

THE COLOSSEUM FROM LATE ANTIQUITY TILL THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES : A CASE OF LOST IDENTITY

A.V. van Stekelenburg, University of Stellenbosch

From the moment the Amphitheatrum Flavium was finished it was felt that it surpassed the other monumental buildings of Rome. Martial, who witnessed the building process during the principate of the Flavians and the inauguration in 80 A.D., emphasises the towering presence of the Colosseum¹ and rates it higher than established world wonders like the Pyramids, the marvels of Babylon and the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus.² More than 17 centuries later another poet, Lord Byron, gives expression to the awe the Colosseum, though reduced to half of its original bulk by forces of nature and human hands, still inspired in the 19th century, as it does today:

A ruin - yet what ruin! from its mass
Walls, palaces, half-cities, have been reared;
Yet oft the enormous skeleton ye pass,
And marvel where the spoil could have appeared,
Hath it indeed been plundered, or but cleared?³

A history of the after-life of the Amphitheatrum Flavium should begin with the 6th century. Before 500 A.D. the building had always been maintained and repaired when damaged by fire or earthquakes. The latter calamity hit the city of Rome twice during the 5th century, in 422 and 486. The repairs done to the Colosseum by the city prefects after these occurrences are the last extensive ones that we know of.⁴ From then onwards decay could set in without let or hindrance.

Since 404 A.D. the Colosseum had no longer been used for gladiatorial combats. These had definitely come to an end after a monk named Telemachus had tried to separate two gladiators in the arena, and had been stoned to death by enraged spectators.⁵ The Emperor Honorius made use of the opportunity to enforce a standing edict of Constantine I from 325 A.D., which had, though ineffectually, outlawed gladiatorial combats.⁶ Honorius made it clear that the prohibition did not include fights against animals,⁷ but it seems that, probably under pressure from Church authorities, human life was soon no longer at risk in the arenas, at least not to the same extent as it had been before. On ivory diptychs of the 5th century we can see how deadly fights against dangerous animals were replaced by the safer game of beast-baiting (ill.2). Acrobats do saltos over bears, or tease them from the safety of baskets that hang from poles, or they jump in and out of places of refuge.

¹ *De Spect.* 2, 5-6: *conspicui ... amphitheatri moles.*

² *De Spect.* 1.

³ *Childe Harold*, canto 4, 1279-1283.

⁴ Inscriptions: *C.I.L.* VI, 32089 and 32094.

⁵ Theodoretus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5, 26. The incident happened in the Circus Maximus, not in the Colosseum. Gibbon (*Decline and Fall* XXX, n. 58) calls Telemachus cynically "the only monk who died a martyr in the cause of humanity".

⁶ *Codex Theod.* 15.12.1 and *Cod. Iust.* 11.44.1. This had been followed by edicts from Constantius II (357 A.D.) and Arcadius and Honorius (397 A.D.), *ibid.* 12.2 and 12.3.

⁷ *Codex Iust.* 11.45.1: *occidendorum leonum cunctis facimus potestatem neque aliquam sinimus quemquam calumniam formidare.*

The last recorded event in the Colosseum was a show of this kind. It took place in 523 A.D. to celebrate the consulate of Anicius Maximus. The detailed description that we have of it in a letter written by Cassiodorus as secretary of the Gothic ruler of Rome, Theodoric, confirms the particulars and the non-bloody character of these events. Nevertheless for Cassiodorus the risk to human life was still too great, and he berates the consul for having allowed such a "deplorable aberration".⁸

Real *venationes*, where animals were killed, did still take place. The victims were, however, rarely the man-eating animals of previous times, but innocuous ones like deer, or domesticated animals like bulls, though the latter were dangerous enough as opponents. Such hunts are also depicted on diptychs.⁹ During excavations in 1878 in the underground passages below the arena of the Colosseum a considerable number of bones were found of bulls, stags and horses.¹⁰ They must have come from the last performances that took place during the first half of the 6th century, and they illustrate the tameness of those shows as compared with the ones of earlier days.

It is extremely unlikely that the Colosseum was ever used for its original purpose after 540 A.D., if we discount the one-time occurrence in the year 1332, about which later. The repeated sieges and sacks during the struggle between Goths and Byzantines for the hegemony of Italy, and the accompanying famines and pestilences, made the population of Rome one of the most wretched of those times.¹¹ When Totila took the city in December 546, he is reported to have found there only 500 inhabitants.¹² During their short stays in the city the Gothic and Byzantine conquerors had little reason to pamper the Roman inhabitants with *ludi*. The senate, from whose ranks the traditional local patrons of games had come, received a death-blow during the Gothic wars and disappeared completely before 600. In 590 Pope Gregory I wrote: "*ubi enim senatus? ubi iam populus? quia enim senatus deest, populus interiit.*"¹³ Amid such conditions the amphitheatres and circuses lost their purpose and became monumental reminders of a more prosperous and splendid past.

* * * * *

It is only when seen from the Esquiline that the Colosseum presents a largely undamaged exterior. On the side of the Palatine and Caelius the outer wall has completely disappeared. Of the original 80 arches of the ground floor only 33 remain. The collapse of this southern part of the building must have been the result of an earthquake, because an enormous pile of rubble has for centuries been visible here. It was known as the *Coxa* or *Coscia* ("haunch") *Colisei* (ill. 2). From the 14th century onwards it was worked as one of the most important stone quarries of Rome,¹⁴ hence Byron's line: "from its mass / walls, palaces, half-cities have been reared". The

⁸ "*Heu, mundi error dolendus!*"; *Variae* 5.42.

⁹ A.M. Colini and L. Cozza, *Ludus Magnus*, Rome, 1962, 105.

¹⁰ R. Lanciani, *The ruins and excavations of ancient Rome*, London-New York, 1897, 375.

¹¹ Good descriptions of life in Rome during the second half of the 6th century can be found in F. Homes Dudden, *Gregory the Great*, New York, 1905 (repr. 1967), vol. I.

¹² Procopius, *De Bello Gothico* 3. 20.19.

¹³ *Homilia in Hiezechielem prophetam* II.6.22 (*Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* CXLII, 312). On the sad conditions of the higher classes Procopius, *De Bello Gothico* 3.20.27f. Also Pope Pelagius I (556-561), *Epistula* 14 (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* LXIX.408): *Tanta egestas et nuditas in civitate ista est, ut sine dolore et angustia cordis nostri homines, quos honesto loco natos idoneos noveramus, non possimus adspicere.*

¹⁴ Material from the *Coxa Colisei* was used *inter alia* for restoration work on St. John Lateran and the Pons Aemilius (Ponte Rotto) and to build St. Peter's and the Palazzi della Cancelleria, - Venezia and - Farnese; Lanciani, *op. cit.*, 207f., 211, 251; Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie* VI, 2522f.

date of the fateful tremor is not known with certainty. It must, however, have taken place between 700 and 1362. The year *ante quem* is a certainty, because documents from the year 1362 report a quarrel between the pope's representative and the family of the Frangipani about the use of the *Coxa*.¹⁵ This is the first proof of its existence. As to the year *post quem*: the famous prophecy in a (supposed) work of the venerable Bede

Quandiu stabit Coliseus, stabit et Roma;
quandiu cadet Coliseus, cadet et Roma;
quandiu cadet Roma, cadet et mundus¹⁶

would have made no sense if around 700 A.D., when these words were written down, the Colosseum had already experienced such a dramatic, if partial, collapse.

Of the numerous earthquakes that struck Rome between 700 and 1362, three were particularly violent. They occurred in 847, 1231 and 1349. It is in connection with the one of 1231 that a chronicler remarked: "*de Coliseo concussus lapis ingens eversus est*".¹⁷ Though remarks about damage done to buildings by the other two earthquakes occur in contemporary literature,¹⁸ the Colosseum is never mentioned. We may, therefore, accept that the great collapse did indeed happen in the year 1231, though later tremors may have extended the damage.¹⁹

No mention is made anywhere of the enormous damage this collapse must have caused to the dwellings that had been built in and adjacent to the Colosseum. In the 11th century political life in Rome - and other cities- had become dominated by relentless feuding between local families. The ancient monuments - after five centuries of neglect - were now in demand as fortresses for the warring clans.²⁰ In the 12th and 13th centuries the Frangipani are known to have held the Colosseum. Two popes sought refuge there with them. Shortly before 1130 Innocent II escaped the pursuit of his enemies, the Pierleoni, and in 1167 Alexander III sought shelter with the Frangipani against Emperor Frederic Barbarossa.²¹

It is unlikely that the Frangipani used the whole of the Colosseum as a fort. A stronghold of that size would have required an enormous garrison to defend it. Probably only a section was sealed off and fortified. This section must, however, have been exactly in the part that was demolished by the tremor of 1231, because it had to link up with the other Frangipani strongholds: the arches of Titus and of Constantine (ill. 1), the Septizonium and the adjacent parts of the Palatine.

The Frangipani did not enjoy total and undisputed possession of the Colosseum. In a bull of 18 March 1244 Pope Innocent IV emphasised that *dominium* of the Colosseum was held by the

¹⁵ E. Rodocanachi, *Les monuments de Rome après la chute de l'empire*, Paris, 1914, 168.

¹⁶ Baeda, *Collectanea* (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* XCIV, 543). *Coliseus* stands for *Coliseum* and not for *Colossus*, as it would be very unlikely that the fate of the world would be made dependent on the notoriously weak footing of a statue. In any case the Colossus probably no longer existed by the 8th century; see note 30. For *Coliseum* see note 36. In medieval times reference is sometimes made to *Colossus* when it is obvious that *Colosseum* is meant; Jordan, *Topographie der Stadt Rom im Altertum II*, Berlin, 1885, 510.

¹⁷ Riccardo da San Germano; *Scriptores Rerum Italicarum* (ed. Muratori) VII, 1026.

¹⁸ See F. Gregorovius, *Geschichte der Stadt Rom im Mittelalter* III.197 (n. 63), 362, 415, 444.

¹⁹ See G. Lugli, *Roma antica - il centro monumentale*, Roma, 1946, 340.

²⁰ Lanciani, *op. cit.*, 198ff.

²¹ *Scriptores Rerum Italicarum* I, 410; *Annali d'Italia* (ed. Muratori) VI, 578; see Rodocanachi, *op. cit.*, 166f.

Holy See and that the Frangipani should only be considered vassals.²² This explains the dispute that arose a hundred years later about the use of the Coxa. The popes had always considered themselves the natural and lawful owners of the monuments, which they often granted to private persons or abbeys.²³ In the 13th century the temporal sovereignty of the pope was no longer accepted - in this respect either - by other parties, in particular the German emperors and the people of Rome.²⁴ The bull mentioned was a response to a move by Emperor Frederic II to force the Frangipani to part with half of the Colosseum and the outside "*palatium*" in favour of the Annibaldi.²⁵ It seems that in this case the pope and the Frangipani lost the dispute, because future branches of the Annibaldi would bear the cognomen "Del Colosseo" or "Della Rota", the latter a reference to the arena, which was known as "rota" because of its almost circular shape.²⁶

* * * * *

From very early days the Colosseum was an important item on the sightseeing programme of pilgrims in Rome. This can be deduced from the knowledge that clearly existed in Saxon England of around 700 A.D. about the prophecy we find reported by Bede. When the Frangipani and Annibaldi inhabited the building in the 12th and 13th centuries, it was still admired by visitors to Rome, but knowledge of its original function as amphitheatre seems to have totally disappeared. Popular imagination, as expressed in Medieval guidebooks collectively known as *Mirabilia*, believed the Colosseum to have been a temple of the Sun. It was supposed to have once been covered with a huge dome of gilded bronze (ill. 3) and to have been a place where thunder and lightning were produced, and where it rained "through slender tubes". Signs of the sun and the moon were depicted and in the middle stood an enormous statue of Phoebus Apollo holding a globe. Pope Silvester I (314-355) had the statue destroyed because it received too much devotion. The head and one hand were, however, preserved and could be seen in front of the basilica of St. John Lateran.²⁷ Another version²⁸ places the statue "*in insula Herodii*" next to the Colosseum, and adds a sword to its attributes. This statue turned with the movement of the sun and was not destroyed by Silvester but by Pope Gregory I (590-604). In yet another version the statue stands on the roof of the Colosseum, while the ceremonies of worship were supposed to have taken place in a separate "*templum Solis ante Coloseum*".²⁹

²² Rodocanachi, *op. cit.*, 166.

²³ See Jordan, *op. cit.*, 667: grant of the Capitoline Hill to the Abbey of St. Mary in the Capitol by Anacleto I (approx. 1130 A.D.); 668: grant of half the Arch of Severus to Church of St. Sergius and Bacchus by Innocent III (1199 A.D.).

²⁴ See for instance J.A. Watt, *The theory of papal monarchy in the thirteenth century*, New York, 1965 and M. Wilks, *The problem of sovereignty in the later Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 1963, both *passim*.

²⁵ *Les registres d'Innocent IV* (ed. E. Berger) I, 106; Rodocanachi, *op. cit.*, 166.

²⁶ In 1157 a certain Romano de Frasia cedes to his brother Pietro a house with a garden "*intus rota Colisei*". This information is to be found in the archives of the Church of S. Maria Nova (nowadays S. Francesca Romana) in the western part of the temple of Venus and Roma. This church must have held certain rights on the Colosseum, maybe before the Frangipani held sole possession, if they ever did. If indeed so, it must have been after 1187, because in a document of that year the Church of S. Maria Nova leases a crypt in the Colosseum to a baronial family; Rodocanachi, *op. cit.*, 165f.; *Arch. Soc. Rom. Storia Patria* XXXIII (1900), 204, 216; XXV (1920), 195; XXVI (1903), 38, 41, 57, 79.

²⁷ This is the version contained in *De mirabilibus civitatis Romae* in the *collectanea* of Nicolas Rosell, cardinal d'Aragona (1314-1362); *Codice topografico delle città di Roma* (ed. Valentini-Zucchetti) III, 149f.

²⁸ By the English Magister Gregorius (approx. 1200 A.D.); *Codice topografico* III, 149f.

²⁹ *Codice topografico* III, 58 and 90.

Such a mixture of superstitious phantasies and displaced elements of actual fact is typical of views on antiquity during the High Middle Ages. The colossal "statue of Phoebus Apollo" is of course the Colossus of Nero that was made into a statue of the Sun God by Vespasian and moved to a site next to the Amphitheatrum Flavium by Hadrian. It had long since disappeared³⁰ and the bronze head and hand in front of St. John Lateran - now in the Conservatori Museum - had nothing to do with it.³¹ Memories of another Colossus, the famous Colossus of Rhodes, survive in the otherwise nonsensical "*insula Herodii*". The "dome of gilded bronze" may have been suggested by the Pantheon,³² while the "temple of the Sun in front of the Colosseum" is probably Hadrian's Temple of Venus and Roma.

It had already been acknowledged³³ that another medieval story, about a tower built by a Persian emperor, Cosroe, was the model for the signs of sun and moon and the artificially created lightning, thunder and rain. Cosroe was supposed to have built this tower to impress God. The specific mention of slender tubes (*subtiles fistulae*) in one of the versions may, however, be connected with the nearby Golden House of Nero where, according to Suetonius,³⁴ a rain of perfume could be brought down upon the guests by means of *fistulae* in the ceiling.

Amidst all these phantasies and half-facts not a trace is visible of the original function of the Colosseum - unless it is the sword mentioned in one of the versions, which is unlikely. What the original purpose of amphitheatres had been was still known to some people,³⁵ but it seems that no one any longer realised that the Coliseum, as the building was most frequently called,³⁶ had once been such an amphitheatre.

It should not be concluded, therefore, that when in the year 1332 a bullfight was organised in the arena of the Colosseum, this was a conscious effort to revive the ancient *venationes*. Bullfights were popular in Italy especially during the late 13th and early 14th centuries³⁷ and the chronicler who has left us an account of the event, Ludovico Monaldesco,³⁸ does not even hint at the possibility that participants or spectators felt that they were taking part in a re-creation of the past. It was a spectacular event, with many participants from noble families from Rome and other towns. Each of them wore a different costume and bore a device specially chosen for the occasion. However, the bulls won: 18 of the toreros lost their lives. Their splendid funerals at Sta. Maria Maggiore and St. John Lateran provided another day of entertainment.

30 The last mention of the Colossus is in the *Fasti* of Philocalus (approx. 355 A.D.): *C.I.L.* I, 344. It is not certain when the Colossus disappeared, but since it is not mentioned after 355 A.D. this must have happened relatively early. See also note 16.

31 They belonged to a colossal statue of Constantine I or one of his sons, and feature on several medieval plans of Rome; see e.g. *Akroterion* XXXII (Sept./Dec., 1987), 103, ill.3.

32 The gilded bronze tiles of its dome had been removed by Constans II in 663 A.D.: Lanciani, *op. cit.*, 8f.

33 A. Graf, *Roma nella memoria e nelle immaginazioni del Medio Evo*, Turin, 1882, I, 128f.

34 *Vita Neronis* 31.2.

35 *Graphia Aureae Urbis* (13th century); *Codice topografico* III, 98: *in amphitheatrum pugnant gladiatores ... etc.*

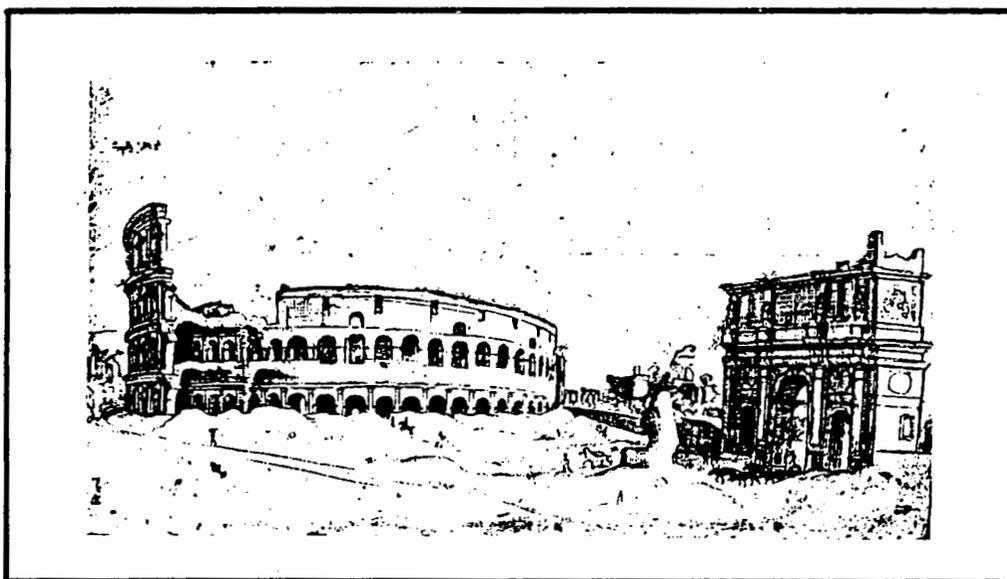
36 *Coliseum*, a corruption of *Colosseum*, was already in use by 700 A.D. (see note 16). It survives in the French *Colisée*. The original *Colosseum* was in its turn the popular name for the *Amphitheatrum Flavium*. The word was probably not derived from *Colossus*, but referred to the colossal size of the building: the amphitheatre of Capua was also known as *Colosseum*. See Rodocanachi, *op. cit.*, 165 and H. Canter in *Transact. and Proceed. Am. Philological Soc.* 69, 1930, 150ff.

37 *Enciclopedia Italiana di Scienze, lettere ed arti*, Roma, 1937, s.v. *torneo*.

38 *Scriptores Rerum Italicarum* XII, 535.

Later in the 14th century the enlightenment of Humanism began to restore the identity of the Colosseum. Giovanni Dondi (1330-1389) was one of the first to look at the monuments in a critical and discerning way. In his *Iter Romanum*³⁹ he goes around Rome measuring and calculating and writing down inscriptions. The Amphitheatrum Flavium is for him still the Coliseum but he realises that it is a similar structure to the "arena Veronensis". He counts the number of pilasters on which the building rests, coming to a total of 800, in ten concentric "circles" of 80 pilasters each.

The first Humanist author to restore the identity of the Amphitheatrum Flavium is Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459), who describes it as "*media fere urbe, ex lapide Tiburtino, opus Divi Vespasiani, Coliseum vulgo appellatum*".⁴⁰ One generation later the combination of archaeology and the study of classical literary sources led to a full understanding of the origin and function of the Colosseum: "*In media urbe amphitheatrum, inchoatum a Vespasiano et perfectum a Domitiano, cum incrustatione intrinsecus et extrinsecus, cum signis, et in singulis superioribus arcibus erant statuæ marmoreæ. Ibi edebantur ludi. Sub tanto aedificio subsunt cloacæ ... Amphitheatrum nunc appellatur Colosseum ab colosso quod ibi erat: colossus autem est magna statua. Quando fiebant ludi, aedificium cooperiebatur linteis*". Thus Pomponio Leto (1428-1497).⁴¹



III. 1: Drawing from about 1491 of the Colosseum seen from the south-west. The Coxa is clearly visible. On the Arch of Constantine are the remains of a tower built by the Frangipani. (Madrid, Escorial Collection)

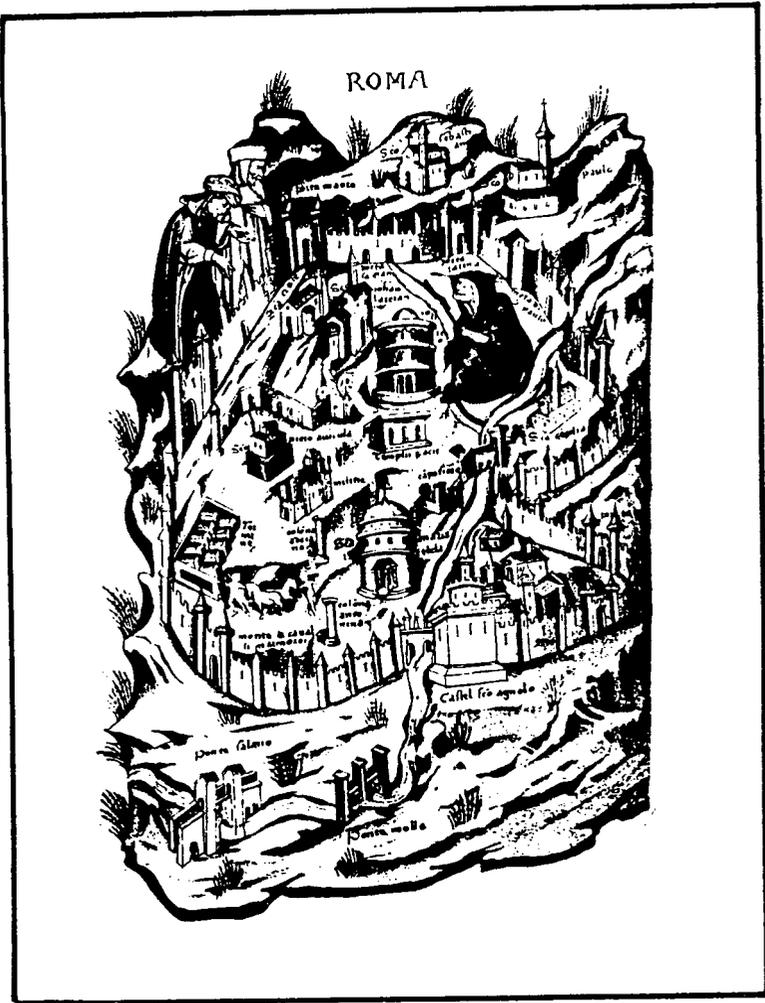
³⁹ *Codice topografico IV*, 68ff.

⁴⁰ *De Varietate Fortunæ; Codice topografico IV*, 238; *lapis Tiburtinus*: travertine.

⁴¹ *De Vetustate Urbis; Codice topografico IV*, 423: "An amphitheatre in the centre of the city, begun by Vespasian and finished by Domitian. Both inside and outside it has incrustations and reliefs and in each of the higher arches stood statues of marble. Games were held here. Everywhere below this enormous building are underground passages ... The amphitheatre is now called Colosseum after the colossus that once stood here (see note 36): a colossus is a large statue. When games took place the building was covered with awnings".



III. 2: Diptych of the Byzantine Emperor Anastasius (491-518)
(Staatliche Museum, Berlin)



III. 3: Illustrated plan of Rome showing the Colosseum with a dome. The widow is a personification of Roma, bewailing her sad state. From a 15th century manuscript of Fazio degli Uberti's *Dittamondo* (National Library, Paris)