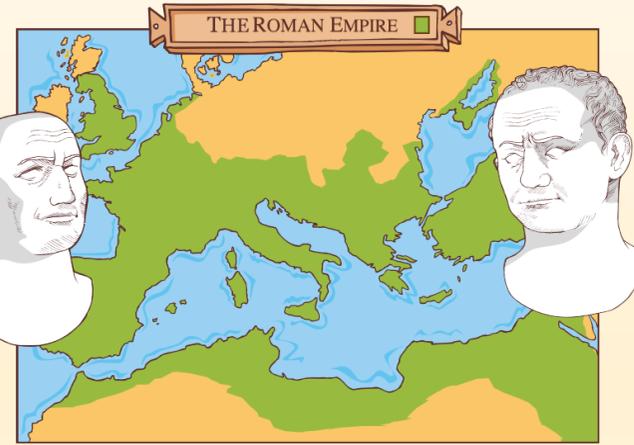


## THE HISTORY

Architectural wonder of the ancient world and universal symbol of Rome, the Colosseum was referred to by the Romans as *"Amphitheatrum Flavium"*, from the name of the imperial family of the Flavians who built it. Construction began in 72 AD during the reign of **Vespasian** and was completed only after eight years of intensive building, by his son **Titus** in 80 AD. The lavish celebrations for its inauguration included games and combats that went on for 100 days, during which thousands of wild animals were killed.

In order to understand why a structure with the planimetric and



architectural features of the amphitheatre had not been conceived earlier in the ancient world, we must consider that the passion for this new type of entertainment, gladiatorial combat with wild animals, could be satisfied solely in the period of **maximum expansion of the Roman empire**. Only after the conquest of the distant provinces of Asia and Africa was it possible for the people of the Latin world to discover the strange, exotic and terrifying aspect of wild beasts. The audience, intrigued by their ferocity,

dimensions and agility, grew more and more fascinated by this exciting form of entertainment, especially if the animals were confronted by courageous men.

The first games were held in circuses, where masses of spectators, crowded in bleachers, risked their lives because of the total lack of protection of any kind. The distance between the combat ground and the seats on the tiers also made it difficult to actually see anything. The **circus** was in fact designed for horse and chariot races and athletic contests, not for close range combat in circumscribed areas.

At the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, the growing passion for these shows stimulated Roman architects to conceive an innovative type of public building. It is worth noting that the one in Pompeii is the first permanent amphitheatre built in stone (80 BC). Considering that there were no means of transportation in the city, the central location of the Colosseum was extremely functional at the time, and was made possible by the disastrous fire of 64 AD, during the rule of **Nero**. The city had grown out of proportion in a disorderly manner; its aspect was primitive and buildings still mostly of wood.

The fire spread uncontrollably for more than seven days (July 18 -25) destroying most of the more ancient part. After the fire, large spaces became available right in the heart of Rome, allowing the town planners to finally redesign the city centre according to modern criteria.

Responsibility for the disastrous event was attributed to **Nero**, whose intention was, according to historians, to entirely rebuild the capital of his empire. It may well be, in fact, that the *"Domus Aurea"*, the incredible and grandiose imperial residence that occupied the whole area before

the Colosseum was built, was planned long before the fire. With Nero's death (68 AD) and the rise of Vespasian to the impe-

rial throne a year later, the great reconstruction that transformed Rome into the *"Caput Mundi"*, the extraordinary capital of the ancient world, finally began.

Nero's barely completed *"Domus Aurea"* on the slopes of the Oppian Hill was destroyed with the intention of erasing every trace of its creator.

Intensive building of new brick housing began, more durable and hygienic than preceding types, while the audacious project for the construction of the world's largest amphitheatre started to take shape. The ideal site was the centrally located bed of the great artificial lake of the *"Domus Aurea"* (*stagnum neronis*), which facilitated excavation for the foundation.

Building began in 72 AD, according to the plan of an ingenious unknown architect, whose project corresponded perfectly to the function of the structure. Some scholars maintain that the Colosseum held up to 60.000 people who could enter and leave easily and have an equally good view from all sections of seats, including the highest tiers. Facilities and refreshments were also necessary, considering that in warm weather the games went on for entire days at a time. Like every amphitheatre, the Colosseum was equipped with a *"Velarium"*, an awning that shaded the spectators from the heat of the sun. Proof of its existence is provided by numerous literary sources and inscriptions on the walls of Pompeii, as well as a famous fresco representing the amphitheatre in Pompeii, in which the awning is clearly emphasized.

With the rise of Christianity and the progressive decline of the Roman Empire, activity in the amphitheatre diminished and in the Middle Ages, the glorious monument found itself at the centre of a depopulated city in ruins. From that time, it became the object of constant, extensive plunder at the hands of the barbarian invaders and of the Romans themselves.

Following the disastrous earthquake of 1349, a large portion of the walls and of the supporting arches of the exterior collapsed; the blocks of travertine that formed the building frame were removed in large quantities and utilized to reconstruct the buildings that had been destroyed.

The Colosseum was completely abandoned, then gradually transformed into a fortress and eventually used as an almost inexhaustible quarry of building materials.

Its state of extreme decay led Pope Sixtus V to consider total demolition, but in the end he fortunately preferred to include it in the pilgrim route of the Basilicas.

Systematic sacking ended only in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Pope Benedict XIV (1740-1758) dedicated the Flavian Amphitheatre to the Passion of Christ and erected the cross that rises in the central section, to the side of the arena.

Despite all these tragic events, what remains of this Roman architectural marvel allows us to understand the spirit of the famous prophecy spoken by the Venerable Bede, who lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, *"Quamdiu stabit Colyseus, stabit et Roma; quando cadet Colyseus, cadet et Roma; quando cadet Roma, cadet et mundus"*, that is, "As long as the Colosseum stands, so will Rome; when Rome falls, so will the world".

## THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME COLOSSEUM

It is impossible to determine the exact origin of the term *"Colosseum"* and the precise moment when it took the place of the ancient name *"Flavian Amphitheatre"*. The first documents in our possession referring to the monument in both ways or simply by its magniloquent

nickname, date back to the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Beside the Venerable Bede's prophecy, other writings of the time attest the use

of the term, possibly by then already in common use. But how did it originate? Scholars base their theories on the etymology of *"colossus"* or of the Greek *"xolossòs"*, a likely reference to the colossal size of the building or to the proximity of a **gigantic statue** (about 50 metres tall) of Nero that survived the destruction of the *"Domus Aurea"* and was transformed into the Sun god before its final destruction during the invasions.

## THE STRUCTURE

The only architectural model from the past that Roman engineers could use as reference was the **Greek theatre**, in which the verticalization of the structure, necessary to group the largest possible number of people near the stage, was obtained by exploiting the natural slope of the hill it was built against. The constant evolution of building techniques (arches and vaults) and of technology, favoured by revolutionary practical construction materials (bricks), offered the builders immense possibilities and led them to conceive an absolutely ingenious new vertically developed structure. They connected the supporting sections of two theatres along the stage side (the origin of the term *"amphitheatron"*) and created a freestanding building that met the practical necessity of grouping a large audience around an arena of limited proportions.

The number of amphitheatres of various dimensions erected throughout the provinces of the Empire is remarkable, and proves how widespread and popular these spectacles became, especially from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD.

The **plan of the Colosseum** is a slightly elongated oval; the ratio between the short and long axis is 1.22, normally used by Roman architects.

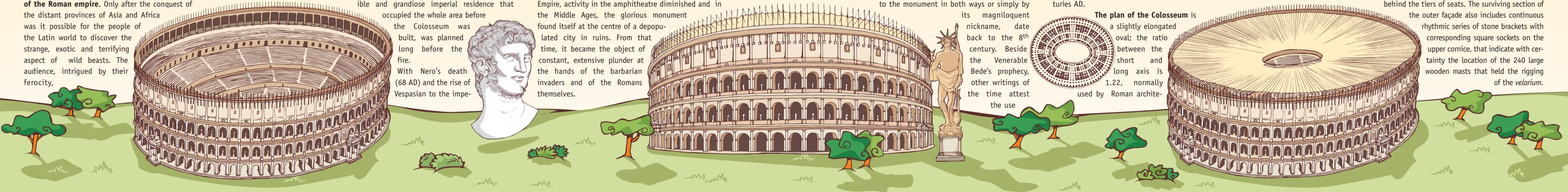
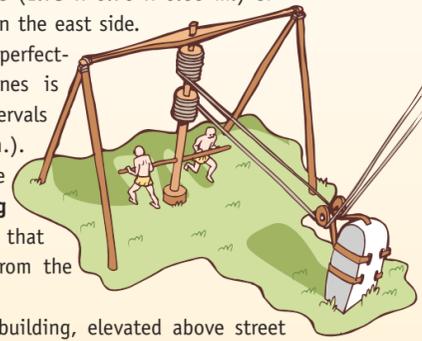
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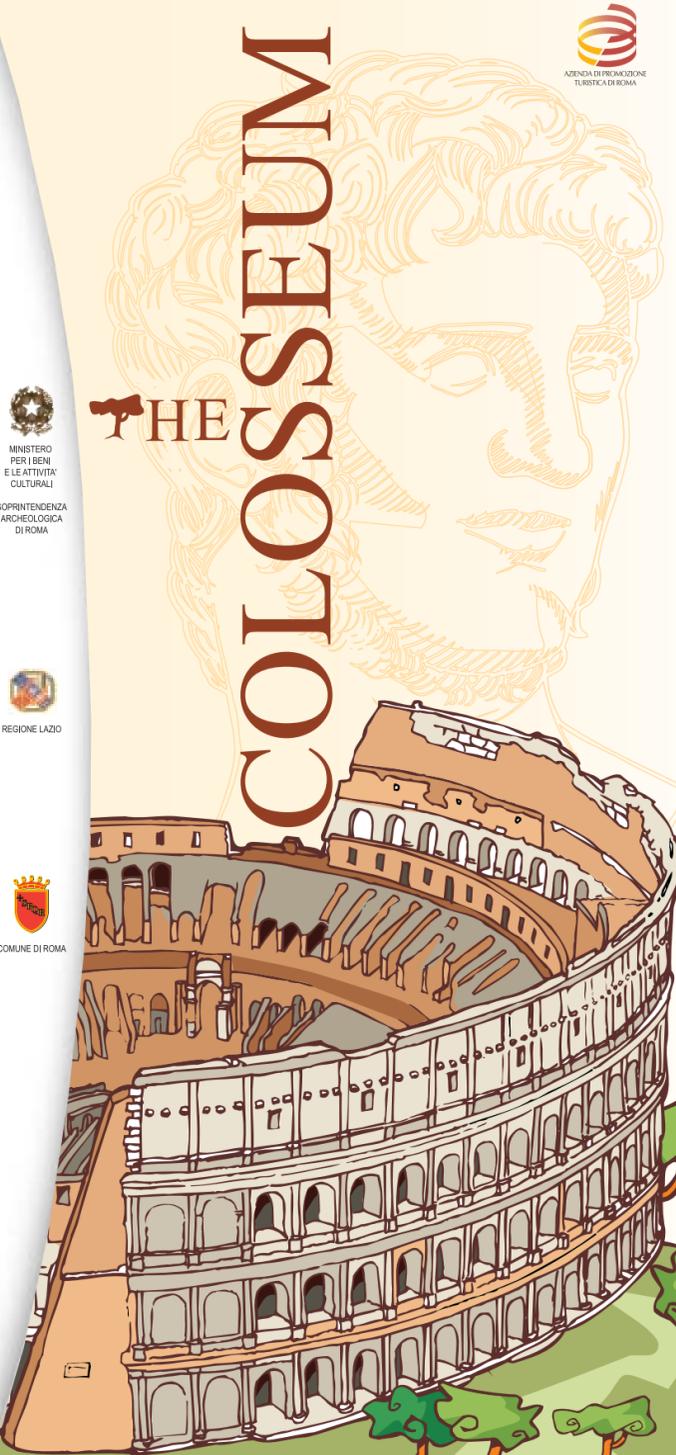
cts to provide amphitheatres spectators with the best visibility. The exterior is 190.25 metres long and 157.50 wide; the height at street level measures 50 metres.

An area paved in travertine 17.60 metres wide surrounds the Colosseum. Its outer perimeter is marked by 160 cippi, carved out of single blocks of travertine (1.75 x 0.76 x 0.60 m.) of which only 5 still stand on the east side.

The total number of these perfectly aligned boundary stones is based on the identical intervals between them (3.40 m.). They may have been the **anchors for the rigging apparatus of the awning** that protected the audience from the sun.

The outer façade of the building, elevated above street level by three steps, consists of four harmonious superimposed arcades, one above the other. The pilasters of the first three rows of archways are decorated with semi-columns in progressive architectural orders, **Doric, Ionic, Corinthian**, and create a wonderful sense of lightness, because empty space prevails over full space. The entrance numbers are carved at the top of each archway at street level and reveal the existence of *"tesserae"* (tickets) for the different sectors of the seating so that spectators could reach their designated seats. The fourth storey, the *"attic"*, is filled in and framed by two cornices and lightened by a series of Corinthian flat pilasters alternating with large bronze medallions, all stolen in the Middle Ages, and windows that brought light to the inner passageways located behind the tiers of seats. The surviving section of the outer façade also includes continuous rhythmic series of stone brackets with corresponding square sockets on the upper cornice, that indicate with certainty the location of the 240 large wooden masts that held the rigging of the *velarium*.





MINISTERO  
PER I BENI  
E LE ATTIVITÀ  
CULTURALI  
SOPRINTENDENZA  
ARCHEOLOGICA  
DI ROMA

REGIONE LAZIO

COMUNE DI ROMA

### THE GLADIATORS

Named after **gladius**, the short sword they used in combat. The barracks they lived in were called "*Ludus gladiatorius*".

The gladiators were grouped in schools known as "*Familiae*", where they became skilled in the various combat techniques and trained under the guidance of expert instructors, the "*lanistae*", veterans who had survived a hundred battles.

Most of the combatants were slaves or criminals condemned for common offenses, but free men also chose this risky profession in the hopes of winning fame and success. The popularity of these champions was indeed enormous: the audience followed them with the same passion reserved to sports stars today.

Mosaics from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD represent gladiators with the names their fans gave them that stressed their character, physical appearance or combat style (*licensiosus*, *callimorius*, *cupido*, *baccibus*, etc.)

The gladiators trained in the use of various weapons that involved different assault and defense techniques. They were grouped and named according to their weapons: *Cetervari*, *Secutores*, *Reziari*, *Mirmillones*, *Traces*.

There were four schools in Rome: *Ludus Matutinus*, *Ludus Gallicus*, *Ludus Dacicus* and *Ludus Magnus*. Archaeological remains of the latter have been uncovered in the area north of the Colosseum.

The first recorded gladiatorial show dates back to 264 BC. In 327 AD, the Emperor Constantine, having converted to Christianity, prohibited them. From that time they survived more or less secretly until the rule of Theodoric, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.



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Apart from specific winter days, the busiest periods were in spring, summer (with the exception of August that was reserved for holidays) and autumn.

The games with wild animals were very cruel and considered exciting because they involved animals of different species that were agitated and frightened by the commotion of the crowd, and thus attacked ferociously, making dreadful sounds.

These spectacles obviously demanded an enormous organizational effort and were extremely expensive. Imagine how difficult it must have been to capture the wild animals in Africa and Asia, transport them to their final destination and distribute them in the numerous "*vivaria*" all over the Empire that were equipped to receive and maintain hundreds of elephants, Indian tigers, rhinoceros, hippopotamus, lions, panthers, giraffes, leopards, buffaloes, bears, crocodiles, deer and ostriches, etc.

**VISITING THE COLOSSEUM**  
Opening times: 9am – 1hour before sunset  
Admittance: € 8,00  
(the ticket is also valid for the Palatine)  
Guided tours for individuals and groups (reservation required)  
Information and reservations: tel. 0639967700  
Audio-guides available  
From Termini Train Station: Metro line B – Colosseo or Bus 75

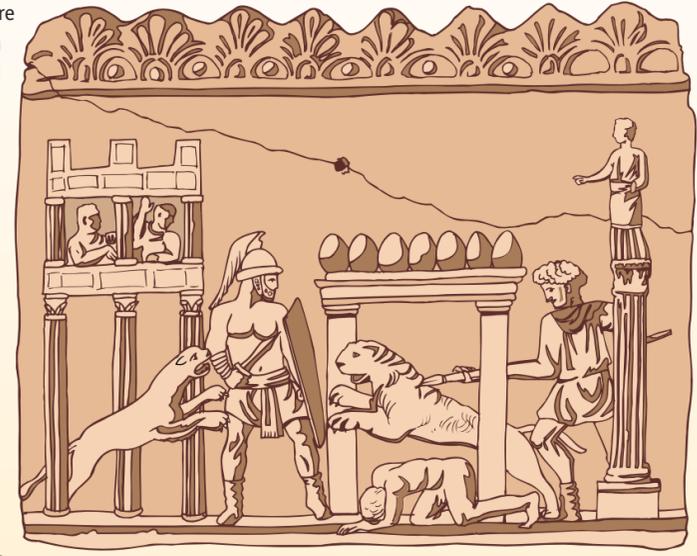
periods in which the authors lived; thus the discrepancies are actually due to the evolution of the games in time.

The origin of the games or celebrations was generally religious, propitiatory or commemorative, so that eventually their meaning and performance also underwent fundamental variations.

The "*Ludi*" were divided into four types; "theatre", "circus", "athletics" and "hunts". The latter were staged in amphitheatres and included gladiatorial shows, known as "*munera*", and wild animal hunts, the "*venationes*". They were the most requested and appreciated by the Romans after the chariot and horse races at the circus. The

passion for gladiatorial combat has very ancient origins, which some scholars trace back to the funerary ritual of sacrificing slaves or prisoners of war on the tombs of the illustrious deceased. This custom is confirmed by the description of similar ceremonies in the Homeric epic, as well as by Greek and Etruscan earthenware. Over the centuries this practice, among the cruelest in antiquity, was gradually transformed into a spectacular athletic contest, and gave rise to the interest and enthusiasm of citizens of every class and cultural level.

The "*Ludi*" could be public, decreed by the State authorities to celebrate special events, or organized by a private citizen authorized by the Senate.



order to diminish the pressure on the outer perimeter wall. The square holes for the supporting beams can still be seen in the better preserved section.

The arena, 79 metres long and 46 metres wide, was surrounded by a sheltered passageway 2.50 metres wide, marked by a series of vertical poles that sustained a metal net; the grooves for the poles are still visible on the level below the arena. This area was almost certainly used by attendants to protect themselves during combat. All the walls in the centre supported the solid floor of wooden planking that could be easily opened to air out the area below. During the performances, the men assigned to manoeuvre the winches and pulleys of the elevators and ramps in the basement, were enabled to bring up material for the scenery and wild animals for the fights up to the arena level.

### THE LUDI

The enormous interest of the Roman world for the "*Ludi*" (games), naturally led ancient Latin authors to devote much space to them in their literary works, allowing us to understand the origin and evolution of these spectacles in the course of the centuries. At times the recorded information may seem contradictory, but we must consider the different

The interior of the Colosseum consists of six concentric and tiered walls that rise on a concrete oval surrounding the area of the arena. This framework of the entire structure can be compared to the reinforced concrete skeleton of modern buildings. It consists of arched walls made of blocks of travertine placed one above the other without mortar.

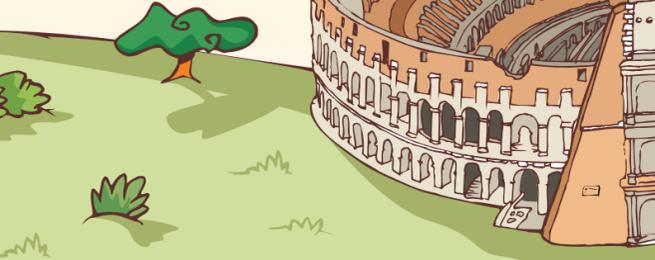
Continuous series of arches that form the concentric walls in an ovoid shape, balance and unload the enormous structural weight of the entire amphitheatre onto the large quadrangular travertine pilasters. The marble pilasters and travertine arches have rather noticeable irregular holes situated at the junction between the blocks. They were made in the Middle Ages to extract the bronze clamps that were fixed vertically to the blocks beneath them with massive amounts of lead, poured into cups carved in the stone.

The technique of inserting these square bronze clamps between the blocks, was the most advanced earthquake-proof system developed by the Romans, since the lead served to absorb tremors.

The rest of the building consists of a series of arches, tiered vaults and intermediate walls in brickwork or blocks of tufa and concrete, according to technical requirements, connected with support structures. The purpose of all of this was to create the slopes on which to build marble tiers, reserved areas, passageways and access staircases and to clearly divide the four sections of seating, the last of them, entirely wood, at the top in

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