

THE THEATER OF POMPEY:
AN UNPRECEDENTED MONUMENT HERALDING THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF
POMPEY THE GREAT

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When a man's ambition and competitiveness are combined with military prowess and political savvy, a need for constant adulation and recognition inevitably arises within. In the case of the legendary Roman general and statesman, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, better known as Pompey the Great, that need was fulfilled with the construction of Rome's first free-standing permanent stone theater: the Theater of Pompey (Fig. 1), c. 55 B.C. If not for Pompey's outsized ego, this monumental architectural structure might never have been erected. Meant to convey a message of strength, success, and wealth, the Theater of Pompey was built to glorify the achievements of its patron on the battlefield and to win the public's and the aristocracy's favor. In a crafty move, Pompey crowned his massive theater complex with a temple dedicated to his favorite goddess, Venus Victrix, further appeasing any critics. This grandiose monument built by Pompey during the era of the late Republic, celebrated, publicized, and heralded his considerable military victories and, consequently became one of history's most architecturally significant structures.

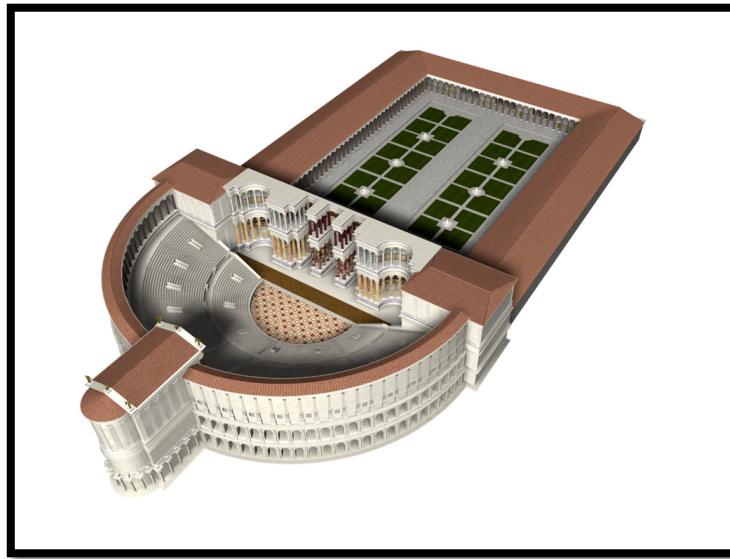


Fig. 1. Theater of Pompey, 3D model, "The Blazeby Reconstructions." Image: The Pompey Project, www.pompey.cch.kcl.ac.uk/index.htm.

Pompey was born in Rome on September 29, 106 B.C. The son of a Roman general, Pompey followed in his father's footsteps, rising rapidly through the military ranks. After his father's death, Pompey, at the age of twenty-two, put together an army that was comprised of men who had previously fought under his father. At the age of twenty-four, he boldly declared himself to be the Roman Alexander. Lucius Cornelius Sulla, the Roman general, took notice and hired Pompey, who at such a young age was already an *Imperator* (a saluted commander), along with his legion. To sweeten the deal, Sulla offered Pompey a stepdaughter in marriage. She became one of five women that Pompey was to marry during his lifetime.¹

One of Pompey's first wartime victories took place in the year 81 B.C when his army defeated Hiarbas (in present day Tunisia). With a hint of what was yet to come, he celebrated with a triumphal public procession, complete with chariot, a ceremony normally reserved for much more experienced military men. Aspiring politicians were expected to follow centuries of tradition, involving long military apprenticeships that eventually culminated in election to the Senate. But, according to the historian John Leach, "Already he was behaving like a senior senator and winning a dangerous amount of personal popularity with the people."²

Pompey used his reputation with the masses to convince the Senate to name him (77 B.C.) to the position of *consul* (military commander), despite the fact that he did not meet the age requirement of 42. He went on to lead scores of major campaigns during his unprecedented military career. In 72 B.C, facing great odds, Pompey achieved victory in

¹ Robin Seager, *Pompey the Great: A Political Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 23–30; 172; Mark A. Temelini, *The Function of Pompey's Building Complex in the Campus Martius* (Ottawa, Canada: University of Ottawa, 1993), 52.

² John Leach, *Pompey the Great* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978), 33.

Spain. He defeated menacing pirates at sea (67 B.C.) and successfully challenged Rome's enemy Mithridates (66 B.C.), King of Pontus (Northern Turkey). By the time Pompey's military career came to an end, his resume included impressive victories across three continents: Africa, Europe, and Asia.³

In 62 B.C., Pompey disbanded his army, and he returned to Rome the following year in a glorious triumphal march. Romans were used to such celebrations, but in Pompey's case, they were dazzled beyond anything that they had previously witnessed. Ten months of preparation resulted in a two-day long spectacle (timed to coincide with his forty-fifth birthday), in which captured enemies, including generals and kings, were paraded before throngs of cheering Romans. Much like we see in modern-day Olympic ceremonies, large placards announced each of the fourteen countries and nine hundred cities that Pompey defeated. On display were wagonloads of glittering plunder. A gilded chariot, drawn by four white horses, carried Pompey, who wore an elaborate costume he claimed once belonged to Alexander. The historian Richard Beacham describes the event as "a consummate piece of propaganda, meticulously stage managed to record indelibly in the imagination of its Roman audience an image of Pompey's power and majesty."⁴

Apparently, Pompey felt unable to rely upon his countrymen's imaginations and decided that he needed to leave them with something more tangible: a permanent stone theater. Erecting monuments to one's own achievements was a long-standing practice in ancient Rome. Visual reminders, mostly small porticos and temples, abounded. Many were decorated with stolen treasures or war booty, including Greek statues and paintings,

³ Seager, 40–85.

⁴ Richard Beacham, *The Roman Theater and its Audience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 157–58; Seager, 80.

which the Romans had come to greatly admire. Pompey's plan, however, was on a much grander scale.

Several important influences contributed to Pompey's idea of building a large, lavish monument. First, he borrowed the idea from his former boss, Sulla. According to the scholar Mark Temelini, Sulla understood "that massive decorated building projects were the visible signs of power." Sulla had used the spoils of war from Greece to build theaters and temples throughout Italy. It was from Sulla that Pompey got the idea to erect a large equestrian statue of himself and an understanding of placing his monument in a conspicuous spot for all to see. Second, Pompey was so impressed with the design of the theater in Mytilene (on the Greek isle of Lesbos) that he desired to build a theater of his own. Third, because of his status, Pompey was now permitted to wear a gold wreath and an embroidered toga to theater games, continuing a Roman tradition of linking politicians and the theater.⁵

Pompey navigated through contentious Senate politics in order to obtain permission to build his permanent stone theater. Although he defended the Roman Empire, his triumphs, and the attention that they attracted, encouraged jealousies. Eventually, Pompey was able to convince the Senate to ease previous restrictions on permanent theaters. Until this point in time, most Roman theaters were temporary wooden structures. The longstanding resistance to building permanent theaters in Rome, stems from political competition and the perceived threat that these theaters posed to the Roman elite.⁶

⁵ Temelini, 1–23.

⁶ Laura Klar Phillips, *The Architecture of the Roman Theater: Origins, Canonization, and Dissemination* (New York: New York University, 2006), 52, 77–81.

By the time Pompey began the construction of his theater, architecture had evolved from early Greek and Etruscan influences to a distinctly Roman style. Employing the latest Roman technology — arches and vaults — and using the best materials — improved concrete — the Theater of Pompey displayed the prime characteristics of a Roman theater: a semi-circular *cavea* (seating area) in an enclosed form (rather than horseshoe-shaped, like Greek theaters), a complex substructure, a multi-story columnar *scaenae frons* (stage front), and lavish decorations, all in a freestanding structure (Greek theaters were built into the slope of a hill). This form celebrates its patron, emphasizing his military accomplishments and placing him at the pinnacle of culture and society.⁷

When construction was completed in 55 B.C. (it was thought to have begun around 59 B.C.), the building complex incorporated not just a theater, but also a temple, a portico, a *curia* (a Senate assembly room), public gardens, fountains, and shops. Pompey selected this site, situated on the outskirts of Rome, for its obvious military significance. The theater was built on the southern section of Campus Martius (the Field of Mars), which served as a staging area for Roman armies as they valiantly prepared to march off to battle, as well as the staging area for triumphal parades heading into the city of Rome.⁸

Built on a concrete and travertine foundation, the theater was enclosed within concrete walls, 1.5-meters thick, and faced with tufa and travertine. The semi-circular *cavea* was approximately 35 meters high and 150 meters long with a seating capacity of 10,000 to 20,000. It was subdivided into sixteen sections on two levels and was reached by arcaded radial corridors. Twenty-four arches, forming arcades, appeared on each of the three levels of the exterior façade. Each arch featured an entablature, and making its first

⁷ Phillips, 13–50.

⁸ Beacham, 160–161; Temelini, 39–40.

appearance in Rome, a distinct pattern of engaged columns: Doric order on the ground floor, Ionic columns on the second level, and Corinthian columns on the third floor. In the niches between the columns stood bronze and stone statues. At 95-feet in width, the stage was nearly the length of a modern-day football field. Standing at the back of the stage was the triple-niched *scaenae frons* (Fig. 2), supported by 46 richly-colored marble columns.⁹



Fig. 2, Left: *Scaenae Frons*; Fig. 3, Right: *Temple of Venus Victrix*. 3D models, “The Blazeby Reconstructions.” Images: The Pompey Project, www.pompey.cch.kcl.ac.uk/Blazeby.htm.

Directly opposite the stage and rising to a height of 42 meters was the temple dedicated to Venus Victrix (Fig. 3), the goddess whom Pompey credited for his military victories. Centered at the back of the *cavea*, the temple was accessed by the rise of the tiered seats below. Noteworthy is the fact that women were treated as second-class citizens and were required to sit in the upper sections of the *cavea*. Although further away from the stage, it is ironic that women had the honor of sitting closer to the Temple of Venus Victrix. Interestingly, when Pompey dedicated his structure, he did so as if dedicating it to the Temple of Venus Victrix that just happened to have a theater attached

⁹ Phillips, 93–95; Temelini, 41–42.

to it. This was likely in response to his political rivals who objected to the construction of a permanent theater. But, Pompey wanted a theater built to ensure his lasting glory and guaranteed it by crowning the theater with the temple to Venus Victrix. By insinuating the goddess's role in military victories, Pompey sent the message that Venus Victrix not only watched over theater productions but also ensured the safety of Rome.¹⁰

The rest of the complex consisted of a large and beautiful park, the *Porticus Pompeii* (Pompey's portico) that extended six hundred feet behind the theater. The center courtyard, known as the Hall of the Hundred Pillars, held four rows of parallel columns, decorated with gold-embroidered curtains. Theatergoers who strolled in this space before the show and during intermission were treated to displays of Pompey's war treasures, including impressive paintings and sculptures, and could visit small shops. Friezes depicting Pompey's military triumphs were also part of the richly decorated park. Fountains, trees, and streams provided cool shading on hot summer days. In a politically astute move, Pompey also built a *curia* here so that visiting senators would have a gathering place of their own. Not so subtly, Pompey had a statue of himself erected in the center of the *curia*. The globe in the figure's outstretched hand made it obvious to viewers that the statue was a reference to Pompey as the Roman Alexander.¹¹

If one were to follow the path of the entire layout of this temple-theater-park complex, it would quickly become apparent that Pompey was once again feeding his ego by creating the route of a triumphal march, as he had throughout his life. Starting in the park area and parading past the *curia* and colonnades, through the main marble arched entryway to the theater, past the stage front with its elaborate *scaenae frons*, into the

¹⁰ Beacham, 161; Temelini, 55.

¹¹ Beacham, 162; Temelini, 44–59.

immense *cavea*, climbing up the stepped seating, and finally arriving at the crowning glory, the Temple of Venus Victrix, the meaning and ritual Pompey intended to convey can easily be imagined: this was a victory path celebrating Pompey the Great.¹²

Ultimately, the Theater of Pompey succeeded in delivering the intended results its patron sought. An image of Pompey's superior strength was mirrored in the massive dimensions and monumental stature of the first permanent stone theater structure, the likes of which had never before been seen in Rome. The theater complex provided an opulent showcase, in which Pompey could display his enormous cache of valuable war treasures, all won in brilliant military campaigns across three continents. Its location in the Campus Martius further emphasized Pompey's message of military superiority. Cleverly combining a temple with a theater, Pompey showed his sensitivity to the role religion played in society. Owning his own theater allowed Pompey to handpick plays and other performances, thereby elevating his cultural status. Envious politicians could only look on in awe. Ordinary citizens were thrilled beyond belief by the visual extravagance of the theater, its extraordinary shows, and its splendid public gardens. Future rulers copied the architectural breakthroughs employed in the Theater of Pompey, including Caesar, who, in a twist of fate, was murdered in the Theater of Pompey before he was able to finish erecting his own monument.

Thanks to scholars, archeologists, and advanced computer imaging, the Theater of Pompey lives on in history. But it was the *Imperator*, Pompey the Great, who had the vision, the ego, and the means to leave an enduring monument glorifying his own legacy.

¹² Phillips, 109.

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