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# Architecture of the Roman Amphitheatre in the Military Camp of *Burnum*

## **Abstract:**

On the eastern Adriatic coast and the surrounding areas, there is an entire range of excavated and recorded amphitheatres located in individual former Roman colonies (*Pola, Iader, Aequum, Salona, Epidaurum* and *Dyrrachium*) and military camps (*Burnum* and *Tilurium*). Through topographic, typological and chronological classification, the author explores the Roman amphitheatre in *Burnum*. Likewise, in an interdisciplinary approach, the author supports his conclusions with historical sources, displaying materials, archaeological remains, numismatic material, toponomastic records, reconstructions, as well as archival, cartographic, urban and other types of data.

## **Keywords:**

amphitheatre, gladiatorial games, architecture, *forum*, *spectacula*, *venatio*, legionary camp, eastern Adriatic coast, *Burnum*

Gladiatorial games draw their roots from ancient rituals of human sacrifice at the tombs of notable people in order to appease the spirits of deceased ancestors (*manes*). Originally, they were associated with funeral ceremonies, but gradually began to separate from this context and became very popular in Rome in the early 2nd century BC as the most important social events of the ancient world.<sup>1</sup> According to historical sources, the usual location for gladiatorial fights, up until the Augustan period, was the *Forum Romanum*. The place from which gladiatorial fights were watched was called the *spectacula*, and it was formed by wooden seating structures that were erected along the *forum*, from which the oval shape of the amphitheatre will later emerge.<sup>2</sup> This type of Roman construction, which meets the needs of various types of spectacles, was located in the cities with the highest levels of urban development, in which performances were held at times of great religious festivals and fairs, which were also excellent opportunities for gathering and enjoyment. It is believed that gladiatorial combat on the eastern Adriatic coast descends from the first Roman conquests, at the time of the late Republic and early Empire.<sup>3</sup>

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The site of *Burnum*, today called “Šuplja crkva” (*the hollow church*), or “Šupljaja” (*the hollows*), named after the remains of Roman arches still visible *in situ*, is located in Ivoševci, on the right bank of the river Krka (*Titius flumen* in the historical documents), in southern Croatia, a few kilometres away from the village of Kistanje (Šibenik-Knin County), an area today part of the Krka National Park.<sup>4</sup> On the southwestern outskirts of the military camp of *Burnum*, a Roman amphitheatre which was for centuries covered by stone piles and stone walls has been dug out. Ancient buildings for the preparation of the favorite gladiatorial games and political rallies of the Roman legions were located low in the southern landscape in the locality of Karlovac<sup>5</sup>, much like the huge sinkhole outside the walls of the camp (*extra muros*), which was

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Claude Golvin, *L'Amphithéâtre romain* (Lacapelle-Marival: Archeologie Nouvelle, 2012), 6-9.

<sup>2</sup> Marcus Junkelmann, *Gladiatoren* (Nürnberg; Tessloff, 2005), 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Marin Buovac, „Amphitheatres in the Republic of Croatia,” in *13th Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists, Abstracts book*, eds. Ante Uglešić, Dražen Maršić, Tomislav Fabijanić (Zadar: University of Zadar, 2007), 304.

<sup>4</sup> Darko Periša, „Je li delmatsko područje presjekao rimski limes?,” *Archaeologia Adriatica* 2/2 (2008): 512; Alessandro Campedelli, „The Castrum of Burnum: between old Excavations and new Researches,” *Archaeologia Adriatica* 5/1 (2011): 35; Nenad Cambi et alii, *Rimska vojska u Burnumu = L'esercito romano a Burnum* (Gradski muzej Drniš – Šibenik: Javna ustanova “Nacionalni Park Krka” – Zadar: Sveučilište u Zadru, 2007), 5-8; Željko Miletić, „Burnum – vojničko središte provincije Dalmacije. Burnum a Military Centre in the Province of Dalmatia,” in *Nalazi rimske vojne opreme u Hrvatskoj. Finds of the Roman Military Equipment in Croatia*, ed. Ivan Radman-Livaja (Zagreb: Arheološki muzej u Zagrebu, 2010), 113-115.

<sup>5</sup> Marin Buovac, „O natpisnoj građi rimskih amfiteatara na prostoru istočnojadranske obale,” *Vjesnik za arheologiju i povijest dalmatinsku* 105 (2012): 85.

discovered in 2003 while researching urban planning, architecture and spatial organization of military camps and the accompanying buildings and civil settlements (*canabae*). This research is still in progress.<sup>6</sup>

This is the building of an amphitheatre which is now the oldest known military amphitheatre in Croatia and which a long time ago was used for military purposes, for entertainment and for leisure (*otium*). Unlike the amphitheatres in *Pola* and *Salona* which are civilian objects, the amphitheatre in *Burnum* is of military nature. The amphitheatre was covered with a variety of vegetation and surrounding rocks and until recently it was thought that this was just another unsightly natural sinkhole in a series of many. It is unquestionably true that the location of the amphitheatre has long been theorized, but never substantiated by archaeological excavations. Even in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Tadija Smičiklas, Frane Bulić, Šime Ljubić and Lujo Marun observed traces of the amphitheatre in *Burnum*. The location of *Burnum* was in centuries after its construction forgotten, but the locals, surprisingly, held on to the memory of the amphitheatre.<sup>7</sup>

While visiting the location in 1890, Šime Ljubić wrote to the local residents about a cluster of rocks called “Kraljevi zvir” (*royal beasts*), probably named after the beasts and people who were, in the gladiatorial events, soaked with blood. Also, in the area of the indicated military amphitheatre in *Tilurium*, the toponym “Zvirnjak” was preserved.<sup>8</sup> The Roman military camps in *Burnum* and *Tilurium* needed to have good logistics in order to handle military entertainment and amusement. The limestone material required for the construction of the said ancient edifice had a local character, and was certainly pulled out from the surrounding area of the large local rugged expanses. Also, it should not be ignored that there was easily accessible tufa from the nearby travertine barriers, which, because of its strength and light weight, was used for the construction of the *Burnum* amphitheatre. Typological and stylistic analyses show that a stone masonry workshop certainly existed on the territory of the Roman *Burnum*. The development of the camp and the subsequent civil settlement required a good stonemason in order to perform more complex tasks, and not just doing simple profiles and architectural decoration, which, presumably, the soldiers did by themselves. This is evidenced by the graffiti *centuria pompeii* which are scratched into the

<sup>6</sup> Marin Buovac, „O sudbini kamena s rimskih amfiteatara na prostoru istočnojadranske obale,“ *Klesarstvo i graditeljstvo* 1-2/22 (2011): 60; Nenad Cambi et alii, *Rimska vojska u Burnumu*, 5-14.

<sup>7</sup> Marin Buovac, „Rimski amfiteatri na tlu istočnog Jadrana i zaobalja,“ *Histria Antiqua* 21 (2012): 137; Nenad Cambi et alii, *Amfiteatar u Burnumu* (Drniš: Gradski muzej Drniš – Šibenik: Javna ustanova “Nacionalni Park Krka” – Zadar: Sveučilište u Zadru – Odjel za arheologiju, 2006), 5-9.

<sup>8</sup> Marin Buovac, „Antroponimi, hagionimi i teonimi u djelu Alberta Fortisa Put po Dalmaciji,“ in *Zbornik radova – Zagora između stočarsko-ratarske tradicije te procesa litoralizacije i globalizacije*, eds. Mate Matas, Josip Faričić (Zadar: Sveučilište u Zadru; Split: Kulturni sabor Zagore - Matica hrvatska Split, 2011), 457.

trunks of the pillars, and which were found while excavating the amphitheatre.<sup>9</sup> Most of the stone monuments in *Burnum* were made of local limestone with its specific color and patina, which suggests that *Burnum* had a workshop that developed continuously.

The central area of the amphitheatre had a battleground that had an area of 44 by 33 meters, where gladiatorial fights and other events took place, and it was covered with sand. The outer circumferential wall of the amphitheatre was built of smaller quarry stones. The ellipse of the arena was separated from the auditorium by a double wall. The inner (older) wall was made of small, quite irregular stones that were tied with large quantities of plaster, while the outer (newer) wall was created like a patchwork of large, properly secured cut stones, connected with iron pegs and sealed with lead.<sup>10</sup> The oval design of the ground plan of this amphitheatre makes more or less a correct elliptical shape on its own. This is confirmed by the dimensions of the amphitheatre, 118 by 87 meters.<sup>11</sup> Typologically, the amphitheatre in *Burnum* belongs to a group of military amphitheatres with four diagonally arranged entrances (two side entrances and two main entrances). However, because of the terrain the builders failed to respect the rule of symmetry when it came to the arrangement of the entrances. Therefore it is not surprising that the Eastern and Western passages have a small angle of deflection, so we cannot expect the passages on the respective sides to be arithmetic. The west side was excavated a few years ago.<sup>12</sup> On the structure, we can distinguish between two established construction phases, although it is not yet reliably determined whether there was more construction work done later, which has to be chronologically dated relatively cautiously. The first construction phase was from the time of Emperor Claudius and this has been archaeologically confirmed. A variety of archaeological materials were found in a layer used for leveling the ground for the construction, especially late republican and early imperial coins, proving that construction of the *Burnum* amphitheatre started in the early years of the reign of Emperor Claudius. All necessary preparatory work in connection with the preparation and leveling of the terrain and the construction of the building of the amphitheatre was carried out by members of the Eleventh Legion, which, from the year 42, bore the honorary title *legio XI Claudia pia fidelis*. Therefore it is necessary to emphasize the fact that the *Burnum* amphitheatre, built around the year 50, served for fun, exercise and the training of soldiers.<sup>13</sup>

The final construction phase of the amphitheatre in *Burnum* should be attributed to the time of the reign of Emperor Vespasian, who financially helped its completion.<sup>14</sup> The work funded by Vespasian was carried out by

<sup>9</sup> Nenad Cambi et alii, *Amfiteatar u Burnumu*, 27; Buovac, *O sudbini kamena*, 61.

<sup>10</sup> Cambi et alii, *Amfiteatar u Burnumu*, 19-20.

<sup>11</sup> Buovac, *Rimski amfiteatri*, 138.

<sup>12</sup> Cambi et alii, *Amfiteatar u Burnumu*, 19-24.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 27; Buovac, *Rimski amfiteatri*, 138-139; Miletić, *Burnum*, 137.

<sup>14</sup> Miletić, *Burnum*, 137; Buovac, *O sudbini kamena*, 62; Nenad Cambi et alii, *Amfite-*

members of the Fourth Flavian legion (*legio IIII Flavia felix*), and can be characterized as a reconstruction or renovation of the amphitheatre. At this time, they arched the passageways and added wall funnels at the entrances, and increased the size of the auditorium as well using regular stone blocks of white limestone for the walled arena. The completion date of construction was marked by an inscription from Emperor Vespasian.

In later times, some minor building reconstructions were performed, most notably the construction of the shrines in the mantle of the arena on the site of an earlier staircase along the axis of the western gate, and there were probably more. The stratigraphy of small archeological material indicates that the construction of the first solid amphitheatre happened in the time of Emperor Claudius, which can easily be paired with known events around Scribonianus' rebellion. It is likely that the Eleventh legion was rewarded for its loyalty to the new Emperor Claudius by reconstructing the camp and constructing the first masoned amphitheatre in the year 42.<sup>15</sup> Within the perimeter walls of the battleground, subsequent rectangular indentations were found. According to these indents, located in the plaster within the western passage, it is assumed that a small altar existed which per analogy was attributed to the goddess Nemesis, the protector of gladiators and gladiatorial games. This was a modest shrine or a miniature temple inside the amphitheatre, where local gladiators would utter their prayers before battle. Shards of ceramic oil lamps and coins are evidence that the gladiators would offer sacrifice before a battle.<sup>16</sup> Stands from the excavated parts were totally destroyed and so far only one bench has been found *in situ*. Building an amphitheatre, with its original features, was one of the most important and most effective means of Romanizing immigrants. Gladiatorial combats were a kind of dividing line between the Romans and barbarians, accepting the spectacles of life and adhering to the Roman civilization.

An undecorated monumental nameplate, *tabulae ansatae*, from Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasian was found at the entrance to the southern arched passage of the amphitheatre, made of much higher quality limestone than is the case with the actual structure of the amphitheatre.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, carved letters are skillfully distributed and dimensioned in this field, the letters being almost calligraphically written in two rows evenly and very carefully processed. This indicates that the very nameplate of Emperor Vespasian was

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*atar u Burnumu*, 12-14.

<sup>15</sup> Miletić, *Burnum*, 126; Campedelli, *The Castrum of Burnum*, 59: The provincial governor *Lucius Arruntius Camillus Scribonianus* tried, with the help of the VII<sup>th</sup> and XI<sup>th</sup> legions, to ascend to the imperial throne, but Roman army detachments defeated the conspiracy. Their loyalty was rewarded by Claudius, who had in the meantime become emperor, with the honorific title of *Claudia Pia Fidelis*.

<sup>16</sup> Marin Buovac, „Duhovni svijet i božanstva gladijatora u sklopu rimskih amfiteatar na tlu današnje Hrvatske,“ *Vjesnik arheološkog muzeja u Zagrebu* 46 (2014): 136-142; Nenad Cambi et alii, *Amfiteatar u Burnumu*, 21-23.

<sup>17</sup> Buovac, *O natpisnoj građi*, 86; Nenad Cambi et alii, *Amfiteatar u Burnumu*, 12-13.

made by skilled stonemasons and that it was ordered and carved at some other place. This is evident from the fine processing inscription field and its great smoothness. The nameplate was placed in a conspicuous place as it informed the public of the name of the investors and donors. The discovered stone nameplate is an irrefutable testament to the importance of the area of *Burnum* and its amphitheatre, as well as an indication of the completion date of the amphitheatre. Of equal importance is also the manifestation of the special interest Emperor Vespasian had in the *Burnum* area because it indicates that the Emperor encouraged the construction of local public buildings for the purpose of imperial propaganda and promotion. The inscription, restituted, is as follows:

*IMP(erator) CAESAR VE[s]PASIANUS AUG(ustus) PONT(ifex) MAX(imus)  
TRIB(unicia) POT(estate) VII IMP(erator) XVIII P(ater) P(atriciae)*

From the inscription we can reconstitute and read the official name of the Emperor in standardized form, formal style, functions and nomenclature, related to the personality – the Emperor as an actual person. We can also conclude that the building was undoubtedly completed from donations because the name of the Emperor is in the nominative case. The formulation unambiguously warns that the person who invested into the amphitheatre was the emperor himself, and it is significant that at that time legions stayed in the camp which was awarded with the honorable title of the Vespasian gens – *Flavia*, which only the Emperor could bestow. The Emperor, a promoter of Roman traditions, among them being the different spectacles in the amphitheatre, could not ignore the pleas of *his* legions and by gifting such a structure he facilitated the difficult service of the legions in the Dalmatian hinterlands. The nameplate dates the end of construction to the years 76/77. After the year 86, when the Fourth Flavian legion left *Burnum*, the amphitheatre was certainly used for civilian purposes and entertainment of the population and later the municipality. It is not known until when the *Burnum* amphitheatre functioned, but it is obvious that it collapsed due to disrepair, old age and the poor quality of the materials from which it was built. The reason why the amphitheatre stopped functioning is obviously due to the simple fact that it was abandoned in late antiquity when gladiatorial fights became prohibited.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Marin Buovac, *Amfiteatri na tlu Histrije i Dalmacije - diplomski rad* (Zadar: Sveučilište u Zadru, 2010), 82.

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## Arhitektura rimskog amfiteatra u vojnom logoru u Burnumu

### Sažetak:

Na jugozapadnoj periferiji kompleksa vojnog logora u Burnumu iskopan je rimski amfiteatar na mikrolokaciji Karlovac, izvan bedema samog logora. Centralno područje amfiteatra bilo je 44 x 33 m veliko borilište, gdje su se izvodile gladijatorske borbe i ostali sadržaji. Sam ovalno koncipirani tlocrtni oblik amfiteatra čini više-manje pravilna elipsa, što potvrđuju i same dimenzije amfiteatra, 118 x 87 m. Na građevini možemo razlikovati dvije građevinske faze. Prva građevinska faza iz doba cara Klaudija arheološki je potvrđena. Sve potrebne predradnje u vezi s pripremom i nivelacijom terena i potom gradnjom građevine amfiteatra izvršili su pripadnici XI. legije koja od 42. godine nosi spomenuti počasni naziv *legio XI Claudia pia fidelis*. Završnu građevinsku fazu amfiteatra u Burnumu potrebno je datirati u vrijeme vladavine cara Vespazijana koji je novčano pomogao njezino dovršenje.

### Ključne riječi:

amfiteatar, gladijatorske igre, arhitektura, *forum*, *spectacula*, *venatio*, legijski logor, istočnojadranska obala, Burnum