

Traces and Memories of a Rural Reuse of Roman Amphitheatres: Archaeological Restoration and Landscape

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Abstract

Following the rise of Christianity and the severe economic crisis that affected the late Roman empire in Europe, Roman amphitheatres faced different fates, influenced by functional, social and economic factors. Urban systems gradually pushed amphitheatres out of the main urban core. They became isolated, and their ruins were repurposed for agriculture and for the defence from nearby cities. Over the years, these structures were buried to make way for new terraces or agricultural fields. In some other cases, they were altered by overlapping layers of other elements for residential or productive purposes. Despite this, the ancient amphitheatres have endured and drawn attention due to their ruins, their landscape and the narrative of their palimpsest. This narrative highlights the archaeological component and tells the story of their transformation over time. By focusing on significant case studies, such as the Anfiteatro Campano of Santa Maria Capua Vetere and the amphitheatre of Cuma, this study aims to examine the vernacular values of the ancient ruins, as well as the outcomes of the farmers activities –such as drainage channels or signs of ploughing and cultivation– on archaeology and landscape. The study proposes possible strategies and criteria for conserving the archaeological sites and enhancing the use of the storytelling, to communicate both their original story and their agricultural reuse over the years.

Keywords: roman amphitheatres; archaeology; restoration; landscape; rural reuse; memories

1. Introduction

The Roman amphitheatres were abandoned or repurposed after centuries of hosting successful and popular *ludi gladiatorii* and *venationes*. These practices came to an end due to a series of circumstances that contributed to their decline, with the spread of Christianity being foremost among them. Emperor Constantine himself condemned such brutal spectacles (Ambrosino, 2013), although they continued to be performed throughout the fourth century. Even in the early years of the fifth century, Saint Augustine references them in his writings (Carena, 2016).

Beyond the *pietas* introduced by Christianity and the socio-political transformations, the primary reason for the decline of gladiatorial *ludi* was undoubtedly economic. The crisis of the Roman political and social system led to the collapse of evergetism (Mingoa, 2004), and consequently, to the dismantling of the costly organizational machinery that sustained gladiatorial combats and *venationes*.

With the exception of sporadic forms of social aggregation –such as sporting events or strictly hunting-related activities that continued in the now-decommissioned arenas– a clear break with

the past occurred, leading Roman amphitheatres toward highly diverse destinies. In some cases, these structures were abandoned and left to deteriorate, primarily due to natural causes such as earthquakes. In other cases, they were damaged by human actions, including the spoliation of architectural and decorative elements for the recovery of construction materials or lime production. In yet other instances, structural and functional adaptations and repurposing rendered ancient amphitheatres closely tied to the history of the cities to which they belonged.

These transformations (Capoferro Cencetti, 1996; Ortolani, 2007; Pedersoli, 2008), while radically altering the original meaning and modifying their architectural frameworks, in some ways facilitated the structural preservation of ancient entertainment buildings, allowing them to survive over the centuries in various forms. Over time, multiple modes of reuse can be identified –military-defensive, residential, productive, sacred-funerary– each exploiting the architectural and constructive characteristics of these particular structures, their urban or extra-urban locations, their public, private, or ecclesiastical ownership, and the historical events that shaped them prior to reuse. Some of these repurposings were passive and indiscriminate, driven by the economic and practical necessity of reusing ruins as solid foundations for new buildings; others, however, were active and intentional, aimed at exploiting structurally functional elements both architecturally and symbolically.

From the medieval period onwards, the contraction of urban systems frequently resulted in the exclusion of large entertainment monuments from city centres, leaving them isolated and repurposed as agricultural outposts or defensive strongholds protecting nearby urban settlements. Amphitheatres, in particular, underwent a more profound transformation in response to substantial demographic growth. The

structural and formal characteristics of these monumental constructions –originally conceived as spaces designed “all around to look” (Treccani 2008)– were significantly modified and reinterpreted to accommodate various forms of residential reuse.

In the case of extra-urban amphitheatres, however, numerous iconographic and cartographic sources attest that these structures were either gradually buried –due to the development of new terraces or agricultural plots– or transformed through successive superimpositions, with their volumes repurposed for marginal residential or productive functions. Nevertheless, the morphological features, size, and location of ancient amphitheatres in relation to inhabited centres favoured their agricultural reuse following their abandonment. Over time, the ruins were progressively enveloped by soil and vegetation. Through cultivation, involving plowing and planting operations of varying degrees of invasiveness, ancient amphitheatres have endured, and now require particular attention with regard to their ruins, their landscape context, and their historical stratigraphy. Conservation and research efforts concerning these sites must adopt a strongly multidisciplinary approach, involving botanists, agronomists, landscape architects, and archaeologists. The complex undertaking of restoration projects involves emphasizing the archaeological dimension, which necessitates prior analysis of the site's characteristics, structural consolidation, and the protection of surviving surfaces. The restoration intervention must also acknowledge the rural elements introduced by agricultural activity, including vernacular architecture built adjacent to or atop ancient remains, as well as the hydraulic and logistical systems in their landscape setting. An interdisciplinary approach is essential for analysing the architectural and landscape values that should be integrated into the restoration process.

Such an approach provides the necessary strategies and criteria for conservation, enhanced accessibility, and effective storytelling –both of the archaeological sites themselves and of their agricultural reuse over time.

2. The Anfiteatro Campano in Santa Maria Capua Vetere. Archaeological characteristics and rural memories

In some cases, the agricultural reuse of ancient buildings for performances is documented solely through indirect sources, such as archival records or travel literature. This is the case of the Anfiteatro Campano in Santa Maria Capua Vetere (Fig. 1), for which significant iconographic evidence exists, offering insight into “agricultural” phases of the ancient ruins of Capua, as well as on their survival and resilience.



Fig. 1 – Aerial photo of the Anfiteatro Campano in Santa Maria Capua Vetere (Aloi, 2023).

A watercolour by William Turner and Thomas Girtin (Fig. 2), currently housed at the Tate Gallery in London¹, depicts the architectural remains of the Anfiteatro Campano from an aerial perspective. Aligned with the aesthetic sensibilities of the ruinist tradition, the drawing employs delicate lines, nuanced shadowing, and a carefully constructed luminosity to convey a

tranquil rural atmosphere – foregrounding the pastoral setting over the amphitheatre’s archaeological character. Turner’s watercolour, dated between 1794 and 1798², depicts the Amphitheatre of Capua in muted tones, with minimal details and faint architectural lines, that seem to downplay the grandeur of the ancient ruins. Turner’s work ‘reproduces’ a sketch by John Robert Cozens from 1782, which is preserved in the valuable *Beckford notebooks* in Manchester.

Reflecting the typical canons of English landscape painting, Cozens’ sketch conveys an almost emotional perception of the architectural remains. This stands in contrast to the investigative nature and scientific objectives of survey drawings. As noted by Mangone (2021), Cozens’ work shifts focus from analytical representation to the expression of the feelings of unease and solitude evoked by the site (Fig. 3).

A farmer, alone with his plow, cultivates a cornfield within the arena of the amphitheatre, which has been completely levelled and repurposed for agricultural use. This evocative image lacks precise measurements or material indications, yet it serves as a potent testament to the phase of abandonment and reuse of the amphitheatre at the end of the eighteenth century. The practice of employing the amphitheatre as a sort of greenhouse dates back several centuries³: as early as 1585, the Government of the City of Santa Maria issued a protective measure for the monument to ensure that “nothing more grows in his navel” (Venosta, Solari, 1982, pp. 16-17).

¹ *The Amphitheatre of ancient Capua*, ink and watercolour. The work is part of the Album of Copies of Italian Views for Dr. Thomas Monro [Turner bequest CCLXXIII 60], ca. 1794-1798, London, Tate Gallery.

² Turner had not yet crossed the Italian peninsula but he studied and replicated its architecture and landscapes based on copies of views by other English painters.

³ This data finds precise confirmation in the Memoirs on the monuments of antiquity and fine arts by Roberto Paolini (Paolini 1812, p. 258) and in the nineteenth-century engraving by Franz Ludwig Catel, entitled *In Capua i muli vanno del basto il peso a scaricare*.



Fig. 2 – J.M. William Turner, Thomas Girtin, *The Amphitheatre of Ancient Capua*, 1794-8 (in Album of Copies of Italian Views for Dr. Thomas Monro, Londra, Tate).



Fig. 3 – John Robert Cozens, *The Amphitheatre of Ancient Capua*, 1794–97 (Courtesy of the Whitworth, The University of Manchester).

The suitability of the Anfiteatro Campano for agricultural activities persisted until the nineteenth century. During the consolidation and reconfiguration efforts led by Ulisse Rizzi (Cappelli, 2023), a mulberry plantation was established on the embankment surrounding the amphitheatre in order to “provide shade for visitors of the Anfiteatro Campano and generate a modest income at minimal cost”⁴. Archival

documents preserved in the State Archives of Naples record routine maintenance interventions conducted in 1850, which included efforts to “uproot [...] the weeds, the wild plants” and to “water the mulberries planted there”⁵. In the following decades and throughout the twentieth century, the rural character of the Anfiteatro Campano gradually disappeared. Agricultural cultivation was abandoned by the late nineteenth century, and the “green” environment in which the ancient entertainment structure now stands is the result of landscape interventions designed to arrange the external areas, as well as the spontaneous proliferation of vegetation along the crests of the *cavea* walls, within the uncovered radial wedges, and along the external pathways. For a time, the arena itself remained green, but it has recently been paved, erasing even the vestiges of its agricultural past.

3. The Anfiteatro Cumano in the Phlegraean Fields. Agricultural reuse and the possibilities of archaeological restoration

Even today, some ancient entertainment buildings retain physical traces of their agricultural reuse, with certain sites still being cultivated after decades. A notable example is the Roman amphitheatre of Cumae, whose foundation dates back to the late 2nd century BCE to early 1st century BCE. Located outside the defensive walls of the ancient city of Cumae, the site selected for the construction of the Anfiteatro Cumano was inherently suited to a naturalistic design. The *cavea* was built by taking advantage of the natural slope of Monte Grillo, situated in the southern suburb of the city.

⁴ The proposal to plant mulberry trees dates back to December 1848 and was put forward by the Commission for the reforms of the Royal Bourbon Museum and Excavations of Antiquities. See ASNA, Real museo borbonico e Soprintendenza generale degli scavi 1848-1864, 324.I.004, «Piantagione di gelsi

nell’Anfiteatro Campano, per rendita e per dare ombra ai visitatori».

⁵ *Idem*.

Following its abandonment between 325 and 438 CE, due to the abolition of gladiatorial games, the ancient entertainment building underwent extensive spoliation of its materials, particularly during the Gothic War (535–553 CE). Between the 6th and 7th centuries CE, part of the amphitheatre was repurposed for ceramic production, while other areas were transformed into burial sites.

Between the 8th and 16th centuries CE, a progressive accumulation of alluvial material led to the gradual infilling of the cavea, ultimately resulting in the complete burial of the amphitheatre's ruins. The first cartographic evidence of the Anfiteatro Cumano in the area of ancient Cumae dates to the mid-18th century. Initially, the structure was generically identified and attributed to a complex of "Fabbriche Antiche"⁶ (Giuliani, 2013). However, by the second half of the 18th century, its original function began to be partially recognized. In the maps by Francesco La Marra, the structure is labelled as "Circus cum", and in 1768, Thom. Rajola produced a plan of the site.⁷ – an interpretative reconstruction based on the few visible above-ground structures. Throughout the 19th century, the Anfiteatro Cumano gained increasing prominence in cartographic representations, with progressively more detailed depictions, particularly by Jean Claude Richard De Saint Non in 1780, Filippo Morghen in the early 19th century, and later Andrea De Jorio and Karl Julius Beloch, who included it in his historical treatise *Campanien*.

From an iconographic perspective, the works of Cuciniello-Bianchi and Pietro Parboni – Thomas Dessoulavy are of particular interest. Despite a twenty-year gap between their drawings, the state of preservation of the amphitheatre appears

virtually unchanged in both. Common features are clearly visible, such as the arches of the foundation structures of the *summa cavea* and the presence of a 19th-century house farm, which incorporates one of the entrances to the arena as well as part of the *cavea*'s elliptical structure. A pivotal moment in the stratigraphic history of the Anfiteatro Cumano occurred with the construction of the house farm atop the remains of the ancient entertainment structure. Prior to this, the site had been characterized by ongoing abandonment and sporadic interest from travellers and scholars who depicted its remains. However, subsequent construction work resulted in the complete destruction of the *porta triumphalis*, compromising the continuity of the monument's geometry.



Fig. 4 – Cuma (Pozzuoli, Italia), Amphitheater, perimeter wall with arches, interior and exterior. Ernest Nash, *American Academy in Rome - Fototeca Unione*, 1957, *FU.Cuma.ANF.1.* and *FU.Cuma.ANF.1.* (Digital image courtesy of the American Academy in Rome, Photographic Archive).

⁶ We refer to the two graphic works by Nicolò Petrini (1750) and Antonio Hermit (1767), very similar cartographic productions.

⁷ This plan is included in the book by Paolo Antonio Paoli "Avanzi delle antichità esistenti a Pozzuoli Cuma e Baja".

The agricultural and productive reuse of the Anfiteatro Cumano was actively pursued and legitimized in the early decades of the 20th century (Fig. 4). The soil accumulated within the cavea of the amphitheatre was cultivated by farmers from nearby Bacoli, who were authorized by the then Archaeological Superintendency of Naples and Caserta. The concessionaires of the amphitheatre's land were required to eliminate crops that could potentially damage the emerging archaeological structures and were also obliged to comply with the Superintendency's directives, which mandated the gradual reduction of agricultural activity should future research needs arise.

However, it was only in the early 1990s that the necessity for in-depth investigations into the amphitheatre's archaeological remains became evident. These investigations were aimed at consolidating the structures and implementing safeguarding measures through stabilization and restoration interventions. By that time, the remains were in a severe state of deterioration and instability.

A series of excavations were carried out by Paolo Caputo, the archaeologist responsible for the excavations at Cumae, as part of a project initiated by the Archaeological Superintendency of Naples and Caserta. This project was structured in two phases – Kyme I (1994–1997) and Kyme II (1999–2002). In October 2000, a comprehensive series of restoration efforts were undertaken, which included the removal of invasive vegetation, the cleaning of surviving structures, structural consolidation and integration, and the installation of new seating, all conducted according to a principle of minimal intervention.

Currently, the Anfiteatro Cumano (Fig. 5) is not accessible to the public, as it is not included in the official itinerary of the Cumae Archaeological Park, to which it belongs. The site urgently requires further restoration and stabilization efforts. Several conservation

challenges persist due to constant exposure to atmospheric agents, the presence of invasive vegetation, and insufficient maintenance. Additionally, the site presents significant accessibility issues and limitations in visitor perception and experience. The route between the Cumae Archaeological Park and the Anfiteatro Cumano is not walkable, and the two sites remain disconnected and unintegrated. Within the amphitheatre itself, there are no visitor pathways, informational signage, or interpretive devices. The central space of the amphitheatre is still preserved as a valuable cultivated garden, framed by partially reclaimed archaeological structures.

Only a comprehensive and well-planned excavation and restoration initiative can enhance the understanding of this ancient entertainment structure and amplify its archaeological significance. Such an initiative would highlight the interplay between ancient monumental architecture, the natural landscape, and human productive activity.

In alignment with the most recent trends in archaeological restoration – emphasizing biodiversity, sustainability, and ethical interventions – agricultural production could be integrated into the broader process of excavation, conservation, enhancement, and site management (Matteini, 2006). It is impossible to exclude the natural and rural dimension from the recovery and valorisation of this Campanian archaeological site, particularly given the historically established image of the Anfiteatro Cumano and its *genius loci*.

4. Conclusions

Ancient amphitheatres, due to their extra-urban location and morphological characteristics, were often incorporated into productive activities following their abandonment. In particular, the cultivation of these sites has played a significant role in their preservation, while simultaneously enhancing the landscape dimension of their ruins.



Fig. 5 – Aerial photo of the Anfiteatro Cumano (Caputo, 2024).

The inseparable relationship between archaeology, landscape, and human activity serves as the foundational premise for any excavation, restoration, and enhancement project involving these sites. In cases where agricultural activity and the rural dimension are attested only through indirect sources – such as in the case of the Anfiteatro Campano of Santa Maria Capua Vetere – it is crucial to preserve their historical memory by incorporating the agricultural reuse phases into the site’s narrative. On the other hand, when ancient entertainment buildings still retain physical traces of their “cultivation” – as in the case of the Anfiteatro Cumano in the Phlegraean Fields – it becomes essential to develop a multidisciplinary and informed project for restoration and valorisation.

Starting with archaeological excavations, which are essential for expanding knowledge of the site’s remains, it is necessary to consider both the phases of construction and reuse. This approach highlights the archaeological component within its naturalistic context, explicitly showcasing the vernacular characteristics of the rural modifications brought about by agricultural activity.

These elements –constructive, landscape, and productive values, both tangible and intangible– must be integrated into the restoration project. They should be preserved, narrated, and transmitted to future generations.

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