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ROMAN ARCHITECTURE FROM AUGUSTUS TO HADRIAN

THE COLOSSEUM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE
INHERENT POLITICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL
SIGNIFICANCE.

*“But now
They’ve pulled in their horns,
There’s only two things that concern them:
Bread and the games “*

(Juvenal. *Satire* 10.71 – 10.81)

THE LATTER YEARS OF THE SEVENTH DECADE were to be some of the most turbulent in the history of Rome. The dangerous situation in Judea committed much of her army to foreign postings, whilst the city had been ravaged by plague and fire, exacerbated, if we are to believe later propaganda, by a despotic ruler intent on misappropriating his subjects’ land for his own private use. The disaster of Vesuvius, had placed further strain on the Roman state whilst with the death of Nero and the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, the city found itself plunged into civil war at the end of which finally emerged an emperor capable of leading the Empire. Vespasian’s position, however, needed consolidating – now that the ‘hereditary’ monarchy had come to an end, he needed to establish his own hold on power despite the ever-present faction calling for the restitution of the Republic. Given the untimely fate of his immediate predecessors, Vespasian’s position on reaching Rome in AD70 must have appeared parlous for the Empire was close to ruin, and it can be no coincidence that the following decade witnessed an unparalleled programme of sustained building activity demonstrating both his munificence and strengthening his grip on power. It is in this context that we view the building of the flavian amphitheatre.

In examining the political motivation for the creation of such public buildings, we must first comprehend the significance of building work as a means of bolstering political status. Augustus, for example, had instigated large building programmes in response to the years of war and in this respect Vespasian, as founder of a new dynasty can be seen as comparable – “new dynasties need such psychological proof of power” (Thornton and Thornton 1989, 3). The end of the Julio-Claudian line had created a power vacuum into which Galba, Otho and Vitellius had been sucked, and so on Vespasian’s accession it was uncertain just what kind of an emperor he would be and how much of the power of previous emperors he would assume. In particular there was uncertainty as to whether the new emperor would inherit chief responsibility for major building projects solely by right of his office. A situation demonstrated most graphically by Helvidius Priscus’ challenge over who should take the lead role in rebuilding the Capitol – a grand demonstration of the end of the war.



Figure 1: B. Bellotto (1720-1780) *Caprice with the Colosseum*. Parma, Galleria Nazionale.

The lack of a direct link to the Julio-Claudians was a weakness which had prompted Vespasian’s immediate predecessors to ally themselves with Nero’s memory, arguably a factor in their downfall. Vespasian, however, chose not to look back to the supposedly villainous Nero, but to Claudius whom he considered a ‘good’ emperor. The obliteration of the memory of Nero and the rehabilitation of Claudius (whose fortunes had suffered something of a decline in the years following his death), forms the primary theme of most modern

interpretations of the significance of Vespasian's building programmes, especially in the conversion of the Valley of the Golden House into that of the Colosseum – a process which took just over ten years.

Whether Nero was as universally despised as later emperors would have us believe is doubtful, Tacitus for example records that many people in Rome still hankered after him.¹ The picture of Nero misappropriating public lands is therefore possibly overdrawn, there was for example a public market close to the Domus Aurea which he could easily have moved had he so wished, and the house itself was frequently thrown open to the public. Perhaps, however, the debate is irrelevant, for it is a common ploy amongst politicians to blame the prior administration for all society's ills, and one which is all too readily accepted by the people. It is this policy of *damnatio memoriae* which is writ large in the Colosseum and indeed all the buildings of what was once the Valley of the Golden House.

As well as looking to Claudius, under whom so much of his military career had taken place, Vespasian also looked to Augustus for inspiration and justification, most notably in his claim that Augustus had himself planned to build a permanent amphitheatre. However, unlike so much of Augustus's construction, there is less self-glorification in Vespasian's work, particularly in the *Templum Pacis*, but also evident in the reduced orders of the Colosseum, though following on from so profligate a ruler, this juxtaposition can be seen as another demonstration of Vespasian's political manipulation of public imagery.

The return of the lands of the golden house to the public domain was of major significance to the people of Rome – “the Colosseum and all the buildings around it are there for the people to enjoy, no longer just its ruler”² – a theme which was continued in the re-display of Nero's private art collection in the *Templum Pacis* (and perhaps also in the arches of the Colosseum, as depicted on a sestertius of AD80 (BMC 190)). Such actions gave a much needed morale boost to the people of Rome and would have improved Vespasian's public image, but what was really important to the Roman plebs was *panem et circenses*.³ The appetite for public entertainment was enormous and gave the imperial house an opportunity to display its munificence – the importance of the Colosseum in this respect cannot be over-emphasised, such that Titus's opening spectacle easily surpassed anything Nero achieved.

Of further significance, however, is the importance of the building trade within Rome. As Thornton has pointed out (Thornton and Thornton 1989) from the time of Augustus (with the exception of the reign of Tiberius) construction had been one of the most important industries in the city. Any emperor who could not find work for this large body of men created a significant man management problem; Vespasian's awareness of this is demonstrated by his refusal to use certain labour-saving devices commenting “you must let me feed my poor commons”.⁴ We should therefore also see the Colosseum in terms of the diversion of labour which was required to build it.

¹ Tacitus. *Annals*, I, 7;

² Martial. *Spectaculae*, 2;

³ Juvenal. *Satire*, 10.71 – 10.81;

⁴ Suetonius. *Divus Vespasianus*, 18;

The political significance of the structure is not however confined to the motives of those building it. The purposes served by the amphitheatre present us with some of the most interesting facets of study. The dichotomy between the unification of society and the segregation of society present us with two contrasting themes. As a place of public entertainment the Colosseum was open freely to all members of Roman society and the glorification of the city by this is reflected when Martial writes of the amphitheatre as “a place for all the peoples of the world to unite.”⁵ However underlying this, the rigid segregation which the design imposes reinforces the hierarchical nature of Roman life. Although entrance to the games was free, admission was by means of a ticket stamped with the number of one of 76 public entrances, beyond each of which was a complex of passageways and staircases which delivered the spectator to a sector of the arena reserved exclusively for people of his status. No other Roman building of this period so effectively incorporates the functional demands of a segregated society into its fabric.

We have already seen how the siting of the Colosseum on Nero’s lake provides a determined demonstration of the handing back to public use of the land, but the location itself is significant in other ways. The sheer bulk of the design would dominate its surroundings no matter where it were placed, but here with only the semi-abandoned Temple of Claudius and the Colossus of Nero / Helios, the structure would be far more visible. The location also has a direct relationship with the *Via Triumphalis* and the point where four or five of the Augustan regions of Rome converged, later to be marked by *Meta Sudens*.

Having outlined the very significant political and sociological importance of the Flavian amphitheatre, I will now turn to the architectural significance of the structure. However, in this respect the Flavian amphitheatre is not a particularly revolutionary building (Darwall-Smith 1996, 80), with the exception of the sheer scale of the monument, precedent can be found for most aspects of its architecture. The following discussion will attempt to contextualise these features with respect to the generally accepted precedents and also, perhaps ambitiously, to push precedents back further than we might expect.

With any attempt to analyse such a well-known structure, probably the most difficult aspect is deciding what to leave out, which material is irrelevant. To this end, I plan to pay scant attention to the mechanics of the amphitheatre’s day-to-day operation – the sub-arena structures, the velarium and other such mechanisms – on the grounds that whilst these do have an impact on the architecture, it is not sufficient to demand significant changes to the design. Instead I plan to concentrate on three aspects of the building’s architecture:

- the structural form;
- the materials, technology and history of construction;
- the architectural vocabulary.

The earliest permanent amphitheatre would appear to be that built c.80 BC by Marcus Porcius at Pompeii, which in plan differs very little from that of the Flavian amphitheatre. Here the design takes advantage of the topography in such a way that the arena is below ground level whilst the *cavea* is supported by artificial earthworks which are held in place by an elliptical retaining wall. This wall in places merges with the city wall, perhaps suggesting a lack of confidence in the amphitheatre as a free-standing form. Access to the seating was primitive, relying on four triangular staircases to disgorge the spectators up-and-over the top of the auditorium.

⁵ Martial *op. cit.*

However, some basic radial passageways were constructed under the *cavea* to permit access to the front row of seats, in a similar, though much less complex, manner to that employed in the flavian amphitheatre. Here then, we see the amphitheatre in its basic form. Others were to be built which developed the theme, with greater complexity and decoration, but this would appear to be one of the earliest. In seeking to establish an earlier precedent for such structures we must examine two strands of evidence – the use of the forum for hosting *spectaculae* and the adoption and adaptation by Rome of the traditional Greek theatre.

The Roman gladiatorial contest had its roots in the Etruscan combats which were held to honour the dead, and as such were well established as a form of entertainment/religious observation long before the amphitheatre developed as a building type. For much of the Republic and into the early principate, particularly important combats took place in the forum (both in Rome and other cities), as well as other structures such as the *Saepta Julia* (e.g. the games to in memory of Agrippa in 7BC). Seating was arranged around the four sides of the usually oblong forum (Vitruvius⁶ states that Roman fora were oblong, whilst Greek agora were square) to allow spectators to view the action in the round, and it is this recto-elliptical form of seating which remained and largely determined the shape of the classical amphitheatre. From this developed wooden structures of a similarly temporary nature erected specifically for certain festivals. However the conservative element in the Senate opposed grandiose displays of luxuria as part of the overwhelming spread of Hellenic culture and the creation of permanent theatres and amphitheatres in Rome was curtailed. It was not until 58BC and the construction of the lavish and expensive Theatre of Scaurus by Sulla's stepson, followed by the Theatre of Pompey (Pompey was careful to assuage possible senatorial criticism by including a temple to Venus Victrix "under which we have built seats for viewing the shows".⁷ The design of this theatre is said to have been influenced by a visit to Mytilene in 63BC, but also bears remarkable similarities to the second century Samnite sanctuary at Pietrabbondante.) in 55BC that the construction of a permanent amphitheatre in Rome might have been possible.

The first semi-permanent amphitheatre in Rome would appear therefore to be Curio's somewhat unbelievable rotating double-theatre (50BC), whilst the first fully permanent amphitheatre in Rome was that of Statilius Taurus constructed in 30BC, but not rebuilt after the fire of AD64. Nevertheless, permanent amphitheatres were still the exception during the first half of the first century AD.

Running parallel with the slowly evolving amphitheatre was the Roman theatre, a building adapted from the Greek, but with important differences. Roman engineering developments such as the refinement of *opus caementicium*, allowed the theatre to be constructed as a free-standing building, rather than cut into a hillside. In addition, a tall *scaena frons* was usually erected running to the full height of the auditorium and uniting the theatre (Woodford 1982). These developments created a structure which could now truly be thought of as a building, rather than an adapted hillside, and the influence on amphitheatre design of theatres such as that of Marcellus is significant. Here, whilst taking advantage of a self-supporting *cavea*, the limited access passageways seen at Pompeii were greatly enlarged to provide a comprehensive entrance system, utilising an alternating annular and radial substructure vaulted in *opus caementicium*. It is this interplay between cut stone and *opus caementicium* as well as the use of the area under the *cavea* to manage access which were to recur as features in the flavian amphitheatre.

⁶ Vitruvius. *De Architectura*, 5.1.1;

⁷ Tertullian. *De Spectaculis*, 10.5;

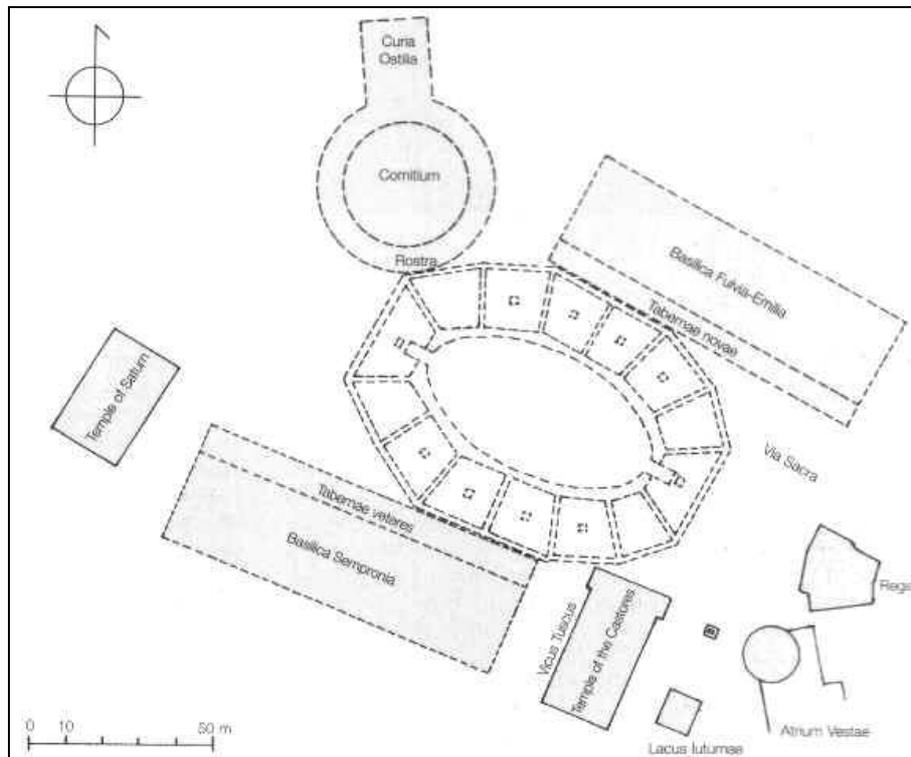


Figure 2: Reconstructed plan of the temporary tribunes erected in the Roman Forum in the pre-Augustan period demonstrating a conjectured origin for the recto-elliptical form of the amphitheatre (Guidobaldi 1998).

Construction work on the Colosseum began with an enormous concrete foundation ring capped with travertine, upon which was built a skeleton of travertine concentric rings infilled with tufa blocks and roofed with opus caementicium. The use of a vaulted form of construction with stone voussoirs and concrete was not a particularly revolutionary building method, similar building styles can be seen at the Tabularium and the sanctuary at Praeneste. However this form of materials was not common in the city during the imperial period. The method of erecting the building with skeleton travertine walls points to a degree of ingenuity, and it is in the mixture of stone and opus caementicium on such a large degree that allows the Colosseum to solve the structural problems inherent in such a design. The use of Tufa is recommended by Vitruvius⁸ as being durable under cover, and was hence used as screen walling in the non load-bearing sections, whilst travertine, which is relatively easily quarried but hardens on exposure to air was used on the load-bearing piers (the Roman reliance on travertine for load-bearing is ably demonstrated at the Temple of Castor & Pollux). The conservative attitude towards concrete

⁸ Vitruvius. *De Architectura*, 2.7;

exhibited by Vitruvius is echoed at the Colosseum where it is used only for the vaults and foundations and nowhere as a major load-bearing part of the structure.

The exact date of the commencement of building work on the Colosseum is uncertain, but would appear to be sometime after AD71 – confusion also exists over which flavian emperor is responsible for which work. Whilst the start of construction evidently belongs to Vespasian, with Titus celebrating the opening in AD80, Domitian would also appear to have carried out some work at the top of the building – the markedly different styles of corinthian capital which now lie around the interior of the amphitheatre attest to the building’s evolving style over the three reigns, as does evidence such as the Haterii relief where the Colosseum is displayed without its storey of pilasters, perhaps indicating an intermediate stage in the design. The use of square windows interspersed with bronze clipea on the fourth storey may also recall the use of an alternate square and segmental design in the Domus Flavia. However, as Lancaster has been at pains to point out, the extensive reconstruction work enacted following the lightning strike in August, AD217 (as well as later work), masks much of the constructional history of the building. Despite this Cozzo has argued that at least the two lowest orders had been completed by the time of Vespasian’s death, though the interior is likely to have remained a skeleton. This has, however, to be seen in the light of the surprisingly small amount of work which has been carried out to determine the true extent of the restorations; a considerable amount of work which was thought to be flavian belongs in fact to the third century.

The architectural vocabulary of the Colosseum is surprisingly restrained for a building whose construction spanned the reigns of so many flavian emperors. The use of an extensively arcuated form of decoration mimics the Theatre of Marcellus forming a neat termination to the radial passageways. The form chosen to articulate this arcuation – the *fornix* – was derived initially from its use at the Tabularium (c.78BC) and became a popular motif, being also used for example on the Sanctuary of Hercules at Tivoli (c.50BC). The Theatre of Marcellus, for example, uses the fornix with a canonically-correct expression of the orders; most of the decorative components are utilised in both doric and ionic levels, with a purer Greek form of doric appearing on the ground level than is usually the case in roman buildings (e.g. there are no column bases (Adam 1992, 74)). The Colosseum, however, exhibits dramatically reduced orders. The engaged columns are now provided with bases, whilst the shaft, bereft of entasis, leads to a simplified capital. Surmounting this a triple-fascia architrave on each level (regardless of order) sits under a plain frieze and relatively simple cornice. The only decoration to show here and not at the Theatre of Marcellus is a more pronounced archivolt, with a small degree of fluting.

However, one has to ask the question why adorn the building like this? The orders are not structural, and simply form a veneer superimposed on the arcades. The answer to this lies not in the building itself, but in our perception of it; if we were to consider the building without its façade of Greek orders, it would appear disconcertingly massive. Whilst allowing for a mechanism to articulate the entrances, the use of the *fornices* serves to scale down the building, making it more accessible. In this way when relating to the building, we look not at the whole mass, but at a single bay allowing the grandeur of the building to be appreciated without feeling alienated from it.

There is, however, no known precedent for the stacking of orders in this way. The Theatre of Marcellus, which would appear to be the major influence for the flavian amphitheatre, does show some similarities, but only the lower two storeys survive. The stacking of orders was not a new feature of architectural design, with early precedents such as the Stoa of Attalos (150BC) and even the Parthenon (438BC) being well known. However, these only stack two orders, usually a slender ionic or doric on top of the architrave of a lower storey of doric. Vitruvius was well-aware of such a practice as he recommends that the upper range of columns be three-quarters of the size of those below and whilst such a format works well when restricted to two orders, if extrapolated further it rapidly becomes extreme. His failure to comment on this suggests that the stacking of three orders was unknown to him and as such the Colosseum and perhaps the Theatre of Marcellus may be the first examples of such a practice.

In summary, the design of the Colosseum speaks to us on a number of fronts. The political significance of such a structure is immense, and clearly served to establish the flavians as the true inheritors of the Julio-

Claudian empire whilst destroying the memory of Nero and removing any trace of him from the map of Rome. As a functioning building it also breaks new ground in the management of spectators in a manner which is still used in today's stadiums. However, its building method was not particularly revolutionary and save for its scale and the use of the stacked orders as decoration, the Colosseum does not stand out as a tremendously innovative building. It is the political manipulation and the solution of the functional and structural problems which makes the Colosseum demand respect to this day.

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