Nîmes' Amphitheatre

Introduction

The amphitheatre in Nîmes is thought to have been constructed in the Augustan period, in the second half of the first century. It was designed by T. Crispius Reburrus. Much like the buildings in Italy the amphitheatre was constructed in a rhythmical pattern with classical framework in order to create the correct shape. It is argued to resemble that of the amphitheatre in Arles and both were seen as 'contemporary' style. Nîmes amphitheatre is the best preserved Roman structure in southern France which can be due to many reasons including the concrete used, the continued use and architectural construction. The amphitheatre could seat 24,000 spectators.

Ancient use

The amphitheatre was a venue for a number of Roman spectacles in ancient times including:

- Gladiator fights, the spectacles most commonly associated with Roman amphitheatres,
- The hunting of exotic animals such as Lions, Tigers and even elephants.
- Also there were cases where executions were held here in front of the public where the accused were thrown to animals to be eaten.

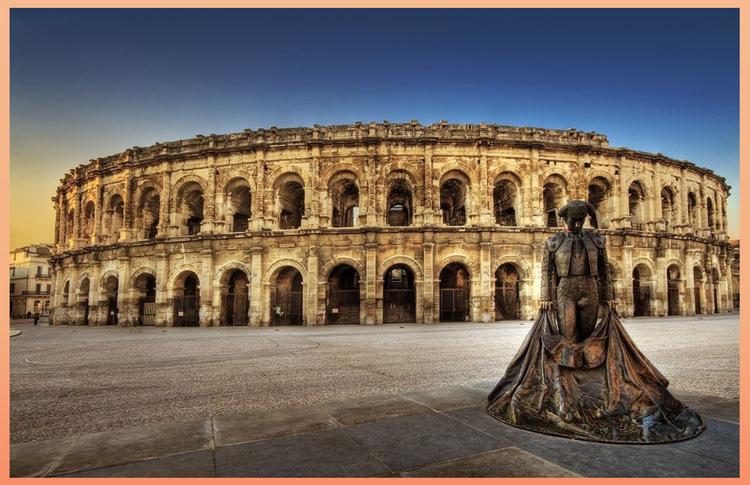
The evidence for gladiator fights comes from relief carving found on the parapet of the arcade at Nîmes (Bomgardner, 2000). Other evidence has been found including inscriptions in the amphitheatre. It is also suggested that the barracks of the imperial gladiators were either in Narbonne or Nîmes itself (Bomgardner, 2000).

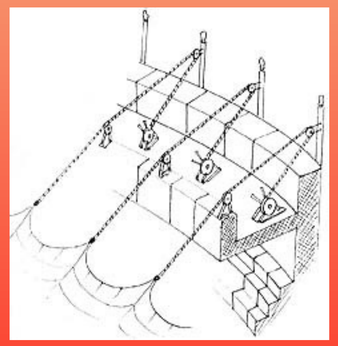
Architecture

The circumference of the complete building stands at 133 .4 x 101.4 M and 21 metres high (Benario, 1981). The internal arena size is 69.1 x 38.3 M (Benario, 1981). Roman architecture Includes archways that are seen throughout the amphitheatre. The shape of the amphitheatre is an oval shape which is different from eclipse shape. The amphitheatre has a two storey façade with arched openings all the way around flanked by pilasters and half columns just like the colosseum in Rome (Sear, 1982). The architectural honeycomb style of the chambers and passageways of the amphitheatre is one of the factors contributing to its survival to this day (Sear, 1982). There are 120 well preserved evidence of mast holes set in corbels around the top wall of the amphitheatre (Sear, 1982). These were used to support a huge awning or velarium to keep the spectators from the sun. Similar evidence of the use of a velarium are found in Roman theatres.

Construction

The amphitheatre was constructed on a flat sparsely populated, largely horticultural region to the south of the city. It was therefore constructed after the city of Nîmes was established. Much like other amphitheatres and theatres there is evidence that the amphitheatre was first built from wood and later build from stone and concrete. The amphitheatre had galleries to allow access to the seating area (Bomgardner, 2000). Lower galleries may have been used to gladiator quarters and to contain prisinors and animals. The amphitheatre was designed to allow rapid entrance and exit of spectators through the galleries and the arches on façade as an effective form of crowd management.





Conclusion

- Amphitheatre at Nîmes is an impressive ancient Roman structure.
- It is also a unique in that it is still intact after nearly 2,000 years.
- Its survival has much to do with the fact that in each successive phase in the history of Nîmes the amphitheatre has been able to adapt to a new use.
- The amphitheatre has gone from being a Roman arena, to fortress, to château, to village, to historical monument to bullring it has engaged and provided for the people of Nîmes.

Renovation in Antiquity to Modern use

After the fall of Rome and its waning influence on provincial southern France the amphitheatre was not just left to fall completely but was renovated in antiquity many times. The table below shows how the amphitheatre was used in antiquity.

Sixth century	The Amphitheatre at Nîmes was converted into a Visigoth fortress for a more militaristic use equipped with a moat and emergency shelter for casualties of war.
Eighth century	Charles Martel in 739 AD ordered all the defences, which were made from wood, to be burnt down (Bomgardner, 2000).

During the medieval period the amphitheatre had a chapel to Saint-Martin-des-Arénes (Bomgardner, 2000). In the twelfth century the fortress was changed again to become the first seat the Viscounty of Nîmes and became a Chateau. In the eighteenth century there was an established seven hundred strong village within the amphitheatre. By 1786 it started to be re-stored into the amphitheatre that it had been in the Roman times.

In the present the amphitheatre has been fully restored with metal frames to help stabilise the structure. It is used to show re-enactments of how it was used in the Roman period with many different shows. There is now even interactive audio guides and a museum with many interesting exhibits. The Amphitheatre has also become a venue for bull fights and has a commemorative statue outside. (travel website and museum website for this section)

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Photos

From Wikipedia