

# THE COLOSSEUM

## A HISTORY

ROBERT B. ABRAMS

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# INTRODUCTION

The most colossal arena on Earth was opening for its first games, and people from all reaches of the Roman Empire came to see the show - Alexandrians and Greeks, Ethiopians and Turks, barbarians from Britain, Sarmatians from the banks of the Danube. And, of course, there were the people of Rome - from august senators and Vestal Virgins to soldiers and artisans, slaves and women.

The year was CE 80. The emperor Vespasian had begun building this vast amphitheater seven years before his death, and his son Titus, who had finished his father's work, would now preside over the grandest opening ever - an event spanning 100 days, with only brief interludes for rest and recuperation. The crowd would see wild beasts pitted against each other in bloody contests, gladiators fighting to the death, and watch as criminals were tortured and killed in myriad ways, all of which were especially gruesome.

No scenario was too base to be played out on the Colosseum floor. In his *Book of the Shows*, the poet Martial describes a scene taken from the mythological tale of Pasiphae, the wife of the Cretan King Minos, who was bewitched by the god Poseidon to fall in love with a bull and conceive the monstrous Minotaur, half bull and half man, performed by a real woman and a live bull.

As dazzling and as horrifying as the spectacles were, the games were dwarfed by the immensity of the Colosseum itself. A mammoth oval stadium, 620 feet long and 513 feet wide, its steeply graded tiers of stone benches would accommodate an estimated 50,000 to 80,000 spectators; the arena itself measured 287 by 180 feet. The walls - built of creamy travertine limestone - rose to the height of a fifteen-story building, with masts jutting from the summit to support the huge awning that shielded the crowd from the Roman sun. Everything about the stadium proclaimed the grandeur and permanence of Rome.

But as the empire rotted from within, the Colosseum decayed with it. Fires and earthquakes shook its foundations, reducing its walls to rubble, which, in turn, became the building blocks for the structures that would rise from its ashes. As it deteriorated, the Colosseum became an unholy shrine, a sinister temple filled with ghosts and demons, where necromancers

communed with evil spirits and medieval warlords plotted and schemed to undermine their rivals.

Now, nearly 2,000 years later, the empire is long gone – no more enduring than its ancient enemy Carthage or the dynasties of China or Adolf Hitler’s thousand-year Reich. But the ruins of the Colosseum still stand, both as a symbol of a once great civilization and a bloodstained monument to human cruelty. This book is its story.



# I

“ROME ARISING  
FROM ITS ASHES”

The Colosseum is one of the world's most famous structures, instantly recognizable to nearly everyone the world over. From its inception, the massive arena was the site of horrific bloodlust: All told, anywhere from 400,000 to 700,000 men, women, children, and more than 1 million beasts lost their lives. Gladiators with nets and tridents battled each other to the death for Rome's amusement; criminals were tortured, butchered, or torn apart by wild animals to appease its thirst for savagery, and the beasts themselves, from ostriches and gazelles to tigers, elephants, and hippopotamuses, were hunted down and slain by the thousands for the pleasure of the mob – so many that entire species were driven to extinction.

One of the emperor's favorite amusements was to reenact stories from classic mythology. In one scenario, a criminal portraying Laureolus, the legendary Roman bandit, was nailed to a cross. But because death from crucifixion was a protracted process that would try the patience of the audience, a bear, imported from Scotland, was dispatched to tear out his entrails. Another condemned man played the part of Icarus, the boy who flew too close to the sun. Fitted with wings and catapulted across the arena, he landed, dead, in a crumpled heap.

On one occasion, Titus flooded the floor of the arena and staged a mock sea-battle, with ships sinking and crews slaughtered and drowned by the hundreds. But not even that extravaganza could quench the Romans' notorious thirst for blood.

To the rulers of Rome, these gory spectacles were intended both to demonstrate to Roman plebeians the all-powerful supremacy of the emperor and to provide entertainment for their spoiled, demanding citizens - a brutal display glorifying the Roman virtues of courage, discipline, and endurance.

Historians have called the Colosseum Vespasian's masterpiece – a triumph both of physical and political durability. But the story begins with Vespasian's predecessor, the flamboyant Emperor Nero.

Nero's wild extravagances, cruelty, and artistic pretensions had antagonized the citizens of Rome long before the great fire that devastated the city in CE 64, ten years into his reign.