

A study on roman ampitheatres



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Roman amphitheatres

If one were to ask any person what first comes to mind when they think of Roman civilisation, most people would instantly respond with the Colosseum in Rome, or the Gladiatorial games. The Colosseum in Rome was a symbol of the power and wealth that Rome possessed at the height of her glory, and even today, the amphitheatre dominates the surrounding area, and draws the eye like nothing else. Roman amphitheatres became synonymous with the spread of roman culture throughout the empire, and as such are an excellent case for understanding the spread of roman engineering practices as well as colonization of new territories.[1]

A roman amphitheatre is a large freestanding structure, often oval or circular, which was built by Romans, primarily for the purpose of entertainment.[2]Amphitheatres housed a variety of spectacles, such as gladiatorial games, or executions of prisoners. The roman ruling elite understood that in order to keep the populace happy and complacent, they needed to be provided with nourishment for both the body and for the mind. As such, those who belonged the roman ruling class, the equestrians, would often fund spectacles for roman citizens of lower classes to attend, and be entertained by.[3]

The history:

Some of the earliest Roman amphitheatres date to the republic period, however, the majority of the most well-known were built during the imperial period.[4]The word amphitheatre comes from the latin “ amphitheatrum” meaning theatre in the round, which differentiates amphitheatres from

traditional greek theatres, which were most often semi-circular.[5]The Roman amphitheatre as an architectural phenomenon is believed to have roots in the Greek theatre traditions, indeed, the two are quite similar to one another in multiple respects.[6]

There has been some debate over how Roman amphitheatres came to be invented, with some scholars suggesting that they first appeared in the area of Campania, which was well-known for its displays of funeral games, and later for its gladiatorial schools.[7]Interestingly, it is possible that the Romans borrowed the idea of gladiatorial combat from the Campanians, and adapted it for Roman ideals. One should note, however, that it has also been suggested by certain scholars that the Roman style of stone amphitheatres originated in Rome's *Forum Romanum*, where a temporary wooden structure may have been built to provide a setting for gladiatorial games. [8]This wooden structure took the shape of the forum, which happened to be oblong.[9]This idea of a wooden amphitheatre comes from Pliny, who stated that Gaius Scribonius Curio constructed two wooden theatres which were moved together to become an amphitheatre to house the gladiatorial combats for the funeral games of his father.[10]Additionally, there are also records which show that after the destruction of Rome's first stone amphitheatre, Nero built a new one of wood.[11]

Later, when the Romans began to build more permanent versions of this original structure, they kept the same basic shape, though it was changed to be more round, which would provide more equidistant views of the spectacles below. The first permanent amphitheatre is believed to be the one built at Pompeii, and is a very simple construction compared to later

amphitheatres.[12]The first stone amphitheatre in Rome was built by Statilius Taurus, an associate of Augustus. Unfortunately, this amphitheatre was eventually destroyed, and, in AD57, Nero built a new, wooden, amphitheatre. This construction was incredibly short-lived, and was eventually destroyed as well.[13]

Though Rome's Flavian amphitheatre was built rather late, most colonies had their own amphitheatres at least one hundred and fifty years before the Flavian amphitheatre was constructed.[14]Archaeological evidence suggests that the roman stone amphitheatres built outside of Rome were largely constructed for those roman citizens who helped to colonize the area, and to help the spread of the idea of Romaness.[15]It has been suggested that the amphitheatre at Pompeii may have been constructed specifically for the purpose of entertaining Sulla's military colonists who were stationed there. [16]

The Colosseum is today the most widely known and recognised of the roman amphitheatres, and even at the height of Rome's power it was no different. The Flavian amphitheatre, as the name suggests, was the centre-piece of the Flavian dynasty. In AD 69, Rome fought a short, but brutal civil war, with the end result of Vespasian and his sons, Titus and Domitian, in control of Rome. The two initial goals of any new regime in Rome were often the same: first, to establish legitimacy and authority, and secondly, to discredit their predecessors. The Flavians were able to do both in one fell swoop, with the construction of the amphitheatre.[17]

Emperor Nero before them had appropriated public land for the construction of his personal pleasure palace, “ the Golden House” or *Domus Aurea* , making the already unpopular emperor despised among the populace.

[18]With the civil war which led to the Flavians acceding to power, Nero was overthrown, and nearly all traces of his reign were obliterated. In AD 106 his opulent palace followed suit by means of a fire, freeing the once-public land to be used again. The Flavians took this opportunity, and constructed a venue which could be used and enjoyed by the Roman populace, the largest stone amphitheatre in the Roman Empire.[19]Indeed, the Flavian amphitheatre was designed to impress.

The Flavian amphitheatre was a spectacular feat of Roman engineering. The seating area or *cavea* of the amphitheatre featured five different levels of seating which were specific to different classes of the population. In order for spectators to end up in the correct seating tier, they needed to traverse multiple flights of increasingly narrow steps, with the senators and members of the equestrian class climbing either no, or very few steps, while women and slaves climbing the most, to reach the highest tier of seating.[20]

The manner in which the staircases and corridors were constructed is an interesting one in that the corridors and staircases closest to the bottom of the amphitheatre are wide and spacious, but the closer to the top, the narrower the passages become. It has been postulated that this was an intentional design on the part of the architects, not only to allow the best support for the structure, but also as an inherent form of crowd control.

[21]The wider passageways at the bottom allowed the members of the upper echelons of society to exit the amphitheatre in an expedient and prompt

manner, while those of the lower classes were filtered through the narrow passageways, thereby taking a longer time to leave the amphitheatre, allowing the elites to pass unimpeded by those who were less important than they.

The amphitheatre also made excellent use of the most modern innovations underground, in the two stories of corridors that formed the substructure of the building.[22] This maze of chambers and passageways contained an assortment of lifts and pulleys which would allow animals for fights, or gladiators, to enter the pit seemingly from thin air, adding a layer of mystery and showmanship to the spectacle, to further excite the audience.[23] There were also spaces in the substructure which housed cages for the animals, as well as measures for safety. Additionally, there were spaces for the gladiators, and also areas for the animals to run and exercise.[24] In his “ On the Spectacles,” Martial states that the structure surpasses earlier wonders of antiquity.

While the Colosseum may be one of the best known amphitheatres, there were a great deal of others which were of similar importance. One such amphitheatre is the amphitheatre at Pompeii, which is currently the oldest surviving amphitheatre in the world.[25] Amphitheatres were synonymous with the spread of the Roman Empire and culture, and this trend continued at Pompeii.[26] While Pompeii already had a greek-style theatre, once she became a Roman colony in 80BC, several wealthy local elites, Quinctius Valgus and Marcius Porcius funded the building of a new Roman Amphitheatre.[27] This early amphitheatre was quite simple compared to the highly-engineered flavian amphitheatre, and featured a hollow oval arena,

which was encircled by earthen banks for seating.[28]As the amphitheatre at Pompeii was the first of its kind, the term *amphitheatrum* was not used when it was first built, and instead, the dedicatory inscription reads *spectaculum*, meaning spectacle.[29]

The amphitheatres of Rome were, and still are, often viewed as the symbol for the expansion of the roman culture and empire, and by examining them we can begin to comprehend the fantastic innovations that roman engineers were able to create. From the earliest amphitheatre at Pompeii, to the largest at Rome, we can see the brilliance, as well as the wealth and power, of ancient Rome.

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[2](Welch, 1994), (Bomgardner, 2002)

[3](Coleman, 2003), (Holleran, 2003)

[4](Bomgardner, 2002), (Welch, 1994)

[5](Welch, 1994)

[6](Welch, 1994), (Kyle, 2007)

[7](Kyle, 2007)

[8](Kyle, 2007)

[9](Welch, 1994)

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[15](Welch, 1994), (Coleman, 2003)

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[22](Mueller, 2011)

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[24](Kyle, 2007)

[25](Welch, 1994)

[26](Holleran, 2003)

[27](Holleran, 2003), (Kyle, 2007)

[28](Kyle, 2007)

[29](Welch, 1994)