HISTORY This Week EP 327: The Colosseum Becomes a Wonder

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. July 7, 2007. I’m Sally Helm.

In Lisbon, Portugal, a giant globe rises from the floor of the Benfica stadium. Dancers hover in the air around it, waving strips of white fabric like butterfly wings. Inside the globe are more dancers, dressed in full-on metallic silver bodysuits. The music is tense and dissonant—and then it resolves into something soaring. The butterfly dancers flutter downwards. The silver dancers move as one.

It is … A LOT. With even more to come.

Famous tenor Jose Carreras performs. And pop star Jennifer Lopez.

And then, on the floor of the stadium, a giant replica of a laptop opens, as break-dancers perform in front of it, and smoke cannons shoot off behind. The illuminated screen reminds every one of the date: 7/7/07.

Now, two of the spectacle’s hosts, actors Hilary Swank and Ben Kingsley, stand on stage to kick off the real heart of the show:

Archival: The time has come, Hilary, to announce the results of the global vote. In random order, the new seven wonders of the world.

Sally Helm: There were once seven wonders of the ancient world. But by 2007, only one—the pyramids of Giza—still stands. We need an updated list of wonders – so says Bernard Weber, the impresario and self-proclaimed “adventurer” behind all this. He says his organization sifted through 100 million online votes to find the world’s most exalted, human-built places. Not everyone is pleased with all this. Especially not UNESCO, a United Nations agency devoted to identifying and preserving world heritage sites. In a statement, the agency sniffs that this stadium show is little more than “mediatized” entertainment.

But Weber’s not backing off. This ceremony is the highlight of his “mediatized campaign.” And finally, it’s time to announce the winners.

Archival: To announce the first of the new seven wonders of the world, we must welcome the first man to set foot on the moon, Neil Armstrong.

The great wall of China!

Sally Helm: Two people come up to accept the award on behalf of the wall. They hold a plaque aloft while fire shoots off behind them. The list continues:

Archival: Petra, Jordan!

The statue of Christ the Redeemer.
Sally Helm: One of the wonders announced today seems especially fitted to this lavish ceremony in a huge, packed arena.

Archival: The Colosseum in Rome! The Colosseum in Rome!

Sally Helm: The Colosseum in Rome. Completed in 80 CE. Centuries before this extravaganza in Portugal, the Colosseum hosted many a baroque and bloody spectacle. You could say it was the Benfica Stadium of its day … with gladiators.

Can I have each of you give me one word you would use to describe the Colosseum?

Alison Futrell: Grandiose?

Barry Strauss: Stupendous.

Sally Helm: Today: The Colosseum. A conversation with historians Barry Strauss and Alison Futrell. How did grand, stupendous, and sometimes deadly events unfold on the floor of this ancient arena? And how did the Romans use games to not only entertain the masses … but control them?

(PREROLL)

Sally Helm: It is such a pleasure for me to have the two of you here. This episode of History This Week, it's kind of a special one because we are not just jumping off of an event. Exactly. We're sort of centering it around a place. And both of you are on the History Channel special that's upcoming Colosseum. So, you know, all about the Colosseum. tell us about the Colosseum as it exists today

Alison Futrell: It's very hot and there are lots of people. It is one of the primary, tourist areas in Rome as well, that something that's been enhanced as the decades have gone by with the provision of people dressed up like gladiators and I'm using air quotes here because they're sort of fantasy gladiators.

Sally Helm: I know that you have worked as an archeologist, is that right?

Alison Futrell: That is correct. I participated in a number of dirt archeological projects.

Sally Helm: Oh my gosh. Well, will you tell us, then what does it look like and feel like the ruin of the Colosseum?

Alison Futrell: The ruins themselves, have undergone certain kinds of transitions to enable more people to appreciate different things. I guess one could say, with attention to the substructures the chambers and the storage areas underneath the actual arena floor itself, that would not have been visible to ancient, attendees at any of the spectacle events, which are kind of the focus. I think for many people, as they enter into this space

Sally Helm: Right, you can like see the skeleton of it now.
Alison Futrell: You can see the skeleton of it now. And you can imagine how it might've worked, though it looks kind of like areas for very large hamsters. It's not exactly a welcoming space.

Sally Helm: What's the hamster aspect?

Alison Futrell: It's the, the tunnels at the substructures. They're very narrow. They block out the light. There's not a lot of, you know, accommodations for or seating or enjoying your leisure or what have you. Not that the, the seats of the actual spectators as they are preserved look particularly enticing either.

Sally Helm: Professor Strauss, those tourists have to imagine what it would’ve been like in ancient times. Help us imagine that. What would the Colosseum have looked like at its height?

Barry Strauss: Well, it would have been jumping that's for sure. Because we approach it as tourists and lovers of antiquity in the past, we want the past to be ye old-y. People go to the Colosseum now and to other ancient amphitheaters and they see plays. They see classical music concerts. That's not what it was like. It was more like a sock in the jaw.

Sally Helm: Yeah. Describe the vibe to me. Cause I think you're right. We do go as tourists and we do imagine olden times being ye olden times and we have a particular thing we mean by that. So yeah. What do you think it would have felt like to be inside?

Barry Strauss: Something like being in the stands in a football stadium or any kind of major league sports stadium for that matter, at a boxing event in Las Vegas or, or Madison square garden, Perhaps, you know, with the emperor present with senators present with the gradations of people in the stands, it would have a kind of formality that our sporting events do not, although we do have skyboxes and, places for elites, to sit, but I think it would have just had this ruckus lively feel about it.

Alison Futrell: I agree in terms of the intensity of the feeling that one must have expected entering into this space as an ancient attendee. But I think that, this also is a place for connection with power for them. And they have expectations of certain kinds of exchanges, the opportunity to vocalize their wants and desires in a way that for us, it's more along the lines of protesting in the streets.

Sally Helm: And when you say relate to power, you mean the emperor?

Alison Futrell: Yes. It's an opportunity to speak to the emperor when there aren't many other kinds of opportunities that still exist for making the popular will known. The Romans were really good at saying when they liked something and when they didn't like something, and that is definitely going on in the Colosseum as well.

Sally Helm: Are these protests that people are making, are they specific demands that are a part of the games?

Alison Futrell: When someone is on their knees and is asking to be left alive to fight another day, asking for clemency, relief from certain kinds of taxes, food, you know different things that people
living in the city of Rome with its mass population might request. And it's something that the emperor is actually under a lot of pressure to do to give into the demands, to recognize the wishes, and to show himself as being appropriately generous in the same spirit that they're putting on these spectacle events.

Sally Helm: Professors Strauss I mean, you were saying that's a thing, you know, that might be different from going to Madison Square Garden it's not like you necessarily expect the president to be there, but at the Colosseum, the emperor would have, been present. I want to talk about the Colosseum as a political symbol and so I do want to start with just like, how does it come about who decides to build it, and when, and why?

Alison Futrell: It's the Flavians. A point of transition that that's happening for the Flavian dynasty is the fact that they are a new Imperial dynasty. So, they have something to prove, they have something to demonstrate. And clearly, they're making use of the building of this vast spectacle building as part of that program. They're putting it in a space that previously had been the sole purview of the emperor Nero, his pleasure gardens, his palace and the things that he constructed so that he could enjoy the most refined and the most voluptuary life he possibly could. Much of that is either razed or transformed into spaces that benefit the Roman people. And that's very much part of the program for the Flavian dynasty.

Sally Helm: Hmm. They're sort of taking these like sites of opulence where the elites and the emperors were and being like, ‘now these are for the people, this is one of our things. This is for you.’

Alison Futrell: Exactly.

Barry Strauss: Totally agree with what my colleague has said but I also want to point out that the Colosseum was a war monument. It's part of the Flavian's attempt to give themselves legitimacy as a dynasty because they are usurpers. And Vespasian is the first emperor who is not part of the Roman nobility. His claim to fame is his military career first in the conquest of Britain. And then in more recently in the conquest of Judea. And it's under his son, Titus, that the great Jewish revolt is put down. The Colosseum is built in part from spoils that come from Judea. It's meant to remind people as many other monuments that the Flavian's built in Rome on this period that their claim to fame is that they had put down this great revolt in Judea and had protected Rome from what the Romans saw as their longstanding rivals, longstanding threat, the Parthians.

Sally Helm: And in both cases it's like meant to cement and solidify power in a way.

Barry Strauss: Absolutely.

Sally Helm: But the first way is, we turn these pleasure palaces into places for the people. That's the way of saying we're for you. You should be for us. And it's also this military monument where it's saying, remember all the great things that we've done as a people, remember our strength.

Barry Strauss: Right.
Sally Helm: And that too is meant to sort of say you should be for us.

Barry Strauss: But also, and don't mess with us.

Sally Helm: Okay. All right. Great. We're letting you in to the pleasure palaces. Be good kind of thing? Like don't forget who's in charge.

Barry Strauss: You know, on the one hand, it's a way for the emperor to show his power. On the other hand, from the emperor's point of view, it's a way for them to remember the hierarchy of the Roman world. In the Republic, the elite was so afraid of popular gatherings, that there were no stone theaters or stone amphitheaters in Rome. Games are held on wooden stands, temporary wooden stands that were erected in the forum, and one of the reasons it's clear is that the powers that be were afraid of having the Roman people gathering and what they might do when they gathered. The fact that the emperors allow the people to have a permanent gathering place, in some sense, is a populous gesture. And in some sense, it does recognize the power of the people. But it also, in another sense, it suggests that the emperors feel confident enough of their power and authority that it's alright for the people to gather. It's a way for the Roman people to see who they are. And from the emperor's point of view, it's a way for them to remember the hierarchy of the Roman world. The seating in the Colosseum is not egalitarian.

Alison Futrell: It's true that there is a strongly hierarchical setup in the, the permanent spectacle structures, with the elites down in front and the foreigners and the women and the poor people, in the nosebleed section. But here's the thing, the Colosseum cannot hold all the people who actually live in Rome. So, the idea that there are seats that are actually reserved for different representatives of the very different classes, of the people of Rome, says something too. That there are places that are set there for them, that they are included, and it is meant to represent basically a subset of the people of Rome as a whole.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: You've mentioned Titus. I know he's the one who holds these first big games in the Colosseum in 80 CE. What would those have been like, what events were held, why were they happening at all?

Alison Futrell: We have a lot of information about these opening games from the Book of the Spectacles written by Martial. It talks about beast hunters. It talks about, other kinds of executions and events that are, that are taking place.

Barry Strauss: There are a hundred days of spectacles. We think it's all about the gladiators, but there's only one gladiatorial event that is mentioned in it.

Sally Helm: Yeah, let's talk about gladiators. Cause I think you're right. Everyone thinks Rome, maybe the fourth word they'll think of is gladiator, maybe the first for some people. So, what is the gladiator?
Alison Futrell: Gladiators are trained combatants, trained to perform as combatants rather than people who are purely trained to fight wars or something like that.

Barry Strauss: Typically, though, not only these were slaves and prisoners of war, and they were condemned to be gladiators. Their lifespan wasn't very long. If you were a gladiator, it's not a job with a long tenure for most people. They were fighting each other to the death, in theory. Although in practice, less likely they're going to be fighting to the death because you would lose your investment if gladiators are killing each other all the time.

Sally Helm: Why, because they would have like a sponsor, someone who was giving them money?

Barry Strauss: Yeah. They're being supported, they're being fed, they're being trained, they're being housed. They are expensive commodities. You know, they're around for a long time by the time we get to the Colosseum the Romans have had gladiators for centuries.

Alison Futrell: Certainly, the first gladiators that we know about in Rome come from the middle of the third century. And those seem to be prisoners of war who are fighting at funeral games.

Sally Helm: It would be like a, a combat event at a funeral. That's what I should picture?

Alison Futrell: Yeah. It's an opportunity for the, the heirs of these, well-known political leaders to show how much they're valued by expending so much effort and money on arranging these spectacular shows to go along with the funeral.

Sally Helm: So, they started as these sort of funereal games, and then they sort of get professionalized, it sounds like. Is that the right word or?

Alison Futrell: Sort of, the giving of these kinds of events gets folded into some of the expectations that Romans have about what the state and the leaders in the state should do for them. For example, if you're running for office, if you're holding office, you could maybe arrange for it to be timed in sometime that's a little bit more convenient for your political career. You're honoring your family; you're providing a big to-do for the people.

Barry Strauss: They also are sometimes used in, in military and even policing roles. So, for instance, in the first century BC, in a period of great disorder in Rome when there is no real police force, wealthy people hire their own personal armies composed of gladiators.

Sally Helm: What do gladiator fights look like by the time we get to Imperial Rome, the Colosseum?

Alison Futrell: Individual gladiators and trained in different sorts of fighting techniques, depending on what kind of weapons they use, what kind of protective gear they have, what kind of shields they have. So, there's the, retiarius which seems to be someone who's using a Trident and a weighted net as their main tools for the arena. So, someone that looks more like a fisherman than an actual soldier. The retiarii also have different kinds of protection. They don't have a shield. They don't have a helmet either. And this is important because among the gladiators, it's the retiarius whose
face you can see and who can use their face in the arena as a means of communicating with the
crowd. And that seems to have worked for them. They seem to be pretty popular in Pompei at least.
A number of people are writing all kinds of graffiti about retiarius and how stirring they are and in
sexual ways, you know, they have to sort of power over women. They do seem to have an allure, and
part of it may be because of the high visibility of those faces. When they're wounded, you can see it
you can see them respond and that's emotionally powerful.

Sally Helm: This is actually just what I wanted to also, ask, how do we know what we know? Like,
what are the sources that you guys are mostly drawing from for, for all of this?

Barry Strauss: People have tried to do statistical studies of the epigraphy.

Sally Helm: Sorry, epigraphy?

Barry Strauss: Inscriptions, people writing on stone, so like gravestones, for example, beach
classical one, or a monuments. There's also this gladiator cemetery, and that's been really studied,
very scientifically and that's given us a certain amount of data about the kind of injuries people had
and lifespan they had is gladiator the age they were killed at. Of course, we also have lots and lots of
graphic representations of gladiators and all sorts of different media, sculpted relief and graffiti
and gems and gladiatorial equipment from Pompei say and—

Alison Futrell: Mosaics, lamps. So, a range of price points available for your gladiatorial material.

Barry Strauss: Yeah. Glasses. We have, you know, souvenir glasses with gladiators. They're
celebrated. They have fans. In Pozzuoli so outside of Naples, there is an underground city, and
there's this graffito of a gladiator on the walls there. It's so eerie. It's like you're in the New York
subway and suddenly you see this graffito of a gladiator and you realize they were everywhere,
everywhere in the ancient world.

Sally Helm: The idea that gladiators are everywhere, that there's graffiti of them, that they're kind
of like celebrities, but then they're also being forced to fight to the death. Often, they’re slaves or
prisoners of war or both. Like what sort of is their status? Are they high status, low status?

Alison Futrell: By law, they are untouchables or the equivalent of untouchables. They are the same
status as prostitutes and pimps. They are people who made to serve the pleasures of others, whose
bodies can be ordered to be penetrated. So, by law, they're excluded from full political
participation, but clearly, it would not necessarily made a difference whether you could run for
political office to a wide sweep of the Roman populace, who might've revered those gladiators and
admired them.

Barry Strauss: People were just, you know, obsessed. But also, there's fear that gladiators can be a
revolutionary force. That unless you lock them up, they can fight for one side or the other. They're
dangerous people. Romans admire them. But they're also afraid of you're not going to be breathing
easy about having gladiators living in your neighborhood. So, they don't want them in Rome. In the
late Republic, the gladiators are housed in Capua, which is about 125 miles to the south.
Sally Helm: Speaking of them sort of like, being dangerous tell me about a gladiator that people may have heard of who is a Spartacus who's he and what does he do?

Barry Strauss: So, Spartacus is maybe the most famous gladiator of the ancient world. He fought in an allied unit of the Roman army. So, he was an experienced soldier, and he became a gladiator much against his will. He was sent to Capua where he trained in one of these gladiatorial schools. And there, he, with some other gliders, let a breakout, they led a revolt. They seized weapons from the kitchen; knives skewers cleavers, and they use those to kill the guards and to break out of this gladiatorial school in Capua.

And they went along off to Mount Vesuvius, it's well, before the famous explosion that destroys the top part of Vesuvius and covers Pompeii and Herculaneum. And they use that as a refuge and encourage slaves from the region to join them. Yeah, it's a problem for the Romans. And there is no police force really Italy at the time. They have to raise an army of inexperienced men, who marched south from Rome to fight Spartacus and his fellow rebels, and they don't do very well against them.

Sally Helm: This is an untrained army. That's just been raised. A lot of these are gladiators.

Barry Strauss: These are gladiators. They engage in a series of maneuvers tricks and bushes surprises. Basically, wipe the floor with the Roman army.

Sally Helm: How does it end?

Barry Strauss: So, the gladiators go south, the next year they fight their way north, Spartacus wants them now to disperse, to go over the Alps and go to their respective homelands east or west. But the men refuse. They want to stay in Italy. They are enjoying too much spectacle of defeating the Romans and getting rich by looting the wealthiest countryside at this point in the Mediterranean world.

And Spartacus, against his better judgment, agrees to go with them back south. Finally, the Romans raise an experienced army. The Senate gives command to Marcus Licinius Crassus and experienced soldier, extremely wealthy man, and they are able first to trap Spartacus and his men in Southern Italy. But then when Spartacus and his men manage to break out to then hunt them down and fight them in a climactic battle, contrary to the myth of Hollywood, Spartacus is killed in the battle. He isn't crucified. There is no famous “I'm Spartacus” scene.

Archival: I'm Spartacus. I'm Spartacus…

Barry Strauss: Some of his followers are killed. Some of them, they're trapped by another army and a third part of them go into the mountains of Southern Italy.

As for those who are captured, Crassus does something infamous and brutal with him. He lines the road between Capua and Rome, with crucifixes. He crucifies his thousands of these surviving. It's a way to say to other slaves don't rebel against Rome, and it's also a way for Crassus to advertise himself and his achievement.
**Alison Futrell:** Bear in mind that Spartacus’s revolt is the third of a number of revolts, that are called the slave wars by some of the Roman authors that we know about. There's also been small uprisings that have been going on for generations that are very much connected to Rome's habits of imperialism habits of conquest. So, Spartacus’s resistance. Spartacus’s battle against the enslavement, as he might understand it from the Romans would have found a ready ear among thousands of people in the countryside.

**Sally Helm:** And that was quite powerful, quite threatening to the people in power, which maybe is one reason that it is ultimately put down in such a brutal fashion.

**Alison Futrell:** It is. Although I should say, you know, Spartacus has a lot of meaning for moderns. And part of it is because of, you know, the Kirk Douglass film or the other miniseries or the dozens of Spartacus novels and plays and performances going back to the 18th century where the story of Spartacus became meaningful at a time when people were talking about, you know, maybe the aristocratic elites don't know everything and don't deserve everything.

**Sally Helm:** And I mean, I want to flash forward to the Colosseum as a symbol and how people do end up reading it over time. I know that there is a moment two thousand years later when, Mussolini sort of tries to capitalize on the power of the Colosseum and sort of the connection to ancient Rome in general. Yeah, Professor Strauss. Can you tell me about that?

**Barry Strauss:** Sure. You know, miscellaneous political movement was called fascism and the fast gaze was the ancient Roman symbol of a public official’s authority. And it was a bundle of wooden rods that were bundled together, and so Mussolini is using that, but he also uses antiquity in general, to buttress his political system, he wanted to create a new Italian empire and he wanted to turn the Italians, who are basically a very gentle people, into a military people like the ancient Romans. There was endless propaganda about this in fascist Italy. And one of the aspects of the propaganda was rebuilding the city of Rome to turn it into more like antiquity. So, one of the things he does is he has an urban renewal project where he basically razes part of the city to create a new. That will connect the Colosseum to the forum and to the monuments, the modern monuments and Renaissance monuments that built around the forum. This is called the via dei Fori Imperiali, the street of the Imperial forums. So these are how he's using ancient symbols, symbols from Imperial Rome to try to create this new empire.

**Sally Helm:** Great. Well, I want to bring us forward to today now. How is the Colosseum still a symbol today? And what is it a symbol of, do you think?

**Barry Strauss:** I think you can have different meanings for different people. If I might say it has kind of a personal meaning for me, because my father was in the U S army in 1944, and he fought in the battle for Rome. He was part of the American army that marched into Rome in June of 1944. And I grew up hearing stories of him going into town and seeing the monuments like the Colosseum. And I always thought of the Colosseum as somehow this almost military symbol and the symbol of, changing regimes. The fall fascism, in a weird way it was my own symbol.

**Sally Helm:** Yeah. Well, I think that's a good place to end. Thank you both so much for coming on the show. And as I said, you are both on the History Channel’s series Colosseum, which is premiering soon, Sunday, July 17th so listeners can catch you both there to hear more about all of this. Thank you so much.
Barry Strauss: It was great working with you, Sally.

Alison Futrell: Thanks Barry. It's been great.

[CREDITS]

Sally Helm: Thanks for listening to History This Week. For moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.

If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410.

Special thanks to our guests, Alison Futrell, co-editor of The Oxford Handbook of Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World, and Barry Strauss, author of The War That Made the Roman Empire: Antony, Cleopatra, and Octavian at Actium.

This episode was produced by Julia Press. It was story edited by Jim O'Grady and sound designed by Dan Rosato. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Morgan Givens and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

Don’t forget to subscribe, rate, and review HISTORY This Week wherever you get your podcasts, and we’ll see you next week!