

Much To Know about the Roman Coliseum

By Geoffrey Clarfield

The ancient historian Josephus writes that the Coliseum and related structures were built mostly by Jewish slaves.



I have read about the Coliseum of Rome since I was a pre-teen interested in Roman history and civilization. I had never visited it until this evening, and it was an accident. All the pictures and photos that I have seen make it look like it is made of dark brown stone. And it is always portrayed as large, monumental and in many senses, menacing. The color of the stone is lighter than I thought.

I had just arrived from Toronto and was spending most of the first day getting over jet lag, organizing my hotel room, catching up with email, taking a long hot shower and then sleeping off jet lag during the afternoon as is my custom the first day I travel east or west for a substantial distance.

I intended to do "Roman Rome" tomorrow; the Forum, the Coliseum, the Arch of Titus, the Arch of Constantine, and the Pantheon, but then I got hungry. The hotel concierge told me about a restaurant nearby, drew me a map, sent me on my way and asked me to send his regards to the maître d of the restaurant.

I set out, map in hand, and quickly got lost as I do not yet know how to connect Waze to my Italian sim card. And so I trudged down the Via Cavour and after walking for a half hour I entered a small side street. I looked up and there, framed in the space between the top floors of the elegant downtown apartments of a traditional Roman apartment complex and street, I got my first glimpse of that famous and infamous building.

As I got closer the Coliseum appeared larger, and I could see more. At the end of the street I found myself on an open road, just above the Forum and the Coliseum just above the main archaeological drag, a road called the Imperial Way which is chock-a-block full of ancient buildings, pillars, statues, and ongoing excavations in and around later medieval and Baroque churches whose builders used the ancient ruins as a quarry until the rise of archaeology, an expression first of the European Enlightenment and then of 19th century ethnic/nationalist romanticism.

I circled the Coliseum. Yes, it was crowded with visitors. The inside was closed for the day but, as the crowds were bearable, I did a slow and complete circumambulation. I did it for reasons that at the time I could not understand. It felt like a ritual impulse, so I just went with it and step by step

with ample breaks for mindful photography, I ended where I had begun.

As I then walked on the Sacred Way – surprisingly the quietest spot in the whole excavated area – I was regaled by Jazz on the hill above me, various street performers and ghetto blasters all giving out variations of American popular music.



Ancient buildings, pillars, statues, and ongoing excavations in Rome, Italy (Geoffrey Clarfield/American Spectator)

I was refreshed by the free water fountains that the curators of this site had put there to slake the thirst of the millions of visitors during these hot summer nights. In the minds of these classically educated modern Italians these fountains function to recreate the feeling of public benefit which was so much the nature of temples and processions during Pagan times.

In those days one did not just render offerings to the Gods,

but the Gods supplied drinking water, often food, and of course processions and intercession on behalf of their followers.

I am not a professionally trained classicist, but as an anthropologist who has read a bit about the ancient world I believe that the daily round of life in ancient Rome was that of hopeful vows, "If my son lives, I will offer this to the Gods, if I am appointed consul I will offer that to the Gods." There must have been millions of these exhortations on a daily basis and, I suspect, this explains so much of the externals of ancient pagan ritual, which anthropologists call a "function" of these deeper daily anxieties.

Indian traders were everywhere at the Coliseum, selling a toy to children that acted like both a sling shot and firework, and so the evening sky was punctuated with the minor fireworks of this do-it-yourself pre-industrial way of what was and still is used to celebrate the polytheistic festivals of contemporary India and who knows, the multiple celebrations of what used to be Pagan Rome before its capitulation to the institutionalized church of the Emperor Constantine and whose arch is now surrounded by a metal fence.

This is done by the local authorities so that its marvelous sculptures and inscriptions do not go the way of the rest of the city, with its endless defacements of walls and streets by angry young men with their angry and undecipherable graffiti, so different in form (but probably informed by the same rebellious spirit) from the elegant graffiti found in places like Pompei and Herculaneum.

Yes, the Romans conquered people and adopted their Gods incorporating them among their own (with the notable exception of Judaism which they both honored because it was ancient, and which they criticized because of the unusual custom of a daily day of rest for both master and slave – how un-Roman!)

And so, as the Yanks defeated Italy and Germany during WWII, we should not be surprised that Italians and Germans have adopted American pop music and that so much music of the pop music of New York during the 1950s was Italian influenced. They have absorbed the new secular Gods and Goddesses of their conquerors.

Umberto Eco, Italian author and scribe of the famous novel and film *The Name of the Rose* would suggest that human beings and especially their rulers often communicate messages through space via architecture or other visual art. So wherever you walk among the ruins of the Forum you will always see, on a hill high among the rest what Italians jokingly call the wedding cake. That is the bombastic neoclassical 19th century palace of independent Italy's first king, Victor Immanuel.

Immanuel was first the king of a northern part of Italy called Piedmont around the city of Turin. Turin is historically and culturally closer politically to the world of France or the social world of the Austrian Hapsburgs, than it is or has been to the whole peninsula or Italy.

Nevertheless it was this boorish, under educated war mongering hunter at royal estates who became the first king of modern Italy and whose goal it was supposed to be to unite these disparate entities whose dialects were often mutually incomprehensible.

It was also to teach them the language of Tuscany in their schools, send them to do national service, and all the while, appropriate the charisma of real fighters like Garibaldi who did more to destroy the old Italy of principalities – such as Kings of the Two Sicilies – and who began the unfinished process of modern Italian nation building. The king and his children were abysmal failures, and they eventually sided with Mussolini.

But that did not stop Victor Emmanuel from exacting taxes from

an already overtaxed peasantry and rising middle class to build this neo-Roman 19th century folly. The building sends a message. "I Victor Emmanuel who rule Italy by the grace of God and my own overestimated military might am greater, more powerful than the rulers of ancient Rome and my monument will overpower theirs for eternity."

That is why at the end of the day one takes comfort in the Italian national ability to make fun of pretention. And so the locals call this piece of architectural hubris "The wedding cake," for that is what it looks like. Yet, it still dominates the skyline of this eternal city. For how long, may I ask? Might future curators re-locate it in a site Museum of the 19th century? The Americans are doing it today with Confederate statues.

I circled the Coliseum. Its curators – for it is a curated archaeological site – have made it quite accessible and light up the stones beautifully in the warm Roman night. There is so much to explore on both sides of the way, but much of this was inaccessible until fascist dictator Mussolini gave the order to excavate and demonstrate the martial grandeur of ancient Rome, defined in Latin by the Romans as "Romanitas."

So much of modern Italian fascism was motivated by a desire of the men of a recently independent historically dominated peninsula to compete with the muscular Christianity of titans like the British Empire, whose boosters often claimed that their empire was greater and vaster than that of ancient Rome. This Italian experiment of modern manliness in a tyrannical form, failed. (READ MORE from Geoffrey Clarfield: An American Return to the Polis)

And yet, and yet, when I see these pillars, remnants of temples, and meeting halls and such of the ancient Romans, the modern citizen of any democracy marvels at their legacy. And marvels at the notion that despite ethnic background, one could become a citizen of the empire, much as today anyone can

become a U.S. citizen. For the U.S. Constitution, like the law of ancient Rome, is modeled on the voluntary Roman loyalty of people who were both born within the Empire and those who choose to join it.

The Romans oddly kept this notion of citizen with its rights and privileges even if after their Republic Imperial tyrants ruled them, few of whom died peacefully in their beds.

Then there are the literary associations, Virgil, Plutarch, Tacitus, the writings of Julius Caesar, Ovid, Apuleius, and all the other Latin writing, authors who still populate our imagination to this day and who gifted Italian directors such as Fellini have brought to the screen.

Who Built the Coliseum

But there is something profoundly missing from all the hoopla around the Coliseum. As President Obama used to say when he wanted to aggravate mainstream America, "You did not build it." (Yea, but their fathers and ancestors did, as he always failed to mention).

It is enough for me that the Jewish historian Josephus, a Jerusalem Temple Priest from an aristocratic background, wrote in his book *The Jewish War*, (he was both a participant and eyewitness – a complicated man) – an attempt to make sense of the Jewish Revolt and its defeat by Roman soldiers, that the Coliseum and related structures were built mostly by Jewish slaves who had lost their national revolt against Rome. It was financed largely by the gold melted down from the sacred objects in the treasury of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Signs, pictures, and explanations of this "Jewish contribution" to one of the greatest monuments ever built by Rome at the height of its power are absent, if not rare here. This is not surprising, for as the forces of the Islamic world are as I write like the ancient Romans, trying to do the Jewish inhabitants of Judea today in the modern reconstructed

State of Israel what ancient Rome did in its time.

So modern Italy and the nations of Europe, although they claim to be secular, possibly unknowingly still harbor some of the deep seated prejudices against Jewish independence that began in Pagan Rome. These prejudices were theologically accentuated by Constantine centuries of Papal and later Protestant theology up until today. There is little public recognition here that Jewish slaves built the Coliseum, unwillingly may I add. I still carry their DNA.

Although I am not a religious person by nature, as I departed the Coliseum, I recited the Jewish prayer for the dead, for no doubt many children of Judea perished here building it. Kaddish is a Jewish prayer about life, even though it is recited for the dead

Glorified and sanctified be God's great name throughout the world which He has created according to His will.

May He establish His kingdom in your lifetime and during your days, and within the life of the entire House of Israel, speedily and soon;

and say, Amen.

May His great name be blessed forever and to all eternity.

Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled and honored,

adored and lauded be the name of the Holy One, blessed be He,

beyond all the blessings and hymns, praises and consolations that

are ever spoken in the world; and say, Amen.

May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life, for us and for all Israel; and say, Amen.

He who creates peace in His celestial heights,

may He create peace for us and for all Israel;

and say, Amen.

And so, when a well read and historically informed visitor to

the Coliseum sets eyes upon it and contemplates the meaning of this gladiatorial monument to mass slaughter, it is understandable that his attention be focused less on the "Grandeur that was Rome" and more on Josephus' story of the praiseworthy fight of a small people who believed in the invisible God that so many of us now accept as the creator. (READ MORE: What Made Rome, Rome?)

I think Classical historians and Curators have yet to ask this important question. It is about time that they do.

Their fight, after all, was about the necessity of religious and political freedom that was two thousand years ahead of its time

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