Colosseum-Rome

Located

Piazza del Colosseo Rome-Italy

The **Colosseum** is an oval amphitheatre in the centre of the city of Rome, Italy, just east of the Roman Forum. It is the largest ancient amphitheatre ever built, and is still the largest standing amphitheatre in the world today, despite its age. Construction began under the emperor Vespasian (r. 69–79 AD) in 72 and was completed in 80 AD under his successor and heir, Titus (r. 79–81). Further modifications were made during the reign of Domitian (r. 81–96). The three emperors that were patrons of the work are known as the Flavian dynasty, and the amphitheatre was named the **Flavian Amphitheatre** (Latin: *Amphitheatrum Flavium*; Italian: *Anfiteatro Flavio* [amfiteˈaːtro ˈflaːvjo]) by later classicists and archaeologists for its association with their family name *(Flavius)*.

The Colosseum is built of travertine limestone, tuff (volcanic rock), and brick-faced concrete. The Colosseum could hold an estimated 50,000 to 80,000 spectators at various points in its history having an average audience of some 65,000; it was used for gladiatorial contests and public spectacles including animal hunts, executions, re-enactments of famous battles, and dramas based on Roman mythology, and briefly mock sea battles. The building ceased to be used for entertainment in the early medieval era. It was later reused for such purposes as housing, workshops, quarters for a religious order, a fortress, a quarry, and a Christian shrine.

Although substantially ruined because of earthquakes and stone-robbers (for *spolia*), the Colosseum is still an iconic symbol of Imperial Rome and was listed as one of the New7Wonders of the World. It is one of Rome's most popular tourist attractions and also has links to the Roman Catholic Church, as each Good Friday the Pope leads a torchlit "Way of the Cross" procession that starts in the area around the Colosseum.

The Colosseum is also depicted on the Italian version of the five-cent euro coin.

Name

Originally, the building's Latin name was simply the Latin: *amphitheatrum*, lit. 'amphitheatre'. Though the modern name Flavian Amphitheatre (Latin: *amphitheatrum Flavium*) is often used, there is no evidence it

was used in Classical Antiquity. This name refers to the patronage of the Flavian dynasty, during whose reigns the building was constructed, but the structure is better known as the Colosseum. In antiquity, Romans may have referred to the Colosseum by the unofficial name *Amphitheatrum Caesareum* (with *Caesareum* an adjective pertaining to the title *Caesar*), but this name may have been strictly poetic as it was not exclusive to the Colosseum; Vespasian and Titus, builders of the Colosseum, also constructed an Flavian Amphitheatre in Puteoli (modern Pozzuoli).

The name *colosseum* for the amphitheatre is attested from the 6th century, during Late Antiquity. The name *Colosseum* is believed to be derived from a colossal statue of Nero on the model of the Colossus of Rhodes. The giant bronze sculpture of Nero as a solar deity was moved to its position beside the amphitheatre by the emperor Hadrian (r. 117–138). The word *colosseum* is a neuter Latin noun formed from the adjective *colosseus*, meaning "gigantic" or "colossean". By the year 1000 the Latin name "Colosseum" had been coined to refer to the amphitheatre from the nearby "Colossus Solis".

The spelling was sometimes altered in Medieval Latin: *coloseum* and *coliseum* are attested from the 12th and 14th centuries respectively. In the 12th century, the structure was recorded as the *amphitheatrum colisei*, 'Amphitheatre of the Colossus'. In the High Middle Ages, the Flavian amphitheatre is attested as the late 13th-century Old French: *colosé,* and in Middle French as: *colisée* by the early 16th century, by which time the word could be applied to any amphitheatre. From Middle French: *colisée* derived the Middle English: *colisee*, in use by the middle of the 15th century and employed by John Capgrave in his *Solace of Pilgrims*, in which he remarked: Middle English: *collise eke is a meruelous place … þe moost part of it stant at þis day*. An English translation by John Bourchier, 2nd Baron Berners, of Antonio de Guevara's biography of Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180) in about 1533 referred to Middle English: *this Emperour, beynge with the Senate at Collisee* .... Similarly, the Italian: *colosseo,* or *coliseo*, are attested as referring first to the amphitheatre in Rome, and then to any amphitheatre (as Italian: *culiseo* in 1367). By 1460, an equivalent existed in Catalan: *coliseu*; by 1495 had appeared the Spanish: *coliseo*, and by 1548 the Portuguese: *coliseu*.

The earliest citation for the name Colosseum in Early Modern English is the 1600 translation, by Philemon Holland, of the *Urbis Romae topographia* of Bartolomeo Marliani, which he used in the preparation of his translation of Livy's Augustan era *Ab Urbe Condita Libri*. The text states: "This Amphitheatre was commonly called Colosseum, of Neroes Colossus, which was set up in the porch of Neroes house." Similarly, John Evelyn, translating the Middle French name: *le Colisée* used by the architectural theorist Roland Fréart de Chambray, wrote "And 'tis indeed a kind of miracle to see that the Colosseum … and innumerable other Structures which seemed to have been built for Eternity, should be at present so ruinous and dilapidated".

After Nero's suicide and the civil wars of the Year of the Four Emperors, the Colossus of Nero was remodeled by the condemned emperor's successors into the likeness of Helios (*Sol*) or Apollo, the sun god, by adding the appropriate solar crown. It was then commonly referred to as the "Colossus solis". Nero's head was also replaced several times with the heads of succeeding emperors. Despite its pagan links, the statue remained standing well into the medieval era and was credited with magical powers. It came to be seen as an iconic symbol of the permanence of Rome. The emperor Constantine the Great remodeled the statue's face as his own.

In the 8th century, an epigram attributed to the Venerable Bede celebrated the symbolic significance of the statue in a prophecy that is variously quoted: *Quamdiu stat Colisæus, stat et Roma; quando cadet colisæus, cadet et Roma; quando cadet Roma, cadet et mundus* ("as long as the Colossus stands, so shall Rome; when the Colossus falls, Rome shall fall; when Rome falls, so falls the world").[16] This is often mistranslated to refer to the Colosseum rather than the Colossus (as in, for instance, Byron's poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*). However, at the time that the Pseudo-Bede wrote, the masculine noun *coliseus* was applied to the statue rather than to the amphitheatre.

The Colossus did eventually fall, possibly being pulled down to reuse its bronze. The statue itself was largely forgotten and only its base survives, between the Colosseum and the nearby Temple of Venus and Roma.

History

Construction, inauguration, and Roman renovations

The site chosen was a flat area on the floor of a low valley between the Caelian, Esquiline and Palatine Hills, through which a canalised stream ran as well as an artificial lake/marsh. By the 2nd century BC the area was densely inhabited. It was devastated by the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD, following which Nero seized much of the area to add to his personal domain. He built the grandiose *Domus Aurea* on the site, in front of which he created an artificial lake surrounded by pavilions, gardens and porticoes. The existing *Aqua Claudia* aqueduct was extended to supply water to the area and the gigantic bronze Colossus of Nero was set up nearby at the entrance to the Domus Aurea.

Although the Colossus was preserved, much of the Domus Aurea was torn down. The lake was filled in and the land reused as the location for the new Flavian Amphitheatre. Gladiatorial schools and other support buildings were constructed nearby within the former grounds of the Domus Aurea. Vespasian's decision to build the Colosseum on the site of Nero's lake can be seen as a populist gesture of returning to the people an area of the city which Nero had appropriated for his own use. In contrast to many other amphitheatres, which were on the outskirts of a city, the Colosseum was constructed in the city centre, in effect, placing it both symbolically and precisely at the heart of Rome.

Construction was funded by the opulent spoils taken from the Jewish Temple after the First Jewish–Roman War in 70 CE led to the Siege of Jerusalem. According to a reconstructed inscription found on the site, "the emperor Vespasian ordered this new amphitheatre to be erected from his general's share of the booty." It is often assumed that Jewish prisoners of war were brought back to Rome and contributed to the massive workforce needed for the construction of the amphitheatre, but there is no ancient evidence for that; it would, nonetheless, be commensurate with Roman practice to add humiliation to the defeated population.Along with this free source of unskilled labor, teams of professional Roman builders, engineers, artists, painters and decorators undertook the more specialized tasks necessary for building the Colosseum. The Colosseum was constructed with several different materials: wood, limestone, tuff, tiles, cement, and mortar.

Construction of the Colosseum began under the rule of Vespasian in around 70–72 AD (73–75 AD according to some sources). The Colosseum had been completed up to the third story by the time of Vespasian's death in 79. The top level was finished by his son, Titus, in 80, and the inaugural games were held in 80 or 81 AD. Dio Cassius recounts that over 9,000 wild animals were killed during the inaugural games of the amphitheatre. Commemorative coinage was issued celebrating the inauguration. The building was remodelled further under Vespasian's younger son, the newly designated Emperor Domitian, who constructed the *hypogeum*, a series of tunnels used to house animals and slaves. He also added a gallery to the top of the Colosseum to increase its seating capacity.

In 217, the Colosseum was badly damaged by a major fire (caused by lightning, according to Dio Cassius) which destroyed the wooden upper levels of the amphitheatre's interior. It was not fully repaired until about 240 and underwent further repairs in 250 or 252 and again in 320. Honorius banned the practice of gladiator fights in 399 and again in 404. Gladiatorial fights are last mentioned around 435. An inscription records the restoration of various parts of the Colosseum under Theodosius II and Valentinian III (reigned 425–455), possibly to repair damage caused by a major earthquake in 443; more work followed in 484 and 508. The arena continued to be used for contests well into the 6th century. Animal hunts continued until at least 523, when Anicius Maximus celebrated his consulship with some *venationes*, criticised by King Theodoric the Great for their high cost.

Medieval

The Colosseum underwent several radical changes of use. By the late 6th century a small chapel had been built into the structure of the amphitheater, though this apparently did not confer any particular religious significance on the building as a whole. The arena was converted into a cemetery. The numerous vaulted spaces in the arcades under the seating were converted into housing and workshops, and are recorded as still being rented out as late as the 12th century. Around 1200 the Frangipani family took over the Colosseum and fortified it, apparently using it as a castle.

Severe damage was inflicted on the Colosseum by the great earthquake in 1349, causing the outer south side, lying on a less stable alluvial terrain, to collapse. Much of the tumbled stone was reused to build palaces, churches, hospitals and other buildings elsewhere in Rome. A religious order moved into the northern third of the Colosseum in the mid-14th century and continued to inhabit it until as late as the early 19th century. The interior of the amphitheater was extensively stripped of stone, which was reused elsewhere, or (in the case of the marble façade) was burned to make quicklime. The iron clamps which held the stonework together were pried or hacked out of the walls, leaving numerous pockmarks which still scar the building today.

Modern

During the 16th and 17th century, Church officials sought a productive role for the Colosseum. Pope Sixtus V (1585–1590) planned to turn the building into a wool factory to provide employment for Rome's prostitutes, though this proposal fell through with his premature death. In 1671 Cardinal Altieri authorized its use for bullfights; a public outcry caused the idea to be hastily abandoned.

In 1749, Pope Benedict XIV endorsed the view that the Colosseum was a sacred site where early Christians had been martyred. He forbade the use of the Colosseum as a quarry and consecrated the building to the Passion of Christ and installed Stations of the Cross, declaring it sanctified by the blood of the Christian martyrs who perished there (*see Significance in Christianity*). However, there is no historical evidence to support Benedict's claim, nor is there even any evidence that anyone before the 16th century suggested this might be the case; the *Catholic Encyclopedia* concludes that there are no historical grounds for the supposition, other than the reasonably plausible conjecture that some of the many martyrs may well have been.

Later popes initiated various stabilization and restoration projects, removing the extensive vegetation which had overgrown the structure and threatened to damage it further. The façade was reinforced with triangular brick wedges in 1807 and 1827, and the interior was repaired in 1831, 1846 and in the 1930s. The arena substructure was partly excavated in 1810–1814 and 1874 and was fully exposed under Benito Mussolini in the 1930s.

The Colosseum is today one of Rome's most popular tourist attractions, receiving millions of visitors annually. The effects of pollution and general deterioration over time prompted a major restoration programme carried out between 1993 and 2000, at a cost of 40 billion Italian lire ($19.3m / €20.6m at 2000 prices).

In recent years, the Colosseum has become a symbol of the international campaign against capital punishment, which was abolished in Italy in 1948. Several anti–death penalty demonstrations took place in front of the Colosseum in 2000. Since that time, as a gesture against the death penalty, the local authorities of Rome change the color of the Colosseum's night time illumination from white to gold whenever a person condemned to the death penalty anywhere in the world gets their sentence commuted or is released, or if a jurisdiction abolishes the death penalty. Most recently, the Colosseum was illuminated in gold in November 2012 following the abolishment of capital punishment in the American state of Connecticut in April 2012.

Because of the ruined state of the interior, it is impractical to use the Colosseum to host large events; only a few hundred spectators can be accommodated in temporary seating. However, much larger concerts have been held just outside, using the Colosseum as a backdrop. Performers who have played at the Colosseum in recent years have included Ray Charles (May 2002), Paul McCartney (May 2003),Elton John (September 2005), and Billy Joel (July 2006).

Physical description

Exterior

Unlike earlier Greek theatres that were built into hillsides, the Colosseum is an entirely free-standing structure. It derives its basic exterior and interior architecture from that of two Roman theatres back to back. It is elliptical in plan and is 189 meters (615 ft

/ 640 Roman feet) long, and 156 meters (510

/ 528 Roman feet) wide, with a base area of 24,000 square metres (6 acres). The height of the outer wall is 48 meters (157 ft / 165 Roman feet). The perimeter originally measured 545 meters (1,788 ft / 1,835 Roman feet). The central arena is an oval 87 m (287 ft) long and 55 m (180 ft) wide, surrounded by a wall 5 m (15 ft) high, above which rose tiers of seating.

The outer wall is estimated to have required over 100,000 cubic metres (3.5 million cubic feet) of travertine stone which were set without mortar; they were held together by 300 tons of iron clamps. However, it has suffered extensive damage over the centuries, with large segments having collapsed following earthquakes. The north side of the perimeter wall is still standing; the distinctive triangular brick wedges at each end are modern additions, having been constructed in the early 19th century to shore up the wall. The remainder of the present-day exterior of the Colosseum is in fact the original interior wall.

The surviving part of the outer wall's monumental façade comprises three stories of superimposed arcades surmounted by a podium on which stands a tall attic, both of which are pierced by windows interspersed at regular intervals. The arcades are framed by half-columns of the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian orders, while the attic is decorated with Corinthian pilasters. Each of the arches in the second- and third-floor arcades framed statues, probably honoring divinities and other figures from Classical mythology.

Two hundred and forty mast corbels were positioned around the top of the attic. They originally supported a retractable awning, known as the *velarium*, that kept the sun and rain off spectators. This consisted of a canvas-covered, net-like structure made of ropes, with a hole in the center. It covered two-thirds of the arena, and sloped down towards the center to catch the wind and provide a breeze for the audience. Sailors, specially enlisted from the Roman naval headquarters at Misenum and housed in the nearby *Castra Misenatium*, were used to work the *velarium*.

The Colosseum's huge crowd capacity made it essential that the venue could be filled or evacuated quickly. Its architects adopted solutions very similar to those used in modern stadiums to deal with the same problem. The amphitheatre was ringed by eighty entrances at ground level, 76 of which were used by ordinary spectators. Each entrance and exit was numbered, as was each staircase. The northern main entrance was reserved for the Roman Emperor and his aides, whilst the other three axial entrances were most likely used by the elite. All four axial entrances were richly decorated with painted stucco reliefs, of which fragments survive. Many of the original outer entrances have disappeared with the collapse of the perimeter wall, but entrances XXIII (23) to LIIII (54) survive.

Spectators were given tickets in the form of numbered pottery shards, which directed them to the appropriate section and row. They accessed their seats via *vomitoria* (singular *vomitorium*), passageways that opened into a tier of seats from below or behind. These quickly dispersed people into their seats and, upon conclusion of the event or in an emergency evacuation, could permit their exit within only a few minutes. The name *vomitoria* derived from the Latin word for a rapid discharge, from which English derives the word vomit.

Interior seating

According to the Codex-Calendar of 354, the Colosseum could accommodate 87,000 people, although modern estimates put the figure at around 50,000. They were seated in a tiered arrangement that reflected the rigidly stratified nature of Roman society. Special boxes were provided at the north and south ends respectively for the Emperor and the Vestal Virgins, providing the best views of the arena. Flanking them at the same level was a broad platform or *podium* for the senatorial class, who were allowed to bring their own

chairs. The names of some 5th century senators can still be seen carved into the stonework, presumably reserving areas for their use.

The tier above the senators, known as the *maenianum primum*, was occupied by the non-senatorial noble class or knights (*equites*). The next level up, the *maenianum secundum*, was originally reserved for ordinary Roman citizens (*plebeians*) and was divided into two sections. The lower part (the *immum*) was for wealthy citizens, while the upper part (the *summum*) was for poor citizens. Specific sectors were provided for other social groups: for instance, boys with their tutors, soldiers on leave, foreign dignitaries, scribes, heralds, priests and so on. Stone (and later marble) seating was provided for the citizens and nobles, who presumably would have brought their own cushions with them. Inscriptions identified the areas reserved for specific groups.

Another level, the *maenianum secundum in legneis*, was added at the very top of the building during the reign of Domitian. This comprised a gallery for the common poor, slaves and women. It would have been either standing room only, or would have had very steep wooden benches. Some groups were banned altogether from the Colosseum, notably gravediggers, actors and former gladiators.

Each tier was divided into sections (*maeniana*) by curved passages and low walls (*praecinctiones* or *baltei*), and were subdivided into *cunei*, or wedges, by the steps and aisles from the vomitoria. Each row (*gradus*) of seats was numbered, permitting each individual seat to be exactly designated by its gradus, cuneus, and number.

Arena and hypogeum

The arena itself was 83 meters by 48 meters (272 ft by 157 ft / 280 by 163 Roman feet). It comprised a wooden floor covered by sand (the Latin word for sand is *harena* or *arena*), covering an elaborate underground structure called the *hypogeum* (literally meaning "underground"). The hypogeum was not part of the original construction but was ordered to be built by Emperor Domitian. Little now remains of the original arena floor, but the *hypogeum* is still clearly visible. It consisted of a two-level subterranean network of tunnels and cages beneath the arena where gladiators and animals were held before contests began. Eighty vertical shafts provided instant access to the arena for caged animals and scenery pieces concealed underneath; larger hinged platforms, called *hegmata*, provided access for elephants and the like. It was restructured on numerous occasions; at least twelve different phases of construction can be seen.

The *hypogeum* was connected by tunnels to a number of points outside the Colosseum. Animals and performers were brought through the tunnel from nearby stables, with the gladiators' barracks at the Ludus Magnus to the east also being connected by tunnels. Separate tunnels were provided for the Emperor and the Vestal Virgins to permit them to enter and exit the Colosseum without needing to pass through the crowds.

Substantial quantities of machinery also existed in the *hypogeum*. Elevators and pulleys raised and lowered scenery and props, as well as lifting caged animals to the surface for release. There is evidence for the existence of major hydraulic mechanisms and according to ancient accounts, it was possible to flood the arena rapidly, presumably via a connection to a nearby aqueduct. However, the construction of the hypogeum at Domitian's behest put an end to the practise of flooding, and thus also to naval battles, early in the Colosseum's existence.

Supporting buildings

The Colosseum and its activities supported a substantial industry in the area. In addition to the amphitheatre itself, many other buildings nearby were linked to the games. Immediately to the east is the remains of the *Ludus Magnus*, a training school for gladiators. This was connected to the Colosseum by an underground passage, to allow easy access for the gladiators. The *Ludus Magnus* had its own miniature training arena, which was itself a popular attraction for Roman spectators. Other training schools were in the same area, including the *Ludus Matutinus* (Morning School), where fighters of animals were trained, plus the Dacian and Gallic Schools.

Also nearby were the *Armamentarium*, comprising an armory to store weapons; the *Summum Choragium*, where machinery was stored; the *Sanitarium*, which had facilities to treat wounded gladiators; and the *Spoliarium*, where bodies of dead gladiators were stripped of their armor and disposed of.

Around the perimeter of the Colosseum, at a distance of 18 m (59 ft) from the perimeter, was a series of tall stone posts, with five remaining on the eastern side. Various explanations have been advanced for their presence; they may have been a religious boundary, or an outer boundary for ticket checks, or an anchor for the *velarium* or awning.

Use

The Colosseum was used to host gladiatorial shows as well as a variety of other events. The shows, called *munera*, were always given by private individuals rather than the state. They had a strong religious element but were also demonstrations of power and family prestige, and were immensely popular with the population. Another popular type of show was the animal hunt, or *venatio*. This utilized a great variety of wild beasts, mainly imported from Africa and the Middle East, and included creatures such as rhinoceros, hippopotamuses, elephants, giraffes, aurochs, wisents, Barbary lions, panthers, leopards, bears, Caspian tigers, crocodiles and ostriches. Battles and hunts were often staged amid elaborate sets with movable trees and buildings. Such events were occasionally on a huge scale; Trajan is said to have celebrated his victories in Dacia in 107 with contests involving 11,000 animals and 10,000 gladiators over the course of 123 days. During lunch intervals, executions *ad bestias* would be staged. Those condemned to death would be sent into the arena, naked and unarmed, to face the beasts of death which would literally tear them to pieces. Other performances would also take place by acrobats and magicians, typically during the intervals.

During the early days of the Colosseum, ancient writers recorded that the building was used for *naumachiae* (more properly known as *navalia proelia*) or simulated sea battles. Accounts of the inaugural games held by Titus in AD 80 describe it being filled with water for a display of specially trained swimming horses and bulls. There is also an account of a re-enactment of a famous sea battle between the Corcyrean (Corfiot) Greeks and the Corinthians. This has been the subject of some debate among historians; although providing the water would not have been a problem, it is unclear how the arena could have been waterproofed, nor would there have been enough space in the arena for the warships to move around. It has been suggested that the reports either have the location wrong, or that the Colosseum originally featured a wide floodable channel down its central axis (which would later have been replaced by the hypogeum).

Sylvae or recreations of natural scenes were also held in the arena. Painters, technicians and architects would construct a simulation of a forest with real trees and bushes planted in the arena's floor, and animals would then be introduced. Such scenes might be used simply to display a natural environment for the urban population, or could otherwise be used as the backdrop for hunts or dramas depicting episodes from mythology. They were also occasionally used for executions in which the hero of the story – played by a condemned person – was killed in one of various gruesome but mythologically authentic ways, such as being mauled by beasts or burned to death.