

## [Transcript] The Rest Is History / 369. The Colosseum: Rome's Arena of Death

Hello, Australia. Hello, New Zealand. Now, we have some very exciting news about the next leg of our mighty World Tour. Extraordinarily, perhaps you might say depressingly, but extraordinarily,

there are still some tickets left for our Antipodean listeners. So, for those listeners down under who have not yet had the sheer thrill of seeing the rest is history live, we are coming to Australia and New Zealand. Our first show on the 15th of November is in New Zealand. It is in Auckland. Then we are in Melbourne on the 18th of November. We are in Brisbane live on the 21st of November. We are performing live in Sydney on the 23rd of November. We are in Adelaide on the 24th of November and we end where else? We end in Perth on the 27th of November. Now, as I say, there are a few tickets still available on [www.RestIsHistoryPod.com](http://www.RestIsHistoryPod.com). Get yours now before they sell out because the depressing truth and this is one of the great realities of history and of life is that once they're gone, they are gone and you will never get this opportunity again. Goodbye.

Your fame is well deserved, Spaniard. I don't think there's ever been a Gladiator to match you. That's for this young man. He insists you are Hector reborn. What was it, Hercules? Why doesn't the hero reveal himself and tell us all your real name? You do have a name.

My name is Gladiator. How dare you show your back to me! Slave! You will remove your helmet and tell me your name. My name is Maximus Decimus Meridius, Commander of the Armors of the North, General of the Felix Legions and loyal servant to the true Emperor Marcus Aurelius, father to a murdered son, husband to a murdered wife, and I will have my vengeance in this life or the next. Brilliant, Dominic. So that was me as the Emperor Commodus and that was you as Maximus. That's Russell Crowe, Tom.

Played by Russell Crowe and Joachim Phoenix, respectively, from *Gladiator*, of course, which is set in the arena of death, the greatest and most celebrated stage in the whole of history perhaps, the Coliseum. So that was one of the first great achievements of CGI, I think, in cinema. I think it was defining. I think it absolutely was. I remember, I saw that film, *Gladiator*. I was doing my PhD research. I was in Washington, D.C. and I took the day off from working at the National Archives because I was so excited about *Gladiator*.

It was one of those films that I felt that when I was watching it, it wasn't just that I was watching it, but there was a sort of the ghost of my 10-year-old self sitting next to me watching it and just in awe at the spectacle of something that I had probably always dreamed one way I would see on screen, but never thought I really would.

So I say that it was defining for CGI because the artificiality of it, in a sense, was the whole point. The reproduction of the Coliseum was vastly exaggerated. It made it look much, much bigger than it really was, but that was absolutely appropriate because everything about the Coliseum, it's all about spectacle, show, illusion, exaggeration. So just to have reproduced it would have been completely untrue, ironically enough, to the actual spirit of the original structure.

Because it wouldn't have awed us in the same way the Coliseum awed people in their first or second century AD.

And are you not entertained? It's all about entertainment. So in a way, the film *Gladiator* perfectly mapped onto the way that the original Coliseum functioned. So I thought it was absolutely fantastic.

But isn't there a fascinating thing with the Coliseum? And indeed, the film *Gladiator* captures

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this perfectly, which was simultaneously dazzled by the spectacle and thrilled by the excitement. It's the ultimate sporting spectacle, I suppose. But at the same time, there's always that enormous uneasiness that this is an arena in which people fought and died for the entertainment of others.

Well, of course, I mean, that's the difference, isn't it, between the film and what originally happened is that we don't really have to worry about that. I don't think many people watch *Gladiator* and feel squeamish or moral anxiety about it. But of course, when you come to look at the original Coliseum and what was staged there, absolutely you do feel that. And it's that that introduces, I think, a slight measure of ambivalence about the role that the Coliseum historically has played as an emblem of Rome itself and of ancient Rome. Yeah.

And I think it's entirely appropriate that the Coliseum should be the emblem of Rome, because it is simultaneously stupefying or inspiring, fascinating, but also kind of terrifying into our way of thinking morally unsettling, which I think Roman civilization was all those things.

Yeah. It's a symbol of simultaneously of cruelty and grandeur, isn't it?

But remember we did the podcast on Mary Beard about classics and the study of the classical world. And she said something that I always remember about when we were talking about the Roman enthusiasm for violence and gladiatorial games, that we are actually no different because all those tourists who go to see the Coliseum, thousands upon thousands of them every single day, it's not just the spectacle of the building that is drawing them. It is also the dark and savage glamour of the violence at its heart. But to go back to the Coliseum as an icon of Rome, Tom, I mean, it's probably these, if you're picking a picture to illustrate the Roman Empire, it's the one you always go to, isn't it? It's the single most obvious emblem of Rome.

And it has been for a very long time. So Byron in his poem, *Child Harold*, wrote, while stands the Coliseum, Rome shall stand, when falls the Coliseum, Rome shall fall, and when Rome falls the world. And Byron attributed that to Bede, the Anglo-Saxon monk, probably inaccurately. But it's always been at the heart of Rome. And so the way that it's kind of evolved over the course of its history reflects the patterns of Roman history. So once it's ceased being used as an arena, it becomes a cemetery, then it becomes a fortress. Actually, a fortress owned by the Francopani, who are the ultimate ancestors of Peter Francopan.

Oh, really? Who appeared on our episode about climate change.

It was fleetingly a workhouse for repentant prostitutes under the Renaissance popes. It became a shrine to the Christians who supposedly were martyred there, even though there's absolutely no evidence that any Christians were martyred there at all. And now of course, as you say, it's a tourist attraction. And as Mary said in that episode, the hint of blood in the air is absolutely a part of the appeal.

So there's a lot of mythology about the Coliseum, Tom. So the Christians are not being fed to lions in the middle of the Coliseum. Well, they might have been, but we have no record of it.

Right. So the Byron thing, the Byron poem, that's not right either, is that the idea that...

No, because the original saying, which may or may not have come from Bede, but it's definitely Anglo-Saxon, is referring to the Colossus, which is the great statue built by Nero, which we will come to when we talk about how the Coliseum comes to be built. So there's that. And also,

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of course, the Romans didn't call it the Coliseum. So this is a stunning revelation to me.

It's not even the Coliseum is not even his name. No. So people who listen to our episode on the eruption of Asuvius that we did, they're brilliantly named Roman Apocalypse.

Yeah. We mentioned Marshall, the epigramist. And Marshall wrote a whole series of poems about the inauguration of what we call the Coliseum. And in that, he calls it the amphitheatrum chisarium. So Caesar's amphitheater. We also noticed the Flavian amphitheater because it was built by the Flavian dynasty, which was Vespasian and his son Titus, who was emperor during the destruction of Pompeii. So we'll talk about them as well. And this inauguration is presided over by Titus. And the reasons why it comes to be built, I think that there are multiple ways of approaching it. To do with aspects that are fundamental to Roman culture, aspects that are due to the circumstances in which the Flavian dynasty have come to power and aspects that are due to the specific circumstances of Titus' own reign. So I thought that that would be a good way to structure the analysis of how this extraordinary building comes to be. And it was absolutely understood to be extraordinary when it was built. So Marshall in one of his poems, he compares it to all the great wonders of the world. And he says that none of these wonders can compare with this astonishing amphitheater. Fame shall speak of one marvel in place of all. And I think he was right. I think in a way, the Coliseum is up there with the great pyramid as one of the stupefying emblems in the popular imagination of antiquity.

Before we get to the Coliseum itself, let's talk about what happens within it, which is gladiatorial games. Although Dominic, not just gladiatorial games, but we'll come to that. But most famously, yes, gladiatorial games. So the Romans have always been enthusiasts for gladiatorial games, haven't they? And is that unusual in the ancient world? Yes. I mean, it's distinctively Italian, I think. But in Rome, they seem to have begun as kind of funerary rites, offering a tribute of armed violence to the shades of the departed. And they are staged in the forum, which is the great central open space between the Palatine and the Capitoline hills.

And these rituals actually seem to have originated along the Bay of Naples, so the very place where Vesuvius erupted centuries later. And this idea that it is a kind of religious right is very, very important, I think, to understanding the power that gladiatorial combat has on the Roman imagination. Even though that initial role comes to be subsumed within to entertainment, there is always a sense that it should properly have a kind of cultic role. So, witness to this is by Christian writer, Tatullian, who was writing in Carthage around AD 200. He's writing back in the midst of time, because the Romans believed that the souls of the dead could be propitiated by the spilling of human blood. They used to mark funerals by slaughtering captives or slaves bought cheaply, especially for that purpose. Gradually, it began to seem a good idea to mask the impiety of this by transforming it into a pleasure. And so it was that the Romans found comfort for death in open murder. Now, Tatullian is, of course, writing as a Christian, so he is inherently a hostile witness. But I think that he is accurately fixing on something that is there in the Roman attitudes towards gladiatorial combat, which is a certain nervousness about the idea that it should rank as mere entertainment. The sense that these rituals are kind of sacral rites, the Romans call these munera. But they come to be what the Romans call spectacular, from which we get obviously our word spectacle, things to be watched. And so right the way through Roman history, even after that sense that the men are fighting to appease the souls of the dead starts to fade, they still have to find justifications for it. To say, you know, it's not just entertainment, it has to be something more than that.

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And basically, as we kind of move into the latter centuries of the Republic, as Rome is becoming a great power, as the city is expanding, as the identity of Roman is becoming one that is standing across the whole of Italy, gladiatorial combat is offered as a means of maintaining social cohesion, of maintaining a kind of a sense of civic Roman identity, because the right to watch them is one of the key perks of citizenship. So to sit and watch a gladiatorial combat means you are a Roman, means you are sharing in a common experience. Although you say sit, but am I not right in thinking that often you're expected to stand? You are absolutely right. That was a slip. Yes. So this is the extraordinary thing is that under the Republic, Roman moralists are paranoid about the idea that people might sit to watch the spectacular. To the extent that the Latin word for seating is *seditio*, from which we get our word *sedition*. And for the Romans, it comes to signify civil strife, all the kind of, you know, anarchy, all the things that come from a failure to maintain the proper social cohesion and the sense of moral standards. So *sedition*, I did not know that. That's fascinating. And Tom, do you know what? There's a funny resonance here, because in England, among people who like football, there is a slight sense that, you know, if you're a real fan, you should stand. You should stand and that the sitting is for what Roy King famously called the kind of prawn cocktail sandwich brigade. Yes. Who are going, you know, they're not going in the true spirit of the game, because to be a true fan is to stand while someone is urinating on your leg from behind. And, you know, in the sort of 1970s terraces football fan style. I mean, it is a really interesting parallel because the all-seater stadiums were brought in, weren't they, after a series of kind of riots and disasters and mass deaths and things. And I think there is a kind of, well, you're much more of a fan than me, but I get the sense that there is this slight feeling among the kind of the really hardcore fans that it's gone soft. I would agree with that. Yeah. It's not just that the seats are just for kind of rich people, but that anyone who sits down is kind of portraying the toughness that should probably be the mark of a fan. Well, there's been a very vocal movement in recent years for what they call safe standing, to bring back standing, because it's truer to the spirit of the game, it's more masculine, it's more hardy, it's more authentic, it's more proletarian, all these things. Well, the Senate, the Roman Senate would absolutely have agreed with you, because in the middle of the second century BC, they brought in legislation to ensure that people had to stand. And the justification for this was that in standing, the proper virility of the Roman race should be linked to relaxation. So in other words, even while they're enjoying themselves, the Romans are affirming their virile character. Cricky. Okay. So that's very Roy Keane, isn't it? Yeah, very Roy Keane. So that is one way in which the Romans justify stage and gladiatorial entertainments, whether they're *Munera* or *Spectacular*. The other one is that as the Empire expands and as the experience of warfare moves from the limits of Rome itself to kind of distant frontiers overseas, there is a feeling that there is a need to remind the mass of the Roman people in the city itself of what it is that

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underpins Roman greatness. So the oath that gladiators swear before they go out and fight is modeled on the oath that is sworn by a Roman legionary. So there is a kind of equation there between the citizen soldier and the slave who is fighting for the entertainment of the masses.

So the gladiatorial oath is, I will endure to be burned, to be bound, to be beaten, and to be killed by the sword. And that is an amplification of basically what it takes to serve in the Roman armies. So you can stand and watch the combat and feel, yeah, this is a display of everything that underpins the greatness of Rome.

And just on the gladiators, one quick question before we move on.

The gladiators themselves, you said slaves. They are slaves, are they? You're not a professional gladiator, but out of choice. No. I mean, in the long run, there are notoriously commoners being an example. Upper class people, the glamour of the gladiator is such that the people who aren't slaves, members of the nobility, even an emperor in the form of cometers wants to, you know, to partake in the excitement of this. But they are slaves. They are the lowest of the low. They are ranked alongside such strengths of society as prostitutes and actors.

So that is the measure of just how lowly they rank in the social spectrum.

I think we should get back to that attitude about actors. I don't have a few actors who listen to this podcast, they'll switch off. So because they're slaves, they can be bought. And obviously, the more money you have, the more you can buy and the bigger display you can put on. And as we enter the final century of the Republic, and you have evermore warlords kind of dominating the functioning of the Republic, so you get an acceleration of anxiety about great men using gladiatorial combat to promote their image to kind of harvest votes.

So unsurprisingly, it's Caesar who kind of blazes the path. So before he becomes consul, while he's still kind of trying to make his way, his father dies and he seizes this as an opportunity to really kind of cut a dash. So this is cast as Munra. This is about appeasing the soul of Caesar's father. And he gets 320 pairs of gladiators by far the largest number that had ever been fought on one occasion. And he dresses them in silver armor. So this is a complete spectacle. And the Senate, in the wake of this introduced legislation to try and kind of rein in extravagance like this. And again, to draw the football parallel, the analogy is pretty clear. This is equivalent to someone like Silvia Berlusconi using football.

And I guess the way that kind of rival Middle Eastern despots now are buying football teams. So Manchester City or Newcastle, United or whatever.

Yeah, Paris Saint-Germain. Yeah, absolutely. Sport as a vehicle for geopolitical rivalry, I suppose.

Yeah. And I think that the most intriguing way in which this is manifest in the urban fabric of Rome is that there is no permanent stadium where people can go and watch gladiators. So you do get

them elsewhere. The word that describes it, amphitheatrum, comes from Greek. So it basically means a space that can be viewed from both sides, as opposed to a theater where you can, you know, you're in a semicircle. But it is a distinctively Italian form. So you asked about gladiators, they're Italian. And the amphitheater, which evolves to stage these displays, is also not just Italian, but becomes the, you know, internationally the marker of Romanitas.

If you see an amphitheater, you know you're in a Roman city. But you don't get a permanent amphitheater in Rome. Instead, the artificiality of the structures that are built either in the forum or on the campus marshes on the kind of the outskirts of Rome are part of the fun.

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This is part of what ambitious noblemen are spending their money on, so that when you go to see gladiators, you will also be going to see an architectural extravaganza.

Yeah.

And this remains a source of constant tension under the Republic. But that, of course, starts to ease once Augustus comes to power and establishes an autocracy. And I think it's really telling that

it's only once Augustus has seized power that you get the first permanent amphitheater in Rome, not built by Augustus, interestingly, but by one of his lieutenants. But Augustus continues to build his own kind of spectacles and stages for the display of gladiators, which are, you know, he puts on it in an absolutely unprecedented scale. So Cesar had kind of raised eyebrows by putting on what was it, 320 gladiators. Augustus stages a show that features 10,000 gladiators. I mean, that does sound, A, a suspiciously round figure, but also like classic Roman exaggeration. Is it more plausible that he may be at 500 or something?

Possibly. I mean, it's a lot.

Right.

I mean, 10,000 is Latin for a lot.

So many, you can't count them.

Right.

And I suspect that Augustus himself says it's 10,000 because this is quoted by Suetonius, who has access to Augustus's records.

So it's like Donald Trump's inauguration, Tom.

Yeah, it's the biggest ever. There's a biggest display of it. Exactly.

So at that point, the experience are going to watch the games. So under Augustus, it's becoming more ordered. Is that right? More regimented, more structured, more class stratified and so on.

Right. So this idea that the display of gladiators is somehow revealing something about the moral character of the Roman people, it doesn't die with the ending of the Republic. In fact, it becomes intensified because Augustus can control the spectacles. Everyone knows that it reflects his vision of Rome. By this point, spectators are sitting, but Augustus is very, very anxious about the fact that people are just kind of sitting willy-nilly, that they're just kind of crowding in, sitting wherever they want. He feels that, what is it, the cocktail eating classes, the senators, should have the best seats, and they should be seen to have the best seats. And that people who lack the necessary property qualifications should be shoved up at the top, and that this should reflect the order and dignity of the way that the Roman people are organized because the Romans are obsessed by social stratification. They have this thing called the census, which isn't just about counting how many Romans there are, but what their property qualifications are, what their kind of moral standing is. You can pinpoint your social standing with minute punctiliousness. Augustus is very keen on this, and he feels that gladiatorial displays should do that, that the place that the spectators are sitting should kind of be a census in stone, if you like. He feels that a gladiatorial display should be a kind of a lived census, that people go there and they know exactly where they should be. But there is also, I think, something that is very, very unique to the Roman autocracy. I mean, there's nothing really comparable that I can think of in any other ancient autocracy, which is that the emperor, by staging these displays, is kind of putting his reputation on the line. These displays have to be effective. They have to be impressive. He has to be confident in his popularity with the masses,

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because he is a public figure, and it would be terrible for him to be booed, for instance. So that's part of the dynamic that you get in gladiator.

Oh, absolutely you do.

Yeah.

Yeah. The question of, are people going to be siding with Commodus or with Russell Crowe is the key dynamic that structures the entire plot. And that is absolutely true to the jeopardy that is always kind of shadowing an emperor who's putting on spectacular.

Those spectacles, they run right through the early emperors, don't they? The Julius Claudians. So you've got the example here of Claudius. Claudius, who is not a martial man at all, actually, is he? He's a scholarly man. He uses this as a stage on which to pretend he's a martial man. Is that fair?

Yeah. So it's Claudius who gets the famous salute, Hail Emperor, we who are about to die salute you. So this is recorded by Suetonius. But again, what's fascinating about it is that this is not in an amphitheatre. It's in a lake that he is about to drain. And before it gets drained, he decides that he's going to hold a kind of naval spectacle. And all the crowds kind of gather around the banks. And when the gladiators say this, we who are about to die salute you. And he answers, well, but you may not die.

Oh, that's reassuring.

And so all the gladiators go, brilliant. And so they down all their weapons on the assumption that he has offered them a pardon. And Claudius is furious. He said, no, I haven't. And the gladiators are refusing to fight. And Claudius has to get up from his seat and kind of hobble down and harangue them and get them to fight. And that is an example of the potential pitfalls that face an emperor who screws up a display.

That's not so Hollywood, is it?

No, that's not so Hollywood at all. And so this kind of shambles shows both the perils that face an emperor, you've got to make sure that the spectacle is right. And it also shows that you still don't have a permanent amphitheatre in Rome, the queen of the world, the capital of the empire. Every other city with any pretensions to be a significant urban space by this point does have an amphitheatre. Rome doesn't. And I think we should take a break here, do you think?

Yes, I think we should take a break here and we will return with the building of the Colosseum, the spectacle of the Colosseum, all its political and cultural meanings. And we'll do that after the break. See you then.

Welcome back to the Restless History. We're talking about the Colosseum. Tom, you've been very remiss because you've not mentioned that you've written about this quite brilliantly in your new book, Pax.

Oh, Dominic.

That readers, that listeners will never have heard us mentioned before on this podcast.

So this will be a novelty for them to hear that you've got this new book out Pax. It's about war and peace in Rome's golden age, isn't it? Life and death at the high point of the Roman Empire. Your book Pax is all about the Flavian dynasty. And so now we have these people who have their upstarts. They have taken power after the chaos that follows the death of Nero.

So it's Vespasian and his son Titus. So why does this mark change in the Roman attitude towards gladiatorial games and the stadia in which they stage them?

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Well, I think that they're not from an elite background. And so as a result, they are probably less tied to the assumptions and prejudices that had governed the Julia-Claudian emperors. So they can kind of think out of the box, perhaps to a greater degree. But there is also a very obvious need to stamp their power, their authority, the existence of their dynasty on the urban fabric of the city. And they're given the opportunity to do that by what Nero, the last of the Julia-Claudian emperors, had done in a similar light. So Nero had been emperor during the Great Fire. We did an episode on him. And in the wake of the Great Fire, he clears away all the rubble and builds this kind of enormous pleasure palace that features a house sheathed with gold, so it glints in the sun. He's got plans for an enormous colossus, giant statue with his own face and a lake with pleasure gardens all around it. And this is cast by the senatorial elite as being an absolute display of self-indulgence, which it clearly is. But that ignores the fact that probably these parks are open to the mass of the people. And the key thing about that is that there's no social ordering in a pleasure garden. People can just wander in willy-nilly. So when Vespasian comes to power, he has every opportunity to get rid of this monument to Nero. Vespasian's whole stick is that he's a kind of rugged, no-nonsense, old-fashioned, turn-it-munching soldier with no time for pleasure gardens and golden houses. And so he starts the process of demolition. He moves all the kind of the statues and works of art out from Nero's house, puts it in a temple to peace that he has built next to Augustus' Forum. And he fills the lake with concrete. And then there is a question, well, what do we do with this vast, empty space in what is probably the most valuable piece of real estate in the world? It's empty. We can do anything we want. And this is where he gets the idea we should have an amphitheatre. And it's got to be on a scale that is sufficiently stupefying that it can basically seat the mass of the Roman people. I mean, it can't see all of them because there's about a million people in Rome, but it's got to be large enough that it can adequately symbolize the presence of the entire mass of people who live in the city. Is there an element, though, that because Nero was building a pleasure garden, and of course, Nero, as you brilliantly described in your podcast, when you did Nero, and you sort of recast him as this populist showman and stuff, is there an element of them having to do something that is A, very showy, and B, that is democratic is the wrong word, but you know what I mean? That is open to the people rather than fancy new blocks for the senatorial elite or something. Yeah, it's a proclamation. Well, it's doing two things simultaneously. It's having its cake and eating it because on the one hand, it's saying, we're not having any nonsense with the pleasure lakes. This is good old fashioned Roman entertainment. It's going to be moral. It's going to be upstanding. It's going to be displays of blood, which will make people better. So it's absolutely part of Roman tradition. And on the other hand, it's saying, look, we are here. We're the new dynasty. We can afford this, and we are giving it to you, the Roman people. And so that's why it's built on the massive scale that it is. It's not just about fitting people in. It's about making a very, very visible statement. So Catherine Welch has written a brilliant book on the evolution of the amphitheater from its beginnings up to the Colosseum. I said about the Colosseum that it towered over the Roman cityscape in much the way that cathedrals later towered over medieval towns. And just cathedrals tell you a lot about the value systems of people in the Middle Ages. So the fact that you have this great monument to sport and spectacle and blood sports tells you a lot about the value system of the Romans. And the extravagance of it is the point. And it's a pretty radical new



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design. So the outside, it has kind of huge statues. It has different kinds of pillars and all kinds of things like that. It has beautiful awnings. It is designed to be spectacular. And the further benefit of this for the Flavians is that it enables them to remind people who are going there about the great military triumph of the Flavian dynasty, which is the defeat of the Judeans and specifically Titus's capture of Jerusalem, which has been stripped of its treasures and these treasures have been paraded through the streets of Rome. Now, this is a slight of hand because actually there wasn't much treasure in Judea. The Flavians are massively exaggerating how much loot they have taken. In fact, the money seems to have come from Vespasian and Titus, hugely raising taxes on the eastern half of the empire. But it's all good stuff. You know, a Roman emperor, the word emperor comes from imperator, which literally means general. So it's Vespasian saying and Titus saying, we are imperatoris. We are an imperator in the original sense of the word, not as Nero was a man who never led an army, who just sat around playing the liar. So it's making a statement about the manliness of the Flavians and the manliness of the Roman people.

And just on the Colosseum, the construction of it, we presumably have no idea who designed it, who built it. These things are lost to us, are they?

No. I mean, it's often said that it's Judean slaves. I mean, it may well have been a huge harvest of slaves was taken from Judea and they would have provided a ready source of manpower. We know that Vespasian sends a whole troop of Judean slaves to Nero when he's trying to build his canal through the Isthmus of Corinth, which never gets completed because Nero dies. I think it's pretty clear that Judea is being used as a source of manpower for kind of big infrastructure projects.

And capacity. So I've seen different estimates from 50,000 to about 80,000 people. I mean, extraordinary when you consider the small size of the population compared with today, that they are building a stadium of that size. But I suppose there's still an element of confusion in that. Is it not set seats for everybody? I mean, the capacity can change depending on how many people you're choosing to pack in. Right. So this now comes to the specific question of why it matters to Titus. So it's probable that the Colosseum is inaugurated by Titus in the summer of AD 80. Might have been 81, but more likely to be 80. And that is a year after the subject of our previous podcast, The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

And that is one of a number of disasters that rocks the reign of Titus. So other disasters include a major outbreak of fire that destroys the Pantheon. So this is why the Pantheon, the temple to all the gods, will get rebuilt by Hadrian, the great dome building that most tourists to Rome will have seen, the best preserved Roman temple. But it also destroys the temple of Jupiter on the capital, which is the most significant sacred space in Rome. And it had already burnt down in the year of the four emperors when Vespasian comes to power, AD 69. And that had absolutely been taken as a terrifying symbol of the wrath of the gods that that temple had been burnt down. So the fact that Vespasian and Titus have been busy repairing it and now it's burnt down again, this is terrible. Then there's an awful plague that ravages Rome again, terrible. And then of course, you have the eruption of Vesuvius and the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum were literally entombed. So there are huge numbers of people who have not been given the funerary rights that they should have been. And so the anxiety is, is that their restless ghosts are going to roam the world unappeased. And so Titus has a desperate need to appease the spirits of these unburied dead. And I think there is no question, when he inaugurates the Coliseum, he is trying to do it not just as a kind of grand master of ceremonies, a man who is offering

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entertainment to the people, but as someone who is the moral guardian of the empire and of the city. So Titus had actually had quite a bad reputation before he becomes emperor. He'd been head of the Praetorians. So the kind of the imperial bodyguard. And that had given him quite a bad reputation. He'd been a notorious Libertine. So his most famous in Amorata was a Jewish princess called Berenice. Oh yeah. But when he becomes emperor, it's kind of like Prince Hal in Henry the fourth part too. He turns over a new leaf and says, basically, I am going to be good. So when he accepts the office of Pontifex Maximus, which is the chief priesthood in the Roman state, he declares that he is motivated by one thing and one thing only, which is he never wants to pollute his hands with blood. That's very un-Roman, Tom. Well, except that it's very ostentatious. And to be ostentatious in your programs is very Roman. So he has a habit of lying around at dinner. And he'll say things like, oh, my friends, I have wasted a day for I have done nothing good. I'm not that. Yeah, I know. I know you are. So very, very Titus behavior. And so he's kind of widely reported as saying things like this. It obviously comes from his own propagandists. And when he inaugurates the Colosseum, people whom he had employed as the head of the Praetorians, kind of informers, the apparatus of spy craft that had been serving to uphold the Flavian regime, all these people are dragged into the arena. They are smashed up with cudgels. They are lashed with whips. And this is, again, making an absolutely public statement to the mass of the Roman people that Titus is no longer the man he was, that this is all about doing right by the Roman people, but more importantly, doing right by the gods. Right. And it's because of that that what you were fixing on the seating aspect is so important because a city in chaos is a city that is going to anger the gods. So Titus is, as Augustus was, obsessed with everyone having the right place. Senators have to be in the right place. The poor have to be right at the top, women slaves, whatever they all have to be. It's a census that is now embodied in stone. Okay. So that's the seating. What are people watching? So my sense of it, Tom, is a complete outsider to the subject and someone who loves the film Gladiator is that you've got a few men in chariots. You've got a bloke with a net and a trident. You've got the other fellow with his sword. You've got a few tigers or whatever roaming around underneath and then suddenly being disgorged out of kind of grills. What's going on? Everything. I mean, it is stupefying. These are the greatest spectacles ever staged. And I think that what Titus is doing, again, it's kind of a repudiation of Nero and it's an affirmation of the fact that the Roman people have to align themselves with the gods. So what Nero had done when he took to the stage and played on the lyre or took a dramatic role was that he was identifying himself with the heroes of myth. What Titus is doing is often kind of basically restaging the dimension of myth in the arena and that in turn is to cast him and the Roman people in the role in the part of the gods. It's actually, people do this thing then they called live action role playing or cosplaying or whatever they call it where they dress up as people from the Viking heroes, carriages and star wars and they do what they do in woods or wherever they do it. This is a kind of version of that. So it's a version of role playing. They would dress up as heroes, as characters from history. So if the Roman people are the gods watching the spectacle of mortals on the earth, then the criminals and the slaves who are entertaining them are often being cast in the role of kind of tragic heroes, heroes from myth and so on. So there isn't a kind of set routine, but the whole point with staging spectacular is that you kind of mix things up. But you could say that there's a kind of a rhythm that is more obeyed than disregarded,

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which is that you open with displays of execution. And again, these are seen by the Romans as being an expression of the correct way to do things. So Livy says of the Romans that we may boast above any other people that our methods of punishment are civilized, which kind of may come as a surprise to us because we tend to think that Roman punishments are incredibly uncivilized. But it is important to the Romans that executions affirm a moral order. What is happening in the Colosseum is that this kind of ambition to make executions affirm a kind of sense that all is right with the world is being fused with the dimension of myth. So in effect, what they're staging, it's a kind of combination of a snuff movie with Cirque du Soleil. It's capital punishment fused with brilliant stagecraft. And I suppose it's the stagecraft and the spectacle that lifts it to the level of a ritual rather than merely, oh, here's some guy who stole some bread will cut his hands off or cut his head off. It's both. I mean, again, it's having cake and eating it. Right. And so Marshall loves these. We know about these punishments because these executions, because Marshall writes about them. So for instance, he describes a man who is chained by his wrists

and by his ankles and a bear comes and gnaws out his intestines. So there's echoes there of the punishment of Prometheus whose intestines were gnawed by a vulture or an eagle.

Oh, of course. Right.

There is a woman who is mounted by a bull. And again, I mean, quite how that is staged, what that involved. I mean, there have been many scholarly attempts to make sense of that. But that again is a story that comes from Greek mythology.

Is that Europa? The story is Europa?

No, it's the story of the Queen who gives birth to the Minotaur.

Of course. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

So Marshall writes that this let decrepit antiquity boast all it likes, whatever has been rendered famous by Song Caesar has been reproduced in the arena for you.

So it's the feeling that the Roman people have entered a dimension of mythology controlled by Caesar.

And they don't view it, well, our senses, of course, who knows what's going through their heads, but our senses that they don't view this as pure fancy dress reenactment, sort of very sinister and dark reenactment of mythology.

These are rituals that to some degree occupy a space between the natural and the supernatural.

Is that right that they?

I think so. Yeah.

I mean, I'm sure that there are people who just love the spectacle of blood.

So Claudius was notorious for adoring executions.

Which is funny because he's such an unbelligerent and weedy man.

Well, so if you just read, you know, I, Claudius, you'd never have that sense.

But Sir Tonius is very specific and he comments on it because it's unusual.

Executions are seen as being a bit vulgar, a bit crass.

But these executions are clearly in terms of stagecraft designed as works of art.

So you have the entertainment value.

But I think you're absolutely right that yes, there is a kind of sense that, you know, you're in the border zone of the supernatural here.

Okay.

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And that, of course, makes it all the more thrilling.

Yeah.

Now, the other thing that is part of the entertainment is hinted at by the presence of a bear tearing out the intestines.

The bear gets specified.

This comes from Caledonia, from what's now Scotland.

And by bringing monsters from the barbarian reaches that lie beyond the empire, or from the kind of the outermost reaches of the empire itself,

what the Caesars are doing is demonstrating the global reach of Roman power.

So those animals that are brought to Rome, they're fierce in themselves.

I mean, imagine seeing a giraffe for the first time, or, you know, I mean, it's kind of remarkable spectacle.

But there is also a sense that, you know, aren't we great?

We can bring all these animals.

And there's a wonderful passage in the Satiracan, which is a novel written by Petronius, who was the kind of the most stylish man at Nero's court, inevitably had to end up committing suicide.

But he has this great passage of poetry in it, where he writes about the wild animal being hunted out in the woods at exorbitant price.

And men trouble Hamon, which is a kind of generic name for a trader, far away in deepest Africa to supply that beast whose tusks are more valuable than the lives of those who hunt him.

So that's elephants.

Strange ravaging creatures are born by our fleets, and the padding tiger is wheeled in a gilded palace to drink human blood while the crowd applauds and cheers.

So actually the tigers in Gladiator in the film are not anachronistic.

I always thought they were anachronistic,

but they really are bringing these creatures into the arena.

Yep. So tigers come from India. Huge snakes come from India.

Elephants, of course, brought from India and from Africa.

So yeah, this is about displaying Rome's global reach.

And then you have the Gladiators.

And the Gladiators are the climax of the entertainment, usually.

This is what people have come to see, because it is sport.

It is about skill.

People will have their favorites.

And that sense that you get often in sport at its most intense, whether it's boxing or if you're a cricket fan, very fast bowling aimed at the head, the sense that a physical danger, I think for sports fans, even if they don't admit it, is often part of the excitement.

But how many people watch Formula One racing and love the crashes?

And there is a... I think I mentioned it before.

There is this brilliant account many centuries later after the Colosseum is inaugurated.

But I think true to the psychology of perhaps how the crowds were affected, written by Saint Augustine, about a friend of his called Olympius,

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who goes on to become like Augustine,  
a very distinguished Christian bishop and thinker.  
But he describes how Olympius is very standoffish about gladiatorial entertainments.  
He's not interested in seeing it, and then he gets persuaded to go in.  
And he sits there, his eyes shut because he doesn't want to watch it.  
And then Augustine describes how as soon as he saw the blood,  
he kind of his eyes open, as soon as he saw the blood,  
he drank it in with a savage temper and he did not turn away,  
but fixed his eyes on the bloody pastime, drinking in the madness,  
delighted with the wicked contest, drunk with bloodlust.  
He was now no longer the same man who came in,  
but was one of the mob he came into,  
a true companions of those who had brought him there.  
Why need I say more?  
He looked, he shouted, he was excited,  
and he took away with him the madness that would stimulate him to come again.  
And although that is about Olympius,  
I think it's almost certainly Augustine is writing about himself.  
So he's writing this in his confessions.  
This is the appeal of it.  
This is the thrill of violence.  
And I remember when I was doing my program about the Islamic State,  
I was researching the snuff videos that they made.  
And there was one that was particularly horrible,  
as Jordanian pilot got captured, I don't know if you remember,  
and he got put in a kind of cage and burned alive.  
But of course, the beheadings of the Western hostages as well  
were kind of regularly going out on the internet.  
And I read some statistic about just how popular a search term,  
the name of those who were put to death on those videos,  
were on Google for weeks afterwards.  
People wanted to see it.  
Terrific.  
People were looking it up.  
Yeah.  
And I think that, you know,  
this is kind of following on from what Mary said,  
that you, when you quoted her,  
that we fool ourselves if we think  
that we have outgrown that lust.  
I think if gladiatorial combats were staged,  
people would absolutely watch them.  
We're not that far away from people watching hangings, Tom.  
And of course, there are countries where

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hangings are still public or beheadings or whatever, and people, human people will fill stadiums to watch them. But to reiterate, I think that the gladiatorial combats are not just about entertainment.

They're not just about sport.

The role that they are playing as, you know, rights that appease the souls of the dead.

This is an important part, I think, of what is going on in the wake of the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum. And it's kind of manifest in very, very unexpected places.

So you get, for instance, you get it in medical books.

So this is the physician of Claudius, the doctor of Claudius, a man called Scribonius Lagus.

He describes how some people take a nine times dosage of a small quantity of liver cut from a fallen gladiator.

Oh, my word.

So, yeah.

So a dead gladiator is seen to be, you know, it's good for your health.

Yeah.

And of course, the other thing which, again, is absolutely manifest in gladiator is that the figure of the gladiator is very, very erotic.

So women who fancy gladiators are an absolute staple of Roman satire.

Juvenile, the greatest Roman satirist, is always going on about it.

And it's a kind of constant anxiety of Roman moralists that the people will be sexually attracted to gladiators.

And indeed, that Roman noblemen will want to be gladiators.

And apart from the erotic appeal, do gladiators have fans?

So in the film gladiator, when he's initially Maximus, is initially called the Spaniard.

One of the devices is that the young heir to the empire, who's called Lucius, Lucius Ferris, I think, has a fixation.

The Spaniard is his favorite gladiator.

He's a fan of the Spaniard.

Would that have worked?

Do you think, would people have fans?

Yes, absolutely.

Right.

Gladiators are the equivalent of sports stars.

And you would pay a premium to see the best, as now.

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People want to see the best sportsman.  
They will pay more money.  
It's kind of more prestigious.  
People in the Coliseum aren't paying.  
They're getting tickets and docketts.  
It's part of their civic right.  
But days on which top gladiators are fighting,  
those are the days that you want to go and get your place.  
So just on the Coliseum, I'm just reading here.  
The Coliseum, the last gladiatorial fights  
are mentioned around the year 435.  
Christianity has become the state religion of the Roman Empire.  
Would Christians go?  
Despite maybe it's a guilty pleasure, maybe?  
No.  
I mean, maybe not if you're a bishop.  
Yeah, probably.  
I think, by and large, for Christians,  
it's not just that these are violent displays of blood.  
It's not just that the execution of slaves  
is unsettling and reminiscent of what the Romans did to Jesus.  
It's also the enduring sense that these combats  
have a sacral significance, if I may use that phrase.  
You may indeed.  
Thank you.  
So obviously, it threatens, yes, it's so.  
Well, if you go there, you are taking part  
in a ritual that is designed to appease the dead.  
Right.  
And that's not very Christian.  
So on the Coliseum, the Coliseum falls into a relative disuse,  
I guess, after the 5th century,  
when Rome itself is on its up as the city.  
I mean, later on, as you said,  
it becomes a castle, the castle, the Francopans.  
The Francopans.  
Yeah, but before that, it's a chapel at one point.  
And that's obviously because people think  
this was the place where Christians were martyred.  
Not sure.  
I think the idea that Christians were martyred is much later.  
I think it's the 18th century.  
Maybe, yes, I think it's the 18th century that that happens.  
Right.

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But I think the Coliseum is always seen as the emblem of Rome because it's the fastest monument there.

You know, that idea that it is the Roman equivalent of a cathedral.

It's that kind of great statement in stone of what the city is.

And the sheer size of it means it doesn't collapse when other buildings do.

So even though it's in ruins now, it's still an extraordinary spectacle, isn't it?

I mean, it's a huge quarry, but it's so enormous that even though chunks of the stone gets carted away, it retains the form that it always had right the way up to the present day.

And although we've made a lot of analogies with football, and obviously a lot of football stadiums do look like the Coliseum, actually, if they're a sort of bowl shape.

Maybe a better analogy is actually the bullfighting arena, because there was talk at one point in the Coliseum's history,

I think, about turning it in the early modern period, turning it into a bullfighting arena.

It never happened.

Yeah, one of the popes, I think, wanted to do that.

The popes!

And he was not an infallibly good idea.

That was kind of harsh.

Yeah, so bullfighting, I think, is the closest that you would get to what the experience of gladiatorial combat would be.

And, you know, for aficionados of bullfighting,

it's not just about the violence,

it's not even, perhaps, mainly about the violence,

it's about the sportsmanship, the skill, the display of expertise.

Spectacle.

Yes, and I think that that's probably true to a lot of the displays that were put on in the Coliseum.

Yeah, it's both a spectacular story,

but it is quite an unsettling one, isn't it?

Just thinking about the sheer, the numbers of people who must have died,

I mean, thousands of people, I assume, over the course of its history,

thousands of animals that were butchered.

Yeah.

Tom?

Butchered to make a Roman holiday, Byron put it.

Yeah, the scary thing is, I often think about this,

if you went on holiday to Rome and they had brought back gladiatorial games,

how many people would go?

Yeah, how many people would go?



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Well, we talked about this when we talked,  
I think, on one of our bonus episodes for our club members.  
We were asked, you know, where would you go back in time  
and all this sort of stuff?  
And the question, of course, is if you went back in time to the second century AD,  
you know, you've gone for a long weekend, courtesy of Dr. Who or something,  
would you go and see the games if they were on?  
And I think that's a really difficult one to answer,  
because there's always a part of you that's thinking,  
God, this is an extraordinary experience to see it.  
But at the same time, the horror of it,  
I mean, I wouldn't go to watch public execution now,  
if there were public executions in Trafalgar Square.  
I mean, that account by Augustine of the man going to see it,  
I mean, it makes it sound almost like taking heroin or something.  
You know, you know, you shouldn't, but then you take it and you're addicted.  
Well, isn't the fear, isn't the fear?  
The fear is not that you'll go and you'll hate it.  
The fear is that you'll go and you'll enjoy it,  
which is the really chilling thought.  
Okay, so if you want to read more about the Coliseum,  
you can, of course, and you should go to your nearest bookshop  
and invest in a copy or indeed multiple copies for friends and family  
of Tom Holland's book, Pax.  
Oh, you're being so nice to me.  
Well, I'm softening you up for stuff, Tom.  
That's what it is.  
It's all about Rome at the height of its power and prestige.  
It's about the Coliseum.  
It's about Pompeii.  
It's about all these exciting things,  
the Empress, Titus and Domitian and Vespasian and so on.  
Great scenes.  
And we'll be back next time,  
not with the Romans, but with something completely and utterly different.  
So we'll see you then.  
Bye-bye.  
Bye-bye.  
you