



# Martial's Guided Tour of the Coliseum

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## ABSTRACT

Accepting the invitation sketched through Martial's *Liber de Spectaculis*, this work aims to guide the reader in a visit to the Coliseum, during its inaugural games of the year 80 AD., while clarifying the importance of the Roman Amphitheatre's edification for the *Vrbs Aeterna*.

The Bilbilitan, that, in epigram, portrayed every single aspect of the *Caput Mundi* everyday life during the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD., would not fail to record one of its most memorable moments: the celebration of the colossal Flavian Amphitheatre in large inaugural games! The Coliseum was created as a prodigy in an imperial scale! And if today it still dazzles us (see Fig. 1), let's imagine it intact, just risen...

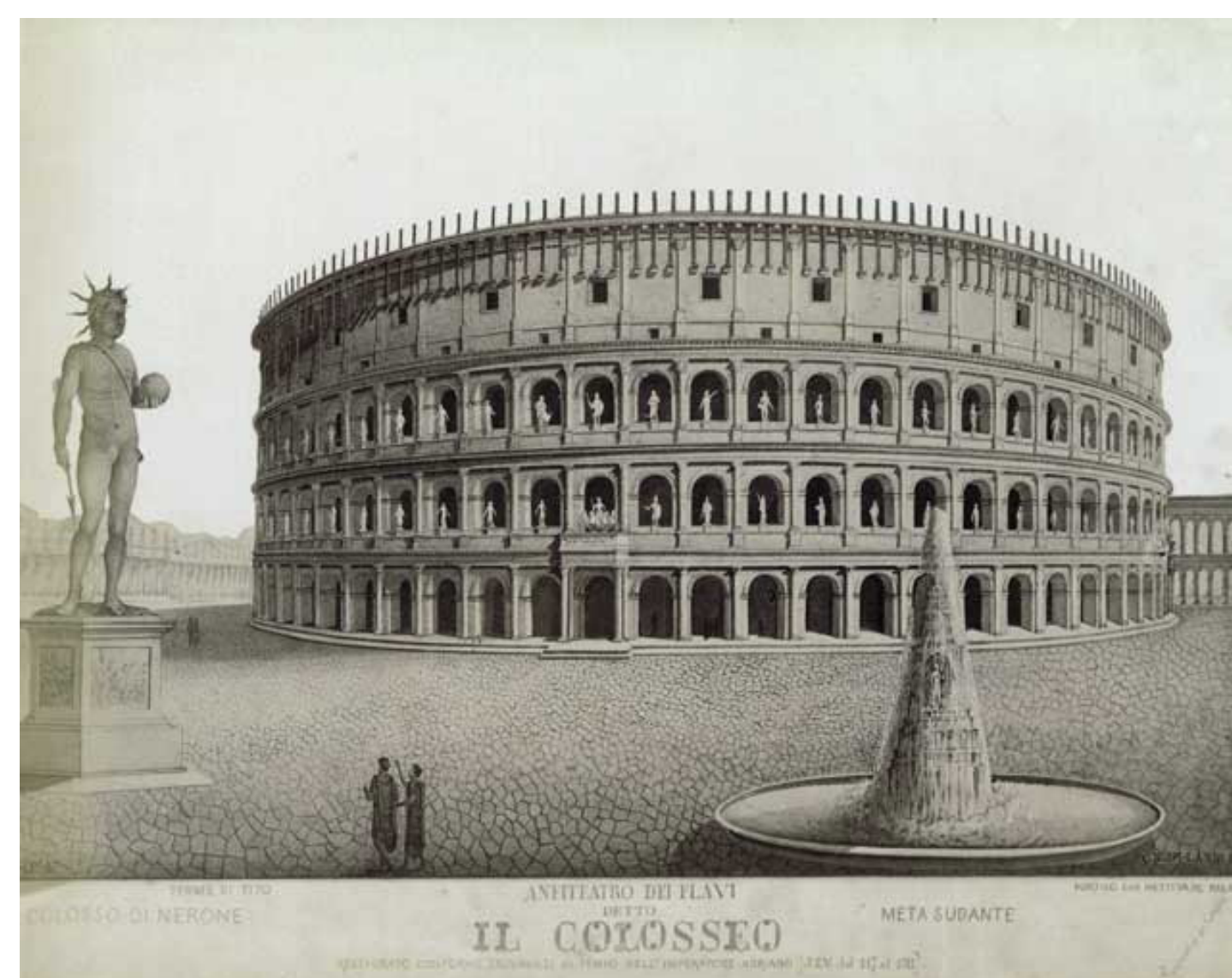


Fig. 2. A reconstruction drawing of the Flavian Amphitheatre flanked by the colossal statue that lend it the name of *Colosseum*.

The largest amphitheater the Roman world would see, with a height of 160 ft., imposed its facade of multiple arches, in the center of the City, flanked by the colossal statue of Nero that already possessed over its 100 ft., the face of the sun (see Fig. 2).

On the outside, Ionic, Doric and Corinthian columns beautified more than sustained the building and countless niches harbored statues; on the inside, four levels of interminable rows of benches, where each of the



Fig. 3. *Pollice Verso* painted in 1872 by Jean-Léon Gérôme (from Phoenix Art Museum).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Joana Mestre Costa is funded by FCT grant SFRH/BD/28304/2006.



Fig. 1. The Roman Colosseum, twenty centuries after its construction.

5000 spectators, coming through the 76 numbered arches, would sit, according to a strict hierarchy.

Opposite the imperial box, stopped, to salute the Cesar, in the beginning of every game, men and even animals. The same Cesar whose hand would in the end of the fight, capture everyone's attention, until the tension between life and death was finally broken after his sign (see Fig. 3).

The *Vrbs Aeterna* always had in the game a strong foundation and Titus, revealing the Flavian shrewdness, seized the taste of the mob, and surprising her, prepared for the grand



Fig. 4. Mosaics from Pompeii depicting Rome's ancient gladiator games.

opening of the Coliseum rare games that lasted for 100 days and nights, between April and July, with the slaughter of thousands of beasts and the exhibit of hundreds of gladiators before numberless daily spectators from the most varied origins to whom he guaranteed *missilia* and saffron.

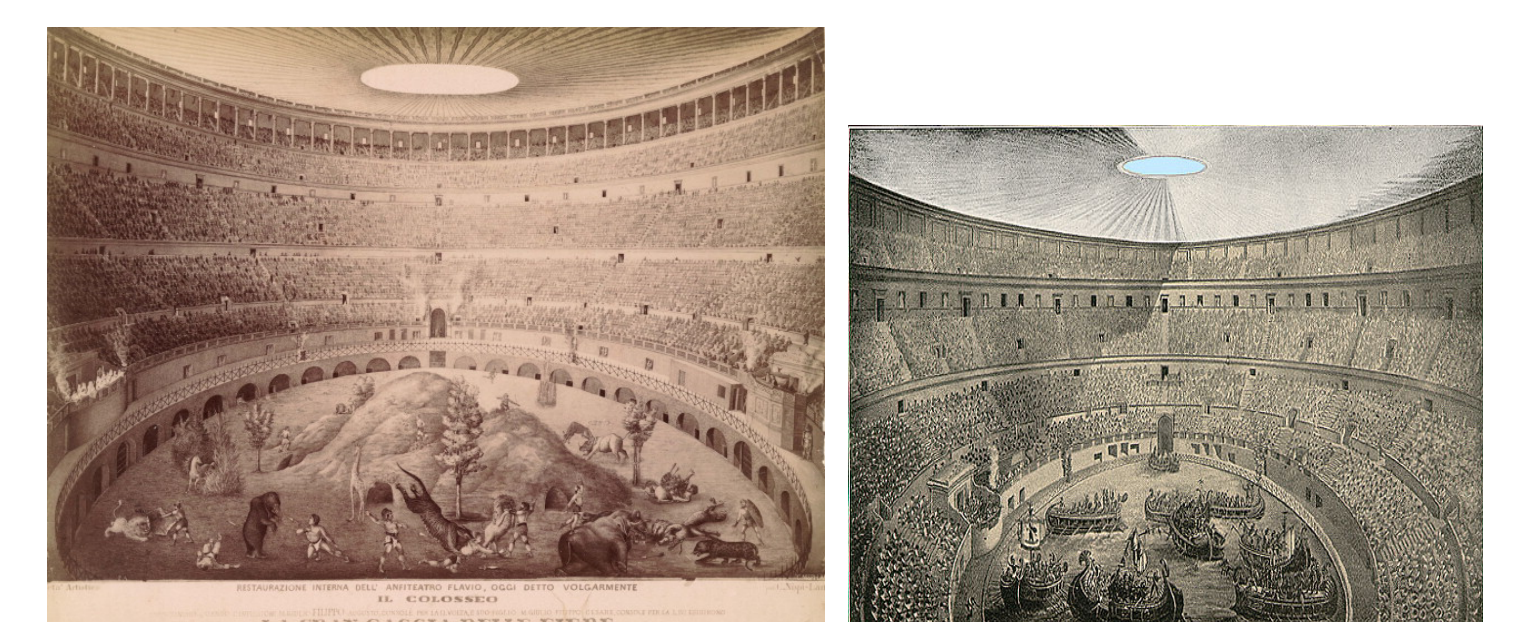


Fig. 5. A reconstruction drawing of a hunt for wild animals.

Fig. 6. A reconstruction drawing of a *naumachia*.

Martial, as no one else, has captured the diversity and novelty of the games and their variegated colors, presenting them at the pace of the epigram: from the famous and crowded *pugnae* of gladiators (see Fig. 4) to the the surprising confrontations between man and beasts in *uenationes* (see Fig. 5) and even graceful aquatic ballets or staunch *naumachiae* (see Fig. 6)...

## CONCLUSION

Engineering and art seem to have never competed in the creation of similar splendor: the Amphitheatre will always speak for itself, for its inaugural games the words of the poet!

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