

THE HISTORY

The construction of the Flavian Amphitheatre, which is named after the *Gens Flavia*, began in AD 72 under the emperor Vespasian and was financed with the spoil of the conquest of Jerusalem of AD 70. The amphitheatre, inaugurated by Titus in AD 80 and completed by his brother Domitian in AD 82, is the most imposing building of the antiquity among those destined for gladiatorial fights (*munera*) and mock hunts (*venationes*). The building rises in the centre of the valley where the artificial lake of Nero's *Domus Aurea* was previously located. Some auxiliary constructions stood around the valley: gymnasiums, store-houses and a hospital.

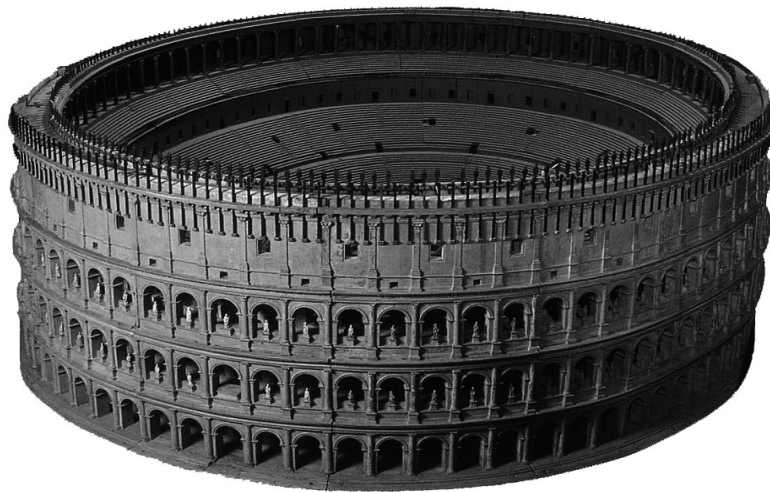
The last spectacle held in the Colosseum dates back to AD 523. Between the end of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth century a process of disassembly of the southern section's structures started, while the arena began being filled with earth. From the second half of the sixth century the amphitheatre went through a period of neglect and, after losing its original functions, suffered a systematic spoliation of its materials: the travertine of the load-bearing structures, the marble facing, the metal clamps that held the blocks of stone were removed. The holes still visible in the travertine are the consequence of this plunder. In the Middle Ages the reuse of its structures in order to establish dwellings, gardens and shelters for animals and goods changed the area into a residential quarter organized around a central square, the ancient arena, and called *Rota Colisei*.

The name "Colosseum", under which the amphitheatre is commonly known, appeared for the first time in the eighth century, might derive from the memory of the colossal statue of Nero which stood in the vicinity of the monument. During the sixteenth century the tradition identifying the Colosseum with the place of the first Christians' martyrdom became established, though never proved. The sacred nature of the building was sanctioned in occasion of the Jubilee in 1750, when Pope Benedict XIV had a cross raised in the middle of the arena and 14 chapels built for the *Via Crucis*.

After an earthquake in 1803 the first reinforcement works were accomplished carrying out two brick abutments, one on the eastern side (Stern 1805-7) and the other one on the western side (Valadier 1827): it was the first phase of a long action of recovery and archaeological research, that changed the Colosseum from ruins into a monument.

THE COLOSSEUM

Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici di Roma



WOODEN MODEL BY C. LUCANGELI AND P. DALBONO, LATE 18th—EARLY 19th CENTURY

THE GAMES

The admission to the spectacles was free; in fact, they gave the opportunity to those who offered them (*editores*) to prove their generosity. In Rome, the ultimate *editor* was the emperor while the magistracies, who had to finance the games, offered spectacles only exceptionally.

On particular events the spectacles could last for several days, as it happened on the inauguration offered by the emperor Titus in AD 80, which lasted for 100 days. On this occasion the central area was also used as a pool for naval battles (*naumachiae*).

A day of spectacle was organized as following: in the morning, after an opening parade of all the participants (*pompa*), spectacles named *venationes* took place, which consisted of fights between wild animals coming from the whole empire, hunts led by armed men and shows of tame animals. Carefully prepared scenographies reproduced the natural habitat of the animals with stunning effects.

At lunch break, the *arena* was used for executions, among which the *damnatio ad bestias* was the cruelest: the condemned was torn to pieces by wild animals. No historical sources prove that the building was the scene of capital punishments of Christians, instead.

In the afternoon, the gladiatorial fights took place, whose origin is related to the tradition of the funeral games. There were several types of equipment for the gladiators, which corresponded to as many fighting techniques, fixed since the Augustan Age: *retiarius*, *secutor*, *oplomachus*, *thraex*, *mirmillo*. The fights to the death were unusual: more often the spectators' favour let the gladiator be granted a pardon.

Most of the gladiators were slaves or prisoners of war who belonged to managers (*lanistae*) specialized in their recruiting and training. There were also free men who chose the profession of gladiator hoping to gain wealth and fame. They lived and trained all together; after several fights they could be discharged and, if they were slaves, set free. Some of them were so popular that became real idols for the public.

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THE ARCHITECTURE: THE STRUCTURE OF THE AMPHITHEATRE AND THE CELLARS

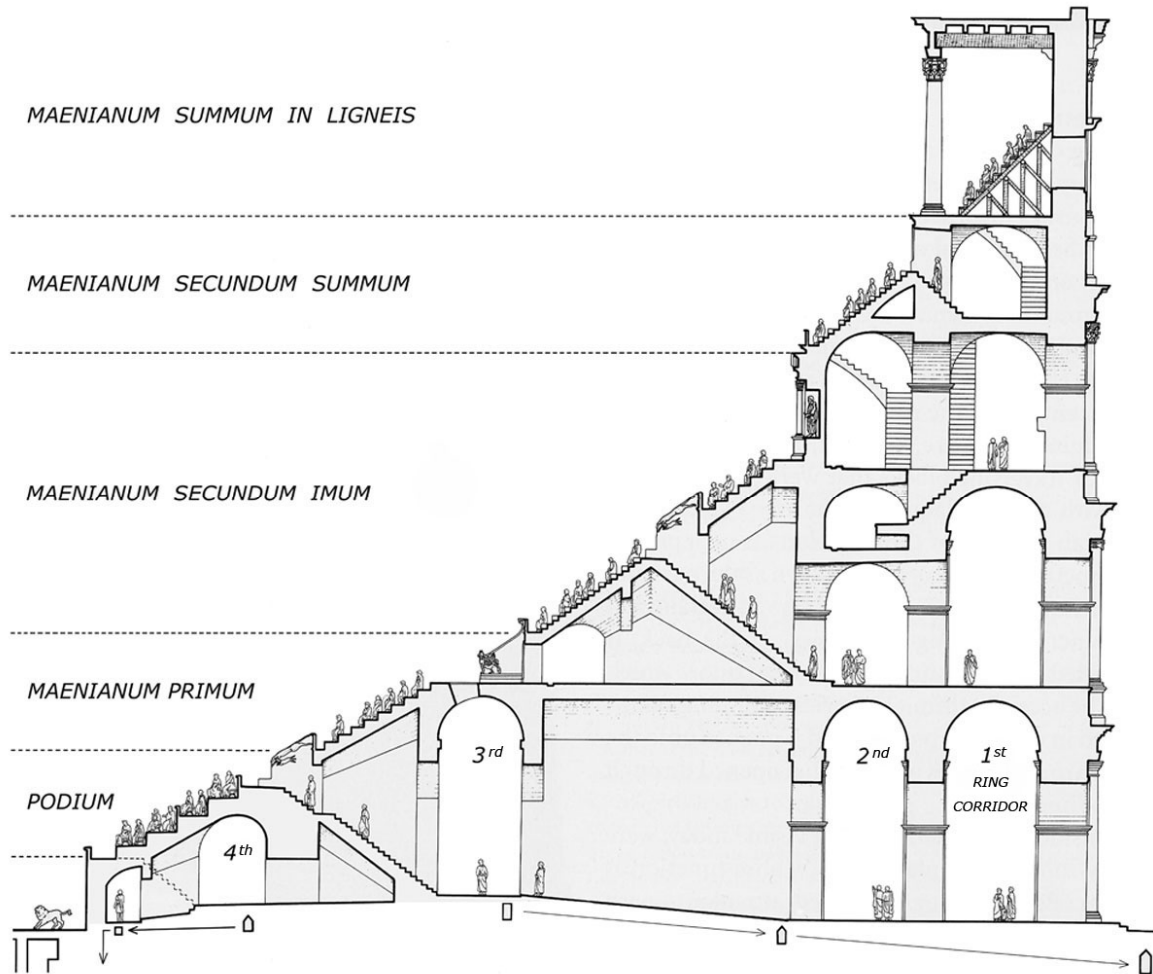
The structure of the amphitheatre is made of blocks of travertine (external walls and load-bearing pillars), bricks and blocks of tufa (radial walls and stairs). The exterior of the building is divided into four levels that add up to a total height of about 50 meters. The last level was crowned with a marble colonnade, whose fragments are still visible on the ground floor.

The building has an elliptical shape with a long axis of 188 m and a short one of 156 m.

In the centre of the building there was the arena, a wooden floor (now partly reconstructed on the eastern side) on which the games took place and that was covered with sand (*arena* in Latin). The amphitheatre had 80 archways: 76 entrances were numbered and intended for the spectators while four ones, located on the ends of the ellipse's axes, were reserved for the emperor, for the political and religious authorities and for the protagonists of the spectacles.

The monumental entrances on the short axis led to two royal boxes near the arena, one of which reserved for the emperor.

On the occasion of the spectacles the public took a seat according to a rigid division based on social classes: a ticket indicated the seat assigned and obligatory pathways led to the tiers of seats (*cavea*) through numbered archways.



The *cavea*, that could contain between 40.000 and 70.000 spectators, was divided into 5 horizontal sectors (*maeniana*), separated by corridors. The senators occupied the section of seats closest to the arena (*podium*). The upper stands were reserved to the knights and to other social categories, whereas the highest columned sector (*summa cavea*) was designed for the plebs and furnished with wooden structures. On the top there was a mobile structure in wood and cloth (*velum*) to shelter the public from the sun.

Originally, the building structures today visible in the middle of the monument were cellars, covered throughout with the floor of the arena. They were built mostly some years after the amphitheatre's inauguration, under Domitian's empire (AD 81-96) and were restored several times during the five centuries of the Colosseum's activity.

The cellars were organized into 15 corridors, made in blocks of tufa and bricks, parallel to a central gallery running east-west along the long axis of the ellipse. The cellars housed the equipment needed for the games, the weapons and the cages of the animals.

A system of goods-hoists moved by winches was used to lift gladiators, animals and stage machineries just below the level of the arena, which was reached through trap-doors and inclined planes. The goods-lifts set along the side corridors, the largest ones, were equipped with cages for hoisting the animals; instead, those located in the middle cellars were used for people and scenographies. The housings of these machineries and of the load-bearing poles of the arena are still visible on the cellars' floor.

The central corridor under the arena continued underneath the eastern entrance, connecting the cellars with the most important barracks of the gladiators, the *Ludus Magnus*, today partially visible in the archaeological area between Via Labicana and Via di San Giovanni in Laterano.

Another underground corridor, known as Passageway of Commodus (the emperor who, according to historical sources, underwent an attempted assassination there), connected the cellars with the outside; the gate leading from this passageway to the *cavea* is still visible today near the terrace on the southern side.