

Ancient latrines, a lucky horse: New finds at Circus Maximus (Update)

November 16 2016, by Frances D'emilio



A general view of Circus Maximus' newly opened archeological site, in Rome, Wednesday, Nov. 16, 2016. Six years of excavations have given Rome a new tourist attraction in Circus Maximus, an open-air archeological ruin that for centuries has been a vast muddy field, lately used mainly by dog-walkers. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

Six years of excavations have given Rome a new tourist attraction in Circus Maximus , the sprawling valley where chariot races once

delighted the ancient city's denizens.

The archaeological ruin has long been a vast muddy, grassy field, lately used largely by dog-walkers and joggers.

But starting Thursday, the public can see ancient latrines, chunks of what was once a triumphal arch honoring the Emperor Titus , and learn about a winning horse dubbed Numitor, which ran on the oval track some 2,000 years ago.

Rome's newest tourist site comes as a counterpoint to Italy's often discouraging cultural developments, like the erosion by pollution or the crumbling of parts of monuments that can't be adequately protected by Italy's chronically lean budget for its enormous catalog of historical and artistic heritage.

For decades, Circus Maximus was littered with syringes from drug users who used to shoot up there at night. The expanse also hosted political rallies and mega-concerts, like those for The Rolling Stones or Bruce Springsteen.

Claudio Parisi Presicce, Rome's top official for archaeology and other monuments, said Wednesday that Numitor the horse will become the logo for Circus Maximus, which sits in a valley between the ancient Palatine and Aventine Hills.



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Decorating the bottom of an excavated glass goblet—the only fragment found of the vessel—is the gold figure of a proudly prancing horse, with a palm branch symbolizing victory in its mouth and the name Numitor emblazoned below.

Archaeologist Marialetizia Buonfiglio told the AP the image is the only documentation found so far of the horses involved in the ancient entertainment that captivated bettors. The goblet's precious fragment, along with some of the 1,000 bronze coins that were dug up, will eventually find a home in a museum.

Excavated areas include the outside upper tiers, where the rank-and-file entertainment-goers once cheered wild animal hunts or charioteers, whipping around a low stone wall that ran down the center of the oval track.

Also visible is a latrine once used by spectators. An explanatory panel, in Italian and English, tells how urine was collected via pipes in ancient Roman times to be used to launder cloth.



A reproduction of a Roman icon showing an horse bearing in its mouth a golden branch is seen in newly opened archeological site at Circus Maximus, in Rome, Wednesday, Nov. 16, 2016. Six years of excavations have given Rome a new tourist attraction in Circus Maximus, an open-air archeological ruin that for centuries has been a vast muddy field, lately used mainly by dog-walkers. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

The excavation helped archaeologists understand the various reconstructions that the Circus Maximus underwent, including one after its wooden timbers helped feed the great fire in Rome during Nero's reign in 64 A.D.

Visitors can climb inside a restored 12th-century tower for a commanding view down the 600-meter (2,000-foot) long field, capturing the imposing dome of Rome's main synagogue in their sights.

At the foot of the tower are excavated chunks of what was once the 10-meter (33-foot) high Triumphal Arch of Titus at the field's the south end. The arch, fashioned from Carrara marble, was built to honor the emperor's conquest of Jerusalem.

Thanks to a written record left by an anonymous pilgrim in the 9th-century, when the arch still stood, experts were able to make sense of fragments they discovered of the arch's inscription in bronze letters.



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Circus Maximus' excavation will be open every day through Dec. 11. After that, opening hours will be reserved for weekends, although visitors can call City Hall (+39-06-0608) to make an appointment to see it on weekdays.

Rome isn't the only Italian city with ancient roots boasting of new archaeological possibilities for tourists.

At Pompeii, near Naples, officials on Wednesday inaugurated a 60-room residential complex that had been buried by Mount Vesuvius' eruption in 79 A.D. Newly restored so tourists can visit it, the Geometric Mosaics Domus boasts terraces with breathtaking views of Capri, an island in the Gulf of Naples.



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