**A Contested Site: Religious Practices and Performances in The Colosseum**

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The importance of Antiquity for the political and cultural life of early modern Rome can hardly be overestimated. Scholars, antiquarians, dealers, forgers and collectors were absorbed in the textual and material remnants of ancient Rome; artists and architects turned to the ancient sculptures and buildings as models and touchstones; aristocrats looked at Roman Caesars and commanders as role models; people from all over Europe travelled to Rome to experience the ancient marvels. However, this intense occupation with Antiquity was not without tensions. After all, the Caesars and citizens of ancient Rome had been heathens, worshipping false Gods. While admiring, and building on, the splendour of Ancient Rome, the early modern papal city also felt a need to display its triumph over the pagan past. Matters were brought to a head at the Colosseum. On the one hand it was the most remarkable remnant of ancient grandeur, the foremost landmark of the city and the architectural model to imitate and emulate. On the other hand it was the stage for the most brutal persecution and execution of early Christian martyrs. The Colosseum, in other words, was the site where the two grand narratives of Antiquity and Christianity clashed. This paper will show how the ambivalent status of the Colosseum in early modern Rome made it a most striking and productive stage for religious ceremonial; how the emotional intensity of the religious performances was heightened by the sublime ruin and the gory narratives it evoked; and how the Colosseum in its turn was transformed, physically as well as conceptually, by the performances.

The Colosseum, the largest amphitheatre of the Roman Empire, was constructed between 72 and 80 AD, under the emperors Vespasian and Titus. With room for 50 000 seated spectators, it was a stage for gladiator and animal fights as well as other public spectacles, such as mock sea battles, executions, and mythological dramas. In the sixth century it was closed to the public due to disrepair. The collapse of the outer walls of the southern part in the eighth century gave the ruin more or less its present shape. Already in the middle ages a papal interest in the Colosseum can be observed. The still standing northern façade provided a magnificent backdrop along the main papal processional route between St Peter’s and the Lateran, its preservation thus becoming a concern for the popes. At the same time, the very same popes made use of the ruined southern part as a stone quarry for the erection of new churches and palaces. Long regarded by scholars as an act of disrespect for the ancient monument, this practice might instead be understood as an expression of the great value attached to it. Stones from the Colosseum were treated as relics, which carried with them the grandeur of Ancient Rome as well as the blood of Christian martyrs. An interesting example is the papal Benediction Loggia, built in front of the old St Peter’s in the mid fifteenth century. Pius II explicitly ordered stone from the Colosseum for the construction of the loggia’s three superimposed arcades, stylistically recalling the shape of the amphitheatre. Thus, a link was created between the ancient amphitheatre and St Peter’s, the centre of the Catholic Church. This link would be further elaborated and strengthened in seventeenth century papal ceremonial.

**Passion plays**

In the late fifteenth century, almost a thousand years after the last gladiator fights, the Colosseum again became a stage for grand public spectacles, as the Confraternity of the Gonfalone received papal permission to use the ruin for Passion plays in Easter week. From 1490 to 1539 the Confraternity regularly staged lavish plays with elaborate stage settings, and numerous actors and musicians, attracting large audiences. The revival of the Colosseum as a performance venue had direct repercussions on the physical shape of the monument: a new circuit wall around the arena replaced the vanishing traces of the original wall, and new seating was installed. In that way, the adaptation of the ancient ruin to fit the religious performances also involved a partial reconstruction of its original shape.

The explicit intentions of the Confraternity were to promote popular piety by appealing to the emotions of the spectators, and their choice of venue for the Passion plays served this aim indeed: the legends of Christian martyrs who had been brutally butchered in the arena heightened the emotional effect of the performance of Christ’s suffering and death, while the staging of Christ’s Resurrection against the backdrop of the ruinous building, formed a strong image of the triumph of Christianity over the pagan past. During the torchlight procession through the city that preceded the play, members of the Confraternity flagellated themselves, their blood bathing the streets of Rome according to contemporary chroniclers. One can easily imagine how the blood of the flagellants merged in the imagination of the spectators into the blood of the tormented Christ and the blood of the martyrs who had been butchered in the arena.

The success of the Passion plays in stirring the emotions of the spectators is suggested by the way they ceased. In 1539 the pope prohibited the use of the Colosseum for religious theatrical performances because of the strong senses and uncontrolled violence aroused by the plays. Reports tell about spectators stoning the actors who played Jews or Roman soldiers before storming out of the Colosseum to stone the Jews living nearby. Borders between performance and life outside of the performance were thus transgressed in an outbreak of anti-Semitic violence with ambivalent symbolic undertones. On the one hand, the stones thrown at the Jews had formed part of the amphitheatre in which Christian martyrs had been executed in the same way as Christ, according to the violators, had been killed by the Jews. On the other hand, the very same stones had been cut and carried by Jewish war captives, taken by Titus at the conquest of Jerusalem and forced to work on his building projects. The history of Passion Plays in the Colosseum is thus rather short. However, the performances played a crucial role for the reconceptualization of the Colosseum as first and foremost a sacred space, a site for the veneration of the early Christian martyrs, and of Christ.

***Possesso* Processions**

An occasion, on which the complex relationship between Antiquity and Christianity was poignantly acted out, was the so-called *Possesso*, a procession by which a newly elected pope took possession of the city of Rome. The *Possesso* was the last act in a ritual cycle devoted to maintaining the papacy after the death of a pope – the three preceding acts being the funeral of the deceased pope, the conclave, and the coronation. Originating in the eighth century, the *Possesso* more or less followed the same route for around thousand years: starting from the Vatican, crossing the Tiber at *Castel S. Angelo* and continuing along what eventually became known as *Via Papale*; then skirting the Capitol, the Forum and the Colosseum before arriving at the Lateran. If the processional route was remarkably constant, the meaning of the *Possesso* gradually changed, as the power relations between the pope and certain groups in society shifted. In the Middle Ages the pope’s secular power was put at stake during the *Possesso*, literally as well as symbolically. The procession was frequently attacked by groups of citizens, or by henchmen to one or the other of the city’s petty princes. To choose a safer route was not an option: in order to claim his authority the pope had to challenge the city’s power centres and local leaders, by way of passing through their territory. The procession was thus a performance of unstable power relations. Papal power over the city could not be taken for granted; every new pope had to prove his right, and ability, to wield it. From around 1500 the supremacy of the papacy was undisputed. The ritual and real threat against the pope was gradually replaced by an unchallenged display of pomp and splendour. This was also the time when the parallels to the ancient triumph, implied in the *Possesso* from the start, became more and more pronounced. Ephemeral triumphal arches were erected along the route. During the sixteenth century, the ancient triumphal arches of Septimus Severus and Titus were incorporated into the procession, furnished with temporary inscriptions and emblems covering the original ones, claiming the supremacy of the popes over the ancient Caesars.

The Colosseum, already incorporated as a backdrop to the *Possesso* in the Middle Ages, became an increasingly prominent part of the staging of the procession in the course of the seventeenth century. An account of the *Possesso* of Innocence X in 1644 relates that the Colosseum was used as a stand for spectators of the procession. The amphitheatre was so to speak turned inside out, the gazes of the people in the arcades directed not towards the central arena but outwards, towards the city. According to the account, the Pope stopped in front of the Colosseum, where he was greeted with “grand’applauso di voci, e d’allegrezza”. An account of the *Possesso* of Clemens XI in 1700 describes a more elaborate exchange between the pope, the spectators and the Colosseum. In passing the amphitheatre, the pope was presented with a memorial, which he immediately read before turning towards the people in the ruin and giving Benediction – one might recall the Benediction Loggia at the old St Peter’s, built 250 years earlier with stones from the Colosseum and formally alluding to the amphitheatre. In this act of reciprocal attention – watching and being watched – the borders between actor and audience are destabilized. In the context of the *Possesso*, the Colosseum is given the triple role of auditorium, stage and scenery.

**Paragone**

The increasing interest in the Colosseum, and its increasing presence in the *Possesso* processions, at this particular time might be understood in relation to the new *Piazza San Pietro*, laid out by Alexander VII and his architect Gianlorenzo Bernini. From the very beginning in the late 1650s, Bernini’s oval design for the Piazza was conceived in terms of *paragone*, or comparison, with ancient architecture in general, and the Colosseum in particular. In his magisterial treatise on St Peter’s, *Il Tempio Vaticano* (1694), Bernini’s pupil and successor Carlo Fontana elaborates the *paragone*. He typically begins by referring to Tacitus and other ancient authors describing how the Roman emperors expressed their greatness through enormous building projects, greatest among them the Colosseum. Not until our own century, Fontana asserts, has the world seen equally magnificent architectural manifestations. Foremost among them is *Piazza San Pietro*, a monument that fully matches the Colosseum in size and quality. Yet, unlike the ancient amphitheatre, intended for “public games and feasts according to pagan customs”, the modern Piazza is devoted to “piety, religion, and worship for the public good”. Fontana continues with detailed comparisons between the Colosseum and *Piazza San Pietro* – geometrical shape, size, quality of building materials and so on – and concludes that the modern Piazza in all essentials surpasses the ancient monument. His *paragone* is accompanied by a plan of the Piazza with two small figures showing the relative sizes of the two oval structures. When Fontana establishes a correspondence between *Piazza San Pietro* and the Colosseum it thus not only concerns architectural shape, size and splendour, but also ceremonial use: “piety, religion and worship” versus “games and feasts according to pagan custom”. The ancient amphitheatre seems to have played an essential and multifaceted role for the conception of the modern Piazza: a pattern to imitate, a rival to match, and a contrasting picture to define oneself against. The Colosseum was the Other in relation to which *Piazza San Pietro* defined itself.

The *paragone* between *Piazza San Pietro* and the Colosseum was visually developed in the engraved representations of the *Possesso* processions. From the late sixteenth century virtually every *Possesso* was represented in engravings. All of these follow an established pictorial scheme, ultimately derived from ancient bas-reliefs: a line of people and horses winding to and fro from the lower to the upper parts of the picture, sometimes with depictions of well-known buildings or monuments inset to indicate place and route. In the early engravings, buildings occur infrequently, but from the second half of the seventeenth century

they include more and more precise images of a number of significant buildings along the route, such as: *Castel S. Angelo*, signalling papal military power; the Capitol as the stage on which the city’s subjection to the pope is performed; and the Lateran symbolizing the role of the pope as bishop of Rome. In an engraving of the *Possesso* of Clemens IX in 1667, the first after the completion of *Piazza San Pietro*, the rounded shape of the Piazza is clearly indicated as the point of departure for the procession. Above it, another rounded architectural shape is shown: the Colosseum. From now on these two buildings appear together in virtually every image of the Possesso. The Piazza and the amphitheatre seem to call forth each other. It is as if the one became visible and meaningful through the presence of the other. Located in opposite corners of the city they were linked together not only by their shape but also by the movement of the procession.

The link between Piazza and amphitheatre was further developed by Carlo Fontana in another richly illustrated treatise: *L’Anfiteatro Flavio* (1725). After having discussed the original shape and use of the amphitheatre, the author devotes a large part of the book to the martyrs who had been killed in the arena. In the last chapter he presents a plan for the transformation of the ancient ruin into a Christian church dedicated to the martyrs. “On this site”, his arguments goes, “on which ancient Caesars, tyrants, and persecutors of faithful Christians devoted themselves to performances, games and feasts dedicated to their imagined Gods, we propose the erection […] of a temple of good dimensions and elevation, for the practice of the cult of the only true God and the Trinity, a Temple dedicated to the Holy Martyrs.” Fontana’s plan shows a centrally planned church crowned by a large cupola. The arena would form an oval forecourt, surrounded by an arcade crowned by statues representing the martyrs. It is impossible not to think of the church and piazza of *San Pietro*.

Fontana’s plan to transform the Colosseum into a church, originally commissioned by Innocence XI, marks the culmination of papal interest in the amphitheatre. For the Holy Year of 1750, Benedict XIV inaugurated a less radical transformation: fourteen small pavilions symmetrically placed around the arena, constituting Stations of the Cross to be used by the pious in their re-enactment of the suffering and death of Christ. Once again the recollection of the martyrs was mobilized to enhance the emotional effect of the religious ceremony. In the course of the nineteenth century the Colosseum was gradually reconceptualized as first and foremost an archaeological site. In our time it has become a site for mass tourism, and for popular cultural projections, such as the blockbuster film *Gladiator* (2000). However, an echo of early modern ceremonial practice lingers in the Good Friday torch light procession from the Colosseum to the Palatine, led by the Pope. Flagellants no longer form part of the procession but one might see participants carrying thorny crowns or crosses.