# INTRODUCTION

But I won't delay you any longer: I know how tedious I find the circus procession.
Seneca the elder, *Controversiae* 1 *praefatio* 24[1]

Power serves pomp. This Geertzian maxim remains especially true for ancient Rome, whose officials and rulers spent inordinate amounts of time and money on some extraordinarily pompous pomp – in particular on its three great *pompae* (processions): the triumph (*pompa triumphalis*), the public funeral procession (*pompa funebris*), and the circus procession (*pompa circensis* or *circensibus, circensium ludorum, circensi*, or *circi*).[2] But of the three, only one was performed multiple times each year in front of crowds that may have topped 150,000, at least during the high empire. From the late republic to late antiquity, the immensely popular chariot races in the Circus Maximus attracted enormous crowds, offering an unparalleled opportunity for public munificence and political patronage. Conducting a spectacular parade through the monumental heart of Rome to the Circus and its anxious crowds, the president of the games achieved considerable public visibility – a key prize in the battle for honor and glory. At the same time, this very same procession was one of Rome's most hallowed religious ceremonies, hedged with ritual rules and regulations whose violation could lead to dire consequences. That is, the *pompa circensis* was fundamentally a *pompa deorum* – a procession of gods made present or represented in various ways in a performed theology. Each carefully choreographed performance conducted the gods to the games in a ludic atmosphere oscillating between gravity and levity and "resonance and

wonder" – rhythmically alternating between serious and austere public self-presentation and sexual and transgressive antics, between reminiscences and connections to memories, places, and practices and the singularity of show-stopping spectacle.[3]

The proud sponsor of the games, the *praeses ludorum*, seems to have led this dazzling procession of gods from the temple of Capitoline Jupiter (the seat of Roman sovereignty); down into the Roman Forum; to the *vicus Tuscus*, which passed through the Velabrum into the Forum Boarium; and finally toward the plebian temple of Ceres on its way to the Circus Maximus, where the wildly popular races entertained the gods and their fellow Romans. After placing the gods in the *pulvinar*, a kind of sacred "loge," the sponsor performed a sacrifice before signaling the start of the first race. From the opening procession to the last race, massive crowds gathered thanks to the beneficence of the game-giver, thronging crowds whose presence and (possibly) gratitude benefitted the patron of the games in turn – a ritual alchemy that transformed financial capital into honor and esteem. Apart from the accolades garnered by the game-giver, the late republican circus parade, in both its participants and its itinerary, fashioned an image of Rome as the senate and Roman people with their gods (SPQR+gods) – one of the most enduring symbols of the city – reveling in the pleasures of *aurea Roma*, golden Rome. Troops of young Roman men, arranged with military precision according to their census status, marched with the game-giver and porters conveyed glittering ritual vessels, while masses of ordinary and not-so-ordinary Romans lined the streets, crowded on steps and balconies, or watched the *pompa* with impatience from their seats. The itinerary mirrored this effect: starting at the gilded temple of Jupiter, the guarantor of Rome's empire, the procession passed through the monumental and historical core of Rome, a landscape of memory, ending at the equally gilded temple of Ceres, protectress of the people, before it entered the Circus whose seating constructed its own, indiscrete image of Roman society.

This republican image of Rome was greatly attenuated but never fully obscured during the course of the empire. Emperors regularly intervened in the procession even as they built an imperial Rome alongside and on top of the republican city. Images and symbols of Julius Caesar appeared in the *pompa* during his own lifetime, which transgressed the boundaries of religious and social scruple and so figured among the reasons for which Caesar was assassinated. Subsequent emperors, especially Augustus and Tiberius, who set the pattern for the next few centuries, were more circumspect, allowing only deified predecessors or deceased members of the imperial household to appear in the procession. Similarly, imperial monuments increasingly and overwhelmingly dominated the itinerary. Triumphal arches and imperial cult temples dotted the route, often marking its major turning points. Nevertheless, Rome's most important and oldest temples and sanctuaries were rebuilt or renovated

(often lavishly to be sure) following religious principles, conserving the cultural memory which these monuments embodied. The Circus also achieved massive size and luxurious décor. Its previously promiscuous seating was progressively made hierarchical and structured. Nonetheless, gods and Romans still gathered for fun and games – and sex and violence. That is, despite a tremendous capacity to unleash brute force, Roman emperors were constrained by the traditions, expectations, and memories of the *pompa circensis* as well as those of the games. The imperial procession was founded upon its republican forebears, maintaining some of its memory within the new order.

This coherence between procession and itinerary fractured in late antiquity. The procession itself was arguably reduced to imperial imagery alone (statues of Victory and the emperors) in the aftermath of Christianizing legislation, at least in official versions and imperial representations, which increasingly focused on the figure of the imperial game-giver. Nonetheless, some sub-imperial images suggest the continuing transport of the traditional gods into, perhaps, the early fifth century CE. Moreover, in the early to mid fifth century CE, the circus procession may have been "Christianized" by the inclusion of Christian symbols – a *pompa Dei* replacing the *pompa deorum*. The itinerary reveals a similarly complicated situation. It prominently featured a number of newly restored republican edifices including temples and sanctuaries, while ignoring, it seems, imperial cult temples and triumphal arches, though emperors were still made present through a copious collection of statuary. The variety of processions, the competing monuments, and the fissure between procession(s) and itinerary produced a multiplicity of Romes marked by traditional civic religion, aristocratic memory (hearkening back to the republic), imperial power, and, eventually, Christianity, as the titular church of Anastasia would be built along the parade route by the late fourth century CE. It is impossible to judge when the last *pompa circensis* was performed at Rome, though it seems reasonable to suggest that some variant of a circus procession endured as long as the consulship and the circus games, both of which fade in the mid sixth century CE.

Though vast quantities of ink have been spilled on both the triumph and the public funeral, the circus parade has languished in relative scholarly neglect, even though it may have been the most often repeated of the three.[4] During the republic and early empire, a *pompa circensis* was only certainly performed before votive games, the *ludi Romani*, *ludi Apollinares*, *ludi Megalenses*, and *ludi Augustales*, though it seems reasonable to conjecture that other public games – like the *ludi Plebeii* and *ludi Ceriales*, as well as games attached to the early imperial cult – would also have been introduced by a ludic procession.[5] And so by the late first century BCE, a *pompa circensis* was performed at least three times a year, and quite possibly more than double that. In the early to mid second century CE, during the course of a twenty-four-year career, Diocles, the

self-declared "most distinguished of the charioteers," competed in 4,257 races, of which he won 1,462, with 110 of those coming in the first race *a pompa* (after the procession), the most prestigious and lucrative race of the games.[6] On average, Diocles won the race *a pompa* nearly five times per year, which strongly implies that five circus processions took place each year – and likely more. If Diocles won the race *a pompa* at the same rate that he won other races (almost one of every three), a not unreasonable assumption, then Diocles may well have competed on average in thirteen races *a pompa* each year, suggesting that at least thirteen *pompae circenses* were conducted every year during the high empire. The numbers are merely suggestive, though they signal the sheer number of repetitions of the circus procession each year.

Such repetition may well have helped the *pompa circensis* to seep into everyday language. In the late first century BCE, Gaius Licinius Stolo, a dinner guest in Varro's *Res rustica*, feared that he had arrived late to a banquet at the temple of Tellus: "'Keep your spirits up,' replied Agrius [another banqueter], 'for not only has that egg which shows the last lap of the chariot race at the games in the circus not been taken down, but we have not even seen that other egg which usually heads the procession (*pompa*) at dinner.'"[7] The races in the arena opened with a procession and ended when the last egg was lowered (or raised or removed), while the parade of food at dinner kicked off with an egg.[8] This metaphorical culinary procession seems to go back to Plautus (ca. 254–184 BCE) – who not infrequently riffed on the spectacle of the circus procession – one of whose characters marveled at his good fortune to enjoy a procession of sturgeon, a *pompa acipenseris* not a *pompa circensis*. Macrobius, in the early fifth century CE, ostensibly quoted the Plautine sturgeon procession, before turning to a high imperial piscine parade. Sammonicus, an antiquarian of medical lore and tutor to Geta and Caracalla, praised the traditional spread of Septimius Severus, in which sturgeon had again achieved its ancient pride of place at the table. However, apparently "it was served by garlanded servants to the sound of a flute, as if it were the procession (*pompa*), not of a delicacy, but of a god."[9] At its core, the *pompa circensis* transported the gods from the temple of Capitoline Jupiter (or some other temple[s]) to the Circus, and so this *pompa numinis* (procession of divinity), in which a sturgeon was escorted to dinner, may well have called to mind that more obvious and fitting procession of gods.

Despite its repetition and metaphorical value, the circus procession has received comparatively cursory attention in scholarship on the games, spectacles, circuses, daily life, and Roman religion, usually consisting of a brief discussion of an excursus by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, the longest and most important portrayal of the procession, and a few other literary and iconographic sources.[10] Even though the *pompa circensis* was likely performed more often, both the *pompa triumphalis* and the *pompa funebris* were seemingly more politically consequential, their spectacle more captivating, and their place in the

Roman social imaginary larger. Indeed, some scholars lean on the elder Seneca's impatience with the procession to dismiss it as a grudgingly tolerated delay before the real show, the races themselves.[11] The evidence for the procession is also problematic: meager (by comparison with the triumph, with which the circus procession competed poorly in Roman cultural memory), varied, and often ambiguous or imprecise, though perhaps no more so than the evidence for any other ritual, ceremony, or spectacle.

## 1 HISTORY IN THE SUBJUNCTIVE

The "grand procession of Ptolemy Philadelphus" poses similar problems. The procession itself took place in the early third century BCE (ca. 270s–260s).[12] The parade was then featured in Callixeinus of Rhodes' *On Alexandria* probably from the second century BCE. Callixeinus' version survives only as a "fragment" in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* ("Scholars at the Table") from the late second century CE. It seems unlikely that Callixeinus witnessed the event himself, though, if it had been at all as he imagined, it would most probably have lived on in Alexandrian communicative (or social) memory, lingering in the stories of the elderly who may have heard about it from their own grandparents. Callixeinus may also have had access to Ptolemaic archives in which some sort of parade protocol may have been stored with "the records of the Penteteric festivals" – perhaps a list of participants and spectacles in order of appearance.[13] Athenaeus then quoted, or paraphrased, or abridged, or embellished the work of Callixeinus.

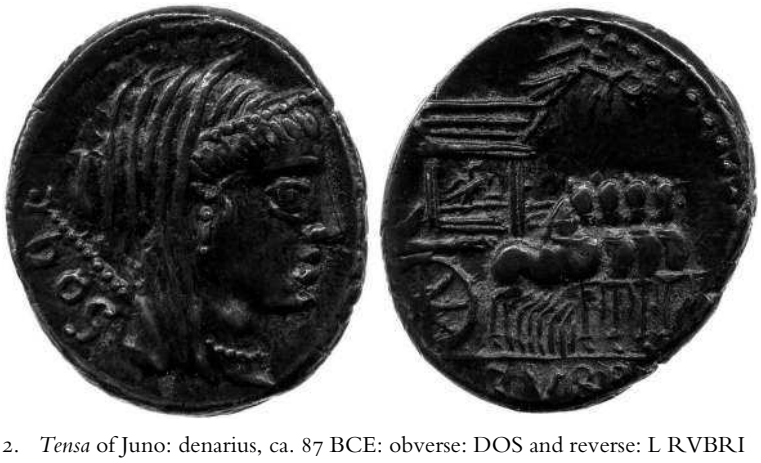
Along similar lines, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, writing in Rome at the end of the first century BCE, penned the longest extant description of the *pompa circensis*. To bolster his argument about Rome's Hellenistic origins, he based his version on the (no longer extant) work of Fabius Pictor from the late third century BCE, instead of his own eyewitness testimony. It appears that Fabius Pictor claimed to offer an account of a procession from the beginning of the Roman republic (early fifth century BCE), for which no festival archive can be claimed – though eventually ritual protocols would be inscribed on stone, as a ex post facto memorial. Nonetheless, this description may offer insight into the performance dynamics of the procession, even as it also came to frame, for some readers/hearers, the experience and remembrance of the *pompa circensis*.[14]

By contrast, Ovid seems to have based his color commentary on the litany of gods parading around the Circus, the second-longest passage on the procession, on his own firsthand observations.[15] However, Ovid was an inveterate conjurer of elusive and, at times, illusionary presences or realities – his *pompa circensis* was as much his own invention as a play on a procession actually witnessed.[16] Moreover, as John Henderson has noted, "Ovid embedded the *pompa circensis* in his erotica . . . [in which] the *pompa* does its work of escorting

us forward onto the field of play, and ushering in what is officially billed by the poet as 'The greatest show on earth.'"[17] In Ovid, the *pompa circensis* was both a real event and a poetic vehicle, which, in either case, may have had nothing to do with chariot racing. Though elegiac poetry may, at first (and even second) glance, seem distant from the hard knock life of early imperial Rome, and though Ovid, as a poet, was likely more concerned with artistic, technical, and emotional effects – language, sound, and affect – than historical description, elegy as a genre was in fact deeply enmeshed in Roman urban life. And Ovid seems to have been particularly attracted to its voluptuous array of public ceremonial.[18] Ovid's evocations of the *pompa circensis* were set in a still licentious world of the Circus, whose seating increasingly mirrored Rome's stratified social sphere. Even so, the elegiac lover "Ovid" fervently recommended the cramped, intimate informality of the Circus where Venus appeared to aid amorous adventurers. Ovid's poetry thus offers an engaged, seemingly personal "reading" of the Circus, one that lurks below imperial politics and even official civic religion. His poetic and quite possibly tendentious portrayals of the *pompa circensis* appear in the midst of a playful and serious interrogation of the Circus Maximus, conjuring the magic of the procession, even if not the procession itself.

Whatever their difficulties as "evidence," Ovid's poetry and Dionysius' history taken together seem to capture the imaginative productivity of the procession in a manner reminiscent of the relationship between metaphor and narrative outlined by Paul Ricoeur. Metaphor has the power "to redescribe a reality," while narrative is "the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience."[19] On the one hand, metaphors (and processions) are creative juxtapositions in which one thing is seen as another. Like a metaphor, the *pompa circensis* conjured a certain image of the complexities and multiplicities of Rome (an act of the social imaginary).[20] Viewed in this way, poetry may have been especially well-suited to explore what one might call the productivity of procession: its effects on participants and spectators, its constellations of meanings, institutional entanglements, and symbolic networks. On the other hand, narratives (and also processions) may order and organize a confusing welter of (urban) experience. Narrative emplotment (typically) arranges its material in a linear trajectory, much as the circus procession ordered and organized an impressive array of humans and gods into a hierarchical display and strung together certain temples, sanctuaries, monuments, civic spaces, and institutions, all with their associated cultural memories, into a linear itinerary – the parade route. Processional paths in particular could be considered the spatial equivalent to narrative, a way to make meaningful and sequential linkages.[21] In the end, as Ricoeur makes clear, "one vast poetic sphere ... includes metaphorical utterance and narrative discourse."[22] Both metaphor and narrative are poetic in the sense that they


1. *Tensa* of Jupiter Optimus Maximus: denarius, ca. 87 BCE: obverse: [D]OSSEN and reverse: L RVBR[I]]



2. *Tensa* of Juno: denarius, ca. 87 BCE: obverse: DOS and reverse: L RVBRI

are acts of *poeisis*, a creative act of the imagination – much as the procession was a creative performance.

Along similar lines, visual imagery, in the absence of labels, captions, or other clues, remains intractable. For example, in ca. 87 BCE an otherwise unknown moneyer, L. Rubrius Dossenus, minted a series of coins with an image of a member of the Capitoline triad, either Jupiter, Juno, or Minerva, on the obverse and an enigmatic vehicle on the reverse (Figures 1–3).[23] In each instance, the vehicles are driverless, single-axle *quadrigae* (four-horse chariots) decorated with "acroterial" sculptures – Victory with a wreath or Victory driving a *biga* (two-horse chariot) – and symbolic imagery on the sides: a lightning bolt for Jupiter and an eagle clasping a lightning bolt for Juno and Minerva. Unlike other numismatic representations of so-called "triumphal" *quadrigae* in which gods or *triumphatores* tower over chariots with low, swooping profiles, these vertically oriented, rectilinear chariots, with their inverted

3. *Tensa* of Minerva: denarius, ca. 87 BCE: obverse: [DOS] and reverse: L RVBRI

triangular tops, stood well above the heads of their horse train.[24] In short, the iconography suggests different vehicles. Their distinctive shape, "pedimental" ornamentation, visual hierarchy (relative size indicating relative importance), relief decoration (lightning bolts and eagles), as well as obverse images intimate that these obscure vehicles may have been *tensae*, sacred chariots that carried the symbols of the gods to the circus.[25] Without explicit corroboration, the identification of these vehicles as *tensae* must remain tentative, though reasonable. Perhaps the mysterious L. Rubrius Dossenus had been or would be an aedile, who helped to organize some of the civic games in which the *pompa circensis* figured so prominently – which may explain this elusive act of self-aggrandizement, but one in keeping with other "aedilician" coin-types.[26] The celebration of the Capitoline triad during one of its most conspicuous public appearances in the circus procession may also explain the later Trajanic restoration of these same coins at least as well as any vague "triumphal" associations would do.[27]

The vexing issue of identification complicates most if not all of the visual evidence for the *pompa circensis*. A representation of any particular procession, even the triumph, tends to look a great deal like representations of any other procession – a confluence likely prompted as much by artistic convention as by the semi-independent co-development of processional traditions, a common idiom of spectacle, or a ritual *koine*.[28] If an image could be tied to a specific structure or monument, context might offer a hint as to the nature and subject of the representations. Unfortunately, many, perhaps most, of the relevant images float free from any concrete context, and so literary evidence, with all its attendant difficulties, must necessarily provide the (all too tenuous) clues for identification. In the end, even if specific identifications are mistaken, the images offer a sense of how ancient Roman patrons, artists, and viewers communicated, represented, and understood the performance of processions. They offer a sense of the sensorium of procession.

Moreover, images transformed individual performances, singular events, into enduring visual commemorations – turning actions into memories.[29] Depictions of the *pompa circensis* inevitably condensed and so perhaps distorted the procession as performed, but they also shaped and were shaped by ways of seeing such processions. Representations of processions were influenced by earlier imagery even as they commemorated a specific performance and molded its remembrance in such a way that could affect future performances, or at least expectations and interpretations of future performances. Much the same may be said about the literary evidence. Fabius Pictor may well have invented a *pompa circensis* out of whole cloth and Dionysius may have further falsified that description with his own interventions. Even so, the description may have become normative, impacting the ceremonial expectations of literate Romans and so also subsequent processional performance. Processional performances were remembered and re-shaped in representations in image and text, archives of Roman cultural memory and potential resources for new performances.

In addition to such (standard) difficulties, evidence for the *pompa circensis* is scattered widely, ranging from texts (including history, poetry, apologetic, law, and epigraphy) to sculpture, mosaic, and coins as well as (other) archaeological materials. And so by necessity, any examination of the procession that wishes to be something other than an exegesis of Dionysius of Halicarnassus (which is nevertheless necessary) must necessarily reconstruct the procession in some way or another. In short, some kind of ideal-type seems unavoidable – an ideal-type that need not be a fanciful assemblage which piles up all extant evidence, no matter how distant in time, space, genre, or media. An ideal-type may be more Weberian in spirit, if not exactly to the letter: a tool of analysis that does not smooth away the differences between different kinds (or dates) of evidence, but one that seeks to highlight certain key features of the procession within a restricted time and place.[30] Such an ideal-type demands a wide range of research protocols, as the admittedly exiguous evidence – found in a surprisingly wide variety of materials – must be examined according to germane methods. Ciceronian rhetoric differs from antiquarian commentary; imperial law differs from a papyrus circus program. The chronological range and variety of the evidence can be used to chart the development of the procession and its representations – one of the goals of this study – rather than a compressed, anachronistic imaginary ideal-type.

Part I aims to reconstruct an ideal-type of the late republican circus procession (ca. 200–45 BCE) before Caesar's fateful interventions, based on evidence largely limited to the late republic or within its communicative, as opposed to cultural, memory. Communicative (or social) memory includes orally or informally communicated memories often of direct experiences, which tend

to fade in eighty to one hundred years, while cultural memory may endure, even if unused, for millennia housed in rituals, texts (even histories), places, and monuments – a distinction akin in many ways to functional and storage memory.[31] For example, the stories that the old folks of Alexandria may have heard from their grandparents about the grand procession of Ptolemy II would be communicative memory, stories usually lost in the passage of time. The penteteric festival records or, better, the texts of Callixeinus and Athenaeus are archives of cultural memory, enduring memory resources even now.

This memory-driven circumscription of the evidence may, at times, lead to some (seeming) oddities. For example, Juvenal and Tertullian are both essential witnesses to the crown worn by the *praeses ludorum* – a crown whose history may well extend back into the republic.[32] Pompey was authorized to wear triumphal attire and a golden crown at the circus games.[33] Nonetheless, the crown of a *praeses ludorum* in a *pompa circensis* was not explicitly mentioned until the high empire. The crown may have been subsumed under the most august clothing of those who led the *tensae* (led a circus procession) or conducted a triumph in Livy's phrase, but it did not warrant special mention – the crown was not yet an essential element of the recollection of the circus procession.[34] The situation, if not also the dress, of the game-giver changed in the high empire and so the crown of the *praeses ludorum* is deferred to a discussion of elites in the imperial circus procession, when such distinction may have mattered more in lower-stakes battles for visibility.

Its hermeneutical limitations notwithstanding, there seems to have been a similar conception of communicative memory in ancient Rome, particularly with respect to its transmission and duration. According to Tacitus, Tiberius feared a disturbance at the funeral of Augustus in 14 CE, as had happened at the funeral of Julius Caesar nearly sixty years prior, so he deployed soldiers to ensure its orderly performance. "Those who had seen personally or who had heard from their parents about that day of still undigested servitude and of freedom served up again unsuccessfully, when the slaughter of the dictator Caesar seemed to some the worst of acts, to others the finest," chuckled at such precautions, for Augustus had long lived in peace as princeps.[35] Whatever its historicity, the scene does suggest that the memory of the late republic could endure in oral memory passed down from parent to child. However subjectively remembered and inconsistently transmitted, Tacitus imagined that direct memories of the funeral of Caesar lasted into the reign of Tiberius. Tacitus also had Marcus Aper, in a dialogue set during the reign of Vespasian, insist that there may still be someone living who had heard Cicero in *viva voce* before he died in 43 BCE, for "there is a sum of one hundred and twenty years from the death of Cicero to the present, the life span of one man."[36] Though far-fetched as a realistic lifespan, Tacitus seems to suggest that Cicero's oratory was still