

The Colosseum

In 80 CE, the emperor Titus celebrated the opening of the Colosseum with 100 days of games. Although the details are sketchy, a few of the more spectacular events are recorded. We hear about a battle to the death between war elephants, and what appears to have been a choreographed skirmish between two large flocks of cranes. In another event, teams of gladiators fought on horseback, first on sand, and then – when the arena was suddenly flooded – in five or six feet of water. Their horses, we are told, had been specially trained to charge while swimming. On yet another occasion, the arena was again flooded, and a naval battle was staged between two groups of condemned criminals. Most memorable of all was the day on which no less than 5,000 animals were killed, many by troupes of female gladiators.

These games, like the newly-built Colosseum itself, were a colossal exercise in public relations. Every day during Titus' inaugural celebration, wooden balls were thrown into the crowd. On each of these balls was inscribed the name of a prize – ranging from a loaf of bread to a golden vase to a slave – which could be redeemed from a claims counter set up near the Colosseum. And of course, every spectator shared in the gift of the games themselves, which were given at the emperor's expense. Equally important was the fact that the emperor himself attended his games, and could be seen by every member of the audience as he sat in the imperial box.

But if the Colosseum reinforced the relationship between ruler and subject, it also confirmed the ruler's power. The exotic animals displayed in the beast combats and hunts advertised the extent of the Empire, and the lavish spectacles of the games bespoke the vast resources at the emperor's disposal. The Colosseum, in short, was a place for performing, and even defining, imperial power. No one understood this better than Vespasian, the emperor who built it.

The origins of both Vespasian's rise to power and the construction of the Colosseum lay in the final years of the emperor Nero. After a week-long fire consumed much of central Rome in 64, Nero decided to build a colossal new palace, the Domus Aurea or Golden House, over the rubble. Even by Neronian standards, the Golden House was a bit much. It sprawled over more than a hundred acres on three of Rome's seven hills. At the vestibule, guests were greeted by a gilded statue of Nero one hundred feet tall, heroically and regrettably nude. The palace itself had the form of a colossal country villa, with several wings arranged in a park-like setting around a vast artificial lake. The rooms of the palace were famous for their opulence – one of the circular dining rooms, for example, featured a ceiling painted with stars that rotated like the heavens, and walls that glittered with gemstones. The most striking feature of the Golden House, however, was the central lake, ringed by buildings meant to evoke the famous cities of the Empire. In the evening, Suetonius tells us, Nero and his guests would cruise along the shores in pleasure barges, periodically stopping at one of the faux-cities to feast or drink beside the water.

Such prodigal extravagance in the heart of the city did not endear Nero to the Roman people, who accused him – probably incorrectly – of starting the Great Fire to clear room for his palace. The emperor deepened his unpopularity by increasingly paranoid and tyrannical behavior. Finally, in 68, several provincial governors revolted against Nero. After the commander of his praetorian guard declared his allegiance to the rebels, Nero panicked and fled Rome. A short distance outside the city, at the villa of one of his freedmen, Nero committed suicide, famously

muttering “qualis artifex pereo – what an artist dies in me!” So ended the Julio-Claudian Dynasty, and so began the brief but savage civil war that brought Vespasian to power.

At the time of Nero’s suicide, Titus Flavius Vespasianus was leading four legions against the rebel province of Judaea. Although he had enjoyed a long and honorable military career, he had fallen out of favor with Nero, allegedly because he fell asleep and began snoring during one of the emperor’s lyre recitals. His thorough and brutal suppression of the Jewish revolt, then in its third year, was approaching its climax at the Siege of Jerusalem. On becoming aware of a power vacuum in the capital, however, Vespasian decided to throw his hat in the ring, and was declared emperor by his legions in July of 69.

Back in Rome, Nero had been succeeded, successively, by three men of senatorial rank: Galba, Otho, and Vitellius. Galba had lasted seven months before being decapitated in the Forum. Otho managed only three months before being defeated in battle and committing suicide. Vitellius, the current emperor, was morbidly obese, cruel, and despised by the Roman populace. While Vitellius busied himself in inventing obscene banquet entrees – Suetonius tells us that he once served a platter on which pike livers, peacock brains, flamingo tongues, and lamprey milt were artistically arranged – Vespasian was preparing for war.

In the event, the conflict between Vitellius and Vespasian was relatively painless; Vespasian won the loyalty of the critical legions along the Danube, and one of his lieutenants defeated Vitellius’ forces north of the capital. Vitellius himself was dragged down the Stairs of Mourning and decapitated; and soon after, Vespasian entered Rome, acclaimed by the people and Senate. Shortly after his arrival, he celebrated a grandiose triumph with his son Titus, displaying heaps of gold and silver seized from Jerusalem. Within a year, he was spending this treasure on a vast new amphitheater on the site of Nero’s Golden House – the structure we know as the Colosseum.

The Colosseum was Vespasian’s means of supplanting the memory of Nero. By building his amphitheater on the site of the extravagant Golden House, Vespasian converted a place of private luxury into one of public entertainment, thereby demonstrating that he put the people’s needs before his own.

Construction of the new amphitheater began in 72. Twenty thousand men drained the lake of Nero’s Golden House, and excavated an immense pit, 250 yards long, 200 yards wide, and forty feet deep. Once the hole was clear, the foundations were laid. Between facing walls ten feet thick, a colossal ring of concrete, forty feet deep and more than one hundred feet wide, was poured beneath the future walls and seating. After the ring wall had set, the center of the pit, beneath the future arena, was filled with twenty feet of rubble and concrete.

Once the foundations were complete, the superstructure began to rise. One hundred thousand cubic yards of limestone block, bonded by 300 tons of iron clamps, made up the towering perimeter wall, 1800 feet in circumference and 160 feet tall. Thousands of tons of brick and concrete were built into the radial walls and hundreds of vaults that supported the seating.

Construction was completed in only eight years. The finished amphitheater – dedicated, as we have seen, by Vespasian’s son Titus – was the largest in the Roman world, capable of seating

between fifty and sixty thousand spectators. The Romans simply called it the amphitheater or the hunting theater; only since the Middle Ages has it been known as the Colosseum.

In some ways, the most impressive part of the Colosseum is the hypogeum, the intricate bi-level network of corridors, cells, and elevators that lay beneath the ancient arena. When games were being held, up to 600 men, mostly slaves, labored in this subterranean world, bringing animals, gladiators, and scenery to and from the arena via 88 pulley-operated elevators.

The arena itself was oval, about 270 feet long by 160 wide. It was covered in fine sand, which had the useful property of absorbing blood and urine. A twelve foot stone barrier and a bronze fence crowned by elephant tusks separated the arena from the seating. The first rows, broader and shallower than the rest, were reserved for Senators and their families, who were allowed to bring their own folding chairs. On either end of the arena's short axis, these rows were interrupted by special boxes. The emperor sat in one of these, and images of the gods were probably set up in the other.

Above the senatorial rows was the section reserved for male members of the equestrian order – Rome's other elite. And in the two sections above these sat the middle classes, divided into more than 300 occupational groups – there were blocks of seating for soldiers on leave, ambassadors, heralds, and a host of guilds. The highest seats, so steep and narrow that they were probably standing room only, were reserved for slaves, the desperately poor, and women. A few groups, notably gravediggers, actors, and former gladiators, were banned entirely.

About half the Colosseum's seats were shadowed by the retractable awning known as the velarium. This was furled, unfurled, and maintained by a hundred sailors from the imperial fleet.

Now that we've surveyed the Colosseum bottom to top, on to the games.

Over the five hundred years of its operational life, the Colosseum hosted a fabulous array of entertainments. Although these varied considerably in scale and organization, most game days at the Colosseum seem to have followed a more or less standard pattern: beast hunts in the morning, executions at midday, and gladiatorial combats in the afternoon. We'll discuss them in that order. But first, a few preliminaries about the games.

Although special events – for example, an emperor's victory or birthday – were celebrated throughout the year, the regularly-scheduled games were concentrated in winter. Whether commemorative or annual, games required a great deal of planning: their dates were decided well in advance, and preparations could go on for months.

Tickets were free but limited in number. With the exception of senators and equestrians with ties to the imperial court, tickets were given to groups, not individuals. A guild or other organization would receive a block of several hundred tickets, which could be distributed or sold as it saw fit.

The tickets themselves were pottery shards inscribed with gate, section, and seat numbers. On game day, after your ticket was checked by attendants stationed around the perimeter of the amphitheater, you made your way to the gate marked on your ticket. The Colosseum had 80

entrances, 76 of which were public. Thanks to numerous stairways and well-designed circulation, it is estimated that all fifty or sixty thousand seats could be filled or emptied within fifteen minutes.

As mentioned earlier, the games usually began with beast hunts. Months before a major event, teams of hunters would be sent into the deserts and mountains of the Roman world to capture animals for the games. Bears came from Scotland, lions from Libya, tigers from Persia, hippos and crocodiles from Egypt, giraffes, rhinos, ostriches and hyenas from sub-Saharan Africa. The methods of capture varied – carnivores, we are told, were often lured by human decoys in sheepskins – but all were shipped off to Rome from the nearest port. In the capital, the more spectacular animals were kept in a primitive zoo near the Colosseum. Some emperors even maintained an elephant herd outside Rome.

On the day of the games, most animals were brought into the arena through the elevators, though the larger ones – elephants, hippos, rhinos, and giraffes – had to enter at ground level. In preparation for their arrival, the arena was often decorated to resemble a forest or desert. Sometimes, dozens of potted bushes and trees were lifted through the trapdoors and arrayed in groves; occasionally, whole tree-covered hills were constructed.

The beast hunts, or venationes, took various forms. Usually, the animals were mowed down by archers – the emperor Commodus, who fancied himself a gladiator, once shot a hundred bears in a single morning from a purpose-built wooden platform. The same emperor devised special arrows with crescent-shaped heads to decapitate ostriches – something he apparently did with some frequency. A few exceptionally skilled hunters killed lions, tigers, and other aggressive animals with spears, swords, or even their bare hands.

After the hunts, beast fights were sometimes staged. The classic matchup was lion vs. tiger. Elephant fights were another crowd favorite. As time went on, however, increasingly outlandish combinations were tried: bear v. python, lion v. crocodile, and even polar bear v. seals.

The morning's events sometimes ended with shows by tame animals – we hear about lions fetching hares and bring them back unharmed, elephants walking on tightropes, and even tigers allowing themselves to be kissed by their keeper.

As noon approached, the arena was cleared by teams of slaves – who must have had their work cut for them, since hundreds, sometimes even thousands, of animals could be killed in a single morning. Much of the meat would be distributed free to the Roman people after the games – in fact, one third century emperor supposedly allowed members of the audience to enter the arena, hunt beasts in an artificial forest, and keep any animal they killed.

Around noon, people got up and stretched, availed themselves of the latrines and water fountains built into the corridors beneath the seats, and settled down for lunch. The emperor sometimes provided a free meal – and if not, there were probably vendors who worked the crowd, distributing roasted chickpeas and other stadium food.

Down on the arena, once the last of the animal carcasses had been cleared, the executions began. There were many methods. Often, the condemned were tied to stakes in the center of the arena, and half-starved lions, bears, or dogs were unleashed on them, with predictably grisly results. Another favorite method was to stage lurid episodes from Greco-Roman mythology, in which the condemned man played the doomed protagonist. The carnage was accompanied by music: the Colosseum seems to have had the equivalent of a house band, which set the mood with lyre, flute, drum, and hydraulic organ.

Once the spectators had been refreshed by a light lunch and a few executions, it was time for the main event: the gladiatorial combats.

Most gladiators were slaves – prisoners of war or condemned criminals chosen for their strength and agility. They were trained in *Ludi*, or schools, where they spent years learning the weapons and techniques of combat. Each of the four schools that served the Colosseum featured a miniature arena, where the gladiators trained with heavy practice weapons. In the weeks and months between major games at the Colosseum, these training arenas became attractions in their own right; the largest of the Colosseum's schools had seating for three thousand spectators.

Gladiators stood at the very bottom of the Roman social pyramid. Thanks to their death-defying occupation and their place in the public eye, however, they were idolized by the Roman public. The more famous gladiators – who chose stage names like “*Flamma*” (the flame) – were known throughout the Empire, and regarded in much the same way as champion boxers or MMA fighters today. Their association with strength and virility gave rise to a number of strange practices; it was thought to be good luck, for example, for a Roman bride to part her hair with a spear that had been dipped in the blood of a dead gladiator.

As the day of the games approached, gladiators were rented out from the schools. Young or unsuccessful fighters (called the *gregarii*, or chorus) were relatively inexpensive. Successful veterans, on the other hand, might command 15,000 sesterces a day. The best and most famous gladiators were often men who had already won their freedom, but continued to fight for premium fees. These men appeared only a few times a year, at the most prestigious games.

The evening before a show, the gladiators who were scheduled to appear in the arena the following day were served a lavish banquet, at which they arranged their wills. Then, after what must have been a sleepless night, they were herded through the tunnels that connected their schools with the maze of chambers and corridors beneath the Colosseum. Then, all the gladiators who were to fight that day appeared on the arena and greeted the emperor with the famous “*Ave Caesar! Morituri te salutant!*” (Hail Caesar! Those who are about to die salute you!).

Shortly after, the combats began. There were usually ten or twelve matches in a given afternoon, separated by intermissions in which clowns ran onto the arena and mimicked the gladiators. Typically, a fast, lightly-armored fighter was pitted against a slow, heavily armored opponent. For example, a *retiarius* – a variety of gladiator armed with a trident and net, and armored only with a shoulder guard – usually fought a *secutor*, who wore a heavy helmet, carried a massive shield, and fought with a dagger.

At the beginning of a match, the fighters' weapons were examined to ensure their sharpness. Then the referee – usually a retired gladiator – stepped forward, and gave the signal to begin. The weight of gladiatorial arms and armor ensured that the fights were usually brief. It was seldom a killing blow that ended the match – more frequently, the loser was simply overcome by exhaustion and loss of blood from flesh wounds.

If a fighter was unable to continue, he lay on his back and held up the little finger of his left hand in the gesture of submission. The audience then called for mercy or death, turning their thumbs up or down to signify the loser's fate. The final decision, however, was the emperor's. If a man had fought bravely, he was often spared – unless the emperor, to pique the crowd's interest, had decreed that all of the day's matches would be fought to the death.

If the emperor chose to show mercy, a waiting doctor would dress his wounds and supervise his transfer to the gladiator's hospital a short distance from the Colosseum. If not, he was killed on the spot, sometimes by a slave dressed as Charon, the ferryman of the underworld, who would crush the hapless man's head with a mallet. Another slave would then come forward and touch the victim with a red-hot iron to prove that he was dead. The corpse was dragged out, the sand was raked, and the next match began.

Some Romans were disgusted by the gladiatorial combats; Cicero, for example, regarded them as barbaric. The vast majority, however, were avid spectators. They enjoyed following the progress of their favorite fighters, thrilled at the athleticism and skill displayed in the combats, and – above all – were fascinated by how the men in the arena faced death.

Gladiators dueled and died in the Colosseum until the combats were outlawed by the Christian emperors of the early fifth century. Beast hunts outlasted the Empire itself; the last on record were held in 523, under the sponsorship of a barbarian king of Italy. In the ensuing centuries, earthquakes and stone robbers gradually reduced the Colosseum to the shell we see today. But even as a ruin, it remains an evocative witness to the spectacle ritual death the emperors staged to confirm their rule.