

Reconstructing the restorations of the Colosseum after the fire of 217

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According to both Suetonius and Dio Cassius,¹ the Colosseum was dedicated by Titus in A.D. 80.² The earliest mention of repairs is found in the *Historia Augusta* under Antoninus Pius,³ but their cause and nature are not described. The first reference to specific damage is a passage of Dio Cassius regarding a fire in 217. He was alive at the time and may even have witnessed the event:

The hunting theatre was struck by thunderbolts on the very day of the Vulcanalia, and such a blaze followed that its entire upper circuit and everything in the arena was consumed, and thereupon the rest of the structure was ravaged by the flames and reduced to ruins. Neither human aid could avail against the conflagration, though practically every aqueduct was emptied, nor could the downpour from the sky, which was most heavy and violent, accomplish anything — to such an extent was the water from both sources consumed by the power of the thunderbolts, and, in fact, actually contributed in a measure to the damage done. In consequence of this disaster the gladiatorial show was held in the stadium for many years (79.25.2-3, Loeb translation, E. Cary).

According to the *HA*, the restorations after this fire were initiated by Elagabalus (218-222).⁴ They continued under Severus Alexander (222-235)⁵ and in 223 a silver denarius, a bronze sester-tius, and a copper as were issued, each with a representation of the building on the reverse, presumably to commemorate the reconstruction.⁶ Work was apparently being carried out in 238 under Gordian III (238-244)⁷ for a coin with a similar representation on the reverse was issued during his reign.⁸ St. Jerome records a fire at the Colosseum under Decius (249-251),⁹ but no archaeological evidence for damage or repairs to the superstructure is associated with it. In 320, the building was struck by lightning but no specific damage is mentioned.¹⁰ In the 5th c. repairs from earthquake damage to the arena and podium are recorded by inscriptions.¹¹

Despite what was apparently severe damage to the structure of the building due to the fire of 217, very little archaeological work has been undertaken to determine exactly how much of the standing structure was damaged and which parts were reconstructed. One of the few scholars to address this issue was A. von Gerkan,¹² but he only discussed the uppermost parts of the building and did not treat the lower levels. During my own investigation of the vaulting techniques used at the Colosseum, I discovered some anomalies in construction methods from one

1 Suet., *Vesp.* 9.1, *Tit.* 7.3; Dio Cass. 66.25.1-5.

2 For a synopsis of the controversy on the dedication and construction phases arising from conflicting literary sources, see Rea 1988, 23-46.

3 S.H.A., *Ant. Pius* 8.2. Restorations by Nerva and Trajan have been hypothesized based on the discovery of inscriptions datable to their reigns found in the building, but these occur on re-used pieces of marble (Mocchegiani Carpano and Luciani 1981, 15-16).

4 S.H.A., *Heliogab.* 17.8.

5 S.H.A., *Alex. Sev.* 24.3.

6 RIC IV pt.2, 64, nos. 33, 410 and 411, pl. 8.2.

7 Some restoration work at the Colosseum (*de exaedificatione Amphitheatrī*) is mentioned in the description of a debate in the Senate on 9 July 238, S.H.A., *Max. et Balb.* 1.4. It has been suggested that these repairs may refer to the area around the Colosseum, including the portico leading to the Baths of Titus, rather than specifically to the monument itself (Rea 1988, 39).

8 Lugli 1955, tav. V, 5.

9 Hier., *a. ab Abr.* 2268 = Helm 1956, 218. For a discussion of the controversy on this date, see Pensabene 1988, 55.

10 *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.1.

11 *CIL* VI 32086-32089, *CIL* VI 32188, *CIL* VI 32094, *CIL* XV 1665.

12 Gerkan 1925, 11-50.