

So long as the
colosseum stands,
rome also stands



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The Colosseum is the most striking evidence of the grandeur of ancient Rome-its most massive, impressive and awe-inspiring feat of engineering. Originally known as the Amphitheatrum Flavium, it was the first major all-stone amphitheater in Rome. ² Since the eighth century, it has been known simply as the Colosseum, apparently because of the colossal statue of the hated Emperor Nero (ruled 54 to 68 C. E.) that had once stood nearb~³ The statue was placed there by the Emperor Hadrian (ruled 117 to 138), who had removed it from the court of Nero's Golden House.

Nero's connection with the Colosseum, however, is mostly negative. It wa~ erected ~p a site where the despised emperor had built a lake that was drained after his death. ⁴ But the clay bottom was hardly fit for a foundation of a structure like the Colosseum, so a concrete ring was sunk into the former lake bottom for support. The building was constructed during the reigns of three Flavian emperors: The first three tiers of seats were built under Vespasian (ruled 69 to 79). Titus (ruled 79 to 81) added two more tiers.

The work was completed under Titus's brother Domitian (ruled 81 to 96) •⁶ Emperors Nerva (ruled 96 to 98) and Trajan (ruled 98 to 117) made further changes and additions, ⁷ and the building was restored by the Emperor Antoninus Pius in the middle of the second century~⁸ When completed the Colosseum was 165 feet high, a third of a mile around and had some 80 entrances. According to the Calendar of 354, it had a seating capacity of 87, 000 though modern scholars generally regard this figure as exaggerated and reduce it to about 50, 000. Spectators could find their seats without difficulty and all of them had a clear view. A canopy protected them from sun and

rain. No wonder that the architects of the Harvard Stadium based their design on the Colosseum. The amphitheater was severely damaged by a fire caused by lightning in 217. 10 It was damaged by another fire, also caused by lightning, in the middle of the third century¹¹ and by earthquakes in the fifth century. 12 Thereafter it was subject to plunder until the 18th century.

Indeed, whole palaces, such as the Cancelleria (the papal chancellery, an enclave in Vatican City completed in the 16th century) and the Palazzo Farnese (a magnificent palace in Rome completed in the 16th century by Cardinal Alessandro Farnese), as well as much of St. Peter's Cathedral in Vatican City were built from its spoils. As late as the year 407, when Rome had been ruled by Christian emperors for almost a century, gladiatorial fights were still being staged there, and as late as 523 wild animals were being slaughtered in the arena. Now the Colosseum is used as an outdoor theater, where as recently as July 20, 2000, the National Theater of Greece put on a new production of Sophocles's. When Vespasian became emperor in 69 C. E., the empire was in deplorable financial condition because of Nero's extravagance and the fire that devastated Rome in 64. The civil war that had raged during the year preceding Vespasian's accession only added to the economic problems. Unlike Nero, Vespasian was frugal to a fault.

Moreover, in contrast to his predecessors, Vespasian did not try to conceal his relatively undistinguished origin. To insure his own popularity (as well as that of his sons, who he was determined should succeed him), Vespasian undertook restorations and repairs that were sorely needed all over Rome. He endowed schools and established a regular annual salary of a hundred thousand sesterces for Latin and Greek teachers of rhetoric, paid for from the

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public treasury. According to the second-century writer Suetonius, Vespasian had learned that the emperor Augustus (ruled 27 B.

C. E. to 14 C. E.) had cherished a plan for constructing an amphitheater in the heart of Rome. ⁴ Presumably there Augustus would be able to present on a grand scale the gladiatorial shows that he took particular pride in offering to the Roman people. The arena with its three tiers was apparently used in Vespasian's reign. A more formal dedication occurred in the year 80. This inauguration lasted 100 days,⁵ during which 9, 000 animals were killed, 5, 000 of them on a single day. ⁶ The exterior is depicted on several coins of Titus's reign. ⁷ Spectacles in the Colosseum included gladiatorial bouts, animals hunts, mock sea-battles, re-creations of myths (as in that of Pasiphae, where, according to Martial,⁸ a bull actually mounted a woman), and even exhibitions of artificial forests. The dedication of the Colosseum in 80 doubtless raised the morale of the populace after the volcanic eruption of Vesuvius, the famine and epidemic that followed and the great fire in Rome in 79 and 80. And what a nice touch to build it on the very ground where the despised Nero had enjoyed himself on his lake.

But where did Vespasian and Titus get the money to erect the structure? The answer might be found in an inscription that was described for the first time in 1813 by one Carlo Fea. ⁹ Visitors to the Colosseum, entering by the present main entrance on the west, can still see a large marble block inscribed with four lines of Latin lying on the ground on the right-hand side of the passageway. It has been considerably restored, but two easily identified pieces of it are ancient.

In its present position, on the ground, we cannot see the underside of the stone, but it contains a festoon of leaves and animals decorated in a grandiose fashion. The stone must have originally served as an architrave that covered a passageway. ²⁰ The inscription could be seen as one approached and the decoration could be seen as one passed underneath. The inscription was restored between 1814 and 1822 and again, more accurately, in 1986. ²¹ It refers to the repair of the building during the reigns of Theodosius II and Valentinian III in 443 or 444. ²² With our two lords, Theodosius and Placidus Valentinianus Augusti, being well, Rufius Caecina Felix Lampadius, a most distinguished and illustrious prefect of the city, restored anew at his own expense the arena of the amphitheater together with the podium [the wall around the arena] and platform and rear doors, but also the tiers [of seats] repaired for viewing. " However, scholars, starting with Fea, noticed that between the letters of this inscription there are a number of little holes, at most one centimeter deep and often only a few millimeters deep.

There must once have been a previous inscription of metal letters that had been fastened to the marble by pegs, they concluded. In 1986, two scholars published a diagram showing the distribution of the holes. ²³ The holes form three sets of parallel lines, not all equally long—27 holes in the first line, 22 in the second line, and 18 in the third, for a total of 67. Though visible, they are, for the most part, not well preserved, because the surface of both original fragments was apparently smoothed and deepened at the time the later inscription was engraved, perhaps to make the holes less obvious.

In 1995, Professor Geza Alföldy of the University of Heidelberg published a decipherment of the earlier inscription based on these holes. ²⁴ This is not the first time that original inscriptions have been detected beneath existing inscriptions and reconstructed on the basis of small holes that once attached the letters. Professor Alföldy himself has restored some of these phantom inscriptions, including an inscription on the aqueduct of Segovia in Spain.

He has also confirmed an earlier reconstruction of the Vatican Obelisk inscription in St. Peter's Square in Rome, where, as here, the original inscription (of 30 B. C. E.) consisted of metal letters (probably gilded bronze) that were replaced in 14 C. E. by an inscription that was chiselled into the stone. ²⁵ He is thus an expert in so-called " ghost epigraphy. " ²⁶ Square brackets refer to reconstructed and/or assumed text. Parentheses indicate the complete form of abbreviated words. To this observer, the result of Professor Alföldy's reconstruction is insightful, albeit conjectural. As he himself recognizes, only about half of the holes have survived and a single hole or two could hold a variety of letters. If all this makes it very difficult, another factor makes it much easier.

Roman building inscriptions are extremely formulaic. Were it not for this fact, the task of re-creating this inscription would probably be impossible. Roman building inscriptions generally begin with the name of the ruler who constructed the building, followed by the name of the kind of building and the source of financing, to which various other details may be added. From the drawing of the holes (see following pages) it is easy to see that there were originally three lines of text and that the inscription must have been quite short—approximately 50 to 70 letters.

Another thing that helps a little is that the later inscription securely establishes the relationship between the two fragments with holes, one very small fragment and the other much larger. In other words, the reconstruction of this later inscription, which is comparatively easy, tells us how much space there was between the two original marble fragments. The two holes in the smaller fragment, one above the other, belong to the beginning of the first line. Their arrangement suggests an I, the beginning of the word Imperator—just what we would expect in a short building dedication.

That exhausts the letters from the small fragment. Then there is a space between the fragments. The space has room for just the two letters MR which complete the customary abbreviation for Imperator, emperor. On the large fragment, Alföldy has restored a T on the basis of a hole near the bottom of the stem and another at the right hand of the crossbar. The hole for the left end of the crossbar of the T has not survived; it presumably appeared on the missing part of the stone between the two fragments. The T could be the abbreviation for Titus, under whom the building was dedicated in 80.

It was customary for the emperor to take the name of his predecessor, in this case Vespasian, as part of his name. On the basis of succeeding holes, Alföldy restores the remainder of this line as CAES (the abbreviation for Caesar) and VESPASI. The last four letters of Vespasianus, the Latin for Vespasian, were on the part of the stone to the right, which has not survived. Similarly, Alföldy adds to this line the abbreviation for the remainder of Vespasian's titulary: AVG, for Augustus. The second line apparently

contained a long word because there appears to be no word divider in the line.

Dedicatory inscriptions often contain little triangles that serve as word dividers. Based on his study of the holes, Alföldy sees no hole for the peg of a word divider. (Note the word divider in the first line between “ CAES” and “ VESPASI. “) Thus, the 18 holes of the second line must belong to the letters of a single word. Here Alföldy has reconstructed AMPHITHEATR[V[M]; only the M is missing. Alföldy suggests that on the right was probably the word NOVUM, thus designating the building: “ New Amphitheater. “

In the third and final line, one would expect a closing formula—a reference to parts of the building, to the recipients of the building (i. e. , the Roman people) or to the cost or the source of the financing for the building. The small fragment tells us where each line of the inscription began, but we don't have that part of the small fragment where the third line begins. We do, however, know how far to the left of the larger fragment the third line began, based on the small fragment. Alföldy concludes that only a couple of letters are missing from the beginning of the third line.

If Professor Alföldy is right in conjecturing that this line contained information as to the source of the funding for the building, a word such as de or ex might well have been the preposition leading to the source of the funding. Alföldy suggests “ EX,” “ from. ” The next word is the key to the meaning of the inscription. Alföldy reconstructs MANVBI(1)S-boo~ The hole for the base of the left stem of the M is missing—it must have been off the edge of

the left side of the large fragment-but the holes for the other four points of the M are there. Then come three holes for the A.

Then another three holes, two for the top and bottom of the left stem of the N and one for the point at the right bottom of this letter. This is followed by three holes for the V. Only one hole has survived for the B. Then there are two holes for the I. Two holes, one above the other, held pegs for the last letter of the word, S; one hole was for the upper curve and one for the lower curve of the letter. This spells MANVBIS, but •the proper spelling is “manubiis”; Alföldy suggests that the I would have extended higher than the other letters, to signify, as is common in Latin inscriptions, a double I.

Thus the word properly spelled: MANVBIIS. Apparently, the phrase ex manubiis was standard in dedications of monuments, if we may judge from the second-century antiquarian, Aulus Gellius (15. 25. 1), who remarks that “all along the roof of the colonnades of Trajan’s forum there are placed gilded statues of horses and representations of military standards, and underneath is written Ex man ubiis. ” Man ubiis means booty. The phrase EX MANVBIIS would indicate the source of the funding for the structure. This would probably be followed by the well-known formula fieri iussit, “[he] ordered to be made. The Emperor Titus Caesar Vespasian Augustus ordered the new amphitheater to be made from the (proceeds from the sale of the) booty. ” Each letter of the inscription would have been created separately.

Sometimes they were formed from a mold that included the peg, but at other times they were sawed from a bronze plate; the pegs were later wrought and attached.

Letters produced in this way were by no means identical. Often the letters were created by several different craftsmen, introducing additional variations. One other peculiarity: Note that the T and the C at the beginning of the first line appear crowded together. Alföldy suggests that this was because the T was not there originally. The inscription, except for the I, was placed there by Vespasian before the more formal dedication of the building in 80 C. E. Even during Vespasian's reign games were held there, although the structure was not quite finished.

A chronicler writing in the fourth century states that the building was actually dedicated by Vespasian, although it was supplemented by Titus. 27 When Titus succeeded Vespasian in 79 G. E. and added the two top tiers that essentially completed the building, he naturally wanted to include his own name in the dedicatory inscription, which he did by squeezing in the I for Titus. According to Alföldy, when Titus arranged to have the letter T inserted, the C, the A and the E (of CAES) were moved and fastened in the following fashion: The peg that in the first version had held the C was in the second version employed for the I.

Above and to the right a new peg was inserted in order to hold the T better. To strengthen the additional punctuation mark (a period), a new peg was inserted after the T. As for the letters CAE, the original A was held by three pegs. In the second version the two left pegs were used for the C. The third peg served to fasten the A. In the upper curve of the C and in the point of the A, a new peg was inserted to hold these letters better. The E in both versions was fastened with one and the same peg.

Thus a change was made only in the position of the letters, which in the second version must have been moved somewhat further to the right. It may at first seem surprising that such a short inscription served as the dedication for such a magnificent building. Alföldy suggests that there was no more room on the architrave above the particular entrance or gateway where this inscription was placed. This suggestion is supported by the fact that the inscription was found at one of the side gates of the Colosseum in the interior of the building.

This inscription was probably a very much abbreviated version of a larger inscription on the podium that contained the full nomenclature of the ruler, Imp(erator) Titus Caesar Divi Vespasiani f(ilius) Vespasianus Augustus; it would also have included his full titles of office with the number of times he held that office, as well as the most important individual parts of the building, such as the arena, the podium, the levels and the gates; finally it would have stated that the building was begun by Vespasian and was financed from the manubiae (the nominative; manubiis, as in ex man ubiis, is ablative).

It would presumably close with a mention of the grandiose spectacles with which the building was dedicated and which are mentioned by later writers. While Professor Alföldy's reconstruction is admittedly conjectural, it has been endorsed by two of the most outstanding scholars in the field of Roman history MANUBLAI- TEMPLES. The Colosseum was not the only grand structure in Rome to be funded from the spoils of victory. It was commonplace for emperors in many periods to use their battle-gained riches to build new temples.

Both the Imperial Forum, which encompassed the forums of the emperors (including Augustus's Forum, which held his Temple to Mars Ultor), and the Roman Forum (right), which included the Temple of Concord and the Temple of Castor and Pollux (the three columns visible left of center) were partially funded ex manubiis, "from the spoils" of war. (The Colosseum and the Arch of Titus can be seen at far left, in the background of the photograph; see the plan below right for the relationship of the buildings to each other.)²⁸ and epigraphy, Fergus Miller of Oxford University and Werner Eck of the University of Cologne. Eck, whose expertise is precisely in the field of reconstructing inscriptions such as ours that have been removed in order to be replaced by others; writes that Alföldy's reconstruction is truly convincing,²⁸ and Millar speaks of it as "spectacular" and asserts that no hesitation need be felt over it.²⁹ Moreover, Alföldy's reconstruction is also consistent with what we might expect, considering the history and the customs of the time.

We focus on what is clearly the most significant word in the restored inscription, manubiis, which indicates that the work was paid for from the manubiae, that is the sale of booty.³⁰ Successful Roman generals of the late Republican era, including Marius, Lucullus, Pompey and Julius Caesar, often legally acquired enormous fortunes from the booty they took in their military campaigns. "In a document listing his achievements, Augustus states that in his fifth consulship (29 B. C. E.), he gave out of his spoils of war a thousand sesterces to each soldier settled in colonies and that on his own private land he built a temple to Mars and the Augustan Forum;³² in the temples in the Capitol, he consecrated gifts from the spoils of war that cost

him about 100 million sesterces. 33 Augustus's successor Tiberius used the money that he received from the sale of his spoils (de manubus) to restore the Temple of Concord and of Castor and Pollux “~ Closer to our case, in 63 B. C. E. the Roman general Pompey intervened in a civil war in Judea in which he besieged and finally captured the Jerusalem Temple.

Although he did not take any of the Temple treasure, he presented his companions in arms with what Josephus calls “splendid rewards.” 5 The custom seems to have continued during the reigns of the Flavian emperors with whom we are concerned here, as evidenced by the extensive discussion Aulus Gellius devotes to the meaning of the word manubiae. The financial pressure on Vespasian must have been tremendous, if we may trust the testimony of Suetonius, 36 who states that Vespasian found the treasury

According to the Oxford Classical Dictionary, “manubiae” refers to funds “raised by an official sale of war booty”; manubiae could be used to pay troops, put on games or build public buildings such as temples. and the privy purse in such a desperate state that he declared at the beginning of his reign that forty billion sesterces³⁷ (certainly billions of dollars in modern purchasing power) were needed to set the state upright financially.

This enormous deficit is the largest sum of money ever mentioned in antiquity. 8 He was consequently driven by necessity to raise money from military spoils (manubiae, precisely the word used in the Colosseum inscription, as reconstructed by Professor Alföldy) and other plunder (rapinae). The next question is from what war Vespasian and Titus would have obtained their manubiae. They were of course successive generals of

the Roman forces sent to Palestine to suppress the Great Jewish Revolt (66-70 G. E.), which effectively ended with the burning of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Jewish Temple.

Prior to being named general in Judea, however, Vespasian had commanded a legion in Germany and had fought some 30 battles in Britain. 39 But there is no indication that there was much valuable booty to be acquired in either of these places. After leaving the command in Judea to Titus, Vespasian as emperor dispatched Petillius Cerealis to put down a revolt in Germany. Vespasian also sent his younger son Domitian to squelch a revolt in Gaul; and he sent Rubrius Gallus to punish the Sarmatians, who had invaded Moesia (modern Serbia and Bulgaria).

But these were not achievements of Vespasian himself, and in any case there is no indication that there was in any of these countries much booty to be taken. As for Titus, there is no indication that he had served as a general prior to his service in Judea. 40 By contrast, we know that the Romans acquired tremendous treasures in their conquest of Judea, especially in Jerusalem, and above all from the Temple, which Herod had renovated at extraordinary expense and which was still being reconstructed almost on the very eve of its destruction in 70 G. E. 1 The Letter of Aristeas states that the Temple “ was built with a lavishness and sumptuousness beyond all precedent.

From the construction of the doorway and its fastenings to the door-posts and the solid nature of the lintel, it was obvious that no expense had been spared. “ 42 The Talmud states that “ he who has not seen the Temple of

Herod has never in his life seen a beautiful building. “ 4’ In his description of the exterior of the Temple, the first-century Jewish historian Josephus remarks that it lacked nothing that could astound either one’s soul or one’s eyes. 4 “ Being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold,” he adds, “ the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from solar rays. ” Moreover, the Temple had been the recipient of countless gifts.

Thus, we are told that King Monobazus of Adiabene in northern Mesopotamia had handles made of gold for all the vessels used on the Day of Atonement⁴⁵ and that his mother, Helena, set a golden candlestick over the door of the sanctuary. 6 Among Roman leaders who gave valuable gifts to the Temple were Sosius, 47, Marcus Agrippa⁴⁸ and Augustus. 49 We hear specifically of treasures that were delivered over to the victorious Romans by priests, including lamp-stands, tables, bowls and platters, all of solid gold and very massive, as well as many other treasures and sacred ornaments. 50 In particular, Josephus asserts that the altar and lampstand, both made of gold, weighed no less than two talents (approximately 66 pounds). ‘

When the Temple was razed the Romans burnt the treasury chambers, “ in which lay infinite [apeiron, ‘ boundless’] sums of money, infinite [again the word used is apeiroij piles of raiment, and other valuables; for this, in short, was the general repository of Jewish wealth, to which the rich had consigned the contents of their dismantled houses. “ 52 The Romans presumably saved for themselves at least some of these valuables. Many people donated houses and fields to the Temple, which were then sold and the proceeds deposited.