

# Amphitheatrum Flavium

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**AMPHITHEATRUM FLAVIUM:**\* ordinarily known as the Colosseum, built by Vespasian, in the depression between the Velia, the Esquiline and the Caelian, a site previously occupied by the stagnum of Nero's domus Aurea ([Suet. Vesp. 9](#); Mart. de spect. 2.5; Aur. Vict. Caes. 9.7). Vespasian carried the structure to the top of the second arcade of the outer wall and of the maenianum secundum of the cavea (see below), and dedicated it before his death in 79 A.D. (Chronogr. a. 354, p146). Titus added the third and fourth stories (*ib.*), and celebrated the dedication of the enlarged building in 80 with magnificent games that lasted one hundred days (Suet. Titus 7; Cass. Dio lxvi.25; Hieron a. Abr. 2095; [Eutrop. vii.21](#); Cohen, Tit.399, 400). Domitian is said to have completed the building ad clipea (Chron. *ib.*) which probably refers to the bronze shields that were placed directly beneath the uppermost cornice (cf. Cohen, Tit. 399) and to additions on the inside (HJ 282).

There are indications of changes or additions by Nerva and Trajan (CIL vi.32254-5; for the inscription of the former see Spinazzola, Anfiteatro Flavio (Naples, 1907) 27 sqq.), and it was restored by Antoninus Pius ([Hist. Aug. Pius 8](#)). In 217 it was struck by lightning ([Cass. Dio lxxviii.25](#)), and so seriously damaged that no more gladiatorial combats could be held in the building until 222-223, when the repairs begun by Elagabalus ([Hist. Aug. Elagab. 17](#)) were at least partially completed by Alexander Severus (Hist. Aug. Alex. Sev. 24; Cohen, Alex. Sev. 468, 469), although they seem to have continued into the reign of Gordianus III ([Hist. Aug. Max. et Balb. i.4](#); Cohen, Gord. III. 165, 166 =Gnecchi, Med. iii.104, 5, 6). In 250 the building was presumably restored by Decius, after a fire caused by another stroke of lightning (Hieron. a. Abr. 2268). It was injured by the earthquake of 442 (Paul. Diac. hist. Rom. xiii.16; BC 1917, 13-17), and restorations by different officials are recorded in the years immediately succeeding (CIL 32086-32089), and again in 470 (CIL vi.32091-2, 32188-9). Some of the inscriptions set up on the former occasion in honour of Theodosius II and Valentinian III were cut on marble blocks which had originally served as seats. Repairs were made after another earthquake by the prefect Basilius, who was probably consul in 508 ([CIL vi.32094](#)), and finally by Eutharich, the son-in-law of Theodoric, in preparation for the last recorded venationes, which took place in 523 (Cassiod. Var. v.42). The last gladiatorial combats occurred in 404 (Theodoret v.26).

The Colosseum was injured by an earthquake in the pontificate of Leo IV (in 847). In the eleventh and twelfth centuries houses and isolated 'cryptae' within the Colosseum are frequently mentioned in documents of the archives of S. Maria Nova, as though it were already in ruins (Arch. Soc. Rom. St. Patr. xxiii. (1900) 204, 216; xxv. (1902) 195; xxvi. (1903) 38, 41, 57, 79). Gradual destruction continued until the eighteenth century, while the work of restoration has gone on intermittently since the beginning of the nineteenth

(De Angelis, Relazione 8-15). The north side of the outer wall is standing, comprising the arches numbered XXIII to LIV, with that part of the building which is between it and the inner wall supporting the colonnade, and practically the whole skeleton of the structure between this inner wall and the arena — that is, the encircling and radiating walls on which the cavea with its marble seats rested. The marble seats and lining of the cavea, together with everything in the nature of decoration, have disappeared.

The amphitheatre (Ill. 3) is elliptical in form. Its main axis, running north-west - south-east, is 188 metres in length, and its minor axis 156. The exterior is constructed of large blocks of travertine — a fact that contributed greatly to the astonishment of Constantius ([Amm. Marcell. xvi.10.14](#)); and in the interior Vespasian erected a skeleton of travertine blocks where the greatest pressure had to be resisted, which was not carried higher than the second story (Ill. 4). The remainder of the inner walls are of blocks of peperino and of concrete, with and without brick facing, the former being used where there was more pressure. Some tufa and sperone is also employed in the lower part of the inner walls. The outer wall, or façade, is 48.50 metres high, and stands upon a stylobate, which is raised two steps above a pavement of travertine. This pavement is 17.50 metres wide, and extended around the whole building. Its outer edge is marked by a row of stone cippi — [five of which on the east side are in situ](#) (BC 1895, 117-119; NS 1895, 101, 227) — with holes cut on the inner side to hold the ends of barriers connecting these posts with the wall of the building. The outer wall itself is divided into four stories, of which the lower three consist of rows of open arcades, a style of architecture borrowed from the theatre of Marcellus. The arches of the lower arcade are 7.05 metres high and 4.20 wide; the pillars between them are 2.40 metres wide and 2.70 deep. In front of these pillars are engaged columns of the Doric order, which support an entablature 2.35 metres high, but without the distinguishing characteristics of this order. There were eighty arches in the lower arcade, of which the four at the ends of the two axes formed the main entrances to the amphitheatre, and were unnumbered. The remaining seventy-six were numbered (CIL vi.1796f = 32263), the numbers being cut on the façade just beneath the architrave. Above the entablature is an attic of the same height, with projections above the columns, which serve as pedestals for the engaged columns of the second arcade. This arcade has the same dimensions as the lowest, except that the arches are only 6.45 metres high. The half-columns are of the Ionic order, and in turn support an entablature 2.10 metres in height, but not in perfect Ionic style. Above this is a second attic, 1.95 metres high, on which the columns of the third arcade rest. The last is of the Corinthian order, and its arches are 6.40 metres high. Above this is a third entablature and attic. In each of the second and third arcades was a statue.

The attic above the third arcade is 2.10 metres high, and is pierced by small rectangular windows over every second arch. On it rests the upper division of the wall, which is solid and adorned with flat Corinthian pilasters in place of the half-columns of the lower arcades, but shows numerous traces of rude reconstruction in the third century (Lanciani, *Destruction of Ancient Rome*, figs. 9, 10). Above the pilasters is an entablature, and between every second pair of pilasters is a window cut through the wall (see below, [p9](#)). Above these openings is a row of consoles — three between each pair of pilasters. In these consoles are sockets for the masts which projected upward through corresponding holes in the cornice and supported the awnings (velaria) that protected the cavea ([Hist. Aug. Comm. 15](#); cf. Mau, *Pompeii*, 223, Fig.111).

Within this outer wall, at a distance of 5.80 metres, is a second wall with corresponding arches; and 4.50 metres inside of this a third which divides the building into two main sections. On the lower floor, between these three walls, are two lofty arched corridors or ambulatories, encircling the entire building; on the second floor, two corridors like those

below, except that the inner one is divided into two, an upper and a lower; and on the third floor two more. In the inner corridor on the second floor, and in both on the third, are flights of steps very ingeniously arranged, which lead to the topmost story, and afford access to the upper part of the second tier of seats. Within the innermost of the three walls just mentioned are other walls parallel to it, and radiating walls, struck from certain points within the oval and perpendicular to its circumference. These radiating walls correspond in number to the piers of the lower arcade, and are divided into three parts, so as to leave room for two more corridors round the building. This system of radiating walls supported the sloping floor (cavea) on which the rows of marble seats (gradus) were placed. Underneath, in corridors and arches, are other flights of steps which lead to all parts of the cavea, through openings called vomitoria. They are arranged in fours.

The arena itself is elliptical, the major axis being 86 metres long and the minor 54. All round the arena was a fence, built to protect the spectators from the attacks of the wild beasts, and behind it a narrow passage paved with marble. Above this passage was the podium, a platform raised about 4 metres above the arena, on which were placed the marble chairs of the most distinguished spectators. These chairs seem to have been assigned to corporations and officials, not to individuals as such, until the time of Constantine, when they began to be assigned to families and rarely to individuals. This continued until the fifth century, when possession by individuals became more common. The names of these various owners were cut in the pavement of the podium, on the seats themselves, and above the cornice, and many of these inscriptions have been preserved (CIL vi. 32099-32248; BC 1880, 211-282). When a seat passed from one owner to another, the old name was erased and a new one substituted. The front of the podium was protected by a bronze balustrade.

From the podium the cavea sloped upward as far as the innermost of the three walls described above. It was divided into sections (maeniana) by curved passages and low walls (praeciniones, baltei); the lower section (maenianum primum) contained about twenty rows of seats (gradus) and the upper section (maenianum secundum), further subdivided into maenianum superius and inferius, about sixteen. These maeniana were also divided into cunei, or wedge-shaped sections, by the steps and aisles from the vomitoria. The gradus were covered with marble, and when assigned to particular corporations the name was cut on the stone. Eleven such inscriptions have been found (CIL vi.32098 *a-i, l, m*), and indicated that space was assigned by measure and not according to the number of persons (cf. the assignment to the Fratres Arvales, CIL vi.2059 = 32363). Each individual seat could, however, be exactly designated by its gradus, cuneus, and number, as was done elsewhere.

Behind the maenianum secundum the wall rose to a height of 5 metres above the cavea, and was pierced with doors and windows communicating with the corridor behind. On this wall was a Corinthian colonnade, which together with the outer wall, supported a flat roof. The columns were of cipollino and granite, dating from the Flavian period. Behind them, protected by the roof, was the maenianum summum in ligneis, which contained wooden seats for women. These seats were approached from above by a vaulted corridor, lighted by windows between the pilasters (p8) as has been supposed by Hülsen (Mitt. 1897, 334, 335). On the roof was standing room for the pullati, or poorest classes of the population. The modern terrace is lower than this roof was, and about at the level of the floor of the corridor behind the wooden seats. Of the four principal entrances, those at the north and south ends of the minor axis were for the imperial family, and the arches here were wider and more highly ornamented than the rest. For the stucco decoration see LR 381; Weege ap. Hoffman (Vatik. Palast.) col.145; Egger, Cod. Escorial 43, pp115-116; Heemskerck,

ii.58; WS 1902, 437-440; id. Festschrift für Bormann (xxiv.2.205); Rev. Arch. 1917, 2.228; Mem. Am. Acad. iv.41-43 Cf. also Md. Ned. Hist. Inst. 1927, 84-88; Heemskerck ii.47<sup>v</sup>). The entrance on the north seems to have been connected with the Esquiline by a porticus. A wide passage led directly from this entrance to the imperial box (pulvinar, cf. [Suet. Nero 12](#)) on the podium. A corresponding box on the opposite side of the podium was probably reserved for the [Praefectus urbi](#). The entrances at the ends of the major axis led directly into the arena.

The floor of the arena, which must have been of wood, rested on lofty substructures, consisting of walls, some of which follow the curve of the building, while others are parallel to the major axis. They stand on a brick pavement and are from 5.50 to 6.08 metres high. These substructures are entered by subterranean passages, on the lines of the major and minor axes. Another such passage, resembling a cryptoporticus, starts from a raised substructure, projecting a little beyond the line of the podium, not far to the east of the state entrance on the south side, and leads to the buildings of Claudius on the Caelian, and is usually ascribed to Commodus. The lower masts of the velaria are generally supposed to have been secured to the projecting corbels between the dens, round the outer edge of the arena. In the substructures are traces of dens for wild beasts, elevators, and mechanical appliances of various sorts, and provision was made for the drainage of the water which flows so abundantly into this hollow and which was carried off in a sewer connecting with that running under the via S. Gregorio (Narducci, *Fognatura della Città di Roma* 65-70 and pl. 14; see Ill. 5). The masonry of the substructures dates from the first century to the end of the fifth.

The statement in the Regionary Catalogue ([Reg. III](#)), that the amphitheatre had 87,000 loca, cannot refer to persons but to pedes, and even so, it is probably incorrect, for the total seating capacity cannot have exceeded forty-five thousand (BC 1894, 312-324), with standing room on the roof for about five thousand more.

Nine published fragments of the Marble Plan (FUR 55, 69, 113 *a-g*) represent parts of the amphitheatre, and there are a few others of little importance and uncertain position (HJ 294-296).

For the history of the Colosseum, see Babucke, *Geschichte des Kolosseums*, Königsberg, 1899; Marangoni, *Delle memorie sagre e profane dell' Anfiteatro Flavio*, Rome, 1746; F. Gori, *Le memorie storiche, i giuochi e gli scavi dell' Anfiteatro Flavio*, Rome, 1874; v. Reumont, *Geschichte der Stadt Rom*, pass.; Gregorovius, *Geschichte der Stadt Rom*, pass.; Cerasoli, *Nuovi Documenti sulle vicende del Colosseo dal Secolo XIII al XVIII*, BC 1902, 300-315; Lanciani, BC 1917, 13-17; DAP ser. ii. vol. xv.368; Colagrossi, *Anfiteatro Flavio*, Rome, 1913; Leclercq in Cabrol, *Dict.* i.1614-1682.

For brief history, plates and description, see *Beschreibung der Stadt Rom* iii. I. 319-336; Canina, *Edifici di Roma Antica* iv.164-177; Reber, *Die Ruinen Roms* 407-421; Taylor and Cressy, *Architectural Antiquities of Rome*, London 1874, 114-129; Dreger, *Das flavische Amphitheater in seiner ersten Gestalt*, *Allgemeine Bauzeitung*, 1896, 40-60; F. Guadet, *Étude sur la construction et la disposition du Colossée*, 1878; Petersen, *vom alten Rom*<sup>2</sup> 1900, 60 ff.; Durm, 668-689; RE vi.2516-2525 (Gall); HJ 282-298. Cf. Mem. L. 5.xvii.519, 520; ASA 92-96.

For restorations, see Knapp in *Beschreibung der Stadt Rom*, *Bilderheft* 2 (the better); Uggeri in *Giornate pittoriche degli Edifici di Roma* xxiii. 1816; Durm, *loc. cit.* fig.475; Mitt.

1897, 334; D'Espouy, Monuments ii.111-119; Fragments, ii.92-94; Cozzo in Architettura ed Arti Decorative, ii. (1922-3) 273-291; Rivoira, RA 114-119; Lugli, ZA 119-128.

For the inscriptions found in the Colosseum, see CIL vi.32085-32263; BC 1880, 211-282, pls. xxi-xxiii. The sylloge of inscriptions alluded to in CIL as in course of preparation by Spinazzola has not yet appeared.

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## **The Authors' Notes:**

### **ordinarily known as the Colosseum:**

For the name see COLOSSUS NERONIS: it was not transferred to the amphitheatre until after 1000 A.D. (HCh 265, 380, 394, 426; HFP 52; BC 1926, 53-64).<sup>▣</sup>

### **third and fourth stories:**

The word used is 'gradus', which applies to the interior; Vespasian may, Hülsen thinks, have completed a great part of the Corinthian order of the exterior.

### **Vespasian, Titus, Domitian:**

Leopold (Med. Nederl. Hist. Inst. Rome. iv. (1924) 39-76) thinks that Vespasian's work extended as far as the top of the Corinthian arcade. Von Gerkan carried the same idea further, adding a number of observations in detail (See Mitt. 1925, 11-50). But the relief of the Haterii, in which the arch of Titus is shown ([see p45 n2](#)), cannot possibly be used as evidence for the condition of the amphitheatre at the end of the reign of Vespasian. as Hülsen has pointed out, Titus came to the throne in June, 79, while the inscription of the Arvales as to the distribution of seats belongs to June or July, 80; and it is quite enough to credit him with the completion of the third and fourth stories on already established lines, without supposing that he also made fundamental alterations in what Vespasian had already built.

**The Colosseum was injured by an earthquake in the pontificate of Leo IV:** For this earthquake see infra, [553](#) (cf. 64, 75, 235, 521).

### **barriers connecting these posts with the wall of the building:**

It seems more likely that the barrier was concentric: for there are no corresponding arrangements on the piers of the building itself to hold the other ends of the beams. These would have been supported by iron rings fixed in the holes in the cippi (Mitt. 1925, 12-13).

**between every second pair of pilasters is a window:**

Cf. Mitt. 1897, 334; 1925, 30-33. In the remaining spaces between the pilasters the clipea were fixed (Colagrossi, Anfiteatro Flavio, 45-47: 257-264).

**From the podium:** It should be added that the wall with niches is on the *outer* side of the vaulted passage which supported the podium.

**curved passages:** The passage between the first and second sections, which is now so conspicuous, was originally roofed over and the tiers of seats continued above it (cf. Text fig.1, and see Mitt. 1925, 13, fig.1).

**The columns were of cipollino and granite:**

This, given the late reconstruction of the outer wall, does not necessarily apply to the colonnade in its final form.

**On the roof was standing room:**

According to the restorations of Taylor and Cresy (Text fig.1) and of Canina, which are adopted by Von Gerkan (Mitt. 1925, 18), there was a covered portico at the top, the roof of which reached to the summit of the outer wall. Durm's objections to Hüsen's restoration (Text fig. 2) (669 sqq) — that the spectators on the roof would have been exposed to the weather and unable to see — are thus both met.

**the floor of the arena:**

For a photograph of the remains of this floor see LR 384.

**usually ascribed to Commodus:**

Lugli assigns it to Domitian (Mem. Am. Acad. cit.).

## **Thayer's Notes:**

**the numbers being cut on the façade just beneath the architrave:** There are quite a few other inscriptions, carvings and frescoes in the Colosseum not mentioned by Platner. Keep your eyes open!

**Lanciani, Destruction of Ancient Rome:** This is a work I hope to put online on this site in the near future. In the meanwhile, a paragraph giving the names of the churches that took root inside the Coliseum, and a very brief comment about them, can be found in another work of Lanciani's, [here](#).



**The name Colosseum not transferred to the amphitheatre until after 1000:**

Although the general idea is accurate — the name does not seem to date back to the earliest times — this specific statement is not true. The Venerable Bede (who died in A.D. 735) first mentions the monument in what may be a colorful paraphrase of a speech in Tertullian, ad Scapulam (in fragments of Bede collected by du Cange, *Glossarium Mediae et Infimae Latinitatis*, vol.ii p407, Basel edition): "Quandiu stabit Colyseus — stabit et Roma; quando cadet Colyseus — cadet et Roma; quando cadet Roma — cadet et mundus." ("As long as the Colyseus shall stand, Rome too shall stand; when the Colyseus falls, Rome too shall fall; when Rome falls, the world shall fall as well.") Gibbon on the other hand, pointing out that there is no record of Bede's ever having left England, believes that he may in fact be quoting a saying already common in his time among pilgrims to Rome. ☐(Some of you may have thought this English saying was Byron's. You're in good company: it's not a recent error. See this amusing photograph of the [flyleaf of a guidebook](#): the early 20c owner writes out Byron's version of it, and signs it for him, too...)

