

VERONA

Introduction

Controlling a ford on the Adige river, an obligatory point of passage between East and West, Verona, already occupied in pre-Roman times, was one of the main cities in the Veneto area. A colony under Latin law in 89 B.C., then a Roman *municipium* in 49 B.C., the city was occupied by Vespasian during the civil war against Vitellius, in 69, and later by Maxentius during that against Constantine, in 312. Later, due to its strategic position, Verona maintained for a long time its importance. The most famous ancient monument of Verona is its amphitheatre, where both gladiator games and hunting shows were held. Despite its name, the amphitheatre is not the simple *collage* of two theatres, nor the product of empirical research: a rigorous geometric study had demonstrated the superiority of the elliptical plan, both in terms of circulation and vision of the spectacle given in the “arena”, a name derived from the Latin name of the sand which absorbed the blood of men and beasts.

History

On the river Adige side, access to the city was facilitated by two Roman bridges, one of which, Ponte Pietra, dating back to the 1st century BC, still preserves two arches of its original structure. Of the ancient city walls, dating back to the Republican period, but restored by Emperor Gallienus in 265, Verona has preserved four gates, the most monumental of which, to the west, at the end of the *decumanus maximus*, is Porta Borsari: dated, in its current state, to the Julio-Claudian period, despite bearing an inscription relating to Gallienus, dated 265; its two arches are flanked by fluted Corinthian columns supporting the tympanum. On the *cardo maximus*, the Porta Leoni, also with two arches, was built using brickwork during the Republican period, and later enlarged and embellished. Inside the city there are the remains of a theatre of the 1st century, rediscovered in 1834, and subsequently restored. Currently located in the very centre of Verona, the amphitheatre was built at the beginning of the Julio-Claudian period, a hundred metres outside the walls and Porta Borsari, on the left bank of the Adige, and later included in the walls of Gallienus. This is one of the first examples of an amphitheatre with an empty structure, i.e. where the steps rest on a series of vaults, and not on a compact concrete core or on a natural slope. Three huge annular sewers ensured drainage of water under the monument. Its maximum dimensions, 123 x 152 m, make it the fourth largest amphitheatre in ancient Italy, and the eighth largest in the ancient world: it could accommodate about 30,000 spectators. The external façade, now disappeared, was entirely built in local stone, the red limestone; articulated with three orders of overlapping arches, it had 72 entrances, the largest of which opened towards the city.

Rediscovery and restoration

The first important damage to the amphitheatre was attested at the beginning of the 6th century, when King Theodoric had the blocks of the upper galleries plundered to reinforce the city walls. However, the amphitheatre of Verona owes its preservation to its transformation into a fortress, from the 10th century onwards, despite a series of earthquakes attested throughout the 12th century. Fortunately, the colossal dimensions of the monument protected it from total annihilation, even though the outer ring that made up its façade is completely missing today. The first restorations were carried out there in the 13th century, while in 1450, under Venetian rule, precise measures were taken to protect the Arena. Over the centuries, however, houses and shops gradually came to occupy the monument, from which they were evicted only in 1820. The first

systematic excavations were carried out there in 1874, while important restoration work was completed during the second half of the 20th century. Since 1913, it has become a temple of lyrical art. Porta Borsari was restored in 1980 and 1990, while the honorary arch of the Gavi, erected on Via Postumia in the 1st century, was destroyed during the Napoleonic occupation and rebuilt nearby in 1930. Verona was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2000, for an extension of 444 hectares, as an exceptional example of uninterrupted development, over a span of 2000 years, of a fortified city, rich in monuments exceptional from an architectural point of view. In the Renaissance, Verona was considered the birthplace of Vitruvius: for this reason, architects carefully studied its monuments, which inspired the construction of some of the most beautiful buildings in Renaissance Italy.