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Vicious Roman emperor who inspired the film Gladiator built his own mini-Colosseum to kill wild animals

Archeologists have unearthed a private mini-Colosseum built by the notorious Roman emperor who featured in the Oscar-winning film Gladiator.

Commodus used the 2nd century amphitheatre on his estate in Genzano, southeast of Rome, to kill animals while dressed as a gladiator.

The oval arena, measuring 200ft by 130ft, was discovered accidentally by a team from an American university, as they excavated thermal baths at the estate known as the Villa of Antonines.

Using radar that showed foundations underground, the images revealed an imperial box and curving walls with yellow, red and purple floors made of marble.

More than 1,300 people could watch from seats around the arena as Commodus, son of Marcus Aurelius, killed wild animals.

The 2000 film Gladiator which won five Oscars including best picture, featured Commodus played by Joaquin Phoenix, a weak but vicious ruler.

In the movie he fought to the death in the Colosseum in Rome with fictional army general Russell Crowe

Historically, he was just 20 when he became emperor, reigning from AD180 to 192. He ordered the masses to worship him as a second Hercules on the ground that he had killed wild beasts in the Colosseum.

Such was his prowess that he once pierced an elephant with a pole, pierced a gazelle's horn with a spear and killed mighty beasts with a single blow.

The team from Montclair State University, New Jersey, found evidence of an underground canal around the arena in which naval battles could have been staged like those at the Colosseum.

A spiral staircase leading almost 10ft down to underground chambers have led to theories that lifts were used to raise scenery and possibly animals, according to the Sunday Times.

Montclair's professor of classics and humanities Timothy Renner, told the paper that Commodus used his amphitheatre for 'practice' as a killer of animals and as a gladiator.

He added: 'In Rome he killed dozens of animals for example bears with single javelin shots - although at least some of the time he was on a protected walkway above the arena.'

It is claimed he battled 735 times in gladiatorial bouts.

Commodus enraged many Romans by sitting in the theatre or amphitheatre dressed in a woman's garments. He enjoyed inflicting pain and cruelty, ridiculing one fat man by cutting open the middle of his stomach.

Outside of the arena he led a depraved life with over 300 concubines. These women were taken from the nobility and also the plebs.

He was finally assassinated when his wrestling partner strangled him after poison had failed to kill him.

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