

# The Colosseum as an Enduring Icon of Rome: A Comparison of the Reception of the Colosseum and the Circus Maximus.

“While stands the Coliseum, Rome shall stand; When falls the Coliseum, Rome shall fall; And when Rome falls - the World.”<sup>1</sup> The preceding quote by Lord Byron is just one example of how the Colosseum and its spectacles have captivated people for centuries. However, before the Colosseum was constructed, the Circus Maximus served as Rome’s premier entertainment venue. The Circus was home to gladiator matches, animal hunts, and more in addition to the chariot races. When the Colosseum was completed in 80 CE, it became the new center of ancient Roman amusement. In the modern day, thousands of tourists each year visit the ruins of the Colosseum, while the Circus Maximus serves as an open field for joggers, bikers, and other recreational purposes, and is not necessarily an essential stop for tourists. The ancient Circus does not draw nearly the same crowds that the Colosseum does. Through an analysis of the sources, there are several explanations as to why the Colosseum remains a popular icon of Rome while the Circus Maximus has been neglected by many people, despite it being older than and just as popular as the Colosseum in ancient times.

## Historiography

Early scholarship on the Colosseum and other amphitheaters focused on them as sites of death and immorality. Katherine Welch sites L. Friedländer as one who adopted such a view,

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<sup>1</sup> George Gordon Byron, “Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, canto IV, st. 145,” in *The Selected Poetry of Lord Byron*, edited by Leslie A. Marchand (New York: The Modern Library, 1951), 148.

arguing that his Christian values clouded his objectivity. He thought the spectacles consumed the Roman people, corrupting them in some manner.<sup>2</sup>

With time, historians began to view the Colosseum as a symbol of the power of the Roman state. Welch emphasizes the Colosseum and amphitheaters in general, as one of Rome's most "emblematic" constructions. She argues that because amphitheaters were so common in Roman culture, they were often ignored by scholars or passed off as a "manifestation of Roman cruelty."<sup>3</sup> Welch's book specifically addresses the evolution of both amphitheater architecture and of the spectacles held within their walls.

More scholars, like Welch, are now looking at the amphitheaters in new light. Hopkins and Beard refer to the Colosseum as "the most famous, and instantly recognizable, monument to have survived from the classical world."<sup>4</sup> In addition to a general history, they detail how the structure has generally survived into the modern day and review its treatment by the Christians and Mussolini and his fascist party.

Alison Futrell and Paul Plass focus on the spectacles produced in Roman amphitheaters, viewing the arena as a social and political institution. Futrell states that the Colosseum especially was a site of "emperor-worship", but other Roman leaders like Augustus emphasized this in amphitheaters that pre-date the Colosseum.<sup>5</sup> Plass' work also centers on bloodshed and the political aspects of the games in the Colosseum. He claims that there was a "need to process violence," which was the purpose of the games.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Katherine E. Welch, *The Roman Amphitheatre: From Its Origins to the Colosseum* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Keith Hopkins and Mary Beard, *The Colosseum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), vii.

<sup>5</sup> Alison Futrell, *Blood in the Arena: The Spectacle of Roman Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Plass, *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome: Arena Sport and Political Suicide* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press), 3.

Claire Holleran views the Colosseum as a propaganda tool used by Vespasian and subsequent emperors that displayed the power of the Roman state, as well as the emperor himself. Holleran believes that the Roman leaders assumed that “such an awe-inspiring construction should surely be feared and obeyed.”<sup>7</sup> She agrees that the Colosseum is a symbol of power, believing that it demonstrates the “ingenuity of Vespasian’s political vision.”<sup>8</sup> However, the amphitheater still cannot rid itself of the image of bloodshed and violence.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, Roman circuses, including the famous Circus Maximus, have been areas of intense study by historians. John H. Humphrey has completed various works on circuses, including *Roman Circuses*, which takes an archaeological viewpoint, including a focus on the Circus Maximus. Humphrey argues that since the circuses are so large, it makes it difficult to study them. The challenge lies in excavation, as it is such an immense task due to their large size.<sup>10</sup> However, Humphrey states that this does not completely hinder research and scholarship on circuses since enough information can be obtained to form their history and an understanding of how circuses functioned.<sup>11</sup>

## Colosseum History

In 75 CE, Emperor Vespasian started construction on the Flavian Amphitheater, known today as the Colosseum.<sup>12</sup> The Flavian Amphitheater received the name “Colosseum” from the

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<sup>7</sup> Claire Holleran, “The development of public entertainment venues in Rome and Italy,” in *Bread and Circuses*, eds. Kathryn Lomas and Tim Cornell (New York: Routledge, 2003), 56-57.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.

<sup>10</sup> John H. Humphrey, *Roman Circuses: Arenas for Chariot Racing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Sear, *Roman Architecture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 23.

nearby statue of Nero, called the “Colossus.”<sup>13</sup> Located in the heart of Ancient Rome, the Colosseum was constructed over the former site of the lake that was part of Nero’s *Domus Aurea*, after it was drained. Vespasian survived to see the first and second stories constructed before his death in 79 CE. Emperor Titus took the project over and saw the final two stories go up. He then dedicated the Colosseum with 100 days of games in 80 CE, even though it was not completely finished.<sup>14</sup>

Vespasian built the Colosseum using his war spoils from his victory over Jerusalem. He built numerous public buildings with those spoils, creating spaces for the public to enjoy. The Colosseum was the most famous of Vespasian’s projects. By constructing buildings for the public, it increased his political and social prestige. The Colosseum and its spectacles, like other earlier amphitheatres, were key propaganda tools for the Flavians and their successors by increasing their *dignitas*.<sup>15</sup>

When finished, the Colosseum’s dimensions were approximately 189 meters by 156 meters and it was 48 meters high.<sup>16</sup> It had a seating capacity for about 45,000 to 55,000 spectators. The amphitheater also had eighty arched openings that served as entrances and exits.<sup>17</sup> Seventy-six numbered entrances allowed common spectators inside. The common spectators were given a numbered token that corresponded to one of the numbered entrances. On the north side of the arena was a special decorated, non-numbered entrance that led to the imperial box.<sup>18</sup> The gladiators used another reserved, non-numbered entrance for entering the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>14</sup> A.T. Fear, “Status Symbol or Leisure Pursuit? Amphitheatres in the Roman World,” *Latomus* 59 (2000): 87.

<sup>15</sup> Claridge, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>17</sup> Sear, 136.

<sup>18</sup> Richardson Jr., 8; and Sear, 136.

arena and the other for their bodies to be carried out.<sup>19</sup> Wooden barriers were used to ease the flow of traffic into the arena.<sup>20</sup>

The Colosseum also had a *velarium* or awning that would shield the spectators from the sun. This was operated by sailors as it took hundreds of skilled men to operate it. The *velarium* covered the entire seating area, leaving only an opening in the middle to illuminate the arena itself.<sup>21</sup> The above ground settings were detailed, but what would later lie beneath the arena floor would make the shows more intriguing.

Emperor Domitian added the system of underground corridors, or *hypogeum*, after the completion of the Colosseum itself.<sup>22</sup> It was a labyrinth-like array of passages located almost two stories underneath the arena. There were thirty-two alcoves that each held a cage and an elevator. These elevators hauled the animals from their cages and were also used for gladiators and scenery. The elevators were run by a counterweight system, usually operated by slaves.<sup>23</sup>

A variety of materials were used in the construction of the Colosseum. The majority of it consisted of raw materials brought from the quarries in Tivoli, which were opened in the second century BCE. Travertine, a hard limestone that was extremely durable, was a key material in the construction of the Colosseum.<sup>24</sup> An estimated 100,000 cubic meters of travertine were used in construction and over 300 tons of iron clamps were used to hold the blocks of travertine together.<sup>25</sup> Concrete was also extensively used in the building of the amphitheater. Tufa, a light

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<sup>19</sup> Sear, 137.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>21</sup> Hazel Dodge, "Amusing the Masses: Buildings for Entertainment and Leisure in the Roman World," in *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire*, eds. D.S. Potter and D.J. Mattingly (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 222.

<sup>22</sup> Marion Elizabeth Blake, *Roman Construction in Italy from Tiberius through the Flavians* (Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1959), 91.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>24</sup> Sear, 83.

<sup>25</sup> Claridge, 276.

volcanic rock, was put in the inner walls to make the material lighter, but it was strong. The seats inside the Colosseum were marble, and the imperial box was of a special colored marble.<sup>26</sup>

Arches and columns were used throughout the Colosseum. On the outside, the first story is decorated with simple Tuscan columns. The second story columns are Ionic and the third and fourth stories are Corinthian, the last story's being more of a flat pilaster. Arches are used all around the first three levels, but on the top level, there are only small square windows.<sup>27</sup> Arches are also used inside the walkways.

Additional architectural elements exist on the exterior as well. Located above the top story windows, are stone brackets with matching sockets through the upper cornices that held wooden posts, a total of 240, which aided in the support of the *velarium* rigging. Along the perimeter of the Colosseum, approximately 18 meters out, there are stone posts that may have acted as anchors for the *velarium* rigging or as a barrier where tickets were checked. Others suggest it was a religious boundary, or that the posts may have served all three purposes.<sup>28</sup>

Inside the Colosseum, there were various types of spectacles. The gladiator matches were not simply a fight to the death. The combatants were supposed to fight until one opponent was killed, fatally wounded, or otherwise immobilized. Although rare, matches could end in a tie.<sup>29</sup> Animal hunts and displays were also popular. The animals were used in hunting scenarios (*venationes*) and man versus beast duels (*noxii*) were especially loved by the people.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the various spectacles, "elaborate executions" of criminals were staged, some even presented like Greek dramas. Examples of such executions include mythological

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<sup>26</sup> Richardson, Jr., 10.

<sup>27</sup> Claridge, 282.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>29</sup> Alison Futrell, *The Roman Games: A Sourcebook* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 101.

<sup>30</sup> Lesley Adkins and Roy A. Adkins, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 348.

deaths that were re-enacted on criminals, like Orpheus being eaten by a bear or Hercules' death by fire. These executions became part of the daily entertainment. The executions that took place within the Colosseum became a controversial element of the spectacles, contributing to their end altogether.<sup>31</sup>

The spectacles were often used as extensions of emperors' power. Romans of all standings went to the Colosseum where the emperors used the opportunity to create symbolic bonds with the people. Emperors, as did magistrates of the past, used the games for political advancement and to increase their prestige. The games made the populace feel like they were on common ground with their leaders. The emperors especially used this tactic to make themselves more popular with their people.<sup>32</sup>

The Colosseum was used continuously until its spectacles would be brought to an end by natural disaster and the passage of time. A large fire in 217 CE burned the upper most level of seating and the arena floor, both of which were primarily wooden. Sources state the amphitheater was supposedly not fully operational until 240 with additional repairs needed in 250 or 252 and 320.<sup>33</sup>

Over time, the Colosseum and the games would also come under fire with the rise of the church. Increasing numbers of people began to see them as cruel and immoral.<sup>34</sup> Churches and bishops competed with the games for attention. Church officials despised this, believing that funds should not be wasted on such vulgarities. Often, if a church celebration and the games were held on the same day, the games would attract more people.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Welch, 145-146.

<sup>32</sup> Holleran, 51.

<sup>33</sup> Claridge, 276-277.

<sup>34</sup> Jill Harries, "Favor populi: pagans, Christians and public entertainment in late Antique Italy." in *Bread and Circuses*, ed. Kathryn Lomas and Tim Cornell (New York: Routledge, 2003), 132.

<sup>35</sup> Harries, 133.

The growth of Christianity brought increasing pressure on Roman authorities to end the bloody spectacles in the Colosseum. Even before Constantine made Christianity a tolerated religion in the Empire in 313, Christian writers and church authorities were speaking out against them. Christian author Tertullian condemned the games around 200 and bishops and priests spoke out in opposition to them as well. Sharp criticism from the newly accepted Christian community caused Constantine to end the custom of condemning criminals to gladiator training or execution in the arena in 325.<sup>36</sup>

Still, Christian leaders found it hard to compete with the popular entertainment of the amphitheater. Games in the Colosseum and Christian events often overlapped, drawing crowds away from the church. Bishops continued to denounce the brutality of the amphitheater, criticizing their fellow Romans for attending them instead of the religious events. Theodosius I and his sons had the games banned on the Sabbath days and Holy days in the 390s, but still the church could not draw away from the popularity of the games.<sup>37</sup>

The end date of the games is uncertain as there are various dates as to when they officially came to a close. Historian Jill Harries states that Constantine attempted to stop the games by banning them in 325 CE, but that was not successful as the games continued as before. She also states that Theodosius I later had the games banned on Sundays and other important Christian holidays and festivals in the fourth century.<sup>38</sup> Boatwright, Gargola, and Talbert claim that Theodosius II ended gladiator fights in 407, with animal hunts and fights continuing until 523.<sup>39</sup> Other historians, including Köhne, have the games ending under the reign of Honorius,

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<sup>36</sup> Köhne, 12, 30.

<sup>37</sup> Harries, 133.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>39</sup> Mary Boatwright, Daniel J. Gargola, and Richard J. A. Talbert, *The Romans: From Village to Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 388.



who banned the games in 404.<sup>40</sup> There is evidence, however, of gladiator contests continuing beyond those dates as the last mentioned gladiator matches were held in 434/5.<sup>41</sup>

Cultural changes may have contributed to the end of the games. Ensuring a steady supply of exotic animals for hunts and fights was an issue. Low supplies of animals and men hindered the spectacles, diminishing the excitement. At the same time, the chariot races at the circuses had gained in popularity, and Romans lost interest in the gladiators. A slow economy was also to blame. Additionally, Roman elites were under increasing pressure not to attend the games so that they would appear modest and moral. Priests especially were told to distance themselves from the games. It was no longer fitting for the top of society to be seen at the Colosseum. Furthermore, the Roman economy, along with the state, was weakening, but many emperors were determined to hold games so not to lose popularity with the masses. The games were costly, but Roman emperors declined to cut back on them.<sup>42</sup>

Over time, the Colosseum was neglected and fell into disrepair, making it an easy target for stone robbers. Theodosius and Valentinian made further repairs to the Colosseum, most likely as a result of a serious earthquake in 443. As the Colosseum continued to age, more construction was required in 464 and 508.<sup>43</sup> After then, the amphitheater went unused for public spectacles. By 1362, the outer south side of the Colosseum had collapsed, likely the cause of an earthquake in 1349. This freed stone for robbers to use in the construction of various palaces, hospitals, churches, and to repair bridges, roads, and Tiber wharves.<sup>44</sup> Elite Romans took advantage of this stone as well. Pope Urban VIII allowed the Barberini family to take travertine

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<sup>40</sup> John Murray, *A Handbook of Rome and its Environs: Forming Part II of The Handbook for Travellers in Central Italy* (London: John Murry, Albemarle Street, 1862), 45; Köhne, 30.

<sup>41</sup> Claridge, 277.

<sup>42</sup> Harries, 132-134.

<sup>43</sup> Claridge, 276-277.

<sup>44</sup> Claridge, 278.

from the Colosseum to build their Palazzo Barberini in the seventeenth century.<sup>45</sup> The Palace of St. Mark and the Farnese Palace are other examples of buildings that were constructed with stone taken from the Colosseum.<sup>46</sup>

Some Romans over the centuries used the Colosseum itself as a living space rather than strip material from it. The vaulted spaces were used as housing and workshops that were rented out until the twelfth century.<sup>47</sup> The Frangipane family took over part of the east side of the amphitheater to use as their own personal fortress. The Frangipane's eventually lost control of it in the mid fourteenth century to their rivals, the Annibaldi's. The Annibaldi family held a bullfight in the Colosseum in 1332, and later sold their holding to the Christian "Order of St. Salvador" in the 1360s.<sup>48</sup> This religious order held onto the northern third of the Colosseum until the early nineteenth century when the state would take possession.<sup>49</sup>

Although it had become a dwelling in the early medieval period, eventually interested persons began to explore the Colosseum with excavations. Early excavations in the fifteenth century revealed parts of the ancient drainage system, left from Emperor Nero's *Domus Aurea*.<sup>50</sup> An 1862 guidebook to Rome commented that "the French" cleared the porticos of debris in the 1700s.<sup>51</sup> Exploratory trenches were dug in the early eighteenth century in search of the arena floor. In the 1790s, debris was removed from corridors uncovering parts of the substructure; however, flooding in the excavation sites proved to be a serious problem, and many sections were later filled back in with dirt as a result.<sup>52</sup> The substructure of the arena was partly

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<sup>45</sup> Hopkins and Beard, 161.

<sup>46</sup> Murray, 45.

<sup>47</sup> Claridge, 277.

<sup>48</sup> Murray, 45; Hopkins and Beard, 163.

<sup>49</sup> Claridge, 278.

<sup>50</sup> Hopkins and Beard, 171.

<sup>51</sup> Murray, 45.

<sup>52</sup> Hopkins and Beard, 171.

excavated from 1810-1814 and 1847, with archeologist Pietro Rosa uncovering the complete depth of the substructure. Flooding took its toll again, filling the site with water, which took years to remove. The Fascists later did more work, completely exposing substructure in the 1930s.<sup>53</sup>

The first excavations sponsored by the Italian state were those carried out in the 1870s. The initial excavations under church sponsorship were careful not to hurt religious effects in the Colosseum. The state sponsored work was less cautious, causing an outcry from the Catholic Church. By this time, the religious ties to the Colosseum were waning, and the site was established as a state monument.<sup>54</sup>

Near the end of the eighteenth century, the majority of stone robbing had stopped and efforts turned toward preservation and restoration.<sup>55</sup> Considerable rebuilding of the Colosseum began and potentially dangerous, unstable sections were destroyed to avoid endangering visitors to the site.<sup>56</sup> When repair started, the ruins were covered in plant life. Botanists claimed the amphitheater had its own microclimate, and about 420 species of plant life were found. This vegetation was carefully removed in 1871 as it posed a threat to the masonry. Even today, plants still grow wherever they can inside the ruins.<sup>57</sup>

Several different supports were constructed to help prevent further sections of the Colosseum from falling and crumbling. Pius VII had a support wall built on the southwest side during his time as pope.<sup>58</sup> Additional support wedges were constructed on the outer southeast and northwest walls in 1807 and 1827, respectively, to prevent them from collapsing further.

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<sup>53</sup> Hopkins and Beard, 171-172; Claridge, 278.

<sup>54</sup> Hopkins and Beard, 171-173.

<sup>55</sup> Claridge, 278.

<sup>56</sup> Hopkins and Beard, 166.

<sup>57</sup> Claridge, 278.

<sup>58</sup> Murray, 45.

Pope Gregory XVI sponsored reconstruction of eight arches on the south side and other miscellaneous reinforcements were made on the interior in 1831, 1846, and in the 1930s.

Maintenance and preservation is a still constant challenge.<sup>59</sup>

After restoration and preservation efforts, the Colosseum became a popular tourist attraction. As Hopkins and Beard comment, the 1843 edition of *Murray's Handbook to Central Italy* highly recommended a visit to the Colosseum, warning that many aspects of Rome were sure to disappoint, but the amphitheater was worth the trip. At the time of the handbook's publishing, there was a staircase that gave visitors access to the upper levels, providing them with an extraordinary view of Rome.<sup>60</sup> The 1862 Murray's handbook commented that the Colosseum could be lit with blue and red lights with the permission of the police for the price of 150 *scudi*.<sup>61</sup>

The Colosseum was one of Ancient Rome's greatest architectural achievements, started by Emperor Vespasian. The amphitheater was built as a venue for the masses, but also as a political tool to increase the status of the Flavians. The Colosseum remains an example of Roman engineering and architectural ingenuity as a large portion of it still stands today. It has withstood neglect and vandalism; undergoing restoration since the 1800s. In modern times, it serves as a venue for local events and as a popular site for tourists. The Colosseum has survived through the centuries and remains one of the most recognizable images of Rome; keeping a part of the past alive.

### **Circus Maximus History**

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<sup>59</sup> Claridge, 278; Hopkins and Beard, 171.

<sup>60</sup> John Murray, *Handbook for travellers in central Italy, including the Papal states, Rome, and the cities of Etruria, with a traveling map* (London: J. Murray and Son, 1843) as cited in Hopkins and Beard, 1-3.

<sup>61</sup> Murray, 47.

The Circus Maximus, according to numerous historians, is “Rome’s oldest and largest public space.”<sup>62</sup> The ancient circus pre-dates the Colosseum, as it was first created by Rome’s first kings in the sixth century BCE. According to legend, Romulus founded the circus in the valley that lies between the Palentine and Aventine hills, where a brook also ran down the middle of the valley and was channeled at an early date.<sup>63</sup> The Circus Maximus, at its height in the Empire, was twelve times larger than the Colosseum at 621 meters long and 118 meters wide. Its *spina* was 335 meters long and 8 meters wide with referee boxes at the end. Charioteers drove approximately 5200 meters in a traditional seven-lap race, with the crowds enthusiastically cheering them on and taking delight in the misfortunes of the opponents.<sup>64</sup> As of the second century CE, the circus could hold 150,000 people, but some sources have it as high as 250,000. The games, like those in the Colosseum, were free to all.<sup>65</sup>

Like the Colosseum, the circus was a place for people and their leaders to interact and for sponsors to show off their wealth. If a leader failed to attend, it could have potentially hurt his popularity. This happened to Tiberius due to his sporadic attendance at the circus games.<sup>66</sup> During the Republic, sponsors attendance at games was not as important as there were usually multiple people holding games at various times. In the Empire, emperors’ attendance at the spectacles symbolized a bond with the masses as not being at the games caused the people to see the emperor as breaking that bond.

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<sup>62</sup> Claridge, 264; Richardson, Jr., 84.

<sup>63</sup> Richardson, Jr., 84.

<sup>64</sup> Richardson, Jr., 85; and Junkelmann, “On the Starting Line with Ben Hur,” 94-96; Cornelia Ewigleben, “‘What These Women Love is the Sword’: The Performers and Their Audiences,” in *Gladiators and Caesars: The Power of Spectacle in Rome*, eds. Eckart Köhne and Cornelia Ewigleben, trans. Ralph Jackson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 135.

<sup>65</sup> Köhne, 9.

<sup>66</sup> Boatwright, Gargola, and Talbert, 383.

Sponsors of the games often tried to outdo each other to win popularity or election votes, similar to amphitheater games. The sponsors often tried to find reasons to have games repeated to make the spectacles last longer, having themselves appear more giving. Sources state that the annual games of the *ludi romani* were held three times and the *ludi plebei* held five times due to “religious ritual infringements.” Finally, the Romans passed a law that allowed only a single repeat of games to cut back on the constant barrage of games, although the year the law was passed is unknown.<sup>67</sup>

There were about twenty-four chariot races held in a single day during the *ludi romani* during the Empire, but contrary to popular belief, there were not enough races to fill the entire day.<sup>68</sup> Other spectacles were held in the circus, including gladiator matches, animal hunts and displays, and athletic events like boxing or running. Horseback racing, although rare, was also held in the Circus Maximus and sometimes featured jockeys racing with two horses, having to switch back and forth from horse to horse while they were running, also known as “Roman-Riding”.<sup>69</sup>

From the time of the Republic to the Empire, the physical structure of the Circus Maximus changed. Tarquinius Priscus is credited with holding the first true circus games in the sixth century BCE after his return from the war with the Latins. The games he held in the valley were supposedly more elaborate than those of the past and it was also the first time the ground was marked out for the circus. He also allowed people to build seats for better viewing of the games.<sup>70</sup> Tarquinius Superbus had additional seating constructed with plebian labor.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Köhne, 15.

<sup>68</sup> Junkelmann, “On the Starting Line with Ben Hur,” 98; Köhne, 9.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>70</sup> Titus Livius, 1.35.7-8.

<sup>71</sup> Titus Livius, 1.56.2-3; and Humphrey, 66.

During the early Republic, sources state the circus resembled a Greek hippodrome. The valley was likely swampy and had no continuous seating around it. The first starting gate was constructed around 329 BCE and was probably wooden, but painted with bright colors.<sup>72</sup> Around that same time, according to Livy, “chariot cells” or starting boxes were built.<sup>73</sup> Some historians suggest that this indicates more “sophisticated” racing was evolving. Before the starting gates and boxes, it is unclear of what the starting process consisted of.<sup>74</sup> The original *spina* may have simply been the channeled brook, probably surrounded by statues mounted on columns. In the early Republic, the brook of the *spina* became a euripus that had several bridges across it, but it was not completely covered.<sup>75</sup>

The circus continued its growth and use through the Republic. In 196 BCE, Lucius Stertinius constructed an arch in the Circus Maximus, possibly in the middle of the semi-circular area. In 194 or 191 BCE, the censors for the games had the aediles appoint separate seating for senators and the common masses. Censors Q. Fulvius Flaccus and A. Postumius Albinus in 174 BCE rebuilt the gates and set up the *ova*, a set of seven large wooden eggs that indicated the number of laps run to the crowd.<sup>76</sup> Aediles in 169 gave games in the circus that supposedly included 63 “*Africanae besita*”, 40 bears, and elephants.<sup>77</sup>

Julius Caesar is credited with establishing the final shape of the Circus Maximus. He defined the semi-circular end and the overall shape of the circus. Caesar enlarged the circus as well, setting it at 621 meters long and 118 meters wide. He also built permanent levels of seating, replacing the wooden benches.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Humphrey, 68; and Richardson, Jr., 84.

<sup>73</sup> Titus Livius, 8.20.1-2.

<sup>74</sup> Humphrey, 68.

<sup>75</sup> Richardson, Jr., 84.

<sup>76</sup> ; Titus Livius, 41.27.6-7; Humphrey, 69; and Richardson, Jr., 85.

<sup>77</sup> Thomas Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 60.

<sup>78</sup> Humphrey, 73; Richardson, Jr., 85; Köhne, 10.

After Caesar's death, changes continued. Marcus Agrippa added a set of seven dolphins to match the *ova* in 33 BCE. Over time, a single story arcade containing shops and living spaces above them was built, creating a marketplace. The arcade also had passages that helped the crowds reach the seats and stairs that led to the different levels in a similar pattern as the Colosseum.<sup>79</sup>

A fire damaged the Circus Maximus in 31 BCE, but Augustus continued building on it not long after.<sup>80</sup> He built a box for himself, his family, and friends to view the games, called the *Pulvinar*, on the side near the Palatine about halfway along the length of the circus. The *Pulvinar* had state and religious functions and was likely decorated with couches and other comforts.<sup>81</sup> Augustus's main accomplishment in the circus was placing an obelisk on the *spina*. He brought an obelisk of Rameses II from Heliopolis in Egypt. It was set up on the east end of the *spina* in 10 BCE. The obelisk was supposedly set up as a monument to commemorate Augustus' victory over Egypt.<sup>82</sup>

Around 7 BCE, the Circus Maximus was starting to become a site of immense grandeur. At the time, there were three tiers of seats; the lowest tier was constructed of stone while the others were wooden. The stone seats were for the important citizens and the wooden for others. There were twelve starting gates enclosed by a set of double gates that could be opened at the same time.<sup>83</sup>

Seating was now located all around the circus, except in the area of the starting gates.<sup>84</sup> Humphrey states that prominent citizens, including senators and *equites*, had their own seats in

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<sup>79</sup> Richardson, Jr., 85.

<sup>80</sup> Richardson, Jr., 85.

<sup>81</sup> Augustus, "*Res Gestae Divi Augusti*," 3.19; Richardson, Jr., 85; and Humphrey, 78.

<sup>82</sup> Richardson, Jr., 85, 273; and Claridge, 264

<sup>83</sup> Richardson, Jr., 85.

<sup>84</sup> Humphrey, 73.



the circus. It is unknown where these seats were located in the circus, but men and women could sit together, unlike in the Colosseum. The seating was tight and uncomfortable as people were crammed next to one another although there were lines on the seats to mark a single seat. The upper wooden seats were said to be steep and the spectators may have used footstools.<sup>85</sup>

Tiberius did not have the same experience with the circus as Augustus did. Tiberius upset the crowds when he refused to have his birthday recognized during the *ludi plebeii* since it fell during that time. Sources state that he rejected an extra chariot race to honor his birthday. This earned him an unfavorable reputation with the masses. He rarely attended the games at the circus, upsetting the bond between leader and people.<sup>86</sup> However, after a fire in 36 CE started in the shops near the circus and spread to the upper seating on the Aventine side, Tiberius gave money for the reconstruction of those damaged areas and for losses.<sup>87</sup>

When Caligula became emperor in 37 CE, the emperor's involvement in the games returned. Caligula held games constantly, from morning to evening according to Suetonius. He was a fan of the red and green factions and colored the arena sand to represent them. Once, he was disturbed in the middle of the night by people in the circus who wanted to secure seats for the next day's games. Caligula had them chased out and twenty people were crushed to death in the chaos.<sup>88</sup>

Work on the Circus Maximus continued with Claudius. He rebuilt the starting gates in marble or another stone with a marble facing. Claudius also worked on the turning posts and the barrier. In addition, he assigned new seats to the senators.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Humphrey, 76-77.

<sup>86</sup> Suetonius, *The Life of Tiberius*, 26; Köhne, 20.

<sup>87</sup> Humphrey, 100.

<sup>88</sup> Suetonius, *The Life of Caligula*, 18, 26.

<sup>89</sup> Richardson, Jr., 85; Humphrey, 101.

Emperor Nero was also fond of the Circus Maximus. Nero had permanent seats given to the *equites* in front of the common masses.<sup>90</sup> He supposedly drove chariots, loved equestrian sports, and even created the Neronian games in his honor. In 68 CE, Nero supposedly competed in chariot racing events in Greece, driving a ten-horse team in Olympia. Although he fell out of his chariot twice and was unable to reach the finish, a “well-instructed” official declared him the winner.<sup>91</sup>

The infamous fire in 64 CE began in the Circus Maximus. The fire started in the shops located beside the circus on the Palatine side. Shops filled with inflammable goods fueled the fire and, with help of the wind, it rapidly spread over the circus, consuming most of it. The fire then spread into the cattle market and throughout a large portion of the city.<sup>92</sup> Nero, who held a strong interest in the circus, started rebuilding the circus, but it is unknown how long the rebuilding took.<sup>93</sup>

There were small changes during the reigns of Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, assumingly since the Colosseum was under construction during their reigns. An arch in the circus was constructed and dedicated to Emperor Titus for his and Vespasian’s, his father, victory over Jerusalem. The arch was likely in the center of the semi-circular end, as shown by coins made under Trajan.<sup>94</sup> Domitian held cavalry battles in the circus and once wanted to hold 100 games in a single day, so he temporarily cut the number of laps from seven to five.<sup>95</sup>

Significant reconstruction was undertaken during Trajan’s time as emperor. Evidence for such a massive project is represented on the “Marble Plan of Rome,” a plan of the city created

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<sup>90</sup> Humphrey, 101.

<sup>91</sup> Köhne, 22-23.

<sup>92</sup> Claridge, 15; Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals*, 15.38.

<sup>93</sup> Humphrey, 101.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>95</sup> Suetonius, *The Life of Domitian*, 4.

later in the Temple of Peace around 213 CE, as the portion containing the Circus Maximus is preserved. The reconstruction was probably a result of another large fire that burned both sides of the circus. Stone was taken from Domitian's constructions and used in the reconstruction.<sup>96</sup>

The subsequent emperors undertook various works and games. Antoninus Pius had a *partecta* built, a cover over an area of seating, possibly over the fourth tier. Septimius Severus gave animal hunts in the circus that included boars, lions, leopards, ostriches, asses, and bison. Caracalla had the gates of the circus expanded, likely referring to the starting gates or doors at the semi-circular end. Alexander Severus is said to have done some form of restoration using tax revenue.<sup>97</sup> Constantine attempted to glorify the Circus Maximus in an attempt to downplay the Circus of Maxentius. Constantine tried to make the Circus Maximus his own, decorating its barrier and building a new portico. He may have additionally used gold and bronze decorations to beautify it. Constantius II added a second Egyptian obelisk, quarried under the New Kingdom pharaoh Thutmose III, and placed it on the barrier in 357 CE. Finally, in the fourth century, senators "were obliged" to be present at circus events.<sup>98</sup>

While the rise of Christianity contributed to the end of the amphitheater games, the circus games were little affected. The Christian population did not see the circus as a place of bloodshed and immorality, leaving it relatively undisturbed. The decline in amphitheater spectacles actually increased the popularity of the Circus Maximus starting in the third century.<sup>99</sup>

The Circus Maximus fell into decline over time, and was lost to nature in the passage of time.<sup>100</sup> Theodoric made a final attempt to restore the Circus Maximus in the late fifth or early

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<sup>96</sup> Humphrey, 118, 103.

<sup>97</sup> Humphrey, 115, 117 and 127-28; and Thomas Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 61.

<sup>98</sup> Humphrey, 129; Claridge, 264.

<sup>99</sup> Potter, 284, 303.

<sup>100</sup> Humphrey, 57.

sixth century, but it continued to fall into disrepair.<sup>101</sup> The last races were held in 549 CE by Totila, an Ostrogothic king. Potter states that circus activity fell with the “classical city” in the Mediterranean world in the sixth and seventh centuries or the state may have been unable to keep up with the demands from the masses. Additionally, the games were expensive and few people had the financial resources to hold them. However, invasions and various crises on the Roman frontier certainly drew attention away from the circus and likely had the largest impact on the end of the games.<sup>102</sup>

After the games ended, the Circus Maximus came under the control of various groups. Between the end of the games and the twelfth century, much of the history of the Circus’ is unknown. In 1145, parts of the circus fell into the hands of the Frangipane family. Later, the circus became a garden area for churches and monasteries. From the twelfth to nineteenth century, those gardens gradually enveloped the ruins. Pictures dating to the nineteenth century show various forms of plant life covering the slope and seating of the Palatine hill. Some stone, mainly marble and travertine from the seating, was removed around the fifteenth century for reuse in other projects, such as lime making.<sup>103</sup>

Under the direction of Pope Sixtus V, the obelisks in the circus were unearthed in 1587. The obelisk originally placed by Augustus, found in three pieces, was relocated to the Piazza del Popolo and remains there today. Constantius II’s obelisk was placed in the Piazza S. Giovanni in the Lateran and it remains there today.<sup>104</sup> The reason why Sixtus V had the obelisks relocated is unknown.

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<sup>101</sup> Murray, 48.

<sup>102</sup> Claridge, 264; and Potter, 303.

<sup>103</sup> Humphrey, 57.

<sup>104</sup> Claridge, 264; and Richardson, Jr., 273.

In 1852, the Anglo-Italian Gas Society constructed a large gas works inside the ruins on the northwest side. This move upset several archaeologists who wished to restore the ruins and the ancient Roman environment. The gas works was removed in 1910 and relocated to the edge of the city.<sup>105</sup> According to Murray's handbook published in 1862, the gas works "destroyed the oval shape" and "form[ed] an eyesore in the beautiful vista."<sup>106</sup>

The work of various people, starting in the late nineteenth century, exposed parts of the Circus Maximus. In 1876, construction workers were building a sewer from the Colosseum to the Cloaca Maxima where they accidentally uncovered a significant number of the brick pylons under southern part of the Via dei Cerchi. The pylons ran parallel to the axis of the Circus Maximus and in front of those, a travertine surface was discovered eleven meters below the modern street level. With these features, the location of the front of the Circus was established, along with the outside portico. More discoveries were made by archaeologists ten years later during excavations of a Jewish cemetery on the slope of the Aventine hill. This time, brick walls, caved-in vaults, seats of the Circus, and parts of the circular corridor were found.<sup>107</sup>

Progress on reconstructing and excavating the Circus Maximus continued into the twentieth century. In the early 1900s, an archaeologist named Bigot located a line of piers that lead to the starting gates along with the assumed position of the podium, substructures, and remnants of the ramp used by Sixtus to remove the obelisks. The starting gates at the west end were partially excavated, but then reburied in 1908. In the early 1930s, the industrial zone in the Circus was removed and the area was cleared and turned into an archaeological park, as it is known today. After the last remnants of the gas works were cleared, archaeologists excavated the area of the semi-circular area of seating on the Palatine side, finding fragments of the arch.

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<sup>105</sup> Humphrey, 57; Murray, 49.

<sup>106</sup> Murray, 49.

<sup>107</sup> Humphrey, 106.

In 1940, archaeologists made “sixteen soundings” to establish the parameters of the Circus Maximus. The podium wall and edge of seating near the arena were found to be twelve meters below the surface.<sup>108</sup>

Additional excavations have followed. In 1976, archaeologists working on the site compared the remnants of the Caesarian and Trajanic versions of the Circus. To do this, archaeologists excavated the outside and podium wall near the tower and made a sounding in the shops where they found an ancient public bathroom. The system of drains was also discovered near the shops.<sup>109</sup> Continuing from work in the 1930s, parts of the seating on the east end, dating to Trajan’s reign, were excavated in 1979 through 1988. During the excavations, evidence of those seating areas being rebuilt earlier during Vespasian and Domitian’s reigns was also found. In 1982, additional excavations were made on the Aventine side of the Circus.<sup>110</sup>

The Circus Maximus was initially planned out in the sixth century BCE by the first kings of Rome. Its structural size and popularity increased as the centuries progressed. The Circus was home to various spectacles, but the chariot races were the most loved entertainment feature. After its decline, the Circus was left to the elements of time. Until the 1900s, few efforts were put toward preservation of the site. The Circus Maximus today is an open field and archaeological park with some visible ruins.

### **Modern Observations**

The Colosseum remains a popular site for visitors to Rome, despite some changes over time. Visitors can no longer travel to the highest level of the amphitheater, for reasons of

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<sup>108</sup> Claridge, 264; and Humphrey, 106, 57, 107.

<sup>109</sup> Humphrey, 107, 109.

<sup>110</sup> Claridge, 264; and Humphrey, 57.

tourists' personal safety and preservation of the site. The central cross that once stood in the arena is gone and indulgences and Friday sermons are no longer given inside the Colosseum. A new cross placed by Mussolini, to replace the one removed in the 1870s, remains on the northeast side of the amphitheater. Additionally, the pope still visits the site every year on Good Friday, sharing stories of Christian martyrs in the Colosseum.<sup>111</sup> Despite periods of neglect and ruin, a large portion of the Colosseum still remains intact to receive tourists from all over the globe and serves as one of the most recognizable images of Rome.

There are few visible ruins of the Circus Maximus, which attract few tourists. Humphrey calls the Circus Maximus today a "considerable disappointment for the visitor," and he is correct.<sup>112</sup> There is little to see and the only visible parts are the substructures that supported the tiers of seating left exposed from excavations in the 1930s and in 1976. The remaining ruins of the Circus Maximus lay underneath the ground, but there is debate as to how deep. Humphrey claims the majority of the ruins are six meters below the surface, while Claridge claims it is nine meters.<sup>113</sup> A complete excavation of the Circus ruins is problematic since there is a profound amount of dirt covering the ruins along with waterlogging at the lower levels near the arena. The excavations would be costly and the soil provides protection for the fragile ruins.<sup>114</sup>

### **Colosseum as Icon**

Many other ancient sites in Rome remain intact and are open to tourists, but the Colosseum captures a significant amount of visitors' interest. There are several reasons why the Colosseum enjoys the enormous popularity it does today. Christians, although they initially

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<sup>111</sup> Hopkins and Beard, 18.

<sup>112</sup> Humphrey, 56.

<sup>113</sup> Humphrey, 56; and Claridge 264.

<sup>114</sup> Humphrey, 57,59.

contributed to the destruction of it, regarded the site as a holy place, honoring it in the memory of the martyrs who died in the arena. Mussolini used the amphitheater to link his Fascist party with the ancient splendor of Rome. Both groups used the Colosseum as a symbol of power.

As the Christian community in ancient Rome gained status, it played a large role in determining the fate of the Colosseum. Although there is no textual evidence that Christians were martyred in the Colosseum, the church constructed and glorified this notion. It is likely that Christians were killed in the Colosseum for other reasons, not necessarily for their faith. Polycarp was martyred “in the arena” in Smyrna during the second century, providing evidence for martyrdoms occurring elsewhere.<sup>115</sup> Additionally, several Christian accounts of saints’ lives include “embellish[ed]” details of their executions in the amphitheater, but it does not specify the Colosseum as a location in which they were killed.<sup>116</sup> The public execution of Christians disturbed some people who viewed it as brutal and immoral, and the faith of the executed convinced several individuals to convert to Christianity. Church tradition even states that a Christian architect named Gaudentius, who was supposedly martyred, designed the Colosseum.<sup>117</sup>

The Christians felt that they had to construct a new, Christian Rome, with their heritage in the city in need of rewriting. The church had to work on, as Elsner describes, “inscribing that new but hallowed Christian antiquity into the fabric and urban ritual of the city,” which included the Colosseum.<sup>118</sup> Church authorities did not always treat the Colosseum as a Holy site,

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<sup>115</sup> Translator’s introductory remarks as cited in Trans. Maxwell Staniforth, “The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians,” in *Early Christian Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 140.

<sup>116</sup> Hopkins and Beard, 165.

<sup>117</sup> Murray, 45.

<sup>118</sup> Jás Elsner, “Inventing Christian Rome: the role of early Christian Art,” in *Rome the Cosmopolis*, eds. Catherine Edwards and Greg Woolfe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 78.



however. Their relationship with the venue shifted between preservation to destruction and plunder.

By the late sixth century, a small church, which used the interior floor as a cemetery, was established in the Colosseum.<sup>119</sup> From the sixth to fifteenth century, there is a lack of noteworthy Christian involvement with the Colosseum. In 1490, the *Compagnia del Gonfalone* was given permission to perform religious plays in the Colosseum. They performed “*Passion*”, “*Resurrection*”, and “*Lazarus*” during the Holy Week from 1490 until 1539. In addition, the *Compagnia del Gonfalone* maintained a small chapel inside the amphitheater along with a crucifix where the “devout” could pray during the performances of the plays.<sup>120</sup> Another church, dedicated to *S. Maria della Pietá*, was built on the east side of the arena.<sup>121</sup>

The Colosseum continued to undergo change as popes gained increasing power and wealth. In 1452, Pope Nicholas V had approximately 2,522 cartloads of stone removed from the Colosseum in nine months, possibly for use in making lime for St. Peter’s Basilica.<sup>122</sup> This trend of demolition continued with Pope Sixtus V, who wanted a wool factory built inside the Colosseum. He asked Domenico Fontana to design the plans, which included turning the ground floor into shops and the second floor into housing for the workers. The outer passages were to become workshops and new fountains for water would be constructed. The project ended upon

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<sup>119</sup> Claridge, 277.

<sup>120</sup> Barbara Wisch and Diane Cole Ahl, “Introduction,” in *Confraternities and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Italy*, eds. by Barbara Wisch and Diane Cole Ahl (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 9; Barbara Wisch, “New Themes for New Rituals: The *Crucifixion Altarpiece* by Roviale Spagnuolo for the Oratory of the Gonfalone in Rome,” in *Confraternities and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Italy*, eds. Barbara Wisch and Diane Cole Ahl (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 208; and Nerida Newbigin, “The Decorum of the Passion: The Plays of the Confraternity of the Gonfalone in the Roman Colosseum, 1490-1539,” in *Confraternities and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Italy*, eds. Barbara Wisch and Diane Cole Ahl (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 175.

<sup>121</sup> Hopkins and Beard, 167.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

Sixtus' death, even though workers had already begun to remove earth from the arena.<sup>123</sup> Before the factory plan, Sixtus had an idea for a major road project that would have called for the destruction of the Colosseum, and, in 1587, he suggested that the amphitheater be turned into a church to show Christianity's victory over paganism. Neither project came to fruition.<sup>124</sup>

In the 1600s, attitudes shifted toward emphasizing the Colosseum as a religious site. In 1622, a decision was made to restore the S. Maria della Pietá inside the arena. Padre Tommasi wrote a treatise in 1675 that stressed the importance of the Colosseum as a martyrdom site, discussing the Greek monk Telemachus who in the fifth century attempted to preach against the games. That same year, an inscription was put up on the east side of the Colosseum for the Holy Year 1675.<sup>125</sup>

Between 1676 and 1679, Carlo Fontana, chosen by Pope Innocent XI, was hired to build a church inside the Colosseum. The plan did not call for a total transformation of the amphitheater into a church because of inadequate financial resources. However, the plan came to a halt due to a war with the Turks. In 1700, the plan was revisited under Pope Clement XI, who thought of the Colosseum as a martyrdom site, and Fontana, who also wished to see the site used for religious purposes. Fontana pointed out that the Pantheon, Temple of Minerva, and Temple of Antoninus Pius and Faustina were all changed to serve Christianity and the Colosseum should be transformed as well. Once again, the plan ended as a result of another war, this time with the Spanish in 1708. The plan was abandoned for the last time when Fontana died in 1714.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Hellmut Hager, "Carlo Fontana's Project for a Church in Honour of the 'Ecclesia Triumphans' in the Colosseum, Rome," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 36 (1973): 322.

<sup>124</sup> Hager, 322; and Hopkins and Beard, 157.

<sup>125</sup> Hager, 322-324.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 325-335.

In the meantime, Clement XI made other plans for the Colosseum. He had the lower arcades enclosed and established a “manufactory of saltpeter [*sic*]”, but with “little success.”<sup>127</sup> In 1700, a manure dump was created in the northern corridors for use in making saltpeter. This setup remained in the Colosseum for about a century.<sup>128</sup>

Around the mid eighteenth century, Christian efforts finally turned to preservation. Pope Benedict XIV consecrated the Colosseum in 1750 to the memory of the Christian martyrs who died there.<sup>129</sup> Additionally, he placed a plaque on the outer east wall, which is still there today. Benedict XIV pronounced the Colosseum sacred ground, dedicating it to the Passion of the Christ with desecration punishable. A cross was placed in the center of the arena and kissing it supposedly brought “an indulgence of 200 days.”<sup>130</sup> Pope Pius VII had a support wall built and Pope Gregory XVI sponsored the reconstruction of eight arches on the south side in the nineteenth century.<sup>131</sup> As of the publishing of Murray’s 1862 handbook, the cross still stood in the center of the arena and a monk preached from a pulpit inside the Colosseum every Friday.<sup>132</sup>

The popes wielded their authority and used the Colosseum as a symbol of power. Their plans for the venue ranged from using it as a factory to changing it into a church. The popes saw the power of the site and dedicated it to the martyred Christians. They saw the importance of the site, using it to further their own agendas, much like the Roman emperors of the past. However, the Christian interest in the Colosseum was by chance. Several plans, such as Fontana’s church plans, could have destroyed or severely damaged the amphitheater had they come to fruition: it is fortuitous that the Colosseum still survives.

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<sup>127</sup> Murray, 45.

<sup>128</sup> Hopkins and Beard, 163.

<sup>129</sup> Murray, 45.

<sup>130</sup> Hopkins and Beard, 5, 164-167.

<sup>131</sup> Murray, 45; and Hopkins and Beard, 171.

<sup>132</sup> Murray, 46.

The Circus Maximus was not a center of debate for the Christians. The Circus was not regarded, to the same extent the Colosseum was, as a site immersed in blood and cruelty where individuals were executed, namely Christians. As Potter describes, martyrdom was an “activity explicitly connected with the amphitheater.”<sup>133</sup> Tertullian stated that people should “all go to the amphitheater” to view blood and brutality, with no mention of the circuses.<sup>134</sup> The Circus Maximus did not come under the church’s scrutiny, paying little attention to it. The Colosseum’s fate can be linked with its later treatment as a martyrdom site, which led to preservation of it in the memories of those who the church said were martyred. Speculation suggests that if the church did take interest in the site, the Circus might be preserved in a way similar to that of the Colosseum.

The Colosseum would later be subject to a new authority at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Mussolini and the Fascists took power, affecting not only politics, but the ancient sites in Rome. Mussolini attempted to bring the ancient glory back to the Italian capital by connecting the present with the Imperial past. The *Renovatio Romanorum* was launched under the direction of Antonio Munoz. Mussolini trusted him with creating a link to Italy’s Imperial past. For example, the *Stadio Mussolini* was built and the Fascists excavated the site of *Largo di Torre Argentina*, unearthing three ancient temples. In addition, Mussolini sponsored major excavations of the Colosseum substructures that completely revealed them.<sup>135</sup>

Mussolini undertook a large project in 1931 with the construction of the *Via dell’ Impero*. This project was a road that connected the Piazza Venezia to the Colosseum, where the *Palazzo Venezia*, Mussolini’s office, was located. The road was inaugurated in 1932 and served as a

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<sup>133</sup> Potter, 323.

<sup>134</sup> Tertullian, *On the Spectacles*, 19.1-4 as cited in Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 168.

<sup>135</sup> George P. Mraz, “Italian Fascist Architecture: Theory and Image,” *Art Journal* 21 (Autumn 1961): 7; Hopkins and Beard, 7, 173.

processional way for Fascist military parades, connecting the modern with the ancient glory. Mussolini was also linking himself with the past imperial power of the Roman emperors. The *Via dell' Impero* was also meant to demonstrate a connection between Mussolini's army and the legions of the ancient Roman army.<sup>136</sup> Mussolini saw the Colosseum as a symbol of the ancient grandeur of Rome. He made the Colosseum a focal point on his new road, wanting to link himself and his Fascist party with that former glory.

Mussolini wanted to impress others, including the Catholic Church, with his accomplishments. He placed a new cross, replacing the one removed in the 1870s, to appease the church's anxieties. Mussolini constructed the new cross on the northeast side of the amphitheater on the lower level in 1926, and it remains in the Colosseum today.<sup>137</sup>

There was not much left of the Circus Maximus after the removal of the gas works, which may have prevented Mussolini from taking more interest in the site. Although some excavations were completed during Mussolini's time as part of his glorification project, it was not enough to draw the same amount attention that Mussolini placed on the Colosseum. There were few visible ruins of the Circus and those did not send the same message of ancient power as the amphitheater did, despite the grandeur of its past.

## Conclusion

The spectacles and political authority the Colosseum represents makes the site a symbol of Roman power. Several authors comment on the power the venue exemplifies. Edwards and Woolfe call it "perhaps the most potent emblem of Rome" where the "spectacles produced in the

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<sup>136</sup> Mras, 7-9; and Hopkins and Beard, 173.

<sup>137</sup> Hopkins and Beard, 173, 175, 13.

arena paraded the city's mastery of the world."<sup>138</sup> Futrell states that the "amphitheater was Roman power."<sup>139</sup> Welch considers amphitheaters as representative of the Roman world and the Colosseum "canonized the architectural type of monumental amphitheatre [*sic*]."<sup>140</sup> Fear also agrees that the Colosseum is "celebrated as a symbol of power."<sup>141</sup>

Additionally, the amphitheater is a uniquely Roman creation, unlike the circus, theater, and stadium, which are Greek.<sup>142</sup> The amphitheater was created to hold audiences who came to view the gladiator matches and animal displays. The amphitheater in general captivated people, but the circus held much larger audiences and was just as popular in ancient times; however, despite that, it does not hold the same importance for visitors today as the amphitheater does.

The Colosseum remains an icon of Rome today due to the attention it has received from the people over the centuries based on its appearance of power. While various people constructed the Circus over the centuries, a specific Roman emperor with political ambitions in mind built the Colosseum. The Flavians constructed the Colosseum to make themselves appear powerful and other people over the centuries have tried to use the site in a similar manner. The church saw the amphitheater as a site immersed in blood and immorality where Christian martyrs lost their lives. The Fascists looked at the Colosseum as a site that represented Rome's ancient splendor and power. Mussolini wanted to recreate his capital in the likeness of Imperial Rome, therefore associating himself and his party with that image. The Colosseum was given attention throughout the centuries, both negative and positive. It was a symbol of ancient Rome's authority and the scale of its spectacles helped it stay within the minds of people. The power the

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<sup>138</sup> Catherine Edwards and Greg Woolfe, "Cosmopolis: Rome as World City." In *Rome the Cosmopolis*, eds. Catherine Edwards and Greg Woolfe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>139</sup> Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 213.

<sup>140</sup> Welch, 1, 129.

<sup>141</sup> Fear, 82.

<sup>142</sup> Welch, 162.

Colosseum represents has fascinated numerous individuals throughout history and into the modern day. The Colosseum has survived over the centuries and remains an icon of Rome as a result of its atmosphere of power.

The Circus Maximus is not commonly identified as a symbol of power. There is no significant controversy that surrounds it, unlike the executions in the Colosseum. Furthermore, the Circus is not frequently connected with violence and blood, although gladiator matches and animal spectacles did take place there. People do not view the Circus Maximus, in the same manner as the Colosseum, as a representation of Roman power.

Despite the impact left by the Christians and Mussolini, the physical remains of the two sites today reinforce their respective popularity and association with power. The Colosseum is well known all over the world and is a common stop for tourists visiting Rome. It is one of the more immense monuments in the city. Throughout the city, there are numerous vendors selling the classic “tourist” merchandise, which includes pictures and models of the ancient amphitheater and not of the Circus.

Furthermore, the Colosseum is in fair condition as far as preservation is concerned. Vast restoration and preservation efforts over the past few centuries have saved what remains of the structure. Tourists over time have admired the splendor of the site, especially when lighted at night. A visitor is able to view much of the ruins, inside and outside. Tourists can walk around the full extent of the outside and view the preserved and not-so-well preserved exterior walls. Inside, visitors walk up some of the ancient stairways and inside the arcades that once funneled the Roman crowds to their seats to view the games. The *hypogeum* is also exposed for viewing, allowing tourists to see the full degree of the underground substructures that once contained gladiators, animals, and scenery.

The Colosseum is still used for concerts and plays. A new partial arena floor has been constructed to hold performers. There is also a reconstructed portion of seating where the ancient spectators once sat. Although the amphitheater is regarded as a historic monument, it is still used by the city for public events, which draws more notoriety to it.

Finally, the Colosseum is beautifully lighted at night. The site does not receive visitors inside after dark, but numerous people come out to view it. Locals gather near the site, treating it as a meeting place or a place to relax. In addition, weddings have been held outside the illuminated amphitheater.

The Circus Maximus, on the other hand, does not have the crowd appeal the Colosseum does for an obvious reason: there is not much to look at. As noted previously, the only visible ruins are those of the seating arcade and the tower on the east end of the curve. If a visitor knew what they were looking at, they would notice the raised ground that covers the *spina* and the steep hills that cover most of the ancient seating. Overall, the valley that is home to the Circus looks like exactly that – a valley. There is not much noteworthy about it. When surveyed, a few people have limited idea what the Circus Maximus is, but cannot identify the location of the ruins.

Today, the Circus Maximus serves as a recreation area. It is a site for joggers, bikers, and those out for a leisurely stroll. The valley is also occasionally host to outdoor concerts and other events, like the Colosseum and other ancient sites. At night, the site is frequented by the local youth as a popular place to meet and socialize. It was also used as a location for people to watch the televised broadcast of the World Cup.

There is simply more to see of the Colosseum. The amphitheater is advertised heavily as a tourist attraction while the Circus is not for such reason. The attention given to it over the



centuries has helped to preserve it, while the Circus was neglected for a long period of history. Moreover, the varying crowds at each location emphasize this point. The popularity the Colosseum is given reinforces its iconic status. However, without the attention, the Colosseum could easily be in the same condition as the Circus Maximus is in.

The Colosseum has remained an enduring icon of Rome, emerging from its low point as a quarry to a famous tourist attraction. Numerous people, like the Christians and Mussolini, have used the Colosseum to promote their own glory due to of the element of power surrounding the site. The Circus Maximus was not used in such a way since it did not receive attention as a site for blood and immorality, lacking the element of power associated with the Roman emperors. The Flavians specifically constructed the Colosseum as a symbol of political authority. The visual elements of both the Colosseum and Circus Maximus today reinforce their respective popularity. Not much of the Circus is visible today; however, a large extent of the Colosseum is which visually reinforces the level of popularity for each site. Lacking the attention, the Circus Maximus was forgotten despite its ancient popularity and glory. The circus was left to the elements of time and the valley was open for gardens and industry. However, the survival of the Colosseum ruins has also been by chance since it could have had a fate similar to that of the Circus if events had transpired differently. The Colosseum is an icon of Rome because of its air of power, its spectacles, and the extent to which it has been preserved.

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