

THREE PAPERS ON THE COLOSSEUM AND ITS ARENA

1. A history of earlier excavations in the arena

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For many centuries the perception of the real dimensions of the arena of the Colosseum has been affected by the massive filling up of the so-called *hypogea* and by the disappearance of the podium wall. In the engraving of G. Lauro the vaults of ambulatory IV, filled with earth, provided the limit of the ancient space of the stage arena (fig. 1).¹ Apart from an isolated notice that refers to finding stretches of drains during digging in the 15th c.,² the first archaeological digging was launched by Sixtus V but we have no information about it.³ During unknown earlier excavations the first copy of the Venantius inscription was discovered. The first proposal for a complete excavation of the arena was made in 1705 by C. Fontana who intended to excavate in and around the amphitheatre. Fontana stated that he had made some cores at his own expense in order to look for the floor of the building.⁴ The findings announced by Msgr. Bianchini, of a travertine surface found in an excavation in the centre of the arena in 1714, had a decisive importance for subsequent ideas tied to the ancient arena since from the earliest studies the arena seemed like an empty space, easy to flood for the aquatic spectacles mentioned in ancient sources.⁵

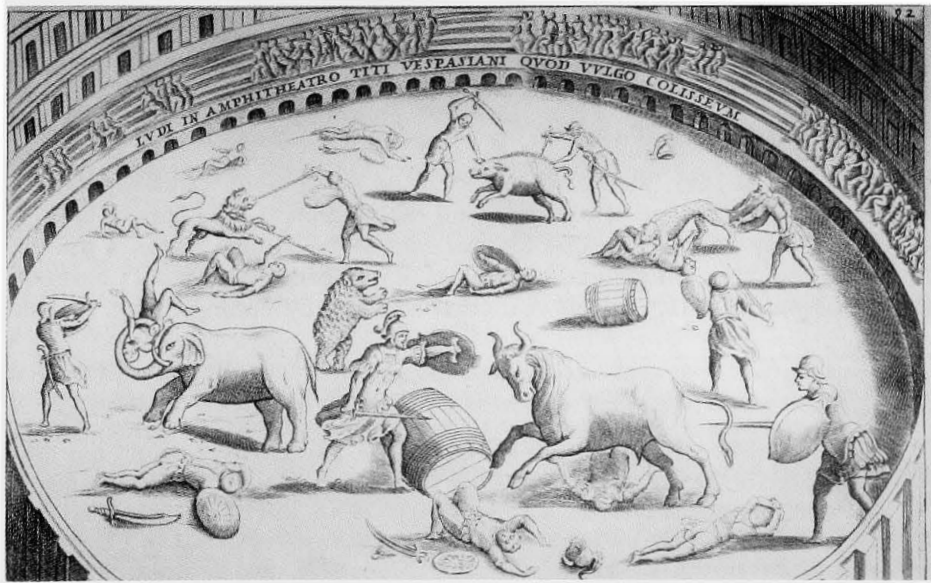


Fig. 1. G. Lauro, "Ludi in amphitheatro Titi Vespasiani" from *Antiquae urbis splendoris* (Roma 1615).

* Abbreviations used in the footnotes:

AASL = Archivio dell'Accademia di S. Luca

ACS = Archivio Centrale di Stato

ASR = Archivio di Stato di Roma

ANP = Archives Nationales, Paris

BAV = Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana

INASA = Istituto Nazionale di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte

1 Luciani 1993, fig. 144-45. On the filling up of the arena see Rea 1996, 102.

2 Colagrossi 1913, 231; Lanciani, *Storia* vol. 2, 83.

3 Spinazzola 1907, 6.

4 Ridley 1992, 39; Di Macco 1971, 85 ff.; Spinazzola 1907, 5-6.

5 Marangoni 1746, 6 n.8, 67. This fact had been accepted by Guattani (1805, 7): "... il piano presente [dell'arena] è formato dagli scarichi: l'antico andava più giù sedici buoni piedi o sia palmi 25 circa, ed era di travertino". This information proved to be misleading in the light of more recent excavations.