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Appendix I: must-see monuments - the Colosseum in guidebooks through the centuries

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Appendix I: Must-See Monuments – the Colosseum in Guidebooks through the Centuries

How does the guidebook image of a monument change over time, and in what ways do the instructions provided by the guidebook vary depending on cultural and chronological context? These questions were addressed in the “Topos and Topography” project with reference to several case studies of separate monuments. What follows is a brief overview of a selection of guidebooks’ treatment of one of ancient Rome’s most iconic heritage places: the Colosseum.

The medieval Einsiedeln manuscript mentions the Colosseum only once, in itinerary VIII. This route follows the papal procession route from Ponte S. Angelo to the Lateran. The Colosseum is labelled somewhat anonymously as *Amphitheatrum*, the amphitheatre, and is characterized in the text solely as a landmark to the left of the route. A couple of centuries later, in Master Gregory’s *Narratio de Mirabilibus Urbis Romae*, the Colosseum emerges as an overwhelming building structure rather than as a symbol of Rome and Antiquity. The rhetorical commonplace of Rome’s indescribable grandeur is beginning to develop in the Middle Ages, and our amphitheatre is thus described by the author in a single phrase: “Because who would be able to express its ingenious construction and magnitude in speech?”¹ Similar terms of physical hyperbole are also used towards the end of the sixteenth century by Georg Fabricius, who wrote that the Colosseum is “of such a great height that it is only with difficulty that human eyes can perceive its summit”.²

The Renaissance, however, brought a new clarity and detail to the descriptions of these monuments. When we meet the Colosseum in Andrea Palladio’s mid-sixteenth century *Antiquitates Urbis Romae* (first edition 1554), we get a short and historically correct description: it was built by emperor Vespasian, and the name Colosseum derives from the colossal statue of Nero once situated nearby. Gladiator combats and animal fights were performed here, and 5,000 wild animals were slaughtered in its opening ceremony. Palladio then briefly describes the physical appearance of the amphitheatre: only half of the original structure in travertine still stood at that time; the building is round on the outside and oval on the inside, and almost as tall as the adjacent Caelian hill. The Colosseum could seat 85,000 spectators.³

¹ Osborne (1987) chapter 31: *Quis enim artificiosam compositionem eius et magnitudinem sermone exequi poterit?*

² Fabricius (1587) 30–31, *altitudinis tantae, ut visio humana ad eius summitatem aegre conscendat.*

³ Hart/Hicks (2009) 34.

Fig. 1: “Coliseum, tagen ifrån Norra Sidan” (“The Colosseum, taken from the north side”). Drawing by Gustaf Georgsson af Sillén (1762–1825). Sillén (1787–1793). Uppsala University Library.

A more ambivalent attitude towards the Colosseum was displayed during the Baroque era. On the one hand, the monument was admired as one of the most intact and magnificent buildings of Roman antiquity. On the other hand, the distressing thought of the Christian martyrs executed in the arena was underlined. The counter-reformation thus paradoxically prized a monument that symbolized the persecution of the Christians. But the will to formulate that paradox is typical for the Baroque, and evident in Giacomo Lauro’s illustration of the Colosseum in *Antiquae Urbis Splendor*. In his work, Lauro depicts the round building reconstructed in its ancient splendour, but at the same time, he cuts out and removes a fourth of it, as if it was a cake, thereby revealing its interior. This abstraction gives us a view of the construction of the building, but also reminds us that the amphitheatre never can be whole again, but survives in a deconstructed state, deprived of function. In the empty space of the removed part of the building, Lauro depicts a couple of strolling men, while plants flourish on the ruin in order to point out the pious guidebook illustrator’s triumph over the pagan injustices which occurred there.

Similarly, in Fioravante Martinelli’s *Roma ricercata* (1644), the connection with the Christian martyrs meant more than the overwhelming impression of the monument itself: “You see before you the grandest amphitheatre of Titus Vespasian, called the Colosseum, better known for the honour won there by holy martyrs than

for the excellency of the building.”⁴ Remarkably enough, he then describes the structure of the building at length, and focuses especially on the many holes that “you can see” in the outer walls of the amphitheatre, which used to contain metal brackets for holding the travertine blocks together. Martinelli also provides some text sources for this phenomenon. Then, he goes on to reveal that it was Theoderic – the Ostrogothic ruler of Rome in the beginning of the sixth century CE – who first allowed the Romans to use stones from the increasingly ruined monument, and that Pope Paul II used building material from the Colosseum in the construction of palazzo Venezia, Cardinal Riario for the Cancelleria palace, and Cardinal Farnese (later Pope Paul V) for his palace on the eponymous piazza. Just as in Lauro’s *Antiquae Urbis Splendor*, the Colosseum is almost ritually deconstructed in the text, while the typical guidebook manner of addressing the reader is evident in formulations like “you see” – the traveller is, it seems, supposed to stand in front of the very monument when reading Martinelli’s book.⁵

The iconic status of the Colosseum is cemented during the centuries to follow. Richard Lassells, author of an influential Grand Tour guidebook at the end of the seventeenth century, describes it as “one of the rarest pieces of antiquity in Rome”, “another wonder of the world: and I wonder indeed, how such prodigious stones could either be laid together in a building, or being laid together, could fall.”⁶ Thomas Nugent, in his *The Grand Tour* from the middle of the 18th century, praises the “prodigious” Colosseum above all because its size, capable of holding four times more spectators than the amphitheatre at Verona.⁷ John Murray, author of one of the first “modern” guidebooks to Italy in 1843, calls the Colosseum “the noblest ruin in existence”. Further, no monument is as familiar to “all classes” as the Colosseum, through the works of artists and engravers; but, Murray underlines, the descriptions and drawings are far surpassed by reality. He then promises that he shall not “attempt to anticipate the feelings of the traveller, or obtrude upon him a single word which might interfere with his own impressions, but simply supply him with such facts as may be useful in his examination of the ruin”. The visitor is then advised to climb to the top of the building, from which the view is “one of the most impressive in the world”, and Murray affirms that most travellers usually visit the monument by moonlight “in order to realise the magnificent description in ‘Manfred’”, the poem by Lord Byron which was standard reading when visiting the Colosseum in the 19th century.⁸

In the 1926 Baedeker guide to Italy “from the Alps to Naples”, the Colosseum has two stars (according to the Baedeker system of giving one star to a monument worth

4 “Havete in vista il superbissimo Anfiteatro di Tito Vespasiano mezzo disfatto, chiamato il Coliseo, più celebre per li trofei acquistati da i SS. Martiri, che per l’eccellenza della fabbrica.”

5 Martinelli (1662), 84–85.

6 Lassells (1698) 17–18.

7 Nugent (1749) 214–217.

8 Murray (1843) 269, 272, 277–279, 294–296, 338.

seeing, and two stars to an absolutely spectacular monument). “The largest of all theatres, and one of the most important monuments in the world”, the book boldly states. The suggestive imagery of the blood of the Christian martyrs still has its place in the narrative, even if rather downplayed, but the dominant theme of the monument description is every single measurement and every number related to the building: circumference, height, length, capitals, pilasters, arcades. It is as if a modern version of Palladio has measured up the whole building for us in minute detail, but with greater accuracy: Palladio’s 85,000 spectators is adjusted to around 40,000–50,000. But suddenly, in the last sentence of Baedeker’s description, a leftover from nineteenth-century Romanticism enters the picture: “The Colosseum delivers an indescribable visual effect at night, by moonlight – it is only then that the enormous ruin appears to its greatest advantage”. Thus, even in the dry Baedeker, sense is finally defeated by sensibility.⁹

In Henrik Schück’s *Rom. En vandring genom seklerna* (*Rome. A Passage Through the Centuries*), the narrative framework often allows the layers of history to be transparent and overlapping. The intersection between Antiquity and the Middle Ages, as well as later periods, is a general theme in Schück’s book, also with regard to the Colosseum. “After having served as living quarters for the Frangipane family, the amphitheatre came into the possession of the ‘Roman people’ in the fourteenth century, when the arena was used for bull fights, among other things; subsequently, it was donated at the end of the same century to the brotherhood of *Sancta Sanctorum*, who established a hospital, a nunnery, and a chapel to S. Maria della Pietà – visible on Piranesi’s etching – in the building. Above, a stage was built, on which passion plays were performed as late as in the seventeenth century, and as late as in our own time, the Colosseum – where so many Christian martyrs according to tradition has met their death – has been a popular pilgrim destination.”¹⁰ Schück substitutes the measurements of Palladio and Baedeker with the grid of history, and perhaps because his book is less of a practical guidebook, where an actual visit is not necessary, he does not give instruction about moon-lit visits.

The “Swedish Baedeker”, journalist and author Ellen Rydelius, describes the Colosseum both as monument and symbol in her *Rom på 8 dagar* (*Rome in eight days*). The amphitheatre appeared in silhouette on the cover of the book in all editions

⁹ Baedeker (1926) 299–300: “Das größte aller Theater und eines der bedeutendsten Gebäude der Welt”; “Einen unbeschreiblichen Eindruck macht das Kolosseum an hellen Mondabenden, weil dann die Massen der Verfall des Einzelnen gegenüber erst zu ihren Recht kommen.”

¹⁰ “Efter att ha tjänstgjort såsom hyreskasern och såsom bostad åt åttan Frangipane kom amfiteatern på 1300-talet i ‘det romerska folkets’ ägo, då man bl. a. använde arenan till tjurfäktningar; sedan skänktes den i slutet av samma århundrade till Sancta Sanctorums brödraskap, vilket här inrättade ett sjukhus, ett nunnekloster och det på Piranesis stick synliga kapellet S. Maria della Pietà. Ovanför lades en skådebana, på vilken passionsspel uppfördes ända in på 1600-talet, och ännu i vår tid har Colosseum – där så många kristna enligt traditionen lidit martyrdöden – varit en omtyckt vallfartsort.” Schück/Sjöqvist (1949) 124–125.

up to 1951, and is described – with an evident echo of the “real” Baedeker – as “the largest theatre in the world, never surpassed as regards dimensions and imposing effect”.¹¹ Continuing in Baedeker style, known facts are duly presented, until Rydelius goes on to excel in a dramatically emotional narrative. “This building has seen many tragedies”, she tells, and suggests that the animal slaughter of its opening ceremony perhaps was the more innocent, compared with the blood of the Christian martyrs and the sighs of the Jewish war prisoners who had to construct the amphitheatre. “Return [to the Colosseum] at night – preferably a moon-lit night”, she urges, and explains that this is the best moment for seeing the ancient arena, filled with Roman spectators, with the mind’s eye. Lastly, she quotes the famous sentence attributed to the medieval author the Venerable Bede: “As long as the Colosseum stands, Rome shall stand; when the Colosseum falls, Rome shall fall; and with Rome, the world. . .”

Thus, we have seen that between the sixteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century the status of the Colosseum became consolidated as an unquestionable wonder and must-see for every traveller. The amphitheatre’s iconic status has turned it into the symbol of both Rome and Antiquity, visible on websites, ashtrays and postcards, so that guidebooks of today almost do not have to explain why the Colosseum is the ultimate must-see monument in Rome – and actually the information we are provided with often tells us only that the Colosseum is utterly spectacular, not why and how. In the *Rough Guide*, it is described as “awe-inspiring”, as the symbol of Rome and of the entire ancient world. The reasons for this are suggested by the fact that the “enormous structure” still is “relatively intact”, that it is “readily recognizable”, and that it “unlike the Forum, needs little historical knowledge or imagination to deduce its function.”¹² *Lonely Planet* labels the Colosseum as “the most thrilling of Rome’s ancient sights”, an iconic monument and a compelling sight, but adds some historical notes to underline the complexity of the thrill: the arena is “a monument to raw, merciless power. It’s not just the amazing completeness of the place, or its size, but the sense of violent history that resonates”. Interestingly, the guidebook also states that “you’ll know what it looks like”, but that “no photograph can prepare you for the thrill of seeing it for the first time”.¹³ But as always, hyperbolically raised expectations bring the risk of disappointment. The *Blue Guide* is sensitive to this risk, and points out that although the Colosseum, “an emblem of Rome’s eternity”, nowadays is located in a “rather unattractive setting”, and that even if its interior still “retains an extraordinary atmosphere”, the spectacular view inside the Colosseum is “less effective” than it used to be because the wooden floor is now removed. But the *Blue Guide* also shows its

11 “Världens största teater, som aldrig blivit överträffad i fråga om dimensioner och imponant verkan”. “Denna byggnad har sett många tragedier.” “Återvänd hit en kväll – allra helst en månskenskväll”. “Så länge Colosseum står, skall Rom bestå. När Colosseum faller, skall Rom falla. Och med Rom hela världen. . .” Rydelius (1948) 120–122.

12 Dunford (2014) 87–88.

13 Garwood/Blasi (2013) 7; 62; Garwood/Blasi (2012) 11.

dependence on the earlier guidebook tradition – absent in the *Rough Guide* and *Lonely Planet* – by connecting with the Romantic appreciation of the building, as well as providing some literary quotes about it from Charles Dickens, who in the nineteenth century described Colosseum as “the most impressive, the most stately, the most solemn, grand, majestic, mournful sight, conceivable”, and one that “must move all who look upon it”.¹⁴

Nowhere else is the hyperbolic guidebook discourse as evident as in the descriptions of the Colosseum. By following the monument through the historical guidebooks and up to our own time, we can trace the gradual increase of its symbolical value, first as the physically most overwhelming of Rome’s ruins, and a parallel to the rhetorical discourse on Rome as the grandest place on earth despite its ruinous state; and then, from the sixteenth century and on, the Colosseum becomes the very symbol of Rome itself, to the extent that it now must be the single most recognisable monument of Rome and perhaps of Antiquity.

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¹⁴ Macadam (2000) 117–119.