

Roman Spectacle



Learning Outcomes

- 2.1. Identify key architectural elements of the Colosseum and the Circus Maximus
- 2.2. Examine the audience experience in the Colosseum and the Circus Maximus considering the environment, the seating arrangements and the types of entertainment they provided
- 2.3. Explore who was responsible for the funding and building of these structures, the organisation of the events within them, and their motivation for doing so
- 2.4. Appreciate the significance of different types of written sources in exploring the Colosseum, the Circus Maximus and Roman spectacle
- 2.5. Compare the role and the significance of spectacle in Roman society with the role and significance of tragedy in Athenian society and with modern forms of entertainment.

Introduction

Now that no one buys our votes, the public has long since cast off its cares. The people that once bestowed commands, consulships, legions and all else, now meddles no more and longs eagerly for just two things – bread and games.

Juvenal, *Satire 3*

The Roman world was very different from the Greek world in many ways. The Romans were more imperialistic than the Greeks – or at least, their empire lasted much longer and was much more successful. Rome conquered Italy, Libya (North Africa from Tunis to Morocco) and

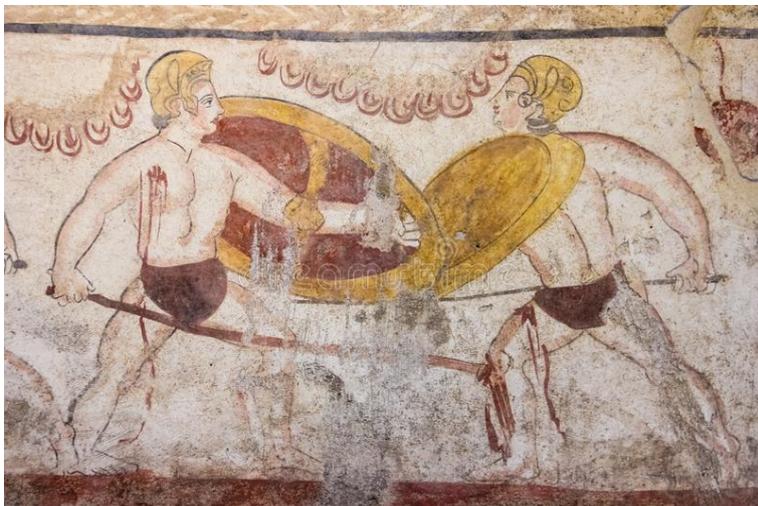
Egypt, Gaul (or France) and Spain (or Iberia), large parts of Germania (Germany, Switzerland, Austria), the Balkans, Britannia (England and Wales), Greece, Thrace and Dacia (Romania and Bulgaria), the Crimean coast (Ukraine and Russia), Asia Minor (Modern Turkey and Armenia), Syria, Palestine, and parts of Arabia.

They were long centuries of conquest, political turmoil, and the slaughtering and enslavement of millions that enabled this empire to exist. No Greek city or Hellenic Kingdom was ever quite so brutal.

And yet, even though the Romans conquered Greece, in many ways Greece conquered Rome. Greek culture infected Rome from very early in Rome's history. Greeks in Campania and Southern Italy gave Rome its alphabet, much of its architecture, many of their gods, and their politics. However, it was another Italian people who gave them their famous gladiatorial games. Though, what started as a funeral game, soon became something much more grandiose and bloodier in the hands of the Romans. It became essential to the Roman world and politics as can be seen from the above quote from the 2nd century A.D. poet, Juvenal. The 'bread and games' were the cornerstone of Roman imperial power and its influence on the Roman populous.

Task: Examine the relief sculpture on the first page. Describe in every detail what you see. Is there anything unique about the Gladiator's appearance?

Origins of Roman *munera*



Tomb frescoes from Campania showing combat

Evidence seems to suggest that gladiatorial games were introduced to the Romans in Campania, south central Italy, by the Lucanians. At least, the frescoes in Paestum depicting ritualised combat strongly suggest this connection. Further evidence is the fact that the first gladiator school – called a *ludi* – was set up in Campania. Livy also tells us that the games came from Campania, however, Nickolas of Damascus tells us that the

tradition came from the Etruscans (an earlier civilization that comes from Tuscany or north central Italy). The stronger argument is probably for the Lucanians because of the above frescoes– they spoke Oscan but probably were influenced heavily by Greek colonists.

The argument for Etruscan influence is supported by frescoes which depict Etruscans fighting wild animals and performing executions – sometimes by animals which was called *Phersu*.



Etruscan Phersu

Of course, it is not altogether unlikely that both cultures would have an influence on the Roman games. The Romans games had gladiators fight, executions performed (sometimes by wild animals – a favourite of the people), and specialised *Ventores* who would fight against wild animals.

What is clear however is that the earliest purpose for gladiatorial fights – or *munera* in the Latin – was to honour the dead at funerals. The primary idea being the reenactment of the great battles between heroes, such as Achilles and Hector at Troy (Book 16 of the *Iliad*).

According to Livy, in 264 B.C., several centuries after the founding of Rome, Decimus Junius Brutus Scaeva was the first Roman to host a gladiatorial *munus* (*munus* is the singular) at his father's funeral in the *Forum Boarum*. He had three pairs of gladiators fight. This is surprisingly late since we so closely associate gladiators with Rome and there is evidence that the chariot games had been held in Rome for many centuries before the first gladiator fights. However, it is clear that even though a later addition to Roman culture, the tradition took off. In 216 B.C. Lucius Marcus and Quintus Lepidus had 22 pairs of gladiators at their father's funeral; in 201 B.C. M. Valerius Laevinus had 25 pairs; in 183 B.C. 60 pairs fought over 3 days at the funeral of Publius Licinius – and so on. And yet, these games were always tied to the funeral; each time a family member died a *patrician* could use it as an excuse to host these widely popular games and gain some *fama* (fame) for himself and perhaps do better in the next elections. Most of these gladiators were of course slaves, prisoners of wars or criminals. It is no coincidence that this

Note: *Fama* is the Latin/Roman equivalent of *kleos*. Both Greeks and Romans considered reputation essential to a good life – the more renown and fame one had, the more honour and the more *virtus* (*virtus* essentially means manliness). *Patricians* were the noblemen of Rome, the 'descendants' of heroes, and thus the class most concerned with their *fama* as this would lead to more political positions, power, family honour, and wealth.

period saw Rome conquering all of Italy, North Africa, Iberia, Southern Gaul, and mainland Greece. Slaves were aplenty in Ancient Rome during this period and the Roman patrician had little problem with them fighting to the death. Although, it was probably only one in every three gladiatorial fights that would end with an execution – gladiators were expensive after all.

The first man to break the tradition of hosting *munera* at a particular person's funeral was unsurprisingly Julius Caesar, who in 65 B.C. decided to host *munera* for his father who had already been dead for twenty years. Caesar is said by Plutarch to have hosted 320 gladiatorial fights for the ceremony (despite massive debts) and in silver armour; Suetonius tells us that the senate passed an emergency bill limiting the number of gladiators a single person might own – fearing Caesar might use the 'extra' gladiators he had in Capua to stage a coup! Or perhaps mindful of the slave revolt led by the gladiator Spartacus in 73-71 B.C. However, this was a revolution for the *munera*, as now anyone could host games in somebodies honour whether or not they had recently died. The connection between *munera* and funeral was broken. This opened up the possibilities for future politicians and emperors to host games that would impress the public – gladiators were an expensive commodity; the more gladiators one was willing to sacrifice in the games, the more money one had to spare.

Gladiators



The *munera* developed a range of the different gladiator types. Ironically, even though the word gladiator comes from the latin for sword *gladius*, many fighters didn't use swords. One of the most famous and most popular types was the *retiarius* who would fight with a net (*rete*) and trident imitating a fisherman or perhaps Neptune. Other popular types are Murmillo and the Thrax who were often put against each other. The Murmillo was distinguished by its unusual helmet and fought with a sword; the Thraex meaning Thracian (coming from Bulgaria/Romania region) would fight with an unusual bent sword consistent

with the style of sword used in this region. So, in many ways the fighters represented the many various and foreign cultures conquered by Rome (there was even a *Hoplomachus* gladiator imitating the Greeks). This was a way to bring the far-stretched empire into Rome to entertain the populous – displaying the *fama* of the emperor or politician, and the greatness of Rome itself. The fighters were often dressed up in unusual armour, displaying unique designs that would distinguish them. They would also be given particular type; and the Romans had favourite types to play against each other.

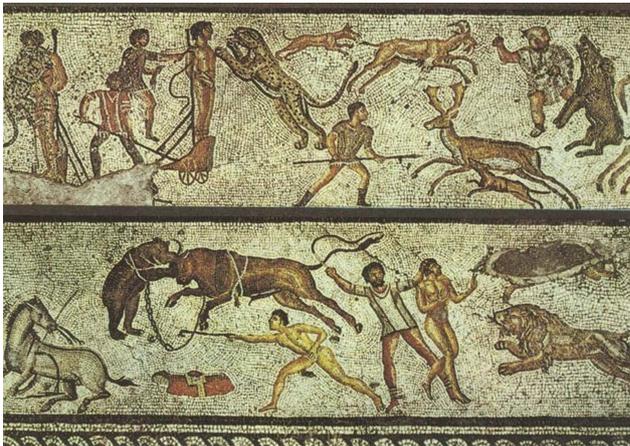
While the vast majority of gladiators were slaves, prisoners of war, or indeed criminals condemned to a career as a gladiator, there were free people who chose to be gladiators. This may seem strange as our impression is that gladiators were not long to live and were to live

a life of servitude. But the fact is that gladiators were kind of celebrities in the ancient world: they sponsored merchants, they were desired by women (matrons would pay high prices for a night with a gladiator; Juvenal's *Satire 3* tells a humorous tale of a woman lusting for a gladiator) and were given many benefits. Eventually, they could even retire after a long and successful career when presented with a wooden sword called a *rudis*. And they didn't die nearly as often as the movies show us. It was probably that one in three contests would end with a death – and this includes from injury. It was rare for a gladiator to be executed by their opponent. The extended thumb seen on film is also somewhat misleading. It was in fact a thumb down that indicated the crowd wanted them to live and a thumb up or towards the chest that indicated they wanted him to live – and this only happened when a gladiator was suspected of not fighting fairly. In fact, one thing absent from modern adaptations is the referee whose job it was to ensure that the fight was fairly fought. The reasons for this are clear: Gladiators were expensive to keep, and it made little sense to have them killed off all the time. Furthermore, the Romans while bloodthirsty, weren't fans of blood for blood's sake. In Suetonius' biography of emperor Gaius Caligula he describes a fight between five Retiarius:

Five Retiarii, in tunics, fighting in a company, yielded without a struggle to the same number of opponents; and being ordered to be slain, one of them taking up his lance again, killed all the conquerors. This he [Caligula] lamented in a proclamation as a most cruel butchery and cursed all those who had borne the sight of it.

Suetonius, Caligula 30

The implication of this is that there were rules to gladiatorial combat. You had to follow certain rules. In fact, in many ways the sport closer resembled fencing at times, perhaps blended with UFC, rather than mortal combat.



However, while the gladiatorial fights might be more tamed, there were still other horrific and bloody events tied to the games. The *bestiarii* were those thrown to wild animals to be slaughtered – usually the more exotic the animal the better. And the *venatores* or hunters were trained to slaughter these wild animals in turn. Up to 5,000 animals could die in a single day in the games. Romans weren't concerned with animal cruelty. There is

even some evidence of more *risqué* entertainment from Apuleius' *Golden Ass*. A poor woman is punished for murder and the main character a donkey (originally human but for a mistaken magic spell) is expected to have his way with her before she is killed.

Types of Gladiators

Murmillio



The Murmillio is perhaps one of the most well-known gladiators. A unique helmet called a *Cassis Crista*, a *Scutum* a large rectangular shield, a *gladius* or sword, a leather belt and a *manica* or scaled arm guard.

They were most often pitted against the Thraex or Hoplomachus who shared similar arms. However, Valerius Maximus and Quintilian say that they only fought Retiarius – which is appropriate as the Murmillio represents a sea-monster and the Retiarius a fisherman.

Retiarius

The Retiarius fought with a weighted net or *rete*, a trident or *fuscina* or *tridens*, a dagger or *pugio*, a *manica* and a shoulder guard or *galerus*.

The Retiarius was usually pitted against a heavily armed Secutor. The former lighter armed and quick, the latter heavily armed and protected but slower.

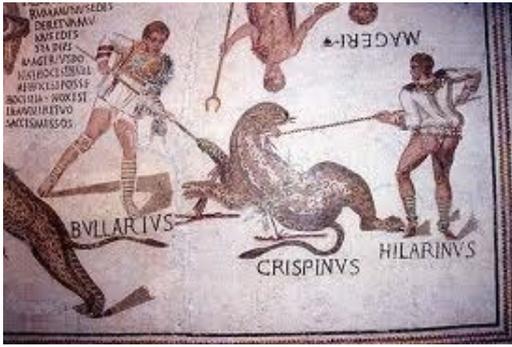


Thraex

The Thraex or Thracian was armed with a small rectangular or round shield called a *parmula* (60x65cm) and a short sword with a slight curve to the blade called a *sica*. This resembled the *falx* blade used by the Thracians and Dacians (Bulgaria/Romania) but was smaller. It could be used to attack an opponents unarmed back. They also wore greaves, a belt, and a helmet with a side plume, visor, and crest. They were usually pitted against the Murmillio.



Bestiarii or Venatores



These fighters were *not* gladiators but had a similar job in the arena. The Bestiarii were those who were condemned as prisoners; they would be set among the wild beasts to be slaughtered. The Venato on the other hand were volunteers who would enter the arena as part of the 'hunt' and fight the wild beasts.

Secutor

The Secutor means 'follower or chaser' and was very similarly armed to the Murmillo – protected by a *scutum* carrying a *gladius* or *pugio*. They were particularly trained to fight the Retarius. The major distinction was the unique helmet which had only two small eyeholes which prevented the Retarius' trident being pushed through. Like the Murmillo, this made the Secutor resemble a fish.



Samnite

The Samnites were an Italian people in central Italy who fought the Romans in the 4th century B.C. This conflict inspired the Campanians and the Romans to create a gladiator type that resembled these 'foreign' and unusual enemies in the arena. They were the earliest gladiator types in Rome. They would be armed with a *gladius*, *scutum*, greaves, and a plumed helmet.

Scissor

The Scissors were gladiators who fought with a very unusual weapon: a hardened steel tube that encased the arm and had a semi-circular blade coming from the end. They were also more heavily armed than the usual gladiator and had a similar helmet to the Secutor. Their name means 'cutter'. They would often be pitted against the Retarius.



Chariot Racing or *ludi circenses*



Circus Games Mosaic, Lyon, depicting chariots of red, blue, green, and white

Gladiatorial fights were just one of many games associated with the Roman spectacle. Perhaps the most popular game were the chariot races or *Equirria* and also the *ludi* (the former is the chariot racing in particular; the latter the games). It is said that the first king of Rome introduced chariot racing. Romulus founded Rome and killed his brother and supposedly invited many thugs and thieves from the neighbouring region to occupy his city. However, there was apparently a lack of women. So, the 'great' king decided the solution would be to host games to celebrate *Consualia* festival (Consus was a Roman deity of harvest). Romulus invited the local Latin people, predominantly the Sabines. He also encouraged them to bring their wives and daughters. All arrived to the *Campus Martius* (Or field of Mars) and gathered for the festivities and games. While the chariot racing was going on, Romulus gave the orders for his men to seize to daughters of the Sabines and bring them behind the city walls – making these unfortunates the wives of the Romans.

These are the mythical origins, and the *Equirria* would continue on the *Campus Martius*. However, chariot racing dates back much further than the founding of Rome. It was widely popular in the Greek world too – who hosted their races in a *Hippodrome* – and it is likely that it has origins with the Mycenaeans (lived in Greece from circa 2,000 B.C to 1,200 B.C.). The first literary account of chariot racing is from Homer, *Iliad* Book 23; these races are hosted as part of the funeral games of Patroclus – Achilles close friend.

Note: this myth is called *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. *Rapio* is literally the Latin 'to steal away' or 'to snatch'. It is a dismal story that does not show Roman society in a good light nor its legendary founder.



The Charioteer of Delphi

The Greeks continued this tradition of chariot racing at their Olympic games and other religious festivals. In fact, king Philip II of Macedon (father of Alexander the Great) apparently had a chariot win a round at the Olympic games the day of his famous son's birth (see Plutarch).

The Romans likely adopted their version of the *ludi circenses* (games) from the Etruscans, who in turn adopted them from the Greeks. But it is also likely that the Greeks were a direct influence on the Romans.

Like the Greek *harmatodromia* (chariot races), the Roman *circenses* were primarily connected with religious festivals: the games would begin with the *pompa circensis* featuring the charioteers, images of the gods, and dancers accompanied by music.

However, the religious aspects of the races were often overshadowed by the entertainment value and the political motivations of those who would patronise the games.

The chariots would be held behind spring loaded gates called *carceres*. When the chariots were ready to begin the race, the emperor or presiding politician (if not in Rome itself or pre-empire) would drop a cloth known as a *mappa* – a white napkin thrown into the arena. The *carceres* would spring open at the same time and allow the chariots to race out.

The racers would race around the *spina* – a long spine barrier that ran down the centre of the track. This *spina* would originally be a raised platform with small tables and supporting pillars and marble sculptures in the shape of eggs or dolphins. Later these would become more elaborate with obelisks and statues. The racers would come to the end of the *spina* and the turning point known as the *meta* – a large column. Chariots would try to pull in front of each other in order to crash their opponents into the *spina* and to get themselves ahead. Spectacular crashes were often called *naufragia* or 'shipwrecks'.

There were 7 laps (and later 5 laps) per race – shorter than the Greek twelve laps. This meant they could host 24 races a day over a 66 day period each year. The racers or *aurigae* would be professionals and would be awarded a laurel of victory and some money if victorious. It was also common for there to be a heavy amount of betting by the spectators. There were factions: Red, Blue, Green, and White – indicated by the colours of the racer's robes. There was even a fierce rivalry between the White and Red teams and supporters by 77 B.C. There was likely no official organisations for these teams until later. A driver could however amass a lot of money in their career: one such driver Scorpus (68-95 A.D.) won 2,000 races before

Note: Roman culture is in many a blend of other cultures. They were particularly influenced by the Greeks and the Etruscans – a people who lived in north central Italy, spoke a non-Indo-European language, and about whom we know little. Their tombs and frescoes remain to us, and we know that many things from their architecture to their gods and their traditions survive through the Romans.



dying in a crash against a *meta* at 27 years of age. The poet Martial refers to Scorpus twice in his *Epigrams* 10.50 and 10.53:

Let Victory in sadness break her Idumaeen palms; O Favour, strike your bare breast with unsparing hand. Let Honour change her garb for that of mourning; and make your crowned locks, O disconsolate Glory, an offering to the cruel flames. Oh! sad misfortune! that you, Scorpus, should be cut off in the flower of your youth, and be called so prematurely to harness the dusky steeds of Pluto. The chariot-race was always shortened by your rapid driving; but O why should your own race have been so speedily run?

O Rome, I am Scorpus, the glory of your noisy circus, the object of your applause, your short-lived favourite. The envious Lachesis, when she cut me off in my twenty-seventh year, accounted me, in judging by the number of my victories, to be an old man.

The Colosseum



As we saw, the *munera* were held for the most part in the Roman Forum – or one of the adjoining Forums. Originally, being tied to funerals, the patrons of the games would erect a temporary structure of wood for the duration of the games, called an amphitheatre. This got to the point that the more elaborate the games held the more elaborate the building would be. For example, Pliny the Elder tells us in his *Natural History* of an extraordinary and temporary building put in place by C. Scribonius Curio in 52 B.C. for the funeral games to honour his father:

'Curio... built close to each other two very large wooden theatres, each poised and balanced on a revolving pivot. During the forenoon, a performance of a play was given in both of them, and they faced in opposite directions so that the two should not drown out each other's words. Then, at a certain point the theatres were revolved (and it is

agreed that after the first few days this was done with some of the spectators actually remaining in their seats), their corners met, and this Curio provided an amphitheatre in which he produced fights between gladiators.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 36.116-120

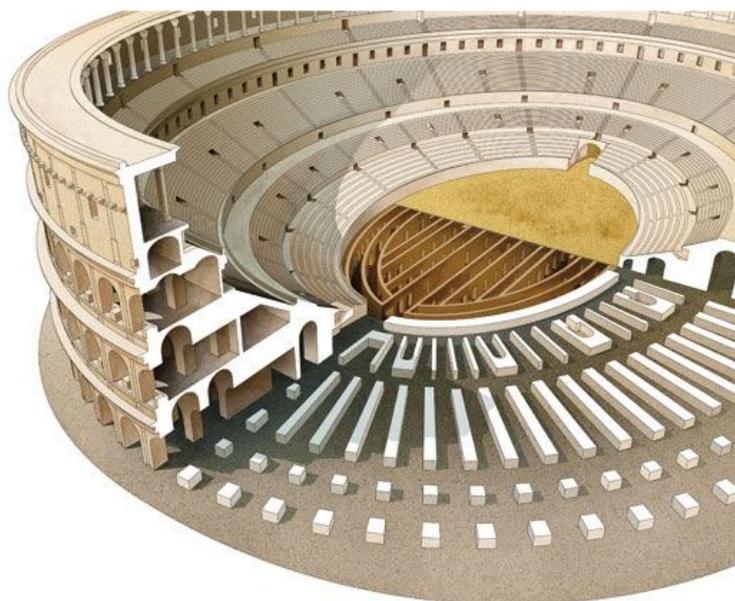
It is clear that not only were the games and their programmes important to the reputation and *fama* of the patron but also the elaborate design of the architecture of the *amphitheatre* (Greek for 'seeing place from all around').

However, the temporary wooden amphitheatres became impractical the more popular the games became – with Caesar's innovative approach to hosting games outside of a particular funerary event, the demand for more permanent structures increased.

The first stone amphitheatre constructed is the amphitheatre in Pompeii. Dated to 70/65 B.C. This was commissioned to keep happy the colonists of a military colony established in Pompeii by Sulla in 80 B.C. It is a relatively simple design and small; built on a hill and quite flat, it could sit approx. 20,000 spectators.



The most famous amphitheatre in Rome, was the Flavian amphitheatre, better known as the Colosseum. It was not referred to as the Colosseum until the 8th century but was known to the Romans as the Flavian Amphitheatre. It was commissioned in 75 A.D. by the emperor Vespasian, and opened 5 years later by his son Titus, but was probably not completed till the reign of Titus' brother Domitian.



The Flavians were the second dynasty of Roman emperors after the Julio-Claudians. Julio-Claudians being the line of emperors that descended from the first emperor Augustus (adopted son of Julius Caesar) and his wife's children (Livia, his wife, was previously married to a Tiberius *Claudius* Nero and had Tiberius and Drusus). These emperors included Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. Nero was the final of the Julio-Claudians and quite unpopular among the patrician class who declared him an enemy of the state in 68 A.D. – shortly after this he committed suicide. 68-69A.D. is known as *the year of the four emperors* as a succession of emperors vied for the vacant throne: Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and finally Vespasian (the eventually victor). Vespasian and his son Titus had been campaigning in the east against the Jews who had rebelled against Roman rule in 66 A.D. Titus would lead the campaign against the Jews after his father left to take power in Rome and in 71 A.D. he would sack the city and the temple of Jerusalem bringing back immense wealth as spoils of conquest. This wealth would be used to fund new building projects by Vespasian and his sons in Rome. It was often an important way of establishing the legitimacy of a new dynasty – particularly since many of the senators resented imperial rule and may have preferred a return to the Republican system or a different candidate. The building of the Colosseum was no doubt an attempt to curry the favour of the populous.

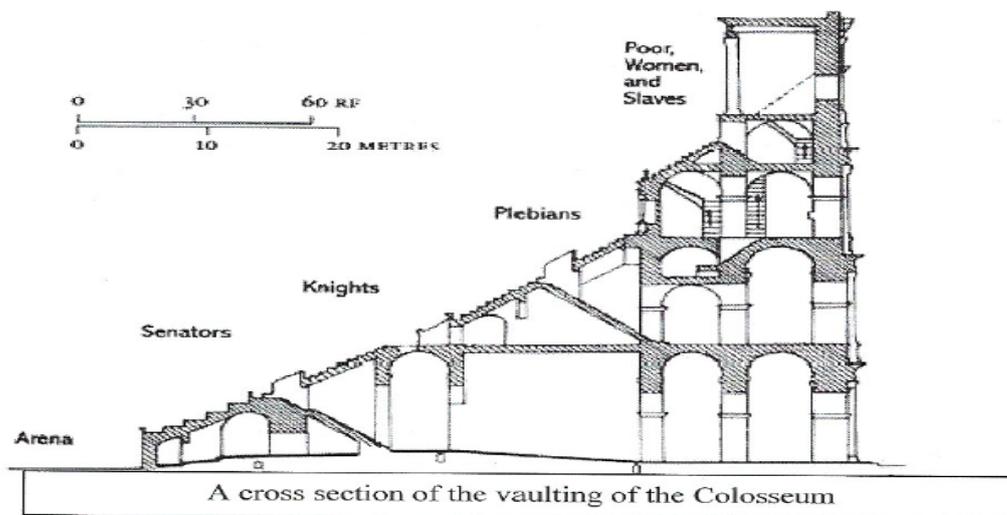
The Colosseum is quite a feat of architecture and engineering. The façade of the Colosseum was built of blocks of hard travertine stone quarried from nearby Tivoli. It was 4 storeys high and rose to a height of 48.5 metres. The foundations were of Roman concrete 12 metres deep. The building forms an oval or elliptical shape, 527 metres in circumference, with diameters of 188 metres and 156 metres respectively. The first three storeys are formed of three superimposed tiers of arcades originally ornamented with statues. The three storeys differ only in the style of column which framed the arcades: the first storey was **Doric** (or Tuscan), the second **Ionic**, the third **Corinthian**. The fourth storey is a plain wall pierced by windows and was originally decorated with shields of bronze. Above the windows on the fourth floor were the corbels which held in place the awnings. The seats began 4 metres above the arena; at the front was a terrace with the marble seats for senators. This improved sight lines and of course protected the spectators from the dangerous show. Above these were the tiers for the ordinary public, known as the **maeniana**. The **maeniana** were separated from each other by horizontal corridors which went all around the building, and the seating areas were divided by staircases. Estimates on capacity range from 45,000 to

Note: The Jewish Revolt or Jewish War would end in 73 A.D. with the siege of the final rebels on the fortress hill of Masada. The Jewish rebels, rather than surrender, would murder the women and children and commit mass suicide. Much of what we know about this comes to us by the Jewish writer, ex-rebel leader, and slave/friend of emperor Titus, Josephus. Further revolts in Hadrian's reign (117-138 A.D.) would see the Jews expelled from their homeland and prosecuted by the Romans.

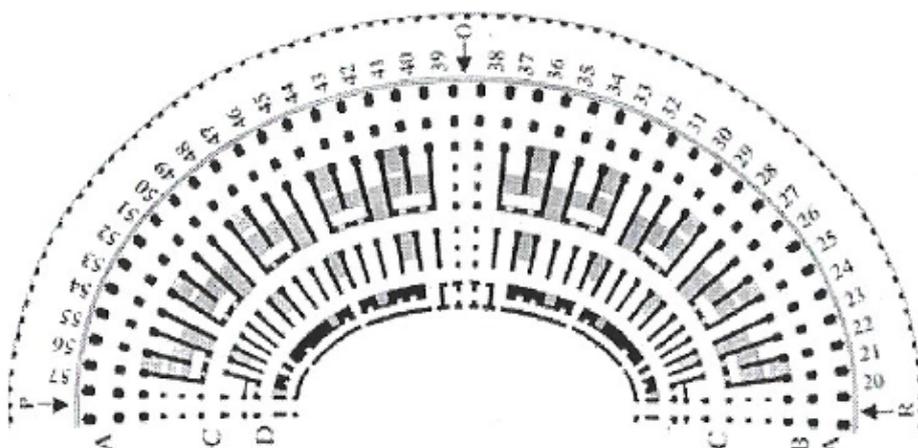


70-80,000. There were 76 numbered entrances on the ground floor. The ticket numbers corresponded to the gates and thus everybody could reach their place in an orderly fashion.

The arena itself was sand strewn and was 86m by 54m in diameter. Beneath the floor was a substantial substructure, which housed the wild animals and allowed the gladiators and wild animals to appear through trapdoors in the arena floor. According to Dio, the Colosseum arena was flooded during the inaugural games held by Titus in 80 A.D. in order to accommodate naval games. There is much debate about this. It was more often that emperors would use a nearby lake or create a lake from the Tiber to host these *naumachiae* (naval battles).



Notice the elaborate vaulting system designed to support the 4 tiers; and how each layer acts a buttress for each other



Numbered Entrances

The Circus Maximus



The Colosseum is the most famous Roman Amphitheatre; however, many Roman games were probably not held there – and for a very practical reason. The biggest arena was the Circus Maximus (literal meaning ‘the greatest Circus’). Built between the Palatine Hill on the north and the Aventine hill on the south, it was in the heart of Rome.

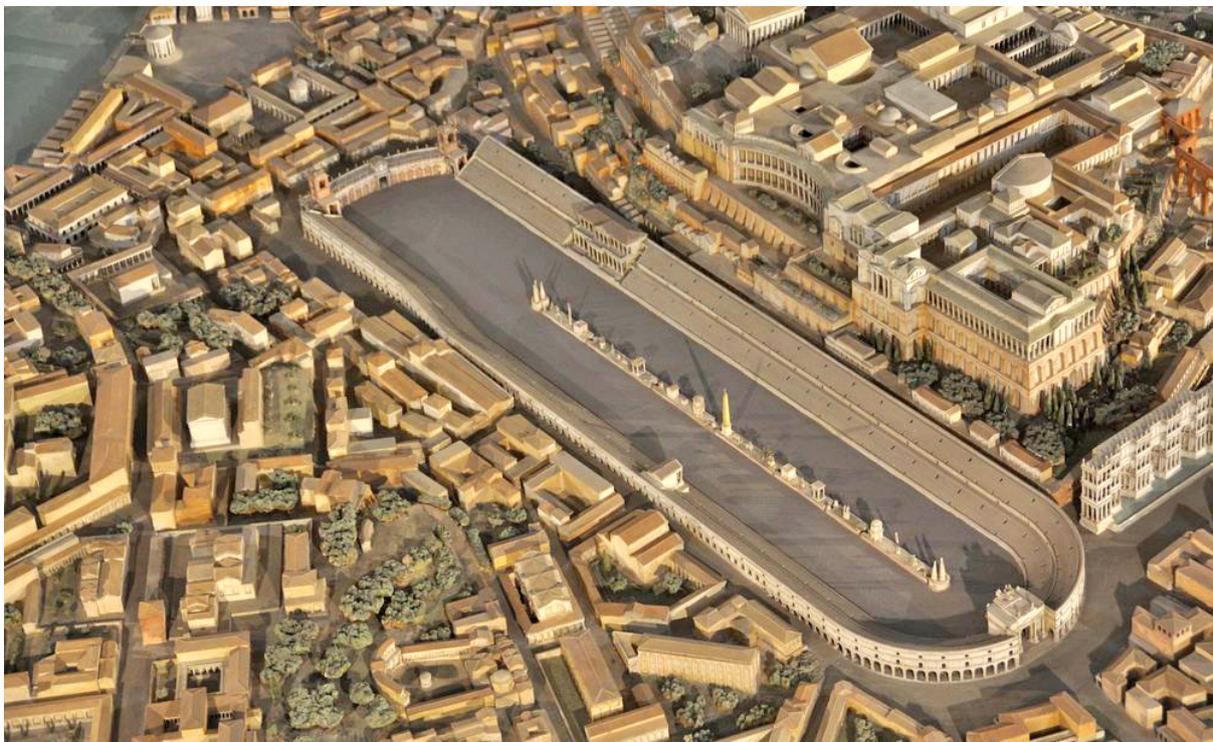


It dates back to the regal period of Rome (8th to 6th century B.C.), but it did not reach its final monumental form until the time of Emperor Trajan (2nd century A.D.) when the structure had reached the huge overall proportions of approx. 600m by 200m. In all, it is probable that the building had a capacity for about 250,000 people. The exterior consisted of three storeys just like the Colosseum. The east end was semi-circular and the seating was built up on vaulted substructures. The track measured 575m by 95m. Down the centre was the central barrier, or *spina*, around which the chariots raced. This was decorated with statues and obelisks. The building was made in concrete in the lower two tiers and wood for the rest. There were also shop stalls surrounding the building allowing for trade.

The building would have began with wooden seating surrounding the perimeter, with seating for the equites (knights) and patricians (noblemen) along the Palatine, and awnings to protect from the weather. The plebs (ordinary folk) would have sat on the Aventine hill. The circus itself was probably nothing more than a track.

Permanent wooden seating stalls were built around 329 B.C. – gated and painted. 190s B.C. permanent stone seating for the senators was built. In 50 B.C. Julius Caesar developed the Circus, extending the seating tiers to run almost the whole track, barring the starting gates and entrances. A canal was cut between the track and the seating to protect spectators. The inner third of the seating formed a trackside *cavea*. All was still made of wood, the concrete layers being added later. Emperor Augustus claims only the addition of an obelisk brought from Heliopolis and placed on the spina and the *pulvinar*, a shrine raised above the trackside seats. The site was prone to flooding till Emperor Claudius made improvements.

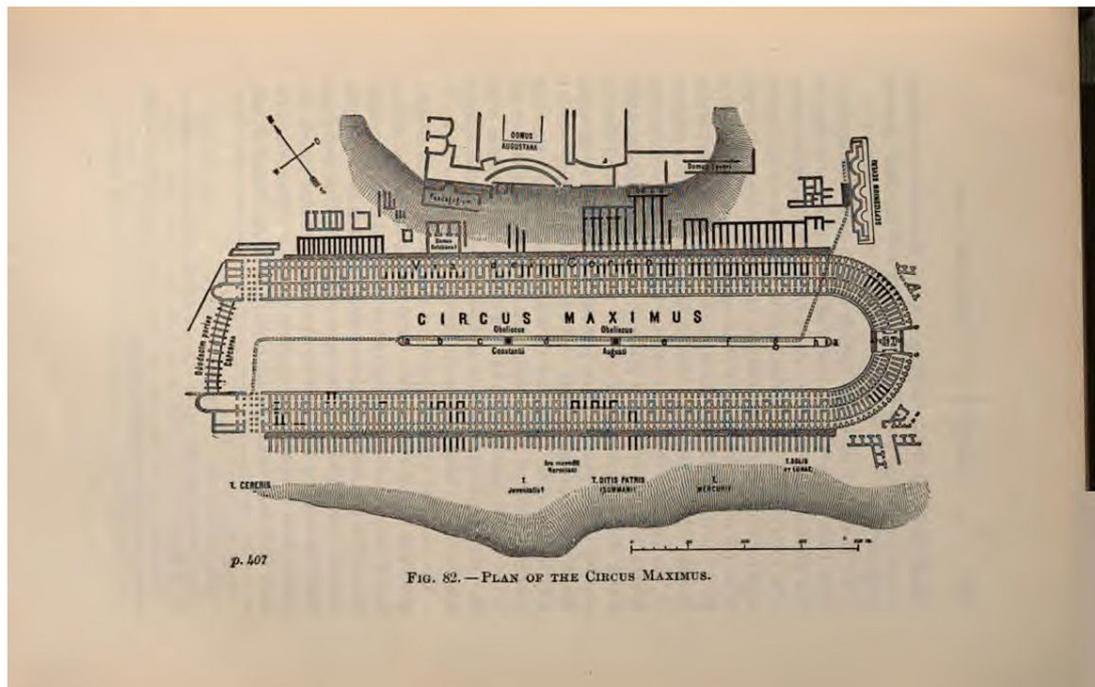
In 64 A.D. the great fire burnt the Circus Maximus and much of the city. Emperor Nero would rebuild the structure following the original plans. In 81 A.D. the senate built a three-way triple archway at the semi-circular end in honour of Emperor Titus and Domitian built a new palace complex on the Palatine hill that was attached to the Circus, allowing him ease of access to watch the games. The final stone version of the Circus Maximus was built by Emperor Trajan at the beginning of the 2nd century A.D. who likely feared the risk of fire from the predominantly wooden structure. But also, the wooden structures probably suffered from water damage and rot.



During the Republican period the *aediles* (minor officials) would arrange the games. At the beginning the *ludi* or games held in the Circus were small and occasional – including races, gladiatorial fights, venatio (beast fights) from 169 B.C., and the *pompa circensis* or parade

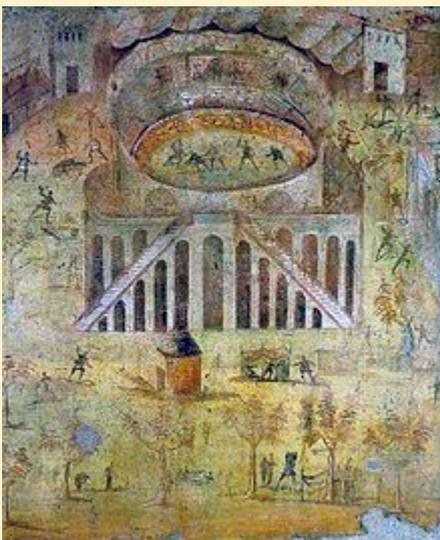
with dancers, musicians and artists. By the late Republic the *ludi* were 57 days, and this would be extended again under the Imperial period.

The construction of newer stadiums in the imperial period, including the Colosseum, probably diminished the use of the Circus Maximus somewhat, however, it was still the largest stadium in Rome and most suitable to large military and religious parades and any other large festivals.



Ground Plan of Circus Maximus

Historical Evidence of Games and Gladiators



Pompeii

The historian Tacitus records that a riot took place at the amphitheatre of Pompeii in 59 A.D. (*Annals* 14.17). It was between groups of rival fans from Pompeii and a nearby settlement Nuceria who didn't have their own amphitheatre. The riots had a high fatality rate, and the games were banned in the town for 10 years by emperor Nero.

This is a great example of Roman fanaticism for these games – they made soccer riots look tame.

Julius Caesar

As mentioned above, Julius Caesar is known for being the first to host *munera* outside a funeral in 65 B.C. with 320 gladiators fighting. However, after Caesar gained power as dictator of Rome and defeated his rivals, we are told by Suetonius that he put on some 'shows of great variety' (Suetonius, *Caesar* 39) these included gladiatorial games, plays of various languages, chariot-races, athletic competitions, and a mock naval battle – it was fought in an artificial lake dug in the lesser Codeta on the banks of the Tiber, between Egyptian and Tyrian ships. One of these gladiatorial contests in the Forum was between Furius Leptinus, of a patrician family, against Quintus Calpenus, a barrister and former senator; it was a fight to the death. There was also the so-called 'Troy Game'; a sham fight between troops of boys – this was apparently introduced by Caesar's ancestor Aeneas. Beast hunts took place five days running, and a mock battle between two armies – each with 500 infantry, elephants, and thirty cavalry. The central barrier or *spina* was removed from the Circus Maximus so this battle could take place.



Augustus

Augustus hosted more impressive games than anyone previous (Suetonius, *Augustus* 63-65). He records 4 games in his own name and 23 in the names of other city magistrates. Many of the games replicated those of Caesar: gladiators, races, the Troy Game, mock naval battles in the artificial lake, plays, athletics, and hunts. There are also records of men of noble families partaking in the hunts, plays, and gladiatorial shows until a Senate Decree forbade this. Augustus also showed the public their first sight of Parthian hostages, leading them down the middle of the arena and seating them two rows behind himself. He is also said to have exhibited the exotic animals for a few days somewhere near the arena whenever they were brought in for the games. i.e. a rhinoceros in an enclosure, a tiger on a stage of a theatre, and a serpent 90ft long in front of the *Comitium*. He is known to have attended when sick. He is also known to have issued decrees to keep order throughout the games.

Claudius

Claudius was particularly fond of hosting the games and distributing largesse to the people. (Suetonius, *Claudius* 21) He gave games in the Vatican Circus, with a wild beast show after every 50th race; he gave the Circus Maximus its marble *carceres* for the chariots and gilded metal *meta*. He staged the Troy Games and wild panther hunts with squadrons of cavalry led by tribunes and their prefect, as well as bull fights with Thessalian cavalry leaping on their backs when they tired and wrestling them to the ground by their horns. All in addition to the races. He is also said to have presided, dressed as a general, over a mock siege and storming of a town, in realistic detail, as well as a surrender of the 'British King'. Before training the Fucine Lake, he is said to have mounted a *naumachia*. Unfortunately, when the combatants gave the customary shout of 'Hail Emperor, those who are about to die salute you!' he joked 'Or not, as the case may be!' At which point they refused to fight; he had to hobble down to the shoreline to encourage them to fight. Eventually the 12 Sicilian triremes

and 12 Rhodians fought. The signal was apparently given by a mechanical Triton (god of the sea), made of silver, which emerged from the middle of the lake and blew its horn.

Martial

Samples from Martials epigrams talking about the games:

*Pasiphae really was mated to that Cretan bull:
believe it: we've seen it, the old story's true.
old antiquity needn't pride itself so, Caesar:
whatever legend sings, the arena offers you.*

- De Spectaculis 6

*As Priscus and Verus each drew out the contest and the struggle between the pair
long stood equal, shouts loud and often sought discharge for the combatants.
But Titus obeyed his own law (the law was that the bout go on without shield until
a finger be raised). What he could do, he did, often giving dishes and presents.
But an end to the even strife was found: equal they fought, equal they yielded.
To both Titus sent wooden swords and to both palms. Thus, valour and skill had
their reward. This has happened under no prince but you, Titus: two fought and
both won.*

- De Spectaculis, 29

Spiculus



Figure I.1: Spiculus defeats Aracintus (PBHG 16)

"ad. sin. SPICVLVS NER(ONIANVS) V(ICIT) / TIRO
ad. d. APTONE TVS P(ERIIT) / LIB[ET]R(TVS) XVI"

Spiculus is a famous gladiator from Pompeii. A slave gladiator rather than a freed man (a large L would be beside any gladiator who was a freed man), he is famous for having defeated the reigning champion in the Pompeii amphitheatre circa 60 A.D. The only evidence for him remains a piece of graffiti accompanied by a crude drawing showing Spiculus defeating his opponent Aptonetus – Aptonetus has an L by his name indicating he was a freed man. He was also a 16 time champion. The inscription reads:

Spiculus the Neronian, a beginner, defeaed and killed Aptonetus, a free man with sixteen wins.

Perhaps what is most significant about this is that a slave in Ancient Rome could legitimately kill a freed man. What's more Spiculus only grew in popularity, also killing another gladiator Columbus. It seems that Spiculus was overly found of killing. He was so popular in fact that he became emperor Nero's favourite gladiator; the emperor gave him a mansion and property worthy of those who celebrate triumph. He in fact was so liked by the emperor that when Nero feared his time was over and that he must kill himself called for Spiculus to kill him – the possibility of a slave killing an emperor was real; but Spiculus did not respond and Nero fled.

Opinions of the Games

Some writers were not fond of the Games, others had mixed feelings. Here are some samples. Those who disapprove usual did so on philosophical or religious grounds.

Cicero

Just look at the gladiators, either debased men or foreigners, and consider the blows they endure! Consider how they who have been well-disciplined prefer to accept a blow than ignominiously avoid it! How often it is made clear that they consider nothing other than the satisfaction of their master or the people! Even when they are covered with wounds they send a messenger to their master to inquire his will. If they have given satisfaction to their masters, they are pleased to fall. What even mediocre gladiator ever groans, ever alters the expression on his face? Which one of them acts shamefully, either standing or falling? And which of them, even when he does succumb, ever contracts his neck when ordered to receive the blow?

- Tusc. 2.41

... you have held the gladiators in contempt? Why, Pompey himself admits that he has spent 'oil and effort' on them to no purpose. Beyond these diversions there are the hunts, two a day for five days. No one denies that they are an imposing sight, but what pleasure can a civilized person take in watching some weakling torn apart by a powerful beast, or some magnificent animal transfixed by a hunting-spear? Even if these events are worth witnessing, you have often watched them, and we who have watched them have seen nothing new. The final day was devoted to elephants, eliciting boundless astonishment but no enjoyment from the common crowd; on the contrary, a feeling of pity was aroused, and a kind of belief that this species of beast shares some kinship with the human race.

- Fam. 7.1.3

And yet I realize that in our country, even in the good old times, it had become a settled custom to expect magnificent entertainments from the very best men in their year of aedileship. So both Publius Crassus, who was not merely surnamed "The Rich" but was rich in fact, gave splendid games in his aedileship... and my friend Pompey's exhibitions in his second consulship were the most magnificent of all. And so you see what I think about all this sort of thing. Still we should avoid any suspicion of poverty. Mamercus was a very wealthy man, and his refusal of the aedileship was the cause of his defeat for the consulship. If, therefore, such entertainment is demanded by the people, men of right judgment must at least consent to furnish it, even if they do not like the idea. But in so doing they should keep within their means, as I myself did. They should likewise afford such entertainment, if gifts of money to the people are to be the means of securing on some occasion some more important or more useful object.

- Off.2.57-58

Seneca

Once I happened to go to the mid-day games expecting to see some light entertainment or at least something different from the usual bloodshed. It was the exact opposite: the other shows were a picnic in comparison. This was pure murder, and in dead earnest. When one man falls, another immediately takes his place. And this goes on and on till none are left for even the last man is killed. You may say, 'But that one committed a robbery.' So what? Does he deserve to be crucified? 'He committed a murder.' Even so, does he deserve to die like this? What sort of punishment do you deserve, you wretch for watching him? All day long the crowd cries, 'kill him, flog him, burn him! Why does he run on the sword so timidly? Why is he so unwilling to die?'

- *Letters 1.7*

Does it serve any useful purpose to know that Pompey was the first to exhibit the slaughter of eighteen elephants in the Circus, pitting criminals against them in a mimic battle? He, a leader of the state and one who, according to report, was conspicuous among the leaders of old for the kindness of his heart, thought it a notable kind of spectacle to kill human beings after a new fashion. Do they fight to the death? That is not enough! Are they torn to pieces? That is not enough! Let them be crushed by animals of monstrous bulk! Better would it be that these things pass into oblivion lest hereafter some all-powerful man should learn them and be jealous of an act that was nowise human. O, what blindness does great prosperity cast upon our minds! When he was casting so many troops of wretched human beings to wild beasts born under a different sky, when he was proclaiming war between creatures so ill matched, when he was shedding so much blood before the eyes of the Roman people, who itself was soon to be forced to shed more. he then believed that he was beyond the power of Nature. But later this same man, betrayed by Alexandrine treachery, offered himself to the dagger of the vilest slave, and then at last discovered what an empty boast his surname was.

- *On the Shortness of Life*, xiii 6-8

Questions

- I. Describe the experience of the audience attending either the Colosseum or the Circus Maximus.
- II. Describe the architectural features of either the Colosseum or the Circus Maximus.
- III. Explain the role politics played in the in the Roman Spectacle.
- IV. Choose two textual sources for the Roman games which you have studied. Compare their historical relevance to the Roman Spectacle.
- V. Compare the role the Roman Spectacle played in Ancient Roman civilization to the role of Drama in Ancient Athens.