World Jewish Travel

Brenda Lee Bohen

August – September 2022

THE JEWISH STORY OF THE COLOSSEUM: Myths to Facts with Historian Samuele Rocca

Did the temple treasures finance the Colosseum? Did Jewish Slaves Build the Colosseum? Were there Jewish Gladiators?
Did the Jews of Rome participate in the Colosseum events?

Jewish tourism is back this scorching hot summer of 2022 and the eternal city is expected to return to pre-covid levels in 2023.

As a trained historic preservationist from the School of The Art Institute of Chicago, a licensed and accredited tour guide from the city of Rome (Regione Lazio) who continues advanced scholarship at the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership, I am on an academic mission to set the story straight about the Jewish history of the Colosseum.

There existed a building trade in Rome from the time of Emperor Augustus (with the exception of the reign under Tiberius) as pointed out by Thornton and Thornton, 1989, "Julio-Claudian building programs: a quantitative study in political management" explains construction had been one of the most important industries in the eternal city. Any emperor who could not find work for this large body of men created a significant man management problem, therefore, Vespasian's awareness of this is demonstrated by his refusal to use certain labor-saving devices commenting "you must let me feed my poor commons" (Suetonius, *Divus Vespasianus*, 18).
Can you elaborate further on this, thus proving no Jewish slaves built the colosseum as this myth continues to be said by tour guides in Rome?

Samuele Rocca:
Well, no. It is a legend. In fact, as well demonstrated by the historian Peter A. Brunt, *Free Labour and Public Works at Rome*, (The Journal of Roman Studies 70 (1980), 81-100), as you well argued that Vespasian was well aware as his predecessors that the common people living in the city of Rome ought to be supported not just by *panem et circenses* (Juvenal, *Satire* 10.77–81), the distribution of free wheat through the *Annona* and

palliative coming from expensive games hold till then in various areas, such as the forum, or in theatres, for example, the Theatre of Marcellus. Common folk needs to work. It is not a case that Brunt quotes a passage of Suetonius, in which is recorded an interesting dialogue between Vespasian and a mechanical engineer, who promised to transport some heavy columns to the Capitol at small expense, he gave no mean reward for his invention but refused to make use of it, saying: "You must let me feed my poor commons. (Suetonius, *Vespasia*n 18)."
Thus, the Colosseum, as well as all the other buildings erected by the Flavians were not constructed through gangs of slave workers, but by unemployed common people. The Jews captured and enslaved in the wake of the Jewish War would not have menaced the economic needs of poor Roman citizens, living in Rome.



According to Josephus "the Jewish War" he notes the following: "Now the number of those that were carried captive, during this whole war, was collected to be ninety-seven thousand. As was the number of those that perished during the whole siege eleven hundred thousand."
It is from this passage that has been interpreted those Jewish slaves built the colosseum. So where is it specially documented that these Jewish slaves built the Colosseum from this passage? In addition, Josephus tells us many of these captives were sold to slave traders and then sent out to the provinces outside Rome. Josephus tells us that 2,500 Jewish captives fought and died in gladiatorial games in Caesarea alone?
There is no evidence of Jewish gladiators in Rome, however, your scholarship has brought forth evidence of Jewish gladiators in Pompeii?



Samuele Rocca:
The siege of Jerusalem lasted six months. Josephus states that while 97,000 Jews were enslaved throughout the campaign, no less than 1,100,000 people died during the siege of Jerusalem. Tacitus, on the other hand, provides the most modest figure of 600,000. In fact, various scholars believe that the urban population of Jerusalem reached no less than 100,000 on the eve of the war. To these must be added the 400,000 pilgrims who were trapped in the city before the siege began. If the number provided by Tacitus is relatively close to what modern historiography proposes, there is no doubt, however, that the figure given by Josephus, apparently exaggerated, must nevertheless be examined with the most serious attention (Josephus, *Jewish War* V, 1-38, 66-52, 135-171, 248-361, 572-420, VI, 1-95, 112-287, 316-317, 353-434). Thus, according to Josephus no less than 97.000 Jews were enslaved.

Josephus narrates that the first Jewish prisoners, captured by Vespasian in his campaign in Galilee, after the conquest of Tarichae, around 6000, were sent to work on the construction of the Isthmus of Corinth, a project started by Nero, however, once he was toppled, did not continue. Of the other prisoners taken in Galilee, 30.000 were sold as slaves, some more, subjects of the Jewish king Agrippa II, who stood by Rome, were given to him, but the king did not free them and he also sold them as slaves. However, a grim fate awaited the old people taken prisoners, more than a thousand, were slaughtered near Tiberias (Josephus, *Jewish War* III, 539-542). Thus, it is clear that the vast majority of the Jews captured at the beginning of the Jewish War never reached the shores of Italy, maybe a few of the Jews sold as slaves by Agrippa. But even here, we ought to be cautious. Many

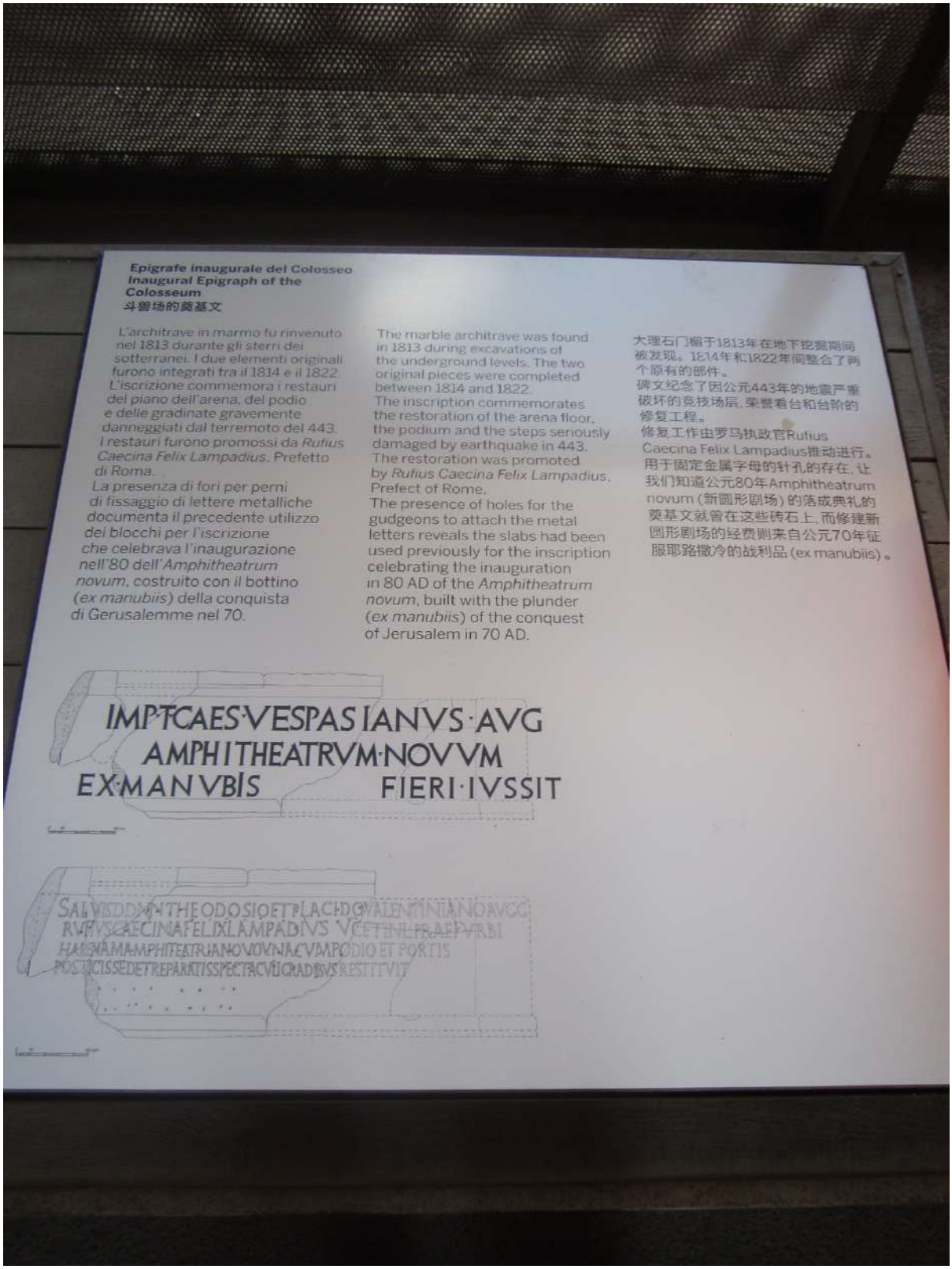
years earlier, Herod's grandfather, the King Herod the Great, made a law, quite unpopular that housebreaker" would be sold outside the border of the kingdom. Josephus states that this "*punishment was not only grievous to be borne out by offenders, but contained in it a dissolution of the customs of our forefathers. For this slavery to foreigners, and such as did not live after the manner of Jews, and this necessity that they were under to do whatever such men should command, was an offense against our religious settlement, rather than a punishment to such as were found to have offended, as such a punishment being avoided by our original laws. For these laws ordain, that the thief … if he have not so much, he shall be sold indeed, but not to foreigners, nor so that he be under perpetual slavery, for he must have been released after six years* (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XVI, 1-5)." Thus, it is possible, maybe even probable that King Agrippa I had the 30.000 slaves sold to Jewish owners in Galilee, and with the incoming Sabbatical year, they would have been freed.

However, after the destruction of Jerusalem, things were different. We know that many of the Jews captured after the siege and destruction of Jerusalem were sent to Caesarea Philippi, where "Titus Caesar exhibited all sorts of shows there. And here a great number of the captives were destroyed, some being thrown to wild beasts, and others in multitudes forced to kill one another as if they were their enemies (Josephus, *Jewish War* VII, 23-24)". Later on, also at Caesarea Maritima, and Berytus, Jewish prisoners had to fight as gladiators. Once more Josephus writes that "While Titus was at Caesarea he solemnized the birthday of his brother Domitian after a splendid manner, and inflicted a great deal of punishment intended for the Jews in honor of him, for the number of those that were now killed in fighting with the beasts, and were burned, and fought with one another, exceeded two thousand five hundred. Yet did all this seem to the Romans, when they were thus destroying ten thousand several ways, to be punishment beneath their deserts? After this Caesar came to Berytos, which is a city of Phoenicia, and a Roman Colony, and stayed there for a longer time, and exhibited a still more pompous solemnity about his father's birthday, both in the magnificence of the shows and in the other vast expenses he was at in his devices thereto belonging; so that a great number of the captives were here destroyed after the same manner as before (Josephus, *Jewish War* VII, 37-40)."

And yet, that was not the whole story. In fact, most of the slaves, including the Jewish prisoners would have been sold as slaves on the slave markets of the Roman East. Some of them who reached the shores of Italy, would have been sold to knights and to city councilors, living in the cities scattered through Roman Italy as well as to villa owners.

An inscription from Campania mentions a certain Claudia Asteria, "prisoner from Jerusalem". It seems that the name Esther was latinized in Aster, or star. Tiberius Claudius Proculus, probably a Jew, an imperial *libertus* of either Claudius or Nero, or his descendant, took care of the sepulchral inscription. This inscription reveals that Claudia Asteria came as a slave from Jerusalem, evidently as consequence of the Jewish War. She was then freed and received the name Claudia. Although the inscription does not suggest it explicitly, it is possible that Proculus could have been Asteria's husband, as Asteria first name is indeed Claudia. Yet, we must remember that Claudia Aster had not so many occasions to marry fellow Jews. The bond with Proculus, no matter if she was married, or if she was a concubine of the latter, suggests that she married to a Jew. The fact that her Judaean past is mentioned in the inscription can suggest that she still conserved a certain pride in her Jewish identity

(See David Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe 1*, no. 26, pp. 43-46).



However, it is at Pompeii, that it is possible to observe in depth the effect of the stream of Jewish slaves taken prisoners during the Jewish War. These examples of Jewish slaves and *liberti* are much important because they can be dated before the eruption of the Vesuvius in 79 C.E., soon after the end of the Jewish War. Various graffiti bear witness for various Jews, who would have been taken prisoners and sold as slaves in the wake of the Jewish War. This

group included gladiators, members of the Pompeian underworld, probably slaves, house maids, and prostitutes.

An anonymous gladiator, whose helmet is decorated with a seven-branch palmetto relief, can be possibly identified as a Jew. It is quite possible that the owner of this helmet was a prisoner of war, sentenced in 70 C.E. to become a gladiator. He survived the ordeal and he was successful enough to arrive at Pompeii and to become a local hero. The decoration on his helmet revealed his ethnic origin, a reason of pride and defy (Samuele Rocca, “A Jewish Gladiator in Pompeii”, *Materia giudaica* XI, 2006, 287-301). Moreover, A certain Ionas is recorded in an obscene graffito. A certain Iesus (Joshua in Hebrew) is recorded on a graffito (CIL 4.4287) making a joke about the gladiator (murmyllo) Lucius Asicius, comparing him to a small fish, instead of a victor. The graffito, which reads "Edictum M(arci) Ati Primi | Si qui(s) Muria(m) | bonam volet | Petat a L(ucio) Asicio | [...]bus mus[...] | Scito muriola es | Jesus" can be roughly translated as "Notice from Marcus Atius Primus: If anyone needs good brine ask Lucius Asicius. Jesus." It seems that the slur of Jesus plays on words. The fish (muria) could also indicate that Lucius Asicius was a *murmillo*, a type of gladiator, whose helmets where decorated with a fish. According to Curtis, a fragment of Sextus Pompeius Festus, who wrote a book, *De Verborum significatione* (Festus, De verb. Sign. 285M), the retiarius, a type of gladiator, often opposed to the *murmillo*, armed with a net and a trident, chanted a song, in which he mocked the *murmillo*, calling him a fish, that would soon fall in his net (Robert I. Curtis, *A Slur on Lucius Asicius, the Pompeian Gladiator*, Transactions of the American Philological Association 110 (1980) 51-61).

Interesting is the great number of women found. After the hecatomb of 70 C.E., women were generally spared from the wanton killing of the Roman soldiers and were sold as slaves. At Pompeii two names occur: Maria and Martha. Both the names Maria and Martha were particularly widespread in Late Second Temple Judaea as literary sources as Josephus and the New Testament corroborate. Indeed, these names, both in Hebrew and Greek appear on first century ossuaries from the Jerusalem area. Thus, in Judaea the name Maria appears in Hebrew or in Greek no less than twenty times. The name Martha appears at least eleven times on inscriptions on ossuaries from the Jerusalem area most dated from the first century C.E. Besides, the name Maria is attested in Jewish epitaphs from Late Antique Venosa. According to David Noy, Maria is in fact the female variation, Mária, of the Latin name Marius. Martha ought to be seen as an Eastern name, not specifically Jewish. Noy is quite correct in seeing the name Maria as the female correspondent of Marius. Yet this can indicate the fact that the Jewish name Miriam was transliterated in the similar looking Roman name Maria. It is probable that female slaves bearing these names were more probably Jewish and not just Easterner women. As consequence of the crushing of the Great Rebellion, the number of Jewish slaves, who could be purchased on the slave markets, was abundant. At Pompeii, the name Maria recurs at least thrice A Maria lived in the Casa dei Quattro Stili, but her position is unknown. Another Maria was a textile worker. That sounds obvious as Judaea, before 70 C.E. was a center in wool production of the Hellenistic East. As a professional worker she probably continued her previous working experience, which she probably had the occasion to exercise before 70 C.E. This Maria, known from a graffito, worked in the house of M. Terentius Eudoxus (Reg. VI, Ins. 12, n. 5). The inscription reads "Maria pii stamiis", Maria works at the warp of wool work (See Giordano and Kahn, *Gli Ebrei a Pompei*, 51. See also Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe* I, nos. 215-216,

294-295). The third, Maria, was a successful prostitute, who worked in the Thermopolium of Asellina, in Via dell'Abbondanza. Probably Maria arrived at Pompeii in 70 C.E. as a slave. Her owner, Asellina, decided to have her employed as prostitute, together with her fellow servants Aegle and Zmyrina, who were also possibly Jewish. Rabbinic literature is full of examples of Jewish girls, who after a rebellion, were sold to such owners, or worked in state owned brothels. Maria was successful enough to get a job with Asellina, whose Thermopolium was situated in the most important urban highway. At the beginning of her career, Maria made electoral propaganda for a certain Caius Lollius Fuscus, to be elected as *duovir* responsible for roads and sacred buildings, together with Zmyrina. Indeed, according to the Italian archaeologist Romolo Staccioli, a graffito (CIL, iv, 7473) from Via dell'Abbondanza, found in the Thermopolium of Asellina (Reg. IX, ins. XI, n. 2), records that "C(aium) Lollium Fuscum (duo) vir(um) v(iis) a(eilibus) s(acris) p(ublicis) p(rocurandis) Asellinas rogant nec sine Zmyrina". Near by there are two shorter graffiti, which states that "Aegle rogat and Maria rogat", evidently invites their clients to vote for someone unknown, possibly the same Caius Lollius Fuscus. (See R.A. Staccioli, *Pompeii vita pubblica di un antica citta'*, *Lotte e ambizioni politiche di un mondo sepolto nei "manifesti" elettorali di 2000 anni fa*, Roma 1979, 112-113 and 149-150). Some years later the same Maria appeared alone on another graffito for electoral propaganda. This time Maria alone made electoral propaganda for someone else, a certain Cneius Helvius Sabinus as *aediles*. The inscription reads "Cn(neum) Helvium Sabinum Aed(ilem) d(ignum) r(e) p(ublica) o(ro) v(os) f(aciatis) Maria rogat". Also this graffito comes from the Thermopolium of Asellina. This Cneius Helvius Sabinus is known from other electoral graffiti (See Giordano and Kahn, *Gli Ebrei a Pompei*, p. 52. See also Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe* I, no. 217.). It is interesting that electoral propaganda for C.H. Sabinus is not recorded from the other girls working in Asellina's Taberna. Thus, only Maria makes electoral propaganda for Sabinus. Evidently, she was important enough and of course well known to make propaganda of her own. Probably Maria did well in her new profession. From a simple tavern girl, she became something of a courtesan, if she alone was chosen to make electoral propaganda. A certain Martha, slave in the house of A. Rustius Verus, or of the Centenario (Regio IX, Ins. 8, N. 7) is also recorded. The inscription reads "Martha hoc trichlinium est nam in trichlinio cacat" (Giordano and Kahn, *Gli Ebrei a Pompei*, p. 51. See also Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe* I, no. 218, pp. 296-297).



Visitors can now see the original inscription on an architrave that reads:
"Imperator Caesar Vespasian Augustus ordered a new amphitheater to be made from the spoils of war."
This is a very important in Jewish history, why?

Samuele Rocca
This inscription has a long and fascinating history. Carlo Fea, who in 1814 visited the Colosseum found a Late Antique inscription, which once restored, indicated that the building had been repaired during the reigns of Theodosius II and Valentinian III in 443 or 444. However, in 1995 Professor Geza Alföldy noticed that little holes among letters, indicated that the block had been reused, and that under the Late Antique inscription, stood another much earlier inscription, which reads: “I[mp(erator)] Caes(ar) Vespasi[anus Aug(ustus)]/ amphitheatru[m novum?]/[ex] manubi(i)s [fieri iussit?]“. Thus, the inscription reads "The emperor Titus Caesar Vespasian Augustus had the new amphitheater built from the profits of the war" (Geza Alföldi, “Eine bauinschrift aus dem Colosseum”, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 109, 1995, 195-226/Louis H. Feldman, “*Financing the Colosseum*”, *Biblical Archaeology Review* 27.4, 2001). Clearly, the inscription refers to the huge loot taken by Titus, after the destruction and the sack of the Temple of Jerusalem. Some of the objects were carried during the triumph of the Flavians. The plunder, also depicted on the triumphal arch of Titus, included the *Menorah*, the golden seven branched lampstand, the showbread table and the trumpets, which were used to announce the coming of the Shabbat, as well as a copy of the Jewish Law. Of course, there was more than that, much more. Ancient temples were also used as banks. No one would have robbed a Temple, a sacrilege! So, it was a safe

place to keep money. We know of many ancient temples that were used as banks. Besides, in the Temple were also kept the money that the Jews living in the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora sent each year for the upkeeping of the Temple, the *Mahazit Ha Shekel*, or half shekel, as stated in the Bible (Exodus 30:11–16). Indeed, Josephus records that in 54 BCE, Crassus, one of the triumviri, together with Pompey and Julius Caesar, on the way to the campaign against the Parthians, stole 2000 of the 8000 talents, which was then, the total amount of the Temple treasury (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XIV, 7). However, by 70, the total amount would have been much bigger. Enough to finance the Colosseum and many other buildings. Thus, it is clear why the inscription is so important, because it reveals that the Colosseum was financed with the plunder taken from the Temple in Jerusalem.



Greek and Roman literary sources say little to nothing about Jewish participation in the gladiatorial arena. But yet some traditions are preserved in Josephus and in the Babylon Talmud with precise knowledge about Jewish participation. Can you explain?

Samuele Rocca:
King Herod the Great (Reign 37-4 BCE) introduced in Jerusalem, and Caesarea Maritima Quinquennial Games in honor of Emperor Augustus, to be held every five years (Josephus, *Antiquities* XV, 268, XVI, 138 and *War* I, 415). While in Jerusalem, these games included wrestling, Thymelic or musical contexts, and chariot races. On the other hand, on the occasion of the inauguration of Caesarea Maritima in 13 B.C.E., gladiatorial games, couples of gladiators duelling and hunt of wild beasts are specifically mentioned. Thus,

according to Josephus, “there was accordingly a great festival and most sumptuous preparations made presently, in order to its dedication; for he had appointed a contention in music, and games to be performed naked. He had also gotten ready a great number of those that fight single combats, and of beasts for the like purpose; horse races also, and the most chargeable of such sports and shows as used to be exhibited at Rome, and in other places. He consecrated this combat to Caesar, and ordered it to be celebrated every fifth year.” These gladiatorial games were to be celebrated in the new leisure buildings, erected in Caesarea Martima, and possibly at Sebaste. These were not amphitheaters, like the Flavian amphitheater in Rome. Indeed, gladiator games could also be held in both the theater and hippodromes. The gladiatorial games were held in the Roman Forum in the Late Republic and in the theaters in the Early Imperial Age until the construction of Colosseum (the Flavian amphitheater), although the earliest amphitheater in Italy, that of Pompeii, was erected around 70 BCE.



Herod’s son, Herodes Antipas (Regin 4 BCE- 39 CE) continued his father’s legacy and built theaters in Sepphoris and Tiberias. Although, these buildings were completely foreign to Jewish tradition, most Jews objected mainly to the possible presence of pagan cultic images. More than that, it seems that also gladiatorial games were shunned. The Jewish public was not enthusiastic about gladiatorial games, which were considered immoral. Thus, the priestly aristocracy, including the Pharisee Masters condemned gladiatorial entertainment. The reaction of the Jewish public was not unique as many Greek and Roman intellectuals, such as Seneca, condemned as well gladiatorial contexts. It is possible that

gladiators in Judea first during the rule of Herod the Great and then under the Roman governors, for example the well-known Pontius Pilatus, were professionals, not common criminals sentenced to death. They would fight in the arena but not to their deaths. Under Roman rule, common criminals in Judea were sentenced to the cross, not to the arena. Nowhere does Josephus write that a Jew was sentenced to death in the arena by the Roman governor.

In Late Antiquity, well after the destruction of the Temple, Rabbinic literature narrates that Resh Lakish, a Sage of the middle of the Third Century, an extremely important person in the Jerusalem Talmud together with his father-in-law, Rabbi Yochanan, started his career as a gladiator in Galilee. It seems that in his youth, after a short parenthesis as a bandit, Shimon ben Lakish, known for his body strength, sold himself as a gladiator. Born in Sepphoris, for a certain period he sold himself to the "ludus", This *ludus*, mentioned in plural, was probably the *ludi gladiatorii*, the gladiatorial games. It seems that the Talmud records his *cena libera*, or the last supper hold for the gladiators in the evening before the games. While this episode is recorded in the Babylonian Talmud (TB, *Gittin*, 47a), the Jerusalem Talmud, written in the Land of Israel, does not record his life as a bandit and as a gladiator (Marc Zvi Brettler and Michael Poliakoff, "Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish at the Gladiator's Banquet: Rabbinic Observations on the Roman Arena", *Harvard Theological Review* 83 (1990), 93-98).

However, with the exception of the Jewish gladiator from Pompeii, whose helmet, decorated with a relief depicting a palm tree, is his only memento left, Jewish gladiators in Roman Italy did not leave any trace. The Colosseum was inaugurated in 80 C.E. How many Jews, captured in the Jewish war, between the years 66 and 70 C.E., would be alive, by then, to play as gladiators. Very few. Besides, most of the gladiators were professional sportsmen. Yet, the games, described by Martial, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio, were impressive! It seems that the inaugural games included *venatio*, or hunt of wild animals, public executions, *naumachiae* or mock sea battles, and of course gladiatorial games. No less than 5000, according to Eutropius, possibly 9000 wild animals (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* LXVI.25), such as wild bulls, lions, elephants, ostriches, were killed during the inaugural games. Public executions were performed during the interval between one game and another. These included probably *damnatio ad bestias*, the culprit was tied to a pole and given to wild animals, or crucifixion. According to Martial a woman was executed by a wild bull, reenacting the myth of Pasiphae (Martial, *On Spectacles* 6.5). To hold mock sea battles, the amphitheatre was flooded. It seems, according to Cassius Dio, that was reenacted first as a naval battle between the Corinthians and the Corcyreans and then between the Athenians and the Carthaginians. Gladiatorial games followed. Martial records the fight between a couple called Verus and Priscus (Martial, *On Spectacles* 31).

No doubt that the Colosseum was quite an impressive building. The choice of the location of the Flavian Amphitheatre, known as Coliseum, Coliseum possibly was not unintentional. Located on a low valley between the Caelian, Esquiline and Palatine Hills, in an area previously occupied by an artificial lake, which was part of Nero's Domus Aurea, the Coliseum stood nearby the Triumphal Arch of Titus, located on the Velia, as well as the Baths of Titus. All these buildings, planned by Vespasian and Titus, but then completed by Domitian in fact stood in the area of Nero's Domus Aurea. The public nature of the buildings

erected by the Flavians made evident their wish to hand back to the Roman people, huge traits of land expropriated by Nero. Well argues Fergus Millar that the Flavian Amphitheatre, opened in 80 CE, together with the Triumphal Arch of Titus, and the Temple of Peace, consecrated in 75 CE, were all monuments that laid emphasis on the successful outcome of the Jewish War, bestowing an enduring legitimacy on the new dynasty (Fergus Millar, *Last Year in Jerusalem: Monuments of the Jewish War in Rome*, in Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome (eds. Edmondson Jonathan, Mason Steve, Rives James; Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, 101-128.). Thus, the Flavian Amphitheatre is the greatest of all Roman amphitheaters.



All photos by Brenda Lee Bohen



