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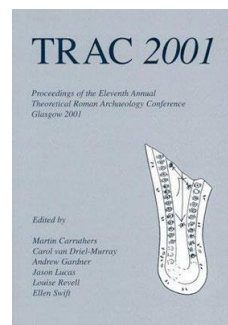
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# A Topography of Death: the buildings of the emperor Maxentius on the Via Appia, Rome

*Lorraine Kerr*

## *Introduction*

It has often been noted that the circus of Maxentius, part of a complex of buildings erected by that emperor on the Via Appia between AD 306–12, is curiously positioned relative to contemporary and pre-existing structures. This feature, and the generally cramped nature of the site, is usually explained in terms of restrictions imposed by the natural topography of the area (e.g., D'Alessio 1998: 17; Ioppolo 1999: 45–46).<sup>1</sup> However, a recent visit to the complex suggested that the orientation of the circus was not controlled exclusively by topographic factors, but also by the location of an important pre-existing tomb built in the immediate area, which is here argued to have been purposely integrated into the Maxentian architectural scheme. Deliberate assimilation of this tomb has significant implications for current understanding of the ideological motives lying behind the construction of the complex. This aspect, which has been little explored since the 1960s, is fundamental to interpreting this and indeed much of Maxentius' architecture in the capital city, on present evidence the only locus of any building activity on his part.

Maxentius' rise to power was facilitated by the so-called 'Tetrarchic' system of rule conceived by Diocletian in c. AD 284, though he may never have been recognised as a legitimate ruler within this framework (Kolb 1987: 77–109). His reign in Italy lasted only six years, his time being cut short by the ascendancy of the first Christian emperor Constantine, who killed Maxentius at the battle of Saxa Rubra in AD 312. Constantine proceeded very successfully to brand him an illegitimate tyrant with the aid of contemporary writers, who were either Christian or employed in Constantine's imperial court (Duchesne 1913; Cullhed 1994: 19–27; cf. Barnes 1981: 28–43).

In spite of Maxentius' short reign, his impact on the urban topography of late antique Rome is outstanding in both scale and scope. This feat is rarely recognised, as Maxentius' thunder was again stolen by Constantine, whose rededication and modification of much of his rival's work has meant that it is the latter emperor who is often cited as the last great builder of traditional public monuments in fourth century

Rome (e.g., Kleiner 1992: 432; Lançon 1995: 27–28; cf. Bauer 1996: 1–26, 51–61; Cullhed 1994: 49–60). It may fairly be said that this title belongs to Maxentius.

Apart from Rome's city walls, to which Maxentius made substantial modifications, his buildings can be divided topographically into two main groups.<sup>2</sup> The first group is located at the east end of the ancient *forum Romanum*. Here Maxentius built a new temple, originally dedicated to the reigning tetrarchs but later renamed in honour of his only son Romulus, who died in AD 309, aged four.<sup>3</sup> Adjacent to this temple, Maxentius constructed a vast basilica of unprecedented scale and sophistication, the roof of which has been described as "the noblest experiment in vaulting in the ancient world" (Richmond in Hornblower and Spawforth 1996: 1335; cf. LTUR I, 170–73). He also extensively remodelled the vast Hadrianic temple dedicated to Venus and Roma, which had suffered great damage in a recent fire (Cima 1981; LTUR IV, 121–23). In 309, Maxentius appropriated Nero's colossus, which stood just outside the east end of the forum, and rededicated it to Romulus (Lega 1989–90). It is also possible that Maxentius began a triumphal monument on the site where Constantine's arch now stands, for the purposes of commemorating his African triumph of AD 311 (Zosimus 2.14.2).<sup>4</sup>

### *The Via Appia complex*

The second group of monuments, which is the main focus of this paper, lies between the second and third miles of the ancient Via Appia, between the catacombs of Saint Sebastian and the imposing late Republican tomb of Caecilia Metella, which dominates the gentle hill that rises immediately to the east of the complex. This includes the circus, a large Hellenistic-style tomb and an imperial residence. The circus itself is the best preserved example in the archaeological record of the Roman empire, second only in size to the Circus Maximus in Rome (Ioppolo 1999; Humphreys 1986: 56–131). The only games recorded at the circus were its inaugural ones and these are generally thought to have been funerary in character (e.g. Camardo 1987; Bertolotti 1999b). They would have been held in honour of Romulus, who was probably interred in the adjacent cylindrical tomb, of which part of the large porticoed rectangular precinct and much of the substructures survive (Rasch 1984). The scantier remains of the imperial villa are today obscured by dense foliage, with only the apse of the great basilical hall being visible above the trees (Bertolotti 1999a). The interior of the villa is connected, via a covered portico, to the imperial box of the circus, which was situated in the usual fashion to give the most dramatic views of the race.

The complex as originally conceived is best understood as an elaborate imperial version of the type of elite residences that appear in Rome and throughout the provinces in the late antique period, whose palatial pretensions are evidenced in the regular presence of large audience halls, circus-shaped gardens and familial tombs; the Villa Gordiani, also on the Via Appia, and the late residence at Piazza Armerina in Sicily are two examples (LTUR II, 34–35; Wilson 1983). These and numerous similar late residential complexes were clearly intended for regular, if controlled, public viewing and reception. However, the events of AD 309 appear to have irrevocably transformed the Maxentian example. From this point, all elements of the complex, with the possible exception of the residence,

appear to fossilize. The dynastic tomb, whose first occupant was surely intended to be Maxentius, was now tragically occupied by his only son, Romulus. The inaugural games of the circus as planned never took place, instead transmuted into funeral games and dedicated, along with the circus itself, to the emperor's deceased heir. The new and pervasive quality of this emphasis on death and apotheosis is clear from the inscriptions found at the site by Antonio Nibby in the early nineteenth century, both of which refer to the 'divine Romulus' (CIL VI.1138; Nibby 1825).

This dominance of funereal elements connected within a coherent architectural scheme of this size is unique in the Roman world, a fact not fully appreciated in modern literature, but one which has important implications for interpretation of the site. Before such implications can be effectively discussed, however, it must be recognised that another structure has exerted a palpable impact on the layout of the complex. This is the tomb of the patrician Caecilia Metella, erected in the early first century BC (Claridge 1996: 341–42; Paris 2000).

To reach the Via Appia site on the approach to Rome, modern visitors must pass by Metella's tomb, a towering cylindrical structure that can be clearly seen from as far away as Rome's city walls, which lie almost three kilometres to the north. The largest and most opulent single building on the Via Appia, it reaches eleven metres high and almost thirty metres across at its widest point, and is faced entirely in white travertine, at that time the most expensive building material available. An ornately carved frieze decorated by *bucrania* and garlands encircles the drum at its top, and part way down there is a prominent inscription advertising its illustrious occupant, who was a relative through marriage of Marcus Crassus and a member of one of the most illustrious families of the Republic. One of the greatest surviving legacies of the well-documented surge in competitive building that took place amongst elites in Rome and across Italy in the late first century BC (e.g. Boëthius 1978: 209–215), the tomb is today, as it may well have been in antiquity, the Via Appia's most famous landmark.

A visitor, having passed Metella's tomb and arrived inside the modern boundaries around Maxentius complex, will enter the circus from the west end, where the remains of the *carceres* are located. Walking east towards the *spina*, they will quickly reach a point where, if they look to their right, the tomb can be seen in its entirety, visible through and above a low, broad archway on the southern side of the circus. Once opposite the exact centre of the arch, a remarkable alignment is revealed: the centre of the great tomb's drum now falls precisely in line with the midpoint of the arch. More significantly, looking to the north from this same position, it becomes apparent that the centres of both arch and drum are also exactly aligned with the centre of the most important structure in the circus: the imperial box. From inside the imperial box itself, this axial relationship is strikingly apparent: the great Republican tomb forms one end of a clearly defined axis of views, the other end being defined by the box. The existence and precision of this alignment can be simply confirmed by taking a ruler to a plan of the area, placing one end at the centre of the tomb and the other at the centre of the imperial box (Figure 1).

It is highly unlikely that this extraordinary arrangement can be attributed to coincidence. If it is deliberate, then it can be said that, while topographical factors may have exerted some general influence, it is Caecilia Metella's tomb that is controlling the

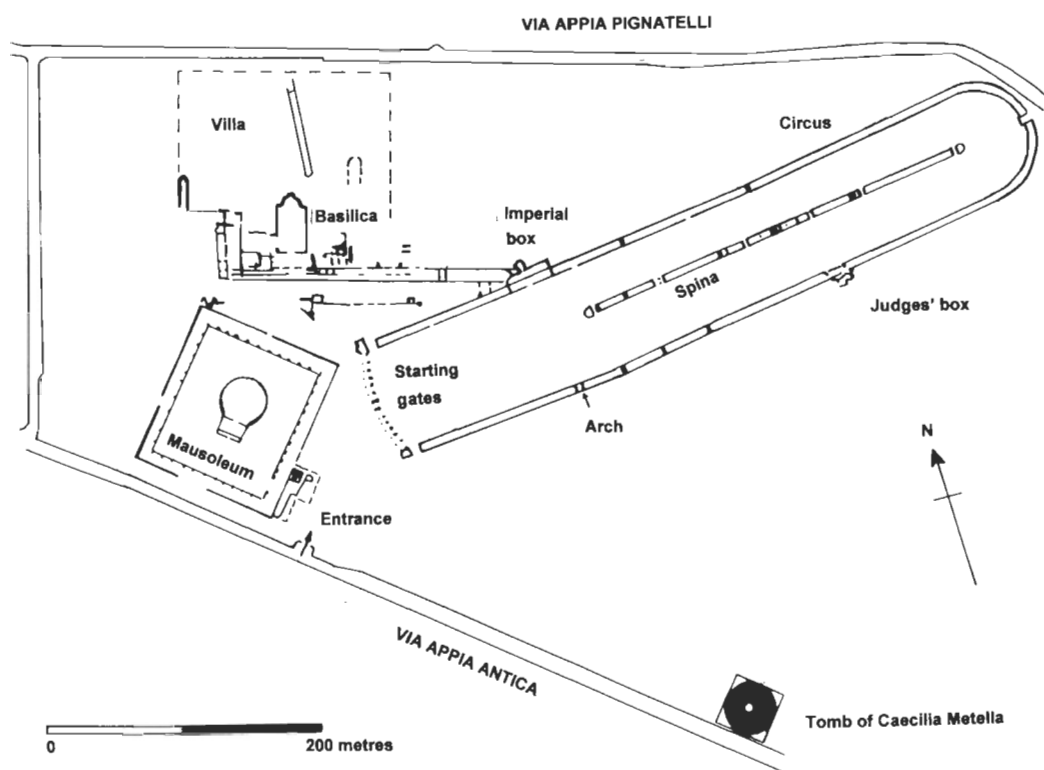


Figure 1. Plan of Via Appia Complex, showing relationship to Caecilia Metella's tomb (based on Claridge 1998: 337)

precise orientation of the circus. The imperial box has been sited, not just to give the best view of the race, but to give the best view of this important monument. Since Maxentius' circus, and the position of the structures within it, closely conform to what appears to be a generic plan for this building type, this means that the whole circus has been pivoted, metaphorically and literally, until tomb and imperial box coincided. In this one stroke, the scope, size, ideological complexity and funerary character of the Via Appia complex is dramatically increased.

### *Beyond the Via Appia*

In addition, it may also be contended that the physical and conceptual boundaries of the site may extend 2 to 3 miles beyond the circus and tomb, to the walls and gates of Rome itself. Maxentius made modifications to many of the gates of the third century

city wall during a period characterised by both external and civil incursions. This work was largely mainly confined to practical schemes, such as modification of the interiors and heightening of existing towers. However, two of the gates were singled out for special treatment: the Porta Appia and Porta Asinaria, which are located along the south-east section of the wall (Figure 2). In addition to interior strengthening, they were the subject of elaborate and not strictly functional exterior modification. They were also heightened by two storeys, rather than one as in all other cases. The extraordinary character of their modifications indicates, as Richmond suggests, "cosmetic splendour as well as practical purpose" (1930: 254). In the context of the entirety of Maxentius' building programme, it is their location that indicates the reason for their special treatment: these gates span the Via Appia and the Via Asinaria, the only two roads that connect the city with the circus. In this way Maxentius appears to have purposely forged spatial and ideological links between the city and the circus complex. The visibility of the Appian and Asinarian gates from the imperial box and Metella's tomb, a feature not shared by other gates along this section of the wall, enhances these connections. These gates were surely intended by Maxentius to be a visual link for visitors between the city and the Via Appia complex.

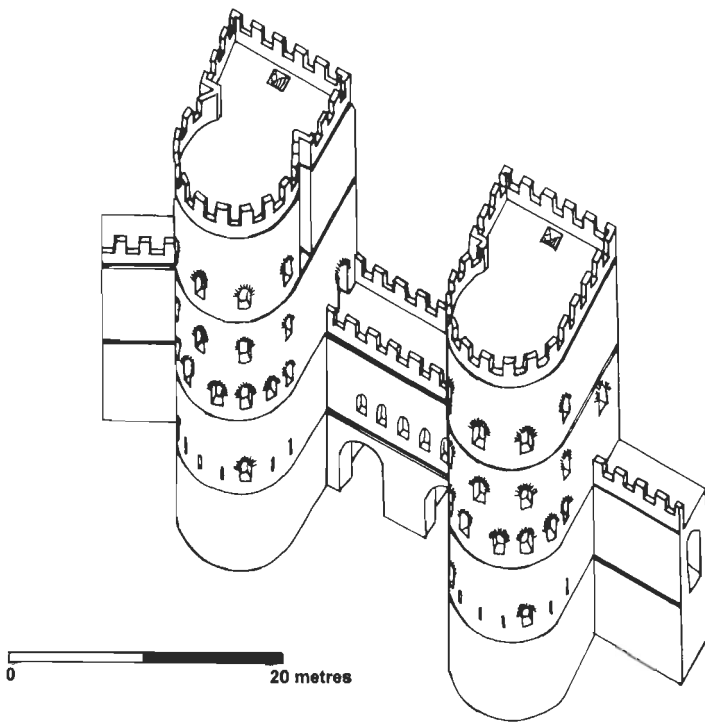


Figure 2. Porta Appia, showing Period 1 (Aurelianic) phase and Period 2 (Maxentian) phase (after Richmond 1930: 140–41)

It is even possible that the spatial and ideological thread running through the Via Appia complex extends to the heart of Rome itself. The location of Maxentius' monuments in and around the east end of the *forum Romanum* makes them the first major group a visitor approaching the forum from the Via Appia would encounter. The most important of this group, the new round temple, is the monument farthest away from the Via Appia and closest to the old *area sacra*, the religious nucleus of Rome. Of course, the site ultimately chosen for the construction of this group may have been depended on other factors, but the obvious spatial relationship to the Via Appia complex must have at least have sounded a satisfactory note for Maxentius. Conceptual links with the site were certainly forged in AD 309, when the round temple was rededicated to Romulus, and Nero's colossus, which itself framed the eastern entrance to the forum, was appropriated to honour the new god. In this way these monuments must now have been firmly drawn into the Maxentian funerary landscape.

### *Ideology and the perception of the Maxentian scheme*

Interpretative scholarship on the Via Appia complex has amounted to very little since it was first identified as belonging Maxentius by Nibby (1825). That is not to say that the potential ideological significance of its individual components has gone unnoticed. For instance, Maxentius' building of a tomb on the Via Appia, where illustrious republican families had been buried for centuries has long been considered intelligible as an expression of Maxentius' attested sympathies with the *mores* and religious sensibilities of the most illustrious families of the Roman republic (Schoenebeck 1939; De Decker 1968). However, most broader treatments have so far been overwhelmingly concerned with identification and archaeological description, rather than serious discussion of the motives and purposes behind Maxentius' building programme. The significant exception to this is Alfred Frazer's article of 1966, which remains the seminal interpretative work on the complex. Here, the dynastic tomb is interpreted as the key to understanding the entire architectural scheme. A conceptual link is envisaged between the Via Appia mausoleum and the Ara Maxima of Hercules, an altar situated close to the *carceres* of the circus Maximus in Rome, and the residence and circus assume secondary importance (1966: esp. 388–92). Frazer's ideas were readily integrated into all subsequent discussions of the Maxentian landscape (e.g. Bertolotti 1980: esp. 55–59). The only challenge appears in Humphrey's work on Roman circuses, published two decades later (1986). Humphrey disputed any conceptual link between the Maxentian tomb and the Ara Maxima, on the very reasonable grounds that there was no appropriate evidence clearly linking the sites, and concluded that Frazer had overplayed the importance of the mausoleum at the expense of the circus. He went on to suggest that Maxentius may have simply acted from a feeling that the construction of his own residence and circus was an essential part of what was by now a standard feature of the Tetrarchic architectural repertoire (1986: 601–2). These arguments have since been noted, but have not superseded those of Frazer, and no criticism of or attempt to advance the arguments of either scholar has been forthcoming since (e.g., Bertolotti 1999a: 12–13 and figure 5; D'Alessio 1998: 44).

### Discussion

How, then, are we to understand the new architectural and ideological connections proposed above in the context of current interpretation? The full implications of are far-reaching and, as such, beyond the scope of a short paper, but some general conclusions can be outlined. The deliberate alignment of the imperial box in the circus with the most flamboyant Republican tomb on the Via Appia, whose bucranian iconography is a beacon of traditional religious sentiment, can be partly understood as an extension of the archaising tendencies. Such tendencies are also reflected in other Maxentian structures, such as the temple he built in the *forum Romanum*. This is round after the fashion of the oldest and most sacred temples in Rome, including that of the Romulus, one of the mythical founders of the city, and after whom Maxentius' own son was named. As part of the original conceptual arrangements, the appropriation of Metella's tomb can be viewed as an attempt by Maxentius to establish his own dynastic claims through implied association with an illustrious ancestry – a technique ironically repeated on the sculptural programme assembled as part of the Roman arch which records his own death at the hands of Constantine (Pensabene and Panella 1999; cf. Elsner 2000: 159–60). That this structure was a tomb saw its ideological significance mutate yet again, as it added an unforeseen resonance to the funerary and memorial character of the site in the wake of Romulus' death. Earlier more holistic attempts to interpret the complex are not diminished by the addition of a new structure within its boundaries or the inclusion of other monuments without. Indeed, the inclusion of Caecilia Metella's tomb indicates that Frazer was right to focus on the funerary aspects of the site; its incorporation brings the funereal aspect more sharply into focus, though the ideology driving the function of the site as Frazer saw it necessarily changes. The broader argument also gives weight to Humphrey's argument that the circus did not play a secondary role; for the short time of Romulus' funeral, at least, it assumed first place.

The potential inclusion of monuments in the city of Rome itself means that the Maxentian buildings of the Via Appia may now also be construed as part of a vast ritual and processional landscape. The idea that major cities, especially Rome, were appropriated by successive emperors as monumental and processional landscapes for the display of imperial power and wealth is not a new one. But Maxentius did something extraordinary and unparalleled: he took the idea of the city as setting for procession one step further, after AD 309 creating what was in effect a giant funereal and ritual landscape of a kind never witnessed again in the pagan Roman world. Maxentius' architectural landscape is more than another example of self-absorbed imperial ideological expression: its peripheral situation would have had an unusual impact on the general population. Those who wished to attend the inaugural funeral games would have, unwittingly or otherwise, become participants in a peripatetic religious voyage, which would have involved a step by step viewing of the whole range of monuments from the city to the Via Appia, of which the circus was the last. This could only be reached after an ambulatory round at least two sides of the vast rectilinear portico that encircled and afforded brief, distant glimpses of the ostentatious dynastic tomb therein, now a shrine to Maxentius' deified son. Only then could they take their place for the games, a funeral spectacle for the god Romulus.



This sophisticated ritual interchange between emperor and citizen viewer through the medium of circus and tomb, a process that we see clearly for the first time in Maxentius' complex, foreshadows certain architectural and liturgical aspects of Christian pilgrimage sites. A good example is that of San Sebastiano, with its ambulatory basilica and a martyrium fashioned like a cylindrical tomb (LTUR I, 59). Its location on the Via Appia necessitated a journey from city-dwellers which in spatial and visual terms is almost a facsimile of that made by visitors to the Maxentian site.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, 'ritual' and processional landscapes that incorporate tombs are known of in many different cultures. Perhaps those that have aroused the greatest fascination amongst theologians in recent years are those of Neolithic Britain, and it seems appropriate to conclude with a brief comment on these. The dominant interpretation of the Neolithic landscapes is that their construction is essentially non-hierarchical in nature, that they are the efforts and products of a community working together (e.g., Bradley 1984, 1998; Muir 1999; Tilley 1994). The Via Appia complex, on the other hand, which shares many of the elements we see in the prehistoric examples – alignments of monuments, ritual and funereal elements, participation of large numbers of people in journeys between the monuments, is emphatically perpetuated and controlled by elite wealth and power, suggesting that it is not always egalitarian ideologies that drive the construction and use of ritual landscapes. The idea of hierarchical operations such as this may not be in tune with current thinking on Neolithic Britain, but the striking conceptual and architectural parallels between the two site types render the comparison a valid one.

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## Notes

1. This is a revision of the paper given at the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference in 2001, an expanded version of which will be published at a later date.
2. Richmond's association of the second major phase of work on the walls with Maxentius, based on brickstamps and strong presumptive evidence, is accepted by some (Richmond 1930: 251–56; cf. Todd 1978: 46–59). Heres has preferred Honorian authorship as have Cozza and Claridge; it is here accepted that Richmond's view is the correct one (Heres 1983: 103–5; Cozza 1987; Claridge 1996: 59).
3. Depictions of the temple on coins differ in finer architectural detail; it has been argued from this that the temple may be misidentified (Flaccomio 1981: 7–22; see LTUR IV, 211 for a summary of the arguments). The coins in question all bear the legend '*Divus Romulus, templum*', so this would seem to be a debate that is at best tangential (Sutherland and Carson 1966: 379, 404, 382; cf. Talamo 1981: 23–34).
4. It is the author's contention that the arch that stands next to the Flavian amphitheatre, currently thought of as Constantine's, was conceived and partly executed by Maxentius; the arguments for this will shortly be published in a joint paper.
5. Parallels may be drawn with Christian 'repackaging' of existing architectural and ritual frameworks in late antique cities of the Near East (see Bayliss 1999).

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