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The Coliseum

The Coliseum, known as the Flavian Amphitheatre, commenced A.D. 72 by Vespasian, the first of the Flavian emperors, dedicated by Titus A.D. 80. The great structure rises in four stories, each story exhiting a different order of architecture; the first Doric, the second Ionic, the third Corinthian, the fourth composite. The material is the famous travertine. The site was originally a marshy hollow, bounded by the Caelian, the Oppian, the Velian and the Palatine Hills, which Nero had transformed into the fishpond of his Golden House.

Its form is that of an ellipse 790 feet in circumference, its length 620, its width 525, and its height 157 feet. The arena, in which took place the gladiatorial combats (*ludi gladiatori*) and with the wild beasts, for which the Coliseum was erected, was of wood, covered with sand. Surrounding the arena was a low wall, surmounted by a railing high enough to protect the audience from danger of invasion by the furious, non-human contestants. As an additional security against this peril, guards patrolled the passageway between this stall and the *podium*, or marble terrace, on which were the seats of the senators, the members of the sacred colleges, and other privileged spectators. From the southern side of the podium projected the *suggestum*, or imperial gallery, for the accommodation of the emperor and his attendants. Next to these sat the Vestals.

Back of the podium twenty tiers of seats were reserved for the three divisions of the equestrian order; the upper tiers of seats were occupied by the ordinary citizens. Last of all was a Corinthian colonnade in which the lower orders were accommodated with standing room only. The Coliseum, according to the "Chronographia" of 354, could contain 87,000 spectators. Professor Huelsen (quoted by Lanciani), however, has calculated that it will seat not more than 45,000 people. From the external cornice projected a circle of pine masts, from which awnings could readily be suspended over parts of the audience for the moment exposed to the sun's rays; the imperial gallery was covered with a special canopy. The arena was never shaded. Nothing is known of the architect of the Coliseum, although an inscription, afterwards shown to be a forgery, attributed its design to a Christian.

THE COLISEUM IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Although seriously damaged by two earthquakes in the fifth century, it is generally held that the Coliseum was practically intact in the eighth century when Bede wrote the well-known lines:

> Quandiu stabit coliseus, stabit et Roma;
> Quando cadit coliseus, cadet et Roma
> Quando cadet Roma, cadet et mundus.
>
> (While stands the Coliseum, Rome shall stand; when falls the Coliseum, Rome shall fall; when Rome falls the world shall fall.)

Lanciani attributes the collapse of the western portion of the shell to the earthquake of September, 1349, mentioned by Petrarch. Towards the end of the eleventh century it came into the hands of the Frangipani family, with whose palace it was connected by a series of constructions. During the temporary eclipse of the nobility in the fourteenth century, while the popes resided in Avignon, it became the property of the municipality of Rome (1312). The last shows seen in the Coliseum were given in the early part of the sixth century, one by Eutaricus Cilia, son-in-law of Theodoric, in 519, and a second in 523 by Anicius Maximus. The story of a bullfight in 1332, in which eighteen youths of the Roman nobility are said to have lost their lives, is apocryphal (Delehaye, L'Amphithéâtre Flavien, 5). In 1386 the municipality presented a third of the Coliseum to the "Compagnia del Salvatore ad sancta sanctorum" to be used as a hospital, which transaction is commemorated by a marble bas-relief bust of Our Saviour, between two candles, and the arms of the municipality, above the sixty-third and sixty-fifth arches. During the next four centuries the enormous mass of stone which had formed the western part of the structure served as a quarry for the Romans. Besides other buildings, four churches were erected in the vicinity from this material. One document attests that a single contractor in nine months of the year 1452 carried off 2522 cartloads of travertine from the Coliseum. This contractor was not the first, however, to utilize the great monument of ancient Rome as a quarry; a Brief of Eugenius IV (1431-47), cited by Lanciani, threatens dire penalties against those who would dare remove from the Coliseum even the smallest stone (*vel minimum dicti colisei lapidem*). The story of Cardinal Farnese who obtained permission from his uncle, Paul III (1534-49), to take from the Coliseum as much stone as he could remove in twelve hours is well known; his eminence had 4000 men ready to take advantage of the privilege on the day appointed. But a new tradition, which gradually took hold of the public mind during the seventeenth century, put an end to this vandalism, and effectually aided in preserving the most important existing monument of imperial Rome.

THE COLISEUM AND THE MARTYRS

Pope St. Pius (1566-72) is said to have recommended persons desirous of obtaining relics to procure some sand from the arena of the Coliseum, which, the pope declared, was impregnated with the blood of martyrs. The opinion of the saintly pontiff, however, does not seem to have been shared by his contemporaries. The practical Sixtus V (1585-90) was only prevented by death from converting the Coliseum into a manufactory of woollen goods. In 1671 Cardinal Altieri regarded so little the Coliseum as a place consecrated by the blood of Christian martyrs that he authorized its use for bullfights. Nevertheless from the middle of the seventeenth century the conviction attributed to St. Pius V gradually came to be shared by the Romans. A writer named Martinelli, in a work published in 1653, put the Coliseum at the head of a places sacred to the martyrs. Cardinal Carpegna (d. 1679) was accustomed to stop his carriage when passing by the Coliseum and make a commemoration of the martyrs. But it was the act of Cardinal Altieri, referred to above, which indirectly effected a general change of public opinion in this regard. A pious personage, Carlo Tomassi by name, aroused by what he regarded as desecration, published a pamphlet calling attention to the sanctity of the Coliseum and protesting against the intented profanation authorized by Altieri. The pamphlet was so completely successful that four years later, the jubilee year of 1675, the exterior arcades were closed by order of Clement X; from this time the Coliseum became a sanctuary. At the instance of St. Leonard of Port Maurice, Benedict XIV (1740-58) erected Stations of the Cross in the Coliseum, which remained until February, 1874, when they were removed by order of Commendatore Rosa. St. Benedict Joseph Labre (d. 1783) passed a life of austere devotion, living on alms, within the walls of the Coliseum. "Pius VII in 1805, Leo XII in 1825, Gregory XVI in 1845, and Pius IX in 1852, contributed liberally to save the amphitheatre from further degradation, by supporting the fallen portions with great buttresses" (Lanciani). Thus at a moment when the Coliseum stood in grave danger of demolition it was saved by the pious belief which placed it in the category of monuments dearest to Christians, the monuments of the early martyrs. Yet, after an exhaustive examination of the documents in the case, the learned Bollandist, Father Delehave, S.J., arrives at the conclusion that there are no historical grounds for so regarding it (op. cit.). In the Middle Ages, for example, when the sanctuaries of the martyrs were looked upon with so great veneration, the Coliseum was completely neglected; its name never occurs in the itineraries, or guide-books, compiler for the use of pilgrims to the Eternal City. The "Mirabilia Romae", the first manuscripts of which date from the twelfth century, cites among the places mentioned in the "Passions" of the martyrs the *Circus Flaminius ad pontem Judaeorum*, but in this sense makes no allusion to the Coliseum. We have seen how for more than a century it served as a stronghold of the Frangipani family; such a desecration would have been impossible had it been popularly regarded as a shrine consecrated by the blood, not merely of innumerable martyrs, but even of one hero of the Faith. The intervention of Eugenius IV was based altogether on patriotism; as an Italian the pope could not look on passively while a great memorial of Rome's past was being destroyed. "Nam demoliri urbis monumenta nihil aliud est quam ipsius urbis et totius orbis excellentiam diminuere."

Thus in the Middle Ages no tradition existed in Rome which associated the martyrs in any way with the Coliseum; it was only in the seventeenth century and in the manner indicated, that it came to he regarded with veneration as a scene of early Christian heroism. Indeed, little attention was paid by the Christians of the first age to the actual place of a martyr's sufferings; the sand stained with his blood was, when possible gathered up and treasured as a precious relic, but that was all. The devotion of the Christian body centred wholly around the place where the martyr was interred. Father Delehaye calls attention to the fact that although we know from trust-worthy historical sources of the execution of Christians in the garden of Nero, yet popular tradition preserved no recollection of all event so memorable (op. cit., 37). The Acts of Roman Martyrs, it is true, contain indications as to the places where various martyrs suffered: *in amphitheatro, in Tellure*, etc. But these Acts are often merely pious legends of the fifth, sixth, and following centuries built up by unknown writers on a feast reliable historical facts. The decree formerly attributed to Pope Gelasius (492-96) bears witness to the slight consideration in which this class of literature was held in the Roman Church; to read it in the churches was forbidden, and it was attributed to unknown writers, wholly unqualified for their self-imposed task (secundum antiquam consuetudinem, leguntur, quia et eorum qui conscripsere nomina penitus ignorantur, et ab infidelibus et idiotis superflua aut minus apta quam rei ordo fuerit esse putantur.--Thiel. Epist. Rom. Pont., I, 458). The evidence, therefore, which we possess in the Roman Acts in favour of certain martyrs suffering in the Coliseum is, for these reasons among others, regarded by Father Delehaye as inconclusive. He does not deny that there may have been martyrs who suffered in the Coliseum, but we know nothing on the subject one way or the other. (Je ne veux pas nier qu'il y ait eu des martyrs de l'amphithéâtre Flavien; mais nous ne savons pas non plus s'il y en a eu, et en tout cas leurs noms nous sont inconnus.--Op. cit., 37.) It is, of course, probable enough that some of the Christians condemned *ad bestias* suffered in the Coliseum, but there is just as rnuch reason to suppose that they met their death in one of the other places dedicated to the cruel amusements of imperial Rome; for instance, in the Circus Flaminius, the Gaianum, the Circus of Hadrian, the *Amphitheatrum Castrense*, and the Stadium of Domitian. Even as regards St. Ignatius of Antioch, the evidence that he was martyred in the Coliseum is far from decisive, the terms employed by St. John Chrysostom and Evagrius in reference to this matter convey no precise meaning (Delehaye, op. cit. 43). The same is true of the term used by Theodoret in reference to the death of St.

Telemachus, who sacrificed his life to put an end to the bloody spectacles which, as late as the early fifth century, took place in Rome. There is no reason to doubt the fact of the heroic death of St. Telemachus, but there is, on the other hand, no clear proof that its scene was the Coliseum. Theodoret, the only writer who records the incident, says that it happened *eis to stadio* (in the stadium), a different place from the Coliseum.

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Transcribed by Joseph P. Thomas