

Responses to Disasters in Ancient Rome: The Case of Sporting Infrastructures

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When one observes the famed plaster model of Imperial Rome, *Plastico di Roma Imperiale*, commissioned by Mussolini in 1933, two buildings immediately stand out: the Colosseum and the Circus Maximus. Monumental in size indeed, but also in terms of social monumentality, for they played a central role in the cultural and political realities of everyday life.

Rome's public games were highly important sporting and religious affairs. Roman civilisation was centred on religion because they thought devout devotion was just as crucial to the prosperity of their Empire as military capability. As the Roman historian Mary Beard has observed, 'Their piety became a boast in their dealings with the outside world' because they placed such a high value on honouring their gods.

In addition to pleasing Jupiter and his cronies, politicians used public games for more practical purposes, including winning over the populace, assessing public opinion, and advancing Roman principles. The Roman state benefited by providing disaster assistance on several levels. The fact that the central authority showed imperial concern for its people was its main benefit. Disaster aid revealed a different, more compassionate side, of the government in an empire where the state was often pejoratively associated with tax collectors.

This 'public task' was an ingenious piece of political scheming. The victims were better able to restore their towns and lifestyles and resume economic output (contributing to the Empire's taxes). Thus, the individual emperor still obtained credit for being philanthropic.

This session discusses how major sporting complexes were affected by calamities and the wide-ranging strategies used to safeguard, maintain, and rebuild the daily life of the Romans and these sites. Considering how much more important sport was to their daily lives than ours, the collective mentality of the ancient Romans was considerably stronger than ours when it came to protecting their sporting and cultural heritage. I will examine how a more committed relationship with sporting traditions has important implications for preservation issues.

Through achieving a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the ancient Romans' relationship with sport and their sporting stadia, we can potentially develop stronger preservation models for sporting heritage sites today, such as the sites of former Olympic Games, which represent notable cultural legacies yet, regrettably, are often overlooked.