

Rethinking the Triumph

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MARY BEARD, *THE ROMAN TRIUMPH* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University, Cambridge MA 2007). Pp. 434, figs. 43. ISBN 978-0-674-02613-0. \$29.95.

Mary Beard's eagerly awaited book on the Roman triumph advertises itself from the start as a manifesto (5):

I ... try to grapple with some of the biggest questions in the understanding of ancient ritual in general and of the triumph in particular, that despite centuries of inspiring work still get fudged or passed by. In fact, the approach that I follow ... is intended to challenge many of the ways Roman ritual culture is studied, and the spurious certainties and prejudices that dog it.

And it is not just an argument among professional academic colleagues (5):

This book is intended not only for those who are already expert in ancient Roman culture but also for those who wish to discover it. ... I hope to convey to non-specialists the intellectual pleasure — and the sheer fun — of making sense of the ancient world from the complex layers of different kinds of evidence that we have.

Scholars often claim that their work will shift our ways of thinking about a subject; they frequently aspire to write with equal accessibility for fellow-scholars and for the general reader. It is rare for either aim to be achieved, but Beard, impressively, succeeds in both.

Readers of *JRA* may remember a very ambivalent response to K. Hopkins' and Beard's short book on the Colosseum, in which the reviewer ended by asking "what constitutes responsible presentation of opposing ideas in publications if no footnotes are present?", and "at what point does irreverent humor move into pandering to public preconceptions?"¹ No such reservations would be appropriate to *The Roman triumph*. There are footnotes in abundance, and all the issues and arguments are set out with exemplary clarity. One of Beard's intellectual virtues is her capacity to look at scholarship from the outside, explaining not only the nature of the ancient evidence but the prejudices and preconceptions of those who draw conclusions from it. It seems to me that what makes this book so successful is its combination of traditionally erudite scholarship with lively exposition and a healthily suspicious attitude to confidently expressed dogmas.

The first chapter is the closest the author gets to providing a straight description of 'the Roman triumph'. It is not, of course, a composite picture of a generic ritual, but an account of the multifarious evidence for one particular triumph: Pompey's in 61 B.C. More general considerations follow, in a chapter on 'The impact of the triumph' which spells out the main target of the author's attack (57):

Given the richness of triumphal culture at Rome and in surviving Roman literature, it is surprising that so much attention has been devoted to the origins and earliest phases of the ceremony in that misty period of Roman prehistory before we have any contemporary literary evidence at all, and only the most controversial of archaeological traces; and that so little attention, by comparison, has been devoted to the triumph in periods of which we know much more and where we can hope to see, if not 'how it actually happened', then at least how it was recorded, remembered, imagined, debated, and discussed.

Chapter 3, 'Constructions and reconstructions', casts a sceptical eye on some of the clichés of modern scholarship on the triumph — the slave with his apotropaic formula, the route of the procession, the 'Porta Triumphalis' (on which more below) — before Beard settles down to her main agenda, using different aspects of the triumph as ways of thinking more widely about Roman culture and ideology, in chapters on the captives, the parade of the spoils of war, the commander in his chariot, the rules regulating who could triumph, the banquets and games that went with it, and so on. Only in the concluding chapter, once the reader has been thoroughly immersed in the complexity and significance of it all, does she offer a tentative history of the triumph, characteristically keeping "the myth of origins" to almost the end.

¹ L. C. Lancaster, "The Colosseum for the general public," *JRA* 20 (2007) 454-59, at 459.

Full of interesting information and important arguments, Beard's book is immediately the standard work on the subject.² I have two points to make, not in disagreement but in reaction to her stimulating argument.

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When Caesar was driving past Velabrum in his triumph of 46 B.C., the axle of his chariot broke. Beard translates *Velabrum praetervehens* as 'riding through the Velabrum' (102, 104), but notes that the participle ought to mean 'riding past'. Quite so: that's what it does mean. Unusually, Beard has here accepted a groundless dogma, that "the Velabrum" was "the valley between the Capitoline and the Palatine that joins the Forum to the Forum Boarium" (103). In fact, Velabrum was the name of a place, probably a piazza, on the street that led from the Forum to the Circus Maximus;³ there is no ancient authority for the common modern misuse of it to mean the whole valley. So when she uses the passage to cast doubt on the traditional idea that the 'triumphal route' went up one side of the valley (*vicus Iugarius*) and down the other (*vicus Tuscus*), she has made her argument unnecessarily vulnerable (104):

A glance at the map would suggest that Caesar was not going *through* or *down* the Velabrum at all but *skirting* or going *past* it — keeping it on his left, in other words — as he made straight (let's suppose) from the Campus Martius across the Forum Boarium to the Circus Maximus.

Exactly. But at this point "the valley between the Capitoline and the Palatine" was nearly 300 m wide; Suetonius' phrase would be implausibly vague if that were what he was referring to. It wasn't: he was referring to a precise toponym, between the Forum Boarium and the *vicus Tuscus*, roughly where S. Giorgio in Velabro preserves the ancient name.

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In his account of the triumph of Vespasian and Titus in A.D. 71, Josephus refers to the 'triumphal gate', "a monument that has been the subject of more pages of learned dispute than any other part of the triumphal route" (96). The problem is that Josephus (*BJ* 7.123-31) clearly places it north of the theatres of Pompey, Balbus and Marcellus: after early-morning prayers at the Portico of Octavia, Vespasian

went back to the gate which took its name from the fact that triumphs always pass through it. Here he and Titus first had a bite to eat, then, putting on their triumphal dress and sacrificing to the gods whose statues are set up by the gate, they set off the triumphal procession, riding out through the theatres so that the crowds had a better view (94).

Beard offers no solution, beyond observing that "this was not a traditional triumph, following the ancient rules, at all" (100). Well, it depends what you mean by "traditional". Wherever the gate was, Josephus' informants in Rome must have believed that it was the one through which triumphs "always" passed. But if we do as Beard recommends and remember that nearly all our evidence describes post-Republican conditions, we can see that their idea of 'always' might just mean 'always in living memory'.

By the late 1st c. A.D., the city gates were no longer gates, and the city wall no longer a recognisable circuit wall.⁴ The old gates had been converted into monumental arches,⁵ and the development of the aqueduct system created other such pseudo-gates, which had no connection with the old defences at all; the Porta Maggiore is the best surviving example. In 19 B.C. Marcus Agrippa had brought the Aqua Virgo to the Campus Martius,⁶ with an arch over the Via

² There are a few trivial slips: 55 B.C. was Pompey's second consulship, not his third (28); Verrius Flaccus' calendar was at Praeneste, not "Praenestae" (64, 66); D. is for Decimus, not Decius (217); "the Cerveteri" (306) sound like a people, not an Italian town.

³ Plut., *Romulus* 5.5, on the tomb of Acca Larentia (kale'tai dε nĕn 1 tōpow BÆlauron); see T. P. Wiseman, "Where was the *porta Romanula*?" *PBSR* 75 (2007) 231-37, at 233.

⁴ Dion. Hal. 4.13.5 (wall lost among buildings); Cic., *Att.* 7.3.9 (Porta Flumentana), *SC de Pisone patre* 106 (Porta Fontinalis) for gates evidently incorporated into private properties.

⁵ *CIL* VI 1384 (Porta Caelimontana, A.D. 10), 1385 (Porta Trigemina, A.D. 2); F. Coarelli, *Il Foro Boario* (Rome 1988) 42-50.

⁶ Frontin., *De aquis* 1.10 (date), 1.22 (position); cf. Ovid, *Fasti* 1.463-64.

Flaminia about 150 m south of Piazza Colonna. We know from a 17th-c. eye-witness what the aqueduct looked like:⁷

The piers were faced with marble slabs on the outside, with *antae* of Corinthian columns at the side: while the pilasters were a little drawn back (recessed), and were also faced with marble. The epistyles, friezes and cornices were of marble, while statues stood, I think, on the fluted marble columns. In the interior the piers were strengthened with travertine, with Doric pilasters supporting the epistyle and the cornice. Above these was brickwork, in which the *specus* was carried: it was about 6 palms high and 3 wide (1.33 x 0.67 m). The arches between the piers were faced with marble.

To a traveller coming from the north it must have looked like a hugely elaborate façade screening the city, with the arch over the road providing a formal entrance. Immediately beyond it were the spectacular buildings with which Pompey, Caesar and Agrippa had transformed the Campus Martius, “as if”, says Strabo (5.3.8), “they wanted to declare the rest of the city a mere accessory”.

The Strabo passage is crucial for our understanding of the topography of the 1st c. He clearly distinguishes two ‘campuses’ (πεδία), one of them a grassy field for equestrian and athletic exercise, the other full of colonnades, theatres and temples. It is clear, I think, that what separated these two distinct areas was the Aqua Virgo, carried at first on arches to feed Agrip-

pa’s Thermae, and then flowing out of the artificial lake along the Euripus to the Tiber.⁸ It is easy to imagine that, under Augustus and afterwards, triumph processions may have formed up on the open Campus to the north and along the Via Flaminia, formally ‘entering the city’ through the arch over the road. That would explain why in A.D. 51 the Senate and People turned the arch into a *monumentum* of Claudius’ conquest of Britain.⁹ What mattered was not so much the ritual line of the *pomerium* as a visibly symbolic city-boundary to mark where the spectacle began.

If that is a plausible explanation of what Vespasian and Titus did in 71, we may perhaps make a guess about circumstances under the Republic. Only one piece of contemporary evidence exists, Cicero’s contemptuous comment (*In Pis.* 55) on L. Piso’s return to Rome in 55 B.C.: *quasi ... ad rem pertineat qua tu porta introieris, modo ne triumphali*. Beard translates: “It doesn’t matter what gate you entered the city by, so long as it wasn’t the triumphal one” (96). But it could equally well be “so long as the gate wasn’t triumphal”, implying that a commander could make his own choice where he entered the city, and which gate was decorated for the triumph.

It is quite possible (to borrow for a moment the author’s habit of scepticism towards received ideas) that the whole notion of a single Porta Triumphalis is a chimaera. It is obvious that the Campus Martius or the Circus Flaminius must have been a good place to form up the procession, but how could space be found for a Porta Triumphalis in the short stretch of wall that already incorporated the Porta Carmentalis? No need. If that site was the commander’s choice, as it was in 187 and 63 B.C.,¹⁰ the Porta Carmentalis would be the triumphal gate for his parade; if he chose to organise the procession somewhere else, it might be (for instance) the Porta Capena or the Porta Collina.

That may be too vertiginous an idea, but it is not far beyond Beard’s own agnostic position (104-5):

The fact is that we cannot map with certainty the route of any individual triumphal procession; still less can we reconstruct ‘the’ triumphal route or even be certain that such a thing existed. No ancient author refers to any such fixed itinerary; the closest we come to that is Josephus’ remark about triumphs ‘always’ passing through the (triumphal) gate.

And that remark is probably evidence for a tradition no more than three generations old.

⁷ Alessandro Donati, *Roma aeterna ac recens* (1638) 292, translated by T. Ashby, *The aqueducts of ancient Rome* (Oxford 1935) 181.

⁸ Strabo passage: T. P. Wiseman, *Roman studies literary and historical* (Liverpool 1987) 161-64. Euripus: F. Coarelli, “Il Campo Marzio occidentale: storia e topografia,” *MEFRA* 89 (1977) 808-14.

⁹ *CIL* VI 40416; E. Rodríguez Almeida, “Arcus Claudii,” in *LTUR* 1 (1993) 85-86.

¹⁰ Liv. 39.5.17, Plut., *Luc.* 37.2.