

The Colosseum for the general public

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KEITH HOPKINS and MARY BEARD, *THE COLOSSEUM* (Wonders of the World; Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2005). Pp. x + 213, figs. 33 ISBN 0-674-01895-8. \$19.95.

This is a little book with big ideas. It is written for the general audience as part of the series "Wonders of the world". The book is both delightful and maddening: delightful in its humor and insights into humanistic issues, maddening in its often gratuitous and unjustified dismissal of other scholars' ideas. To some degree it undoubtedly suffers from its history: the brainchild of K. Hopkins, who did not live to see it finished, it was taken over by M. Beard, as his friend and general editor of the series, to create the final version.

The book is about much more than the Colosseum. It explores the social institutions behind the events in the amphitheater and the reception of the building by both ancient and modern audiences. In chapt. 1, the authors begin by comparing the experience of visiting the Colosseum for a tourist in the 19th-c. and today, which allows them to pose some critical questions that are to be the underlying themes:

How different was their society from our own? What judgments of it are we entitled to make? Can we admire the magnificence and the technical accomplishments while simultaneously deploring the cruelty and violence? How far are we taking vicarious pleasure in the excesses of Roman luxury or bloodlust, at the same time as we lament them? Are some societies really more violent than others?

Their assessment of the modern reaction concludes (16) that it is "a combination of admiration, repulsion and insidious smugness", which is good primer for an undergraduate course — and a warning for what comes later.

In chapt. 2, the authors turn from modern to ancient perceptions and explore the building's meaning for those who frequented it in Roman times. The chapter focuses on the key rôle that it played in the historical and political development of imperial Rome by explaining its part in Vespasian's strategy to replace the tyrant (Nero) with a man of the people (himself). The former replaced the private lake of Nero's pleasure palace with an amphitheater that hosted mass entertainment for the people.¹ Moreover, the evolution of the amphitheater from wooden impermanent structure to the grandiose permanency of the Colosseum reflected the changing nature of the relationship between the ruling classes and the Roman people. During the Late Republic, the temporary wooden amphitheatres allowed the senatorial class who erected them to control the shows, which were intended as vote-winning devices. By the time the Colosseum was built in A.D. 80, the imperial system was firmly in place, and the amphitheater had become the venue for the emperor to be seen and admired by his subjects, as well as the place for the Roman people to experience their own "power as the Roman people" (41).

In this chapter, the political significance of the building is emphasized by pointing to its financing, which evidently was supplied by the spoils of the Jewish War, a fact long suspected but only recently supported by evidence from an unusual inscription on a loose block found in the building. The bronze letters of the original inscription were attached by means of dowels fixed into holes. When the block was re-used in the 5th c., the surface was chiselled away, leaving only the dowel holes. Using these holes to reconstruct the original letters, G. Alföldy has proposed the following: 'the emperor Vespasian ordered this new amphitheater to be constructed from the spoils of war (*ex manubiis*)'.² The only spoils of war it could refer to are those from the

¹ For a somewhat more nuanced and complex explanation of the political significance of the placing of the Colosseum on Nero's Lake, see K. Welch, "Nerone e i Flavi. Dialoghi fra la Domus Aurea ed il Colosseo, il ritratto di Nerone di quarto tipo e l'immagine di Vespasiano," in *Neronia 6. Rome à l'époque néronienne. Institutions et vie politique, économie et société, vie intellectuelle, artistique et spirituelle* (Brussels 2002) 123-40.

² G. Alföldy, "Ein Bauinschrift aus dem Colosseum," *ZPE* 109 (1995) 195-226. In Latin the reconstruction reads: I[MP] CAES VESPASI[ANVS AVG]/ AMPHITHEATR[V]M NOVVM/[EX] MANVBIS [FIERI IVSSIT].

Jewish War. After presenting this new evidence, the authors proceed to speculate on whether it is “the result of a brilliant piece of academic detective work or the combination of vivid imagination and wishful thinking”, coming down on the side of the latter by observing (34) an “uncomfortably long distance between the scatter of holes and the suspiciously appropriate solution to ‘joining the dots’”. The comments are unfair because nowhere do the authors justify the scepticism. In fact, the holes (not visible on fig. 7) do align closely with the proposed text. Further, a rigorous epigraphical method was employed to limit the possibilities: it included an examination of syntax, word order, and word choice on other similar kinds of inscriptions.³ Alföldy’s final proposal is not definitive, but the only way one can dismiss it responsibly is to propose something better. Ultimately, the criticisms come across as gratuitous because, after rejecting the only piece of evidence we have for financing the building from the spoils of war, Hopkins and Beard go on to build their argument on the assumption that it was true.

Chapter 3 (“The killing fields”) investigates the activities that occurred in the Colosseum, starting with the inaugural games memorialized in Martial’s *De Spectaculis*. There are discussions of some of the more salacious myth-based spectacles, such as Pasiphae and the Bull, where a real woman is raped by a bull, and Orpheus, where a condemned criminal fails to tame the animals with his music and is devoured by a bear. After presenting the gory details, Hopkins and Beard bring the reader around to understand (48) that for Martial the intention was not to emphasize the blood and cruelty but rather to demonstrate the clever appropriation of the Greek mythological inheritance and to dazzle his audience with ingenious plays of representation and reality, an insight which goes back to one of the initial questions about the differences between ‘us and them’. Later in the chapter one can sense Hopkins’ input as statistics are presented on numbers of gladiators, of animals slaughtered, and of frequency and the cost of shows. Even if tempered with a bit of scepticism, the numerical journey leaves the reader with a sense of scale.

One of the engaging aspects of the gladiatorial fights is the variety of different types of gladiators, each with its own equipment and specialties. Some of the types that have been reconstructed from written sources as well as images on tombstones, paintings, graffiti and mosaics are described, though the authors are quick to point out (63) that matching up the various types of evidence is not as straightforward as it might seem.⁴ During the course of this discussion they introduce one of the most curious artifacts yet discovered: the *tintinnabulum* from Herculaneum representing a beast fighter with bells hanging from his feet and brandishing a sword at his own erect penis, which ends in the head of a panther who growls back at him. For the modern viewer it cannot help but raise Freudian questions. The authors choose (64) to leave aside “the difficult questions of where this nightmarish creature might have been displayed, by whom and why”, but in doing so they have taken it out of context. This is certainly one object that deserves its context: it is one of many ithyphallic *tintinnabula* found at the Vesuvian cities. The objects come from the merging of two devices (the bell and the phallus) typically used for warding off evil and promoting abundance, and they were displayed at the entrances of houses and particularly in bars or other commercial contexts to ensure well-being and prosperity.⁵ With no explanation given of its context, the reader is left at liberty to imagine that it could have been conceived as some kind of sex object for the bedroom. Contextual evidence is necessary if we are to move beyond shock value and wild speculation to explore the differences between ancient and modern perceptions.

Another important find that sheds light on the elaborate displays in the arena is a large collection of gladiatorial equipment, including helmets, greaves, shoulder guards, and a shield. Many of the helmets are magnificent pieces of bronze-work decorated with figural

³ S. Orlandi, *Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell’Occidente Romano* VI. Roma (Rome 2004) 39-41, gives a clear and concise overview of the argument and methodology. See the review of this work in the present issue.

⁴ A nice range of examples of different types of material evidence is presented in A. La Regina (ed.), *Sangue e arena* (Milan 2001), and E. Köhne and C. Ewigleben (edd.), *Gladiators and Caesars* (Berkeley, CA 2000).

⁵ La Regina *ibid.* 366, no. 86, with bibliography.

reliefs. Their elaborate decoration, great weight (double that of a military helmet), and lack of dents have raised questions as to whether they were actually used in the arena. Hopkins and Beard take the traditional position that they were never intended for fighting but were display pieces for pre-game parades; they then note (68) that

some archaeologists, predictably, have tried very hard to resist that suspicion, and have resorted to some desperate arguments in the process.

The comment must refer to M. Junkelmann, who recently presented an argument in favor of the armor being used for fighting.⁶ Far from being “desperate”, his arguments are very reasonable and at least deserve attention. He points out that the extra thickness of the metal increased the strength of the armor, an unnecessary expenditure for parade gear, and that, unlike soldiers who had to lug their equipment around for extended periods, gladiators were involved in brief bouts in a confined space. Moreover, the one undecorated type of helmet found at Pompeii is that of the *secutor*. He typically fought the *retiarius*, who wielded a trident and net, so the *secutor*’s helmet had to be devoid of protruding appendages that could get caught in the net. If it were simply for wearing in parades, it could have been decorated like the others. This is just one example in which other scholars’ ideas are dismissed (humorously?) with little justification.

Chapter 4 examines the various classes of participants in the arena: gladiators, beasts, spectators, emperors.⁷ The gladiators are effectively resurrected as possessing human emotions, fears, and sexual allure (although I was unclear why the authors were so quick to dismiss [75] the notion of women gladiators as “more of a feature of modern over-optimistic fantasy than Roman practice”, as there is both literary and visual evidence suggesting that it occurred at least occasionally⁸). The authors explore the paradox that the gladiator had a dismally low social status while at the same time enjoying the popularity of a modern sporting superstar. They conclude that his glamour came from the fact that he “was a crucial cultural symbol at Rome because he prompted thought, debate, and negotiation about Roman values themselves” (84), an observation that holds true for modern audiences too. The beast-fights were presented as a manifestation of Rome’s conquest of the natural world, especially since the beasts themselves were usually imported from conquered territories. The spectators were arranged in a hierarchical manner, with those of higher status lower down and closer to the action so that they too were on view and part of the experience of spectacle. The chapter ends by emphasizing that some Romans did question the bloody events that had become so integrated into their culture, but often the aspects of the events they questioned, and their reasons for questioning them, were different from our own. This brings us back nicely to one of the questions posed in chapt. 1.

Chapter 5 (“Bricks and mortar”) deals with the building itself. Unfortunately, the major advances in study of the Colosseum made in the last decade are nowhere to be found in the main text (relevant citations are, however, noted in the bibliographical discussion at the end). The recent work includes studies of the hydrology and geology of the site, detailed analysis of the arena substructures (including the dating of different phases and reconstruction of the animal lifts), analysis of the different phases of the superstructure, documentation of the drainage system and the fountains within the building, excavations within the floors of the superstructure, and documentation of the walls that gives a clearer understanding of the building’s later reuse. I understand from colleagues that Hopkins was enthusiastically pursuing the new findings, and one suspects that this part of the book is the one that suffered most from his passing. The chapter begins by explaining that the building consists of a puzzle of different phases, both

⁶ M. Junkelmann, “*Familia gladiatoria*: the heroes of the amphitheatre,” in Köhne and Ewigleben (supra n.4) 38-45.

⁷ Some of the discussions presented in this section are versions of the first chapter of K. Hopkins, *Death and renewal* (Cambridge 1983) 1-30.

⁸ D. Briquel, “Les femmes gladiateurs: examen du dossier,” *Ktèma* 17 (1992) 47-53; T. Wiedemann, *Emperors and gladiators* (London 1992) 112; K. Coleman, “*Missio* at Halicarnassus,” *HSCP* 100 (2000) 487-500; S. Brunet, “Female and dwarf gladiators,” *Mouseion* 3.4 (2004) 145-70.

ancient and post-antique. One of the first major destructive episodes in its history was a fire resulting from lightning in the summer of 217 which, according to Dio Cassius (79.25.2-3), caused much of the building to be ruined to such an extent that it was unused for many years. Hopkins and Beard assert "it has proved difficult to identify exactly the third century repairs or their extent" and then indicate that "the most recent attempt ... has suggested that one section of the main outer wall of the building ... actually dates from the rebuild in the third century". This "recent attempt" refers to my own article in *JRA* 11 (1998), where I indicate precisely which parts of the superstructure were rebuilt and how one can go about identifying them.⁹ In the arena substructures, even more radical reconstructions exist, as sorted out by H.-J. Beste and others.¹⁰ The results indicate that the way in which the shows were put on changed over time with each new reconstruction. The early phase included counterbalanced ramps that could have popped scenery, men and animals up onto the arena floor; later phases employed an elevator system that probably used cages of some kind raised by pulleys and capstans. In spite of these recent findings, Hopkins and Beard conclude (123) that distinguishing one phase from another is difficult "even for experts (though few like to admit it)". Thus, the reader is left with the impression that we tend to make things up. In passing over any discussion of the recent advances in the phasing of the building, an opportunity has been lost to show readers how to go about *looking* at the Colosseum. The rest of the chapter, which deals with earlier evidence, resumes with a good description and explanation of the various parts of the superstructure, including decoration, entrances, routes to different seating areas, and protective devices around the arena to keep the senators seated in the lowest rows from harm.

One of the most common questions asked about the Colosseum concerns the flooding of the arena for mock naval battles. Given the incredible hold that this issue has on the modern imagination, the cursory treatment of the new findings is surprising. The problem arises from an apparent conflict between the archaeological remains and the literary sources. From Dio Cassius (66.25.4) and Suetonius (*Dom.* 4.1) we hear of naval battles put on in the Colosseum by both Titus and Domitian, yet when one looks at the excavated arena today it is filled with brick and masonry walls that would have impeded such activity. In addition to sorting out the phases of the existing permanent structures (see above), H.-J. Beste has revealed evidence that the first phase of the arena consisted of a removable wooden floor that could be disassembled when necessary, much like temporary bleachers.¹¹ Such a system would have allowed the possibility of flooding for shows in the early years of the building's history. Once the permanent walls were built a decade or more later, the flooding could no longer have occurred; indeed, there is no reference to the mock battles after the time of Domitian. This recent study is alluded to, but the conclusion implies that the "modern orthodoxy" has resulted in a "compromise" solution between the literary and archaeological evidence that has been "massaged" to make it fit. The choice of words leaves the reader doubting the veracity of the scenario, while the conclusion leaves little doubt as to the authors' opinion when they note that "for all the up to date careful analysis and new discoveries ... we still do not know" (141). Maybe not, but we know much more than the reader of this book has been led to believe.

The other question regarding the flooding of the arena has been the source of all the water needed to fill it. The only suggestion mentioned involves harnessing backflow from the Tiber that would have brought loads of sewage with it into the arena. With this, the section on the flooding ends with an observation (141-42) on the contrast between the imagery of floating sewage and that of the "lavish and luxurious spectacle" painted by Martial. The sewage idea presumably(?) comes from misunderstanding a comment by L. Lombardi (a hydraulic geologist),

⁹ L. C. Lancaster, "Reconstructing the restoration of the Colosseum after the fire of 217," *JRA* 11 (1998) 146-74.

¹⁰ H.-J. Beste, "The construction and phases of development of the wooden arena flooring of the Colosseum," *JRA* 13 (2000) 79-92, id., "I sotterranei del Colosseo: impianto, trasformazioni e funzionamento," in La Regina (supra n.4) 277-99, and several articles in R. Rea (ed.), *Rota Colisei. La valle del Colosseo attraverso i secoli* (Milan 2002).

¹¹ R. Rea et al., "Sotterranei del Colosseo. Ricerca preliminare al progetto di ricostruzione del piano dell'arena," *RömMitt* 107 (2000) 311-40.

that during times of natural flooding the water from the Tiber could back up into Colosseum via its drainage system, bringing with it sewage; however, Lombardi's proposal for the *deliberate* flooding of the arena is that the water was supplied by the Neronian branch of the Aqua Claudia, which had also furnished the water for Nero's lake.¹² This solution is never mentioned in the discussion: the selective use of the evidence is unjust, depriving the reader of information that the general public is eager to discover.

The chapter ends with a discussion of the building's design and construction that effectively emphasizes the importance of pre-planning and design as well as the scale of the enterprise.¹³ However, the descriptions of the design as consisting of "concentric circles" (127) and "circular corridors" (128) is a misnomer worth pointing out. Amphitheaters are elongated structures designed around either an ellipse or an oval, both of which are geometrically much more complicated to lay out than a circle. Another critical misconception in this section is the notion (142) that large public building projects like the Colosseum were made possible by the "vast quantities of slave labor". This belief was debunked in 1980 by P. A. Brunt, whose argument has been developed further in recent years by numerous scholars.¹⁴ The fundamental assumption of the 'slave labor proposal' is that such large projects were possible because of the State's access to a labor force free of charge. Evidence from literary, legal, and epigraphic sources indicates that large public projects were typically built by private contractors, *redemptores*, who took jobs for profit. These contractors had crews that could have been made up of a variety of different classes (free born, slaves, manumitted slaves, or any combination of those). Regardless of the status of the workers on site, someone was paying for this labor, and that in turn provided a means of social advancement for the lower rungs of society. J. DeLaine's study of the economics of building the Baths of Caracalla has demonstrated the important effect that such large projects had on the economic health of the city precisely because it did employ so many of the working poor.¹⁵ With this in mind, the rather creative way of ending the chapter with an estimate from a surveying firm on the modern cost of building the Colosseum's foundations alone is even more telling: a whopping £28.5 million (or roughly \$57 million).

The book ends (chapt. 6) with a look at the afterlife of the Colosseum, including the end of the spectacles and the slow disintegration of the building as some parts were re-used as mediæval fortress-palaces and others as quarries for Papal building projects. Hopkins and Beard deliver a refreshing reminder of the absence of direct evidence for Christians being martyred here for their beliefs before Christianity was officially sanctioned. This is not to say that the Colosseum never was the venue, but no contemporary sources confirm it (though lots of later sources claim it); much of this tradition derives from the Renaissance when humanists began to study classical texts and to learn more about the amphitheater, which then began to be asso-

12 L. Lombardi, "Il sistema idraulico del Colosseo," in A. Gabucci (ed.), *Il Colosseo* (Milan 1999) 234-36. Recent geological and archaeological investigations have shown that in antiquity the groundwater was lower than now so that even the *stagnum* of Nero had to be filled artificially rather than by natural aquifers: C. Panella, "La valle del Colosseo prima del Colosseo e la Meta Sudans," in *La Regina* (supra n.5) 51 and 60-62; R. Funicello, *La geologia di Roma. Il centro storico*, 1 (Rome 1995) 927-37; R. Funicello, L. Lombardi, and F. Marra, "La geologia della Valle dell'Anfiteatro," in *Rea* (supra n.10) 161-67.

13 For further discussion of design and construction methods used, see M. Wilson Jones, "Designing amphitheatres," *RömMitt* 100 (1993) 398-401, and my own work in R. Rea, H.-J. Beste, and L. C. Lancaster, "Il cantiere del Colosseo," *RömMitt* 109 (2002) 361-74 and "The process of building the Colosseum: the site, materials, and construction techniques," *JRA* 18 (2005) 57-82.

14 P. A. Brunt, "Free labour and public works at Rome," *JRS* 70 (1980) 81-100; S. D. Martin, *The Roman jurists and the organization of private building in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (Coll. Latomus 204, 1989) 57-72; J. C. Anderson, *Roman architecture and society* (Baltimore, MD 1997) 119-26; L. C. Lancaster, "Building Trajan's Markets," *AJA* 102 (1998) 305-8; J. DeLaine, "Building the Eternal City: the construction industry of Imperial Rome," in J. Coulston and H. Dodge (edd.), *Ancient Rome: the archaeology of the eternal city* (Oxford 2000) 120-23.

15 J. DeLaine, *The Baths of Caracalla: a study in the design, construction, and economics of large-scale building projects in Imperial Rome* (*JRA Suppl.* 25, 1997) 207-24.

ciated with the saints so that the monument became a symbol of Christian faith and fortitude (164-71). As the authors point out at the beginning (19-20), a lovely irony is that this symbol of the Roman penchant for viewing death has been re-appropriated by those lobbying against the death penalty, including the Pope, the city of Rome, and Amnesty International, by lighting it up every time a death sentence is commuted. The chapter ends with one of the more unusual aspects of the Colosseum: before it was cleared in 1870, it was the subject of a number of botanical works in which as many as 420 plant varieties present in the Colosseum were documented.

Appendices include a section giving advice on how to visit the Colosseum, including hints on the best way to get tickets and to avoid the queues, on finding the toilets, and on what to look for once one is there. Finally, in lieu of notes, there is a very good, up-to-date bibliographic essay divided according to chapter. Given the popular nature of the book, the loss of notes in favor of the bibliographic essay is understandable, but it is frustrating if one wants to read more about the ideas of the anonymous scholars who are subjected to such barbed criticisms.

Would I recommend this book? To friends and family traveling to Rome I would do so without hesitation, for it gives an engaging introduction to the Colosseum and why it matters. For a general undergraduate course in humanities, it would be useful in spite of my criticisms — the good probably outweighs the bad. For an undergraduate course in archaeology or art history, it is not appropriate because of the inaccurate way in which the methodologies used to interpret material culture are treated. Paradoxically, however, the book could be used to advantage in a postgraduate seminar. It raises questions that need to be addressed as we try to show the world at large that what we do is worthwhile:

- How does one present ideas to a general audience without oversimplifying, on the one hand, and overburdening with detail, on the other?
- What constitutes responsible presentation of opposing ideas in publications if no footnotes are present?
- At what point does irreverent humor move into pandering to public preconceptions?
- How does one handle in a public forum the clash of disciplines within classical scholarship?

I do not attempt to supply the answers, but the book made me think about the questions, and that in itself is worthwhile.

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