

Amphitheatres: Changing the World

Both Past and Present

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When it comes to Ancient Roman structures, one of the most known structures would have to be the Roman amphitheatres. These amphitheatres were a focal point for Roman culture, built throughout the Roman Empire. The events that which took place in these amphitheatres ranged from gladiator battles to mock naval battles. This paper will go over not just the history of these structures, but also how the average Roman citizen perceived them, what really went on inside them, exactly why the Roman Empire built them and why they are arguably the most important structures in Roman history. It is important to understand all of these aspects of amphitheatres in order to truly realize their importance on not just Rome but also the modern world.

The person credited with coming up with the amphitheatre design is C.

Scribonius Curio. As Bomgardner writes:

In his encyclopaedic compendium of knowledge about the known world, the *Historia Naturalis*, Pliny the Elder discussed the origins of the architectural form known as the amphitheatre. According to Pliny, the amphitheatre was born fully developed, like Athene sprung from the head of Zeus, during the spectacles given by C. Scribonius Curio in 52 BC. (Bomgardner 2021, page 57)

The earliest discovered amphitheatre was built in Pompeii and the reason this can be tracked is due to its fate. The construction of the amphitheatre in Pompeii is said to be date back to 70 BC. The amphitheatre was able to seat up to 24,000 spectators according to Bomgardner. One fascinating aspect of this amphitheatre was how it was decorated. The walls on the amphitheatre had all different art on them. “depicting gladiators are placed at either end of the minor axis of the arena. The scene on the southern side depicts two retiarii (net-fighters) one on either side of the entrance

from the corridor leading from the façade of the amphitheatre to the arena,” (Bomgardner 2021, page 84). The Pompeians put art into their amphitheatre to make it stand out and look fancier. Pompeii had actually been hosting gladiator battles already for years before the building of the amphitheatre. The main reason behind building this structure was because other nearby cities such as Capua, Puteoli, and Cumae were constructing amphitheatres of their own causing Pompeii to feel like they needed one to compete with local rival municipalities. The material used to build this structure was completely imported stone, (Bomgardner 2021, pages 64-71). This amphitheatre would have to endure a lot, starting with the amphitheatre riots of 59 AD. During an event, a fight broke out between the Pompeians and residents from the neighboring city of Nuceria. These two cities already had bad blood for generations. As Bomgardner explains:

In addition to the usual hometown crowd, visitors from the nearby town of Nuceria were there in large numbers. The Roman historian Tacitus⁹⁸ recorded the horrific details of what happened. An argument broke out between the locals and the Nucerians. Hard words led to violent actions. At first stones flew, then swords were drawn and fighting broke out. The Pompeians, having the advantage of reinforcements to hand, soon got the better of it. Many Nucerians, both adults and children, were either killed or severely wounded, (page 76).

The events that took place during this riot led to a ten-year ban on the amphitheatres, as well as many Pompeian officials being relieved from duty. The amphitheatre would also need to endure the earthquake of 62/63 AD. A severe earthquake struck Pompeii causing much destruction and death. As explained by Bomgardner “The amphitheatre suffered damage to its vaulted passageways and repairs were completed before its destruction in AD 79,” (Bomgardner 2021, page 80). The damage was repaired but the structure itself was still compromised. The amphitheatre in Pompeii

had to endure a lot of hardships up to its demise when Pompeii was destroyed by the volcanic eruption.

The Romans would go on to build around 230 amphitheatres throughout their massive empire. The big question that remained though, was why did the Romans feel the need to build these amphitheatres? The answer to this question is actually a little more simple than expected. The Romans wanted these massive structures built as a way to host entertaining events for the people of Rome, which would boost the morale of citizens and keep them happy. Some of them were also built as signs of power as well. These amphitheatres would go on to be a major part of Roman culture once they were built. As more were built, other cities began to want them as well which led to the spreading of amphitheatres around the empire.

The Roman Empire would later go on to build their most fascinating

amphitheatre ever built, that being the Flavian Amphitheatre. The biggest and most well known amphitheatre was also known as the Colosseum. The reason why the alternative name of Colosseum came to be was because it was located next to a statue of Nero which was known as the colossy. According to Herber Benario, the Colosseum's building dimensions in meters were 188 x 156 and the arena's dimensions were 86 x 54, (Benario 1981, page 2). It would take seven to eight years to build the Colosseum. The Colosseum was built using a variety of materials, which Bomgardner describes as:

The building materials used in the Colosseum were well-known local products with a long history of use. Some 100,000 cubic metres of travertine blocks, quarried at Tivoli in the Sabine hills east of Rome, were used in the major load-bearing parts of the structure (the network of seven concentric 'elliptical' rings of piers) and in those areas where decorative carved stonework was required (for example, the façade). Marbles from various quarries were used mainly as thin facing slabs to adorn the monument (for example, the facing of the arena wall), but

large blocks of marble were also used for the seating (gradus) of the podium, ima and media cavea as well as for the columns of the crowning colonnade. Brick was used in the construction of arches for concrete vaulting (to make sloping concrete vaulting for stairways) and for building short stretches of walling between travertine piers on Levels II and III (to make radial passageways), (page 38).

It would go on to take all of these different materials to construct the massive structure. According to Bomgardner the Colosseum could host about 54,000 spectators. The Romans also used up to 60,000 slaves to help construct the structure. The slaves used to build the structure were Jewish slaves from the First Jewish-Roman War. The reason behind using these slaves was to send a message to the Jews. The Arch of Titus is said to be able to prove this through its depictions of Jewish slaves. This massive structure would not only become the biggest amphitheatre the Roman Empire ever built but would also become a sign of power. The Colosseum would go on to host a variety of

events for the citizens in Rome to spectate, like gladiator battles, mock naval battles, and even on some occasions, such as punishing a deserter to make a point, executions. These events were important as they made Rome seem more powerful and in the case of executions made the citizens realize what could happen to them if they did wrong. When the Colosseum first opened Emperor Titus announced 100 days of games in order to celebrate. Over the 100 days following the opening of the Colosseum tons of events from gladiator battles to mock naval battles would be held. Hundreds of people and wild animals that took part in the events would be killed throughout the hundred days as well.

One aspect of these amphitheatres that is important to understand is the economic aspect. Many amphitheatres were actually privately funded by wealthy Romans such as the one in Pompeii who was funded by Quinctius Valgus and Marcus

Porcius, who was a relative of Julius Caesar. Just a couple other of amphitheatres that were funded by noblemen were the amphitheatre of Serdica and the amphitheatre of Bregenz. It wasn't too uncommon for these structures to be funded by noblemen or people in office of smaller cities as they wanted the amphitheatre for their city. When it came to the Colosseum in Rome, it is believed to have been funded by the First Jewish-Roman War. This war lasted from 66-73 BC and was between the Roman Empire and a Jewish rebellion. After the war the Romans looted Jewish temples and brought back lots of spoils which the empire then went to the government and used to fund the Colosseum. Another part of the funding from the Colosseum came from taxes that the empire had imposed on its citizens. Overall, though not wealthy for the time, the Roman Empire was able to gather enough funds to put towards the building of the Roman Colosseum to finally build it.

With these amphitheatres being finally completed in different parts of the empire, the gladiator battles could finally begin within them. When it comes to the origin of gladiator combat, it is believed that the Romans adopted it from the Etruscans. These battles were supposedly started in Rome as funeral practices, mainly for wealthy nobles. They would have two slaves fight each other at the nobleman's funeral, (Streinu 2016, page 1). In these battles a gladiator, usually armed with a sword or similar weapon, would be pitted against other gladiators or even in some cases deadly animals. These animals would usually be apex predators such as bears and tigers. One solid example of a gladiator match is the one between Priscus and Verus. This was the first gladiator battle to take place in the Colosseum once it was open and became an instant classic. The two men were evenly matched, Carter states that "Emperor Titus claimed he was unable to

intervene in a long bloody duel between two equally matched gladiators, Priscus and Verus,” (Carter 2006, page 100). The two gladiators went on fighting for hours and gained much respect. Many gladiators were usually actually treated quite well and for their status and had received decent treatment. Andrew Curry states that “Many gladiators were criminals or prisoners of war condemned to combat,” (Curry 2008, page 28). Many of these gladiators were looked down on for their actions that led to them becoming a gladiator. Despite the harsh conditions they faced in the arena, the life of a gladiator outside the arena was not as bad, but strict. To keep up on their diet, the gladiators would need to do a variety of things, even needing to drink vile brews of charred wood or bone ash to keep their calcium levels up. Curry goes further when he states:

Grossschmidt, who has degrees in medicine and anthropology, has examined thousands of human remains over the past 25 years. From

Neanderthal bones in Croatia to mummies in Egypt. He reaches across the table and takes the skill from me. Running his hands over the skeletons' tiny ridges and lines is like reading a biography. Over the course of a lifetime, our bones are shaped by what we do, and Grossschmidt literally feels aches and pains thousands of years old, tracing history with his fingers. (2008)

Just from this skeleton of a gladiator Grossschmidt was able to see the struggles that this man would have gone through. Gladiators did all they could to survive when in the arena. Cicero describes their bravery from his own perspective from the time when he states:

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., Cicero, translated by Noy)

These fights were at times done to celebrate military victories or to display the wealth of Rome so in a way they were usually done as celebrations which made Roman citizens happy for their Empire. A good example of this is when Julius Caesar hosted gladiator games to commemorate the death of his father in 65 BC and how he also hosted games following military success in Gaul and Egypt. For the most part citizens enjoyed these games as Rome was having some struggles during this time and it allowed for citizens to escape reality as well as go and see their empire's power be displayed.

Another spectacle of some amphitheatres including the Colosseum in Rome was the ability to have mock naval battles in the amphitheatre itself. Certain amphitheatres had the ability to be flooded, allowing the Romans to use boats in the

arena to do mock naval battles. Many people are skeptical today if it was really possible to flood the Colosseum in Rome. Despite there being some missing links, Martin Crapper, who studied the possibility of flooding the colosseum, found out that it is possible and that the 80m long arena could be filled in just two to five hours, (Crapper, 2007). The battles done were sometimes reenactments of some of Rome's past battles to help glorify their victories. An example of this would be when Julius Caesar wanted to celebrate Roman victories in Gaul and Egypt so he planned a reenactment of a naval battle in the Colosseum. Multiple boats would be put up against each other with a crew that usually varied in numbers, each boat would sometimes have men with bows and arrows to fire at the other boat, rowers, and men with swords. The boats that were used in these mock battles were special compared to normal boats as they had flat bottoms due to the amphitheatre's shallow waters. Regular

boats would scrap against the bottom of the arenas if they were used, causing damage to the ship and making it impossible to use.

They would often ram each other to damage the opposing sides ship. The battle would go on till one side was victorious. The mock naval battles didn't occur nearly as often as gladiator battles due to the fact that flooding the Colosseum wasn't practical.

One other aspect of the amphitheatres is the use of executions within them. The Romans were not hesitant in punishing people who had committed severe crimes against the empire such as being a traitor, abandoning the army, or being a war criminal. The Romans have been known to host these executions in amphitheatres and the Colosseum in order to send a message to their citizens. One method of execution was crucifixion. Cook states that:

In imitation of Christ's cross the victims of the Neronian persecution were probably suspended. The cruciarii in Cumae died publicly in a spectacle perhaps combined with other imaginative forms of death,

such as condemnation to wild beasts or burning with pitch or other combustibles. Nearby Puteoli contacted out its burials and crucifixions (with the attendant torture), and some perhaps took place in the amphitheatre of that town, (Cook 2012, page 82).

This statement from Cook's article shows that not just crucifixion was done to criminals, but also other cruel forms of execution and torture. Other forms of execution that took place were mythological executions. These were reenactments of mythological events through the execution of a person, these did not occur often. The use of wild animals in executions did occur as well. There are even cases of the Romans burning people alive as a form of execution. The use of these executions in arenas at times struck fear and pleasure into others seeing the person get punished. It was clear that the Romans had cruel and inhumane forms of executions when it came to their amphitheatres.

One last event that occurred in amphitheatres, though not as common as other events, was animal hunts. Animal hunts were events that pitted either animals against other animals or a person against an animal. The Romans would gather exotic animals from all over and bring them back to Rome for shows in the Colosseum. The animals would be kept in cages underneath the arena. The animals used varied from deadly tigers and panthers to rhinos and elephants. The events often started with the animals being announced to the crowd and then a person coming out to fight and try to kill the animals. Sometimes the events would include gladiators as well and they would fight animals. These events today would be seen as animal cruelty but back then it was a spectacle to the people.

These amphitheatres and the shows that went inside them did change the empire in some ways. It is believed that the

population of cities that had amphitheatres and great entertainment had larger populations throughout the empire. S.G. Ortman and J.W. Hanson did a study that went on to prove that entertainment structures like amphitheatres would lead to higher populations throughout the empire. This is one reason behind why cities wanted amphitheatres as people would flock to where they were. The events that took place in these amphitheatres have also improved morale throughout the empire, even when times were tough for its citizens. The Colosseum in Rome was said to be a gift to the people from Emperor Vespasian, as a way to make himself look better within the eyes of the public and keep citizens happy. These amphitheatres were used as a symbol of power which caused them to spread throughout the empire.

There is also a true importance of these amphitheatres that impacts the world to this very day. It is thanks to these

amphitheatres that such things like modern day stadiums and even some modern day sports exist. Almost every modern day stadium is built similar to the design of these Roman amphitheatres. An example of this that can be used in Lincoln Financial Field in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This field is built in an oval shape with 4 levels of seating to maximise the amount of people who can come see the game. The Roman Colosseum also is oval shaped and has 4 levels of seating. Also like the Roman Colosseum, these modern stadiums like Lincoln Financial Field host sporting events like baseball, football and soccer. Some ancient Roman amphitheatres are actually still used as venues today such as the Verona Arena which has hosted many concerts from artists such as Pink Floyd and Alicia Keys. It is fascinating to see that these structures can still be used to this day and truly shows how well constructed they were. As for modern day sports, it is believed that

gladiatorial battles may have been an influence to modern day football. The comparison is that football is focused on tackling and brute force, hitting somebody on the other side as hard as possible and beating the opposing team. There is a likeness between the two sports. Though not really held in amphitheatres, Romans are credited with coming up with an early form of racing in chariot races. These can be linked to being the inspiration for modern-day NASCAR and other races using vehicles. When it comes to animal hunts that can be linked to events today such as bull riding, which is also controversial to people as it comes off as animal cruelty. There is no denying the impact that amphitheatres had on the modern world, from their amphitheatre design to the events that took place they have influenced aspects of the modern-world.

In conclusion, the amphitheatres that Rome built certainly became a focal point

on Roman culture. The events that took place within them would go on to entertain many Roman citizens till the empire eventually collapsed. To this day these colosseums play a role as they lead to modern day stadiums and even some sporting events. They are still being studied as well to this day to help everyone truly understand Roman culture even more. It is clear to see why these structures are possibly the most important structures that Rome had ever built.

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