the theater there was probably a tree-lined avenue leading to Pompey's house and that the temple was a modest shrine, like other theater-temples.

When Pompey built his theater in the Campus Martius of Rome in the middle of the first century before Christ, he put a Temple of Venus Victrix at the top of the cavea in order to avoid censorial objections to the construction of a permanent showplace for *ludi scaenici*. Thus he was able to maintain that the complex was primarily a temple and the cavea essentially a flight of steps leading up to the temple. Since the time of Canina, if not earlier, Pompey's Temple of Venus has been envisaged as grandly proportioned, a major temple in scale with the theater as a whole, its pronaos projecting into the cavea, its cella carried on towering substructures in multiple stories continuing the arcades of the exterior of the cavea.<sup>1</sup> This is what is shown on the plastic map of Rome made under the direction of Italo Gismondi in the Museo della Civiltà Romana (fig. 1) and in reconstructions on paper by others (e.g., fig. 2). It is so described by J.A. Hanson in his book on Roman theater-temples,<sup>2</sup> and in standard works on Roman architecture and topography.<sup>3</sup>

Our sources for the Temple of Venus Victrix are few, though our sources for the Theater of Pompey are many. Tertullian is fullest in his account of it:

And so Pompey the Great, the less only in his theater, when he had built that stronghold of all that is disgraceful, fearing censorial reprisal at some future time, set over it a Temple of Venus, and inviting the people by proclamation to its dedication, called it not a theater, but a Temple of Venus, beneath which, he said, we have added seats for shows. And so he shielded a work condemned and deserving condemnation with the label of temple and cheated tradition with religiosity.<sup>4</sup>

This story is confirmed by Aulus Gellius (10.1.7) in his account of Pompey's dilemma about the form of the dedicatory inscription, but he adds nothing to a description of the architecture. Pliny (*HN* 8.20) casually mentions the dedication of the Temple of Venus Victrix without mentioning the theater. In the Fasti of Rome for 12 August we find sacrifices appointed at temples of Venus Victrix, Honos, Virtus, Felicitas, and V . . . in the theater.<sup>5</sup> The last is confirmed by Suetonius (*Claud.* 21.1) in his account of Claudius' rededication of the theater after a fire. Claudius first sacrificed at the temples at the top of the cavea (*apud superiores aedes*) and then descended through the cavea to a tribunal erected for him in the orchestra.

Whether all five temples were part of the original concept does not greatly matter; all five had come to be considered important by the time of Claudius' restoration, and it is tempting to see them as arranged in a semicircle crowning the radial stairs that divided the cavea into cunei, with that of Venus Victrix given emphasis and set on the central axis. Other theater shrines are regularly small affairs projecting in from the circuit wall at the top of the cavea and with little, if

<sup>1</sup> Cf. J.A. Hanson, *Roman Theater-Temples* (Princeton 1959) figs. 16-19 (after L. Canina, *Gli edifizii di Roma antica* 3-4 (Rome 1851)).

<sup>2</sup> Hanson (supra n. 1) 44-45.

<sup>3</sup> Cf., e.g., G. Lugli, *I monumenti antichi di Roma e suburbio* 3 (Rome 1938) 70-83; L. Crema, *L'architettura romana* (Enciclopedia classica 3, vol. 12.1, Turin 1959) 93-95; Nash II, 423-28; A. Boëthius and J.B. Ward-Perkins, *Etruscan and Roman Architecture* (The Pelican History of Art, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1970) 172-73; F. Coarelli, *Guida archeologica di Roma* (Verona 1975) 254-57.

<sup>4</sup> Itaque Pompeius Magnus solo theatro suo minor cum illam arcem omnium turpitudinum extruxisset, ueritus quandoque memoriae suae censoriam animaduersionem Veneris aedem superposuit et ad dedicationem edicto populū uocans non theatrum, sed Veneris templum nuncupauit, cui subiecit, inquit, gradus spectaculorum. Ita damnatum et damnandum opus templi titulo praetexit et disciplinam superstitione delusit (Tert., *De Spect.* 10).

<sup>5</sup> *Inscript. Ital.* 13.2.493-94. Various suggestions have been made to complete the abbreviation "V" in the Fasti Alfifani. If it is not a mistake, I should prefer to read Victoria, despite the apparent duplication of Venus Victrix.

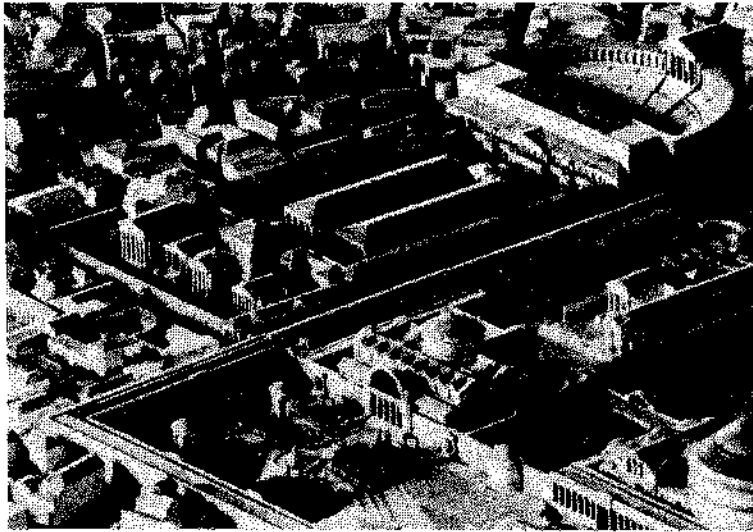


Fig. 1. The *Theatrum Pompei* and *Porticus Pompei*, Rome. Model by Italo Gismondi. Rome, Museo della Civiltà Romana. (After B. Brizzi ed., *Ancient Rome: Yesterday and Today* [Rome 1971] 47)

any, projection behind it. At Vienne in Gallia Narbonensis the theater of perhaps about 15 B.C., built on a steep hillside, has a colonnaded ambulatory at the top of the cavea. This is interrupted on the main axis by a temple with a pronaos tetrastyle in antis and a very shallow cella. The columns of the pronaos are in line with those of the colonnade to either side, but larger in diameter, and the back of the cella projects about a meter and a half beyond the exterior of the cavea. Access was given by lateral stairs to a shallow altar platform in front of the pronaos. At Leptis Magna in Tripolitania the arrangements of the theater-temple, ded-

icated in A.D. 35/36, are similar. The front of the shallow hexastyle pronaos lies along the edge of a platform projecting across the summa cavea. The back of the cella is a continuation of the back of the cavea with no projection. The cella stood open almost full width, with two columns in the opening. Access was only from the colonnaded ambulatory to either side.<sup>6</sup> Why should the temples of the Theater of Pompey be different?

In seeing the Temple of Venus Victrix as different the scholarly world has been influenced by a preconception of what a temple should be like and the repre-

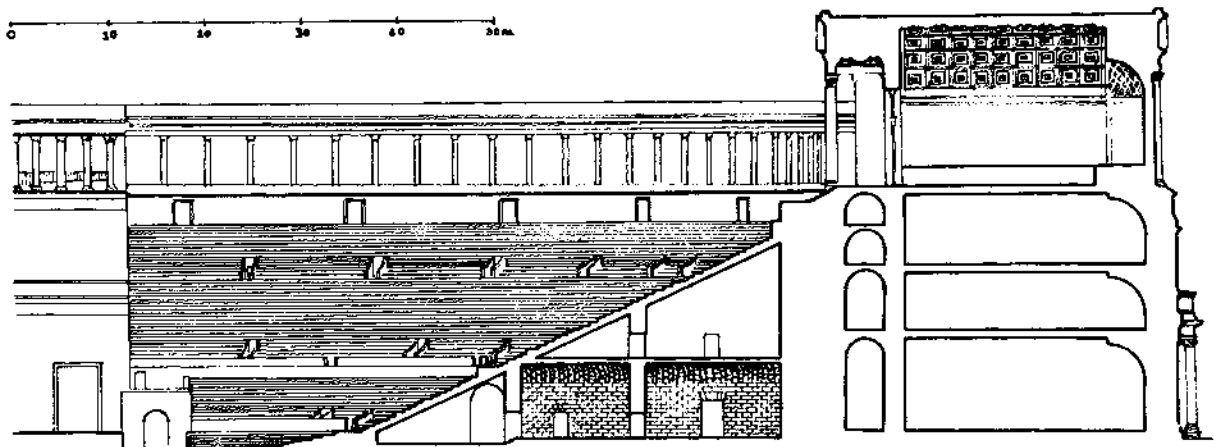


Fig. 2. Cross-section of the *Theatrum Pompei* and *Aedes Veneris Victricis* on axis. Reconstruction by L.-P. Baltard, *Monuments antiques* 2 (Paris 1834) pl. 142.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Hanson (*supra* n. 1) figs. 22, 32.

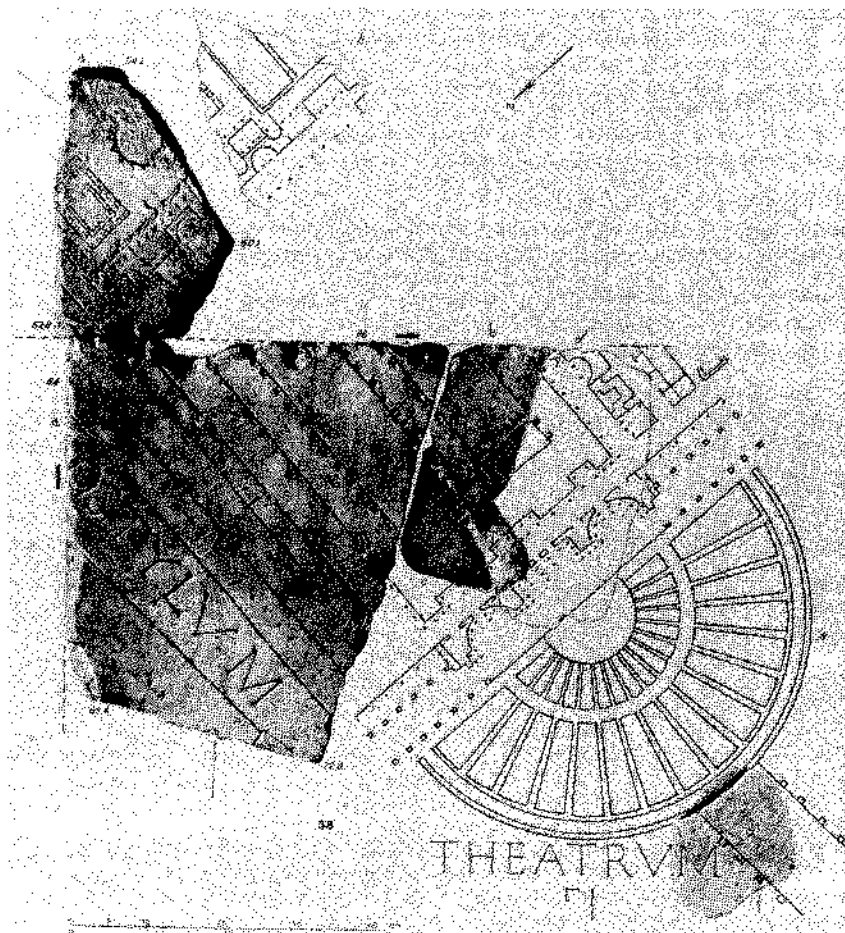


Fig. 3. The *Theatrum Pompei* and *Porticus Pompei* as shown on the Severan Marble Plan of Rome. (After G. Carettoni et al., *La pianta marmorea di Roma antica* [Rome 1960] pl. 32)

sentation of large parts of the theater on a fragment of the Severan Marble Plan (fig. 3). The latter is now largely lost, but known from a careful drawing of it in the Codex Ursinianus.<sup>7</sup> The *cavea* is shown as consisting of two concentric arcs of 16 wedge-shaped elements and an outer annular corridor. Beyond the *cavea* on axis projects a broad addition of the width of the two central wedges of the outer arc flanked by a line of five small, widely spaced squares that might be columns. It breaks off without any indication of a termination, and no interior feature is shown, but it has been presumed that this was the base of the Temple of Venus Victrix. A small fragment preserving part of the representation of this element still survives<sup>8</sup> and shows that the drawing is not absolutely accurate;

among other details, the puzzling feature was not shown radiating true to axis, but slightly skewed to the left. Comparison with the fragments of the Plan showing the Theater of Marcellus indicates that what is shown is a schematic plan of the base story of the theater, as we might have guessed. Although the outline of the *cavea* survives today in the shape of the buildings subsequently built over it,<sup>9</sup> we can see no trace of a massive rear addition, which would have projected into Piazza Campo de' Fiori.

But had there been foundations of a temple of the sort and size everyone has imagined, these would have projected inward as well, running out into the central segment of the *cavea*, and were what is shown foundations for a temple, one would expect to find substructure

<sup>7</sup> *Cod. Vat. lat.* 3439 fol. 23r. G. Carettoni, A.M. Colini, L. Cozza, G. Gatti, *La pianta marmorea di Roma antica* (Rome 1960) pl. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Carettoni et al. (supra n. 7) pl. 32; cf. also E. Rodriguez

Almeida, *Forma urbis marmorea: aggiornamento generale 1980* (Rome 1981) pl. 32.

<sup>9</sup> Cf., e.g., Nash II, 424, fig. 1217.

tures for the cella walls indicated and the columns differently disposed. Columns are shown by various conventions on the Marble Plan (small squares, drilled dots, dotted squares), but never, so far as I can discover, adorsed to the podium of a temple.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, what this element most closely resembles is another part of Pompey's complex, the long rectangles flanked by lines of widely spaced dotted squares in the open area of the Porticus Pompei. These lines of squares may have been files of plane trees (cf. Prop. 2.32.11–16) or the supports of light wooden arbors, but are too widely spaced to have been colonnaded buildings.<sup>11</sup>

Pompey is said by Plutarch (*Pomp.* 42.4) to have been so taken with the beauty of the Theater of Mytilene that he had plans of this made and used it as a model for his own, but made his larger and more splendid. The Theater of Mytilene was excavated, beginning in 1958, by Evangelides,<sup>12</sup> but no trace of a theater-temple, let alone one towering over the cavea and projecting behind, was found. In fact, no addition

of any sort was found behind the cavea. Plutarch (*Pomp.* 40.5) also tells us that although Pompey maintained a modest house down to the time of his third triumph, when he came to build his theater he built close to it a splendid house for himself, and this was like a tender towed behind a great ship. If this was attached to the theater by an avenue lined with trees, it might well have suggested just that simile.

The evidence then suggests that the Theater of Pompey was not an extraordinary hybrid, that the shrines at the top of the cavea were of modest architecture harmonious with the rest, that what was really remarkable was the size, the extent of the porticus, the lavish use of marbles, the planting and the fountains. We do not need to see it as an architectural anomaly.

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<sup>10</sup> In Carettoni et al. (supra n. 7) 104, Colini interprets these squares as buttresses, but they are too small to have been buttresses.

<sup>11</sup> These are restored as arcaded pavilions by Gismondi on the plastic map of Rome, but these would leave no room for

the gardens that so excited the Romans' admiration. Moreover on the Marble Plan indication of interior walls is completely lacking. Gismondi must be in error here.

<sup>12</sup> *Prakt* 1958, 233ff.