

Arrivederci, Roma!

At the height of a hot 2013 summer, I traveled to Rome to present some research at a large international conference. During the previous summer, I had studied a basic course in ancient Rome. The course took the form of a DVD titled "Famous Romans" containing a large number of beginning classics lectures delivered by the inimitable Prof. Rufus Fears of OK State Univ. The guy is gifted in the old-school approach of non-stop but nonetheless very engaging lectures. So naturally it made sense to stay in Rome for sightseeing.

The course helped stimulate my imagination as I took long walks, armed only with a tourist guide's map and an iPhone compass app. A mostly vacant area sunk between two hills was labeled "Circo Massimo", i.e. the Circus Maximus that became the namesake of a piece of Las Vegas corporate excess. It was hard to envision the countless exotic animals, chariot races, and screaming throngs of toga-clad bettors that Prof. Fears insists were there around 2000 years ago. Few referents are found here in Denver; we don't even have a dog track anymore. My mind wandered back to Las Vegas: perhaps some of you saw Siegfried and Roy boss lions around the stage in Caesar's Palace?



Circo Massimo, Rome

After suitable prayers to my God -- that would be The God of the Hebrews, of course -- pledging not to engage in idol or more commonplace forms of worship, I took the subway to the Vatican. The tourist guide warned of long lines, but I enjoyed the 40 minutes or so in line within the classically beautiful colonnade leading to St. Peter's Basilica, designed by Bernini:



Colonnade of St. Peters Square, Rome

St. Peter's is truly amazing. The interior is monument (no pun intended) to the no-efforts spared approach of The Church over the centuries. No single photo comes close to capturing either the enormity or minute detail within, but here is a nice one showing humanity in scale to it:



Small part of St. Peter's Basilica

After wandering aimlessly through it, I entered the even more crowded tour of the Vatican Museums, which includes the famous Sistine Chapel and its Michaelangelo murals along the ceiling, depicting scenes from our bible (as well as their newer one). Michaelangelo painted these between 1508-12. I quickly found his depiction of Moses parting the Red Sea, noting that he did look far more like Charlton Heston than the semitic Jew that he actually was. I searched in vain to find horns emanating from his forehead. I had read that virulently anti-semitic acts were motivated in part by the view that such forehead horns prove the equation Moses = Devil. After walking out of the Sistine Chapel, Gina alertly spotted this unfortunate depiction :



I wish the guy had never painted those ridiculous horns!
Fortunately, C.B. DeMille didn't stick them on Charlton Heston.

Scholars have long maintained that the biblical Hebrew phrase for "rays of light" has been incorrectly translated as "horns of light", so there you have the origin of Michaelangelo's unfortunate brushstrokes.

Unfortunately, much of the visibly religious grandeur on display in Rome started after the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and officially enshrined the Church. While Constantine's Edict of Milan (313 AD) proclaimed tolerance for all religions, it is far more than just fair to note that century after century of problems for Jews ensued. For example, the cramped and dangerous (from floods and their associated pathogens) Jewish Ghetto in Rome, where Jews were forced to live between 1555 and the late 19th Century, is usually viewed as an improvement in their living conditions. Pope John 23 bravely admitted as much during the Second Vatican Council he started in 1962.

The Ghetto is now a popular tourist attraction. One can find a nifty tour of the splendidly restored great synagogue there, as well as a Kosher meal, enjoyed by Gina and I below:



Gina and I in the Ancient Roman Hood

In the photo above, note that I am wearing a Tour de France polo shirt. The Tour was in progress while I visited. Boulder is surely a bicycle town, but Italy is a bicycle country. Cable sports channels not only were covering the Tour, but were replaying archival, black and white footage of past Italian triumphs, e.g. Roberto Visentini winning a stage in the 1984 Giro d'Italia. There were numerous, long taped interviews of skinny, sweaty guys wearing caps bearing the names of now-defunct sponsors. They even devoted an entire morning of live coverage to a gran fondo called the [Maratona dles Dolomites](#), a wonderful trip/race in the mountains of NE Italy for citizens of all ages. A lot of folks I see at Amante Coffee would love to ride it.

As for me, I will settle for morning coffee rides to Amante on my American-made recumbent bike, and watch the rest of the Tour while sipping an iced Americano. Arrivederci, Roma!