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The Colours of the Circus: a Prolegomenon to the Semantics of Faction Colours

Frederik Grosser

Παρά τοῦ τροφέως τὸ μήτε Πρασιανὸς μήτε Βενετιανὸς
μήτε Παλμουλάριος ἢ Σκουτάριος γενέσθαι [...]
*From my teacher: That I neither become a Green nor a Blue,
neither a Palmularius nor a Skutarius [...]*
Markus Aurelius, Meditations 1, 15

Abstract

The Roman chariot races were the greatest spectacles in the Roman Empire. Consequently, images of charioteers and chariot races can be found in nearly every context and in almost every media-form of the Roman Imperial period as well as of Late Antiquity. On a significant number of those images from the domestic sphere – mostly on mosaics and mural paintings – as well as those found in grave contexts, colours can still be traced. This paper aims to investigate whether the colours of the four circus factions on such images were used in different ways to communicate specific values, ideas, and the sense of be-

longing. To this end, it explores when and why the colours of *factiones* were created, where they can still be found in the corpus of circus imagery, and how they were employed in the written tradition of both the Imperial era and Late Antiquity. It will then ask what additional layers of meaning the faction colours brought to representations of charioteers and chariot races in the funerary context with a focus on the so-called circus sarcophagi.

Keywords: Roman circus, chariot races, polychromy of Roman sarcophagi, meaning of colours in the Roman Empire

Introduction

While the Roman chariot races, the factions, and the significance of the *spectaculum* with all its actors are well-known and often described, the question whether the colours of the factions had symbolic significance within the corpus of images of races and charioteers

– especially in a funerary context – remains open¹. Literary testimonies show that authors from the 2nd/3rd, throughout the 4th and up to the 6th cent. A.D. used the colours of the factions in a metaphorical way. Still, it is questionable whether the colours of

¹ I want to acknowledge my sincerest gratitude to Sinclair W. Bell, Jan Stubbe Østergaard, and Stephan Zink for their invaluable comments. A special thanks is also due to Sinclair W. Bell for

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the factions were used mimetically or symbolically when employed in the imagery of circus races and charioteers. While the symbolic use of colours in toto, especially in Late Antiquity, has for instance been investigated by P. Liverani², often we do not know about the colour codes standing behind the use of specific colours³. The question of such codes and their meaning continues to attract ever more scholarly attention, but still remains open for further research⁴. Circus imagery can serve as an indicator of

how specific colours (in this case, green, blue, red, and white) might be used in a mimetic way, but also could bear further layers of meaning⁵ – both in the way they were used in images of chariot races and charioteers and as they were used in the written record of the Imperial era and Late Antiquity. As I will argue in this paper, it seems that colour codes were especially found in a grave context, in which specific values, ideas, and questions of identity were communicated (see also the contribution by C. Roberts).

The Factions

Rome is often defined as a culture of spectacles⁶, especially in the modern era, and there was no spectacle more popular or longer-lived than the chariot races⁷. In the Roman Empire the four factions (*factio russata*, *albata*, *prasina* and *veneta*) were crucial for organizing the races: they provided horses, charioteers, chariots, and a huge support staff in the background who took care of the animals and drivers⁸. While all four factions competed with each other, the Greens and the Blues were the dominant factions from the early imperial period onwards, as is repeatedly stated by the ancient sources; further, the Blues had an alliance with the Whites and the Greens with the Reds⁹. Little is known about some specific and very short-lived factions, the Gold and the Purple, both of which were founded by Emperor Domitian – and didn't survive his fall¹⁰.

While the role of the factions in organizing the races is well known and described several times, together with the changes they underwent in the 3rd

and 4th cent. A.D.¹¹, the origin of their iconic colours is difficult to examine and pinpoint. In the opinion of the French historian J.-P. Thuillier, the colours already existed long before the first factions were founded in the Republican era¹². While there is still debate over whether the Roman chariot races were mostly influenced by the Greeks or the Etruscans, with a tendency in the most recent scholarship to attribute a greater role to the latter¹³, there is no doubt that they existed in Rome at an early period – according to ancient sources the first races were organized by Romulus¹⁴. Since no factions have been attested for the organization of the races, but charioteers, horses and chariots were provided at that time, Thuillier has proposed that the different *tribus* of the *Urbs* were responsible for the races and were also represented by at least one chariot – analogous to *contrade* in modern Siena competing in the *Palio di Siena*¹⁵. The four colours most probably served as identification markers for the different *tribus*¹⁶. From at least as early as the

2 Liverani 2014, 14–20.

3 Liverani 2014, 20.

4 Liverani 2014, *passim*, esp. 26.

5 On the mimetic and symbolic use of colours see also Swift 2009, 180 (on intaglios with circus scenes as «lucky charms»); Henke 2020, 643–645. 647–649.

6 Newby 2015, 552.

7 Bell 2020, 184.

8 Letzner 2009, 87–92, esp. 91 f.; Bell 2020, 191 f.

9 Cameron 1976, 61–73; Thuillier 2012, 196–200; Bell 2020, 191.

10 Bell 2020, note 95, with reference to Suet. Dom. 7, 1; Mart. 14, 55. The Golden and the Purple are also mentioned by Cass. Dio 67, 4, 4; see also Thuillier 2012, 204.

11 Cameron 1976, 5–13; Bell 2020, 191. While the factions were independent, in the late Empire they fell under the control of the emperors. The structures themselves also changed: in the early Principate mostly *equites* but also senators used to be *domini factionum*, while late in the 3rd cent. A.D. it switched to charioteers

– freedmen by this time in their career – who, after their active careers as drivers, started as *factionarius* as this rank was renamed and reorganized.

12 Thuillier 2012, 188–193. The exact moment of the founding of the factions cannot be determined; all that we know is that they existed in the Late Republic: Thuillier 2012, 193 f. John Humphrey argued that the construction and renovation of the *carceres* 174 B.C. ought to be brought in line with the founding of the factions, but Thuillier rightly asks why for two centuries afterwards we have no testimonies for the existence of the factions: Humphrey 1986, 136; Thuillier 2012, 194.

13 See most recently Bell 2020, 187 with further literature.

14 See Bell 2020, 187–191 with a brief summary of the history of chariot races in the Roman Empire. Liv. 1, 9; Cic., rep. 2, 7, 12; Dion. Hal. ant. 2, 30.

15 Thuillier 2012, 189.

16 See also Cameron 1976, 59–61.

3rd/2nd cent. B.C., different colours are attested within the circus context: Ennius, referring to the reign of Romulus, wrote either about coloured chariots or *carceres*, depending on whether the word in question is transcribed as *pictos* or *picti*¹⁷. Whether all four colours already existed from the city's foundation cannot be proven, but as Thuillier rightly states: «Quel qu'ait été le nombre initial des couleurs, deux, trois

ou quatre, il est sûr en tout cas qu'elles existent à l'époque républicaine¹⁸». In short, the colours most probably represented different competing *tribus* and were taken over by the factions in the Late Republic (at the latest). These regional associations were not completely forgotten, however: at least one later, imperial monument demonstrates a continued awareness of the colours' origins in this regard¹⁹.

Evidence for the Colours of the Factions

In the Imperial period there are various types of sources which testify to the four factions and their colours: literature, epigraphic sources, and preserved images, such as mosaics or wall paintings. Among the epigraphic sources, especially in the sometimes very monumental Roman grave inscriptions of charioteers, the factions are named, mostly together with the number of victories, second and sometimes even third places, that the charioteer achieved for the respective *factio*²⁰. Particularly useful in this context are the inscriptions for Diocles, one of the most successful charioteers of all time, whose prime was during the reign of Antoninus Pius²¹, and for P. Aelius Gutta Calpurnianus, the only known freeborn charioteer whose prime was also in the 2nd cent. A.D.²². Ancient authors, such as Pliny the Younger and Procopius of Caesarea, briefly mention the factions²³. For instance, Pliny complains about the importance that even «honorable men» attached to the coloured tunic of a charioteer: «Tanta gratia, tanta auctoritas in una vilissima tunic

ca, mitto apud vulgus, quod vilius tunica, sed apud quosdam graves homines²⁴». While Pliny's «attitude was very much the intellectual snob's, who simply disdained common people and found it fundamentally unbearable to share the unsophisticated joys of the majority²⁵», as M. Wistrand has pointed out, his complaint is a remarkable testimony to the social significance of the factions, symbolized by their colours. Pliny further mentions that a charioteer could change his «colour» in the middle of a race and the crowd cheering for him at one moment would then condemn him in the next, simply because he was now wearing the wrong colour²⁶. These more extreme forms of fandom for the factions have been rightly described as «Farbenkoller»²⁷ by K.-W. Weeber. Even some (notorious) emperors expressed their loyalty on a scale appropriate to their power; Caligula, for instance, ordered that the sand in the circus be coloured red and green by using powdered lead and copper²⁸. He was also accused by Cassius Dio of poisoning the chariot-

17 Enn. ann. 1, 84–87. Cameron 1976, 57, with a brief discussion of the *carceris pictos* or *picti currus* in note 3.

18 Thuillier 2012, 190. According to Tert. de spect. 9, 5, at the beginning, meaning in the reign of Romulus, only the *factio russata* and *albata* existed. However, Cameron 1976, 57 f. rightly points to the fact that Tertullian is the only author who argues in this way, while other ancient authors from Suetonius onwards debated rather unfruitfully the existence of two, three or all four factions after the reign of Romulus.

19 See Thuillier 2012, 192 f. who records the example of the grave monument for Sextus Vetulenus Lavicanus, dated in the late 2nd cent. A.D. In the inscription a certain Lavicanus is named, a herald (*nuntius*) at the races, who was appreciated by the inhabitants of the sixth and seventh region; this recalls the differentiation of the races by *tribus*.

20 E. g. CIL VI 10047 a–c; CIL VI 10048. See also Horsmann 1998, 135–137.

21 CIL VI 10048. Diocles is known for winning 35.182.363 sesterces in his career, according to the grave epigram – see also Horsmann 1998, 194–198 no. 38.

22 CIL VI 10047 a–c; Horsmann 1998, 226–228 no. 94.

23 Plin. epist. 9, 6, 1–3; Prok. BP 24, 1–5. The database *Spectatores. Quellen zum Zuschauer im Altertum* by the Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz allows a more complete overview over the sources to the factions: <<https://dh.uni-graz.at/cocoon/spectator/index.html>> (07.08.2024).

24 Plin. epist. 9, 6, 3: «Such is the influence and authority vested in one cheap tunic, I don't say with the common crowd, for that is even cheaper than the tunic, but with certain men of position» (transl. Firth 1910, <<https://topostext.org/work/198>> s. v. § 9, 6 [03.09.2024]).

25 Wistrand 1992, 41 f.

26 Plin. epist. 9, 6, 2. The rivalry of the factions, as always expressed by their colours, is also certified in an episode mentioned by Pliny the Elder (nat. 7, 168): during the funeral of the charioteer Felix of the *factio russata*, a fan jumped on the pyre and immolated himself. According to the *actis* to which Pliny refers, the opposing team wanted to avoid any fame for the Reds, which is why it claimed that the fan passed out due to the fragrances and fell on the pyre.

27 Weeber 1994, 49.

28 Humprey 1986, 84; Bell 2020, 193.

eers and horses from rival factions²⁹, a charge that was levelled at him in the follow-up to the *damnatio memoriae* of the emperor, but that also revealed at least some possible consequences of such rivalries. A similar situation surrounds the accusation that Caracalla had the driver Euprepes murdered long after his career had ended, because he was supporting an opposing faction to the emperor (who favoured the Blues)³⁰, and that he also ordered the murder of rival fans³¹. Another and less extreme way to express one's own fandom was to purchase clothing for children: Juvenal writes about 'little green jackets' (*viridem thoraca*), which are clearly 'team jerseys' for children³², and which – as a side effect – visibly informed other persons of their factional allegiances.

The vast corpus of circus imagery includes numerous depictions that preserved their original colour – first and foremost mosaics, but also wall paintings³³. These images allow us to differentiate immediately between the charioteers of the four factions by the colours of their tunics. Some of the mosaics, such as the famous depiction of Polydus in Trier (c. A.D. 250), portray named charioteers of a specific faction – in this case, the driver Polydus of the *factio russata* (Fig. 1). A mosaic today in the Bardo museum in Tunis (which dates to the second half of the 4th cent. A.D.) shows an unnamed victorious charioteer surrounded by four named horses; he appears to be wearing a blue tunic (Fig. 2)³⁴. Most probably the client who ordered the mosaic was a horse-breeder or at least owned the depicted quadriga, which won for the *factio veneta* and achieved him wealth and fame – the omission of the driver's name suggests that the horses are rather the main subject of this image³⁵. In other instances, the colours are no longer preserved³⁶, and in some cases they may have never existed³⁷. On one occasion, an inscription on a gem names the Greens in the form of an acclamation, which still cannot be deciphered with certainty. The red jasper, nowadays in a private col-

lection, bears the inscription ORTE PRA³⁸, which is unique in the corpus of Roman gems³⁹. While PRA unequivocally refers to the *prasina*, the Greens, ORTE can be read in different ways⁴⁰ – but in any case, it is an acclamation, a chant in support of the Greens. The abbreviation ORTE PRA can also be found in a more elaborate manner on clay medallions produced in the late 2nd/early 3rd cent. A.D. in the Rhone valley. These medallions were applied on fine clay pottery, the *sigillée claire B*. The scenes depicted vary from circus races to erotic encounters, deities and more⁴¹ – in total, the variety is reminiscent of images on Roman clay lamps. While no traces of colour have been detected on them, on a couple of medallions the circus imagery itself is supplemented by inscriptions, such as the above-mentioned ORTE PRA which appears as ORTE PRASINVS EST⁴² and can also include the Blues: ORTE VENETVS EST (Fig. 3)⁴³. Also, inscriptions such as CALOS VENETE⁴⁴ or NICA PRASINE⁴⁵ name the two major factions in the form of circus acclamations.

The inscriptions as well as the preserved coloured representations undoubtedly reveal the fondness and the fan loyalty of their respective owners. Such statements represented a form of communication within Roman society, whereby a person's belonging to one of the factions was not a triviality but could be part of a bitter, sometimes violent and even deadly rivalry⁴⁶. The colours were marks of identification with an unequivocal recognition factor: they constituted, perpetuated, and supported a communication system tied to belonging, loyalty, affection, antipathy and rivalry. Images, whether or not they bear supplemental text, were the media in this communication process. Through them, the participants could make a lasting statement. A fine example of such a statement is a mural painting in the mausoleum of the freedman L. Tullius Zethus (Vatican Necropolis, Tomb C) from the first half of the 2nd cent. A.D.⁴⁷. The badly preserved image above two grave altars shows two cha-

29 Cass. Dio 59, 14.

30 Cass. Dio 78, 1, 2.

31 Herodian. 4 6, 4.

32 Iuv. 1, 5, 143–144; Bell 2014, 501; Bell 2020, 202.

33 For an overview of the variety of circus imagery, see Grosser 2021, *passim*.

34 Dunbabin 1978, 257 Dougga no. 7.

35 Puk 2014, 202; Grosser 2021, 33.

36 For instance, sculptures, sarcophagi, marble, bronze, ivory and clay statuettes: Grosser 2021, 62–70. 118–129. 272 f. 277–288.

37 For instance, Terra Sigillata, dies, coinage, and contorniates: Grosser 2021, 83–86. 95–102. 130–137. 236–251. 270 f. 289–292.

38 Weiß – Aubry 2009, 231 f. 239 no. 1; Grosser 2021, 215 f. G91. The use of red jasper is intriguing as it contrasts with the inscription that mentions the Greens. However, red jasper was widely used in the Roman Empire, suggesting there may not be any in-

tended correlations. For this see Grosser forthcoming. About the use of red jasper and red cornelian as the most common materials for gems see also Zazoff 1983, 344; Zwierlein-Diehl 2007, 306 f. 309

39 Weiß – Aubry 2009, 245; Aubry 2011, 653.

40 See Weiß – Aubry 2009, 244. 246 with notes 87. 88, who discuss the exact meaning and origin of *orte*; see also Aubry 2011, 653.

41 In comprehensive form see Desbat 2011; Rivet – Saulnier 2016.

42 Grosser 2021, 296 f. Ta30; 297 f. Ta36.

43 Grosser 2021, 297 Ta32.

44 Grosser 2021, 297 Ta34.

45 E. g. Grosser 2021, 294 Ta13.

46 Dion Chrys. 32, 43; Min. Fel. 37, 11; Philostr. Ap. 5, 26; Amm. 28, 4, 29; SHA Ver. 6, 1–6; Nonn. Dion. 37, 439–453.

47 Mielsch – von Hesberg 1986, 45–47; Feraudi-Gruénais 2001, 48 K 14; Gee 2012, 66 with note 15.



1 Mosaic depicting the victorious charioteer Polydus in his quadriga



2 Mosaic depicting a standing victorious charioteer, surrounded by four horses, probably belonging to his quadriga



3 Victorious charioteer of the Greens in his quadriga on a clay medallion from Lyon, 2nd/3rd cent. A.D.



4 Mural painting from the mausoleum of the freedman Zethus, showing two victorious charioteers, one of the blue, the other of the green faction

rioteers in two panels, one above each altar, standing in a quadriga nearby *metae* (Fig. 4)⁴⁸. While the left charioteer wears a blue tunic, the right most probably wore a green one – due to the deplorable condition of the driver, it is not possible to determine unequivocally the colour of his tunic. A particularly intriguing aspect of this representation is that both *metae* are painted in the colours of the depicted charioteers, blue and green; in contrast to the poor condition of the green driver, the colour of the green *metae* can be determined with greater confidence⁴⁹. Between both drivers, a picture of a tree was added later on, decorated with blue ribbons hanging from its branches⁵⁰. H. Mielsch and H. von Hesberg have previously argued that the blue ribbons should be seen as a reflection of the deceased's partisanship toward the circus factions, in this case the *factio veneta*⁵¹. Within the preserved corpus of images of charioteers and chariot races, this kind of depiction is unique – both the coloured *metae* and the expression of partisanship to the blues in a grave context and made in such a visible way. The depiction and unique colouring of the *metae* in this wall painting might have been motivated by the desire to visualize the topos of the *meta mortis*: the description of life as akin to a race which ends at a turning post, which is mentioned by several authors, especially in the early Imperial period⁵².

48 Both the grave altars and the depiction were added shortly after the erection of the mausoleum. The inscription of the grave altars names the children of Zethus, and were probably erected for them; they were also named in the *titulus*: AE 1987, 154: L TVLLIVS ZETHVS FECIT / SIBI ET / TVLLIAE ATHENAIDI CONIVGI BENE / MERENTI ET TVLLIAE SECVNDAE ET / TVLLIO ATHE-NAEO FILIS [---]. See also Mielsch – von Hesberg 1986, 58. It is most unlikely, however, that the children can be identified as the charioteers, since neither of the drivers bears a portrait nor do the inscriptions show any hints of the profession of the children. Furthermore, differently from the gladiators, female charioteers are not attested in any other source, so Tullia Secunda would then be viewed as the only known female charioteer – not an

On the basis of our preserved sources, especially during Late Antiquity, it appears that the faction colours were increasingly ascribed natural attributes, such as being linked to the seasons or explained by their «physical properties». A. Cameron describes the writings of the historian John Malalas (6th cent. A.D.) as follows:

There are also the pairings [of green and white as well as red and blue, the pairings in the East in the 6th cent. A.D.] which Malalas attributes to Romulus, in his explanation of the alignment of the colours according to their physical properties. The earth, which is green, «naturally» blends with the air, which is white; red is subordinate to blue because water, which is blue, extinguishes fire, which is red⁵³!

It was also not uncommon to link the circus with the cosmos⁵⁴ and the factions with the seasons. In his *Variae*, the late antique statesman Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus (c. A.D. 485–580) explicitly draws such a connection. He compares the twelve starting gates (*carceres*) in the Circus Maximus with the zodiac, while bigae and quadrigae are thought to repre-

impossibility, but unlikely. On the lack of evidence for female charioteers see also D'Ambra 2007, 345.

49 On the image, the identification of the colours of the drivers' tunics and the *metae* see Mielsch – von Hesberg 1986, 45–47. 51 fig. 6.

50 Mielsch – von Hesberg 1986, 46; Feraudi-Gruénais 2001, 48 K 14.

51 Mielsch – von Hesberg 1986, 58.

52 Cic. Cato 83; Lucr. 6, 91 f.; Hor. epist. 1, 16, 79; see also Grosser 2021, 73.

53 Cameron 1976, 64.

54 More extensive: Wuillemier 1927, *passim*.

sent the moon and the sun, respectively⁵⁵. More intriguing, at least for the purposes of this discussion, are his comparisons between the faction colours and the seasons: while the greens symbolize spring (unsurprisingly from a modern perspective), the Reds represent summer, the Whites embody autumn, and the Blues represent the cloudy sky of winter: «prasinus virenti verno, venetus nubilae hiemi, russeus aestati flammeae, albus pruinoso autumno dicatus est [...]»⁵⁶. Very similar to Cassiodorus and also active in the 6th cent. A.D., the poet Flavius Cresconius Corippus compares the Greens with spring, the Reds with summer, the Blues with autumn, and the Whites with winter⁵⁷. Both of them also likely refer to much older texts

and ideas: for instance, in the 2nd/3rd cent. A.D. the early Christian writer Tertullian linked the factions with seasons, just as in the case of Cassiodorus⁵⁸. Other late antique sources, however, draw a connection between the faction colours and planets such as Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and so on⁵⁹, similarly to Nero's «self-presentation as solar charioteer and his performance of the role in his own circus [which] created a physical, visible model of the cosmos and allow Nero to assume the role of the benefactor of the Earth⁶⁰». Thus, according to the different sources, the faction colours served specific purposes, especially to signal belonging, loyalty, and fandom, but on other occasions they were also employed with a metaphorical purpose in mind⁶¹.

Case Study: Funerary Art

As we have seen, in the funerary context colours could be used in various kinds of metaphorical ways – assuming that the mural painting in the mausoleum of Zethus visualizes concepts such as the *meta mortis*. In the corpus of circus imagery from grave contexts⁶², sarcophagi with race scenes, mostly with Erotes as charioteers, are preserved in the greatest number. Whether human drivers or Erotes are depicted, the iconography and compositions are in most cases the same: four chariots racing from left to right, accompanied by riders in the background, the *hortatores*, and

circus staff (*sparsores*) ducking under the hooves of the running horses⁶³. In the background, the typical monuments of the *euripus*⁶⁴ of the circus can be seen: lap counters, statues, and *metae* to the extreme left and right⁶⁵. While the driver in the front (that is, the driver on the right side) is often described and seen as the winner, the chariot immediately behind him crashes in most cases⁶⁶. This *naufragium* (shipwreck), as such crashes were named, stands at the centre of the whole scene – both because of the positioning of the crash and because of the contrast it strikes with

55 Cassiod. var. 3, 51, 4, 6: «Sed mundi dominus ad potentiam suam opus extollens mirandam etiam Romanis fabricam in vallibus Murciam tetendit Augustus, ut immensa moles firmiter praecincta montibus contineret, ubi magnarum rerum indicia claudentur. bis sena quippe ostia ad duodecim signa posuerunt. haec ab hermulis funibus demissis subita aequalitate panduntur, docentes totum illic, ut putabant, consilio geri, ubi imago capitis cognoscitur operari. [...] Biga quasi lunae, quadriga solis imitatione reperta est. equi desultorii, per quos circensium ministri missus denuntiant exituros, luciferi praecursorias velocitates imitantur. sic accidit ut, dum se colere putarent astra, religionem suam ludicra similitudine profanarent.» «Long after, Augustus, the lord of the world, raising his works to the same high level as his power, built a fabric marvellous even to Romans, which stretched far into the Vallis Murcia. This immense mass, firmly girt round with hills, enclosed a space which was fitted to be the theatre of great events. Twelve Ostia at the entrance represent the twelve signs of the Zodiac. These are suddenly and equally opened by ropes let down by the Hermulae (little pilasters). [...] The Biga is made in imitation of the moon, the Quadriga of the sun. The circus horses (equi desultorii), by means of which the servants of the Circus announce the heats (missos) that are to be run, imitate the herald-swiftness of the morning star. Thus it came to pass that while they deemed they were worshipping the stars, they profaned their religion by parodying it in their games.» (transl. Hodgkin 1886,

226 f.). Linking chariot races, circus buildings, and factions with the cosmos and astrology was not uncommon in Late Antiquity, as Wuillemier 1927, 184–189 shows through an inspection of other late antique sources. For similar (preceding) concepts see also Coon – Sexton 2020, 9 with further literature.

56 Cassiod. var. 3, 51, 5. «The four colours worn by the four parties of charioteers denote the seasons: green for verdant spring, blue for cloudy winter, red for flaming summer, white for frosty autumn.» (transl. Hodgkin 1886, 227).

57 Coripp. 1, 319–329. See also Cameron 1976, 336–338.

58 Tert. de spect. 9, 5. See also Wuillemier 1927, 191 f.

59 Wuillemier 1927, *passim*, especially 191–193; Gee 2012, 66 f. 70.

60 Gee 2012, 70–72, quote p. 72.

61 On the latter, especially in Late Antiquity, see also Coon – Sexton 2020.

62 Bell 2004; Bell 2008, 394 f.; Grosser 2021, 51–76.

63 *Hortatores* and *sparsores* are also explained by Neppi Modona 1960, 565. 567; Letzner 2009, 141.

64 The barrier around which the races took place might often be called *spina*, but as Humphrey 1986, 175 pointed out, this term was not used for the barrier before the 5th cent. A.D.

65 Humphrey 1986, 201; Schauenburg 1995, 34–36; Bell 2004, 85 f.; Grosser 2021, 64 f.

66 Schauenburg 1995, 32. 35 with notes 187–189; Grosser 2021, 64.

the driving chariots⁶⁷. The crash, which takes place at a distance from the *metae*, is also not depicted in this way outside of grave contexts⁶⁸. The scheme itself may therefore be highly metaphorical and has been interpreted in different ways: for instance, with the concept of *meta mortis*, through making the deceased equivalent to the crashing driver or the winner, or also as the victory of death over life⁶⁹. However, it might be possible that the search for preserved traces of colours on the drivers and perhaps also on the architecture on these sarcophagi could unveil further layers of meaning behind this scheme, at least for the handful of sarcophagi which depict human drivers⁷⁰.

While the Erotes are depicted naked (which reduces the likelihood of finding traces of the faction colour)⁷¹, the human charioteers wear their customary gear: tunic, *fasciae*, and helmet⁷². It would be surprising if the drivers' tunics weren't coloured in at least one instance⁷³. Recent research has shown that sarcophagi were typically coloured, including the Phaethon-circus sarcophagus in Florence (Fig. 5)⁷⁴. In some cases, this may have been done using simplified colours, given the limited visibility of the sarcophagi in the grave chambers, as P. Liverani has observed in the case of some sarcophagi; however, he rightly warns against generalizing this supposition as fact⁷⁵. A close comparison with how such colours may have appeared is provided by the mural painting from the grave of Aelia Arisuth. Located in Gargaresh near Tripoli, this grave chamber dating to the 4th cent. A.D. contains two *loculi* – one for Aelia Arisuth and the other for her husband Aelius Magnus or Aelius Maximus (Fig. 6)⁷⁶. In a «complete reversal of the traditional male-female tradition in Late Antiquity, where it is the woman who is represented at leisure as an attestation to her husband's success and wealth⁷⁷», as M. De Marre points out, the *loculus* of Aelia shows a variety of mural paintings that evoke her own achievements and accomplishments. Among these paintings we find a chariot race scene, which follows precisely the scheme on the canonical circus sarcophagi

as described above – the second driver, out of reach of one of the *metae*, crashes. In this case, the driver in the front belongs to the Blues, the one crashing to the Whites, the third to the Greens, and the last to the Reds⁷⁸. Because of the alliance between the Blue and White factions, one might assume that the colour of the winning team as well as that of the crashing charioteer is not a mere coincidence, but a deliberate choice determined by the semantics of this scheme within a grave context.

Unfortunately, the sample size of the circus sarcophagi – with only three completely preserved sarcophagi with human charioteers – is very small⁷⁹. Nonetheless, one can try to analyse whether there are more examples for such colour patterns and potentially include the sarcophagi with Erotes, which would extend the corpus to more than 100 examples. For instance, if the first and the crashing drivers are always coloured as members of the *factio veneta* and *albata*, on the one side, or as members of the *factio prasine* and *russata*, on the other, this would give us a clear indication of a deliberate pattern. One might also assume other colour patterns, but it would make good sense if the figures of victory and defeat (crash) were painted in the colours of the preferred faction. The iconography with the *naufragium* was meant positively and evoked the sudden death of the participant, especially when we take into account that most of the circus sarcophagi were made for children (based upon their size)⁸⁰. But the imagery also evokes *virtus*, bravery, skill, and strength, and in this sense represents «adult ideals and parental hopes⁸¹», as S. Bell puts it.

In addition, using such a colour pattern enhanced the positive aspect of the entire visual scheme and also contributed more layers of significance by referring to the fandom, rivalry, and the sense of belonging to a particular faction that was an almost daily event in the life of the everyday Roman, not only in the *Urbs* itself but in the whole empire. Even though the Romans lived in a world full of diverse and vi-

67 Grosser 2021, 64 f.

68 Grosser 2021, 70 f. 74 f. 153 f.

69 Davies 1990, 140; Bell 2003, 225 f.; Grosser 2021, 154 with further literature.

70 Schauenburg 1995, 85–88 nos. 103–112; canonical scheme: Grosser 2021, 278 f. Sr4–Sr7; 280 f. Sr11.

71 According to Siotto 2018, 779 there was a colour pattern for the wings of Erotes, including yellow, red and blue, which could also be found on the wings of the Erotes on such circus sarcophagi.

72 Bell 2018/2019, 73–75.

73 On the colours on sarcophagi, see Liverani 2010, 293–296; Siotto 2018, *passim*; Zaccagnino – Rossi 2020, all with further literature.

74 E. g., Zaccagnino – Rossi 2020, who use various technologies to detect the colours on a circus sarcophagus in Florence that are no longer visible to the human eye.

75 Liverani 2010, 296.

76 De Marre 2016, *passim*; Grosser 2021, 74 f. 318 f. Wa12.

77 De Marre 2016, 5.

78 Romanelli 1981, 413; Barbet 1990, 93.

79 Grosser 2021, 278 f. Sr6. Sr7; 280 f. Sr11.

80 See Grosser 2021, 63 with note 646, with a brief discussion of this topic and further literature.

81 Bell 2003, 239.



5 Reworked backside of the Phaeton sarcophagus in the Uffizi



6 Mural painting from the grave of Aelia Arisuth, showing a race scene below the loculus

brant colours (as is discussed elsewhere in this volume), the colours of the four factions elicited a deeply felt emotional response that would have been matched by few other experiences in the *Urbs*⁸². Nor were the colours of the circus singular in meaning, as we have seen: they were (likely) bound up with the founding events of the city of Rome, the divisions of

its neighbourhoods (*tribus*), and – for some in Late Antiquity at least – even the seasons and the cosmos itself. Thus, when we look at now-white marble circus sarcophagi or objects in the ‘minor arts’ (such as gemstones), we should think of the ways in which they once loomed large and bright in the Roman mind – that is, in living colour.

⁸² See further the monograph on the Roman circus audience by S. Forichon (Forichon 2020).

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Fig. 4 per gentile concessione della Fabbrica di San Pietro in Vaticano

Fig. 5 su concessione del Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali e per il Turismo – Le Gallerie degli Uffizi

Fig. 6 Sokol Mucä for Meda Foundation – Ancient Mediterranean – ETS

