

The Colosseum by Keith Hopkins and Mary Beard.
Profile Books 2005.

This is the latest book in the excellent series by Profile, previous volumes of which have considered the Alhambra, the Temple in Jerusalem and the Parthenon.

The Colosseum follows the pattern of its companion volumes with a detailed historical survey of the building, its construction and use, an analysis of the activities that took place within it, a detailed consideration of how to get the best out of it as a tourist attraction, and some suggestions for further reading.

Of greatest interest to most readers will be the material on the Games that took place inside the Colosseum, their inhumanity and gore, and the cynical way in which they were used by those in authority to curry favour with the masses. Hopkins and Beard go into a commendable amount of detail, particularly regarding gladiatorial and animal contests, and while what they describe is horrific enough, it seems from their investigations that the picture of the Games in the Colosseum portrayed by Hollywood significantly over-eggs the pudding.

Students of ancient Roman history, prospective visitors to Rome, and those with an interest in iconic buildings will find much to enjoy and be entertained by in this book. There are also some unusual and surprising facts which emerge: I for one will never be able to see the Colosseum in the same light again having read about its botanical dimension and the fact that in the 17th century no fewer than 337 different species of plants were discovered in its ruins!

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