

The Roman Amphitheatre: From Its Origins to the Colosseum

By Katherine E. Welch. Pp. xxii + 355, figs. 196, pls. 18. Cambridge University Press, New York 2007. \$85. ISBN 978-0-521-809443 (cloth).

London's Roman Amphitheatre: Guildhall Yard, City of London

By Nick Bateman, Carrie Cowan, and Robin Wroe-Brown (Museum of London Archaeology Service Monograph 35). Pp. xviii + 241, b&w figs. 76, color figs. 100, tables 12, plans 11, maps 8, CD-ROM 1. Museum of London Archaeology Service, London 2008. £29.95. ISBN 978-1-901992-71-7 (cloth).

In 2008, the British newspaper *The Independent* published a story titled "After 1,500 Years as a Ruin, Gladiators' Stadium to Be Restored" (3 April 2008). In the piece, the author describes how, at a now-derelict site in Rome, "gladiators and wild animals fought in mortal combat, and the central arena was often flooded so miniature triremes could battle it out for the Romans' delight." That the story concerned the Soprintendenza's plans to restore the site of the Circus Maximus—not the Colosseum—reflects a humorous, if persistent, irony: the circus may have held the greatest audience of any spectacle in ancient Rome, but it is only when repackaged as a "gladiators' stadium" that it can compete for some share of the contemporary imagination.

As Welch discusses at the start of her important monograph on the Roman amphitheater, that imagination has been unhelpfully stoked at times by scholars who wrote about it from a Christian, moralizing register. But a more significant deficit of the scholarship, which her work is expressly intended to correct, is its tendency toward a so-called imperial interpretation of the gladiatorial games: reading backward from the abundant evidence for the amphitheater's operation and distribution

under the High Empire while overlooking the critical (if poorly attested) period of its development under the Middle to Late Republic. By contrast, Welch's book seeks "to consider the amphitheatre building at three critical stages of its architectural history: its origins, its monumentalization as an architectural form, and its canonization as a building type, exploring in detail the social and political contexts of each of these phases" (8). The author lays out her argument in the first half of the book (chs. 1–6), together with an introduction and conclusion; the second half is comprised of an appendix, notes, and bibliography.

Chapter 1 begins with a brief survey of the literary and archaeological evidence for competing theories of the games' origin. Welch departs from the scholarly majority who favor a Campanian root and instead holds that, since the evidence is ambiguous, the question must remain open. Shifting focus to Rome, she refutes the traditional view of the development of Republican arena games—namely, that they gained popularity only in the early to mid first century B.C.E. when they began to shed their purely religious associations as funerary ritual and were exploited for political gain. Instead, she argues that literary sources (esp. Livy),

inscriptions, and wall paintings indicate that the games were indeed popular in Rome at a much earlier date (ca. 200 B.C.E. or before) and that they had a strong military connection from the outset. As a result, she believes that gladiatorial combats, together with other forms of the death penalty in use at this time (e.g., *venationes*, *damnatio ad bestias*), must be understood as linked to a military ideology of discipline and punishment that leaked into the public sphere (cf. S. Phang, *Roman Military Service: Ideologies of Discipline in the Late Republic and Early Principate* [Cambridge 2008] esp. 111 and following).

Chapter 2 reconstructs the physical setting of the games at Rome during the republic. Welch concentrates on the evidence from the Forum Romanum, which is well documented as the regular site of gladiatorial shows until the Augustan era; its form is theorized to have influenced the design of later stone amphitheaters. Welch modifies J.-C. Golvin's theory to suggest that the temporary wooden arenas were oval in shape because they were designed expressly for gladiatorial shows and thus did not include *venationes* (animal hunts), which were usually staged in the Circus Maximus (see G.L. Gregori and P. Sabbatini Tumolesi, "Gladiatori nei circhi?" *ArchCl* 51 [1999–2000] 427–37). In addition, these so-called *spectacula* were constructed of wood and characterized by a functional aesthetic. (Welch's written reconstructions are greatly aided by numerous new conjectural plans, sections, and perspectival views drawn by Stinson.) This leads to a discussion of the evidence for other wooden structures, both theaters and amphitheaters, including the amphitheater recently discovered at Forum Novum. By the later second century B.C.E., these temporary seating constructions had assumed a monumental character.

Chapter 3 considers the cultural and technological processes that drove the amphitheater's geographic spread and its translation from wood to stone. Using the best-preserved and documented republican amphitheater (Pompeii) as a case study, Welch posits a general connection between veteran colonization and amphitheaters in Campania, where the latter first appeared. She considers the importance of gladiatorial combat in the training of soldiers from the late second century B.C.E. onward and how such training would have encouraged the Sullan veterans at Pompeii and elsewhere to be particularly receptive to having a permanent arena. (Her discussion of the impact of

the veteran settlement at Pompeii needs revision, however, in light of the new findings of a pre-Sullan municipium there; see E. Bispham, *From Asculum to Actium: The Municipalization of Italy from the Social War to Augustus* [Oxford 2007].) She further speculates that Pompeii's amphitheater may have originally been designed together with the Palestra Grande and that the former may have featured displays by the *iuvenes* (youth), a thesis that leads to an interesting digression on elite performances (see G. Horsmann, "Public Performances by Senators and Knights and the Moral Legislation of Augustus," in J. Nelis-Clément and J.-M. Roddaz, eds., *Le cirque romain et son image* [Bordeaux 2008] 475–80). The similar, seemingly styleless appearance and the identical terminology (*spectacula*) for, and dimensions of, the structures in both Rome and Pompeii are cited in support of the theory that the former was the prototype for the latter. Welch suggests the fame that had accrued to the temporary amphitheater in the Forum Romanum would explain the sudden appearance and wide-scale distribution of the permanent type in Italian towns with close ties to Rome. One wonders, however, how this building can be seen as "a particularly Roman architectural presence" (my emphasis) if Rome itself lacked a permanent one until the Augustan period.

Chapter 4 focuses on the amphitheater of Statilius Taurus, the first permanent structure of its kind at Rome. Welch argues that it was likely constructed of wood and stone and located in the area of modern Monte de' Cenci. (On the latter identification, however, see P.L. Tucci, "L'entrata di un magazzino romano sotto la chiesa di San Tommaso ai Cenci," *MEFRA* 108 [1996] 747–70; K. Coleman, "Euergetism in Its Place: Where Was the Amphitheatre in Augustan Rome?" in K. Lomas and T. Cornell, eds., *"Bread and Circuses": Euergetism and Municipal Patronage in Roman Italy* [London 2003] 61–88. Neither appears in Welch's bibliography.) She believes that Taurus' amphitheater served as the template for a so-called civic type that was constructed in Italy and the western provinces from the Augustan period onward and that it grew up alongside the old military one (e.g., at Pompeii). She explains the use of the Tuscan order in the facades of Augustan amphitheaters as a conscious, patriotic nod toward Italian tradition.

Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of the Colosseum's impressive engineering, including information yielded by recent work there,

especially that of Beste (see also “Foundations and Wall Structures in the Basement of the Colosseum in Rome,” in S. Huerta Fernández, ed., *Proceedings of the First International Congress on Construction History: Madrid, 20th–24th January 2003*. Vol. 1 [Madrid 2003] 373–80). Continuing her discussion of the language of amphitheater facades from the previous chapter, Welch notes that the application of Greek orders and statues indicates an elevation of the building type’s status within the Roman architectural hierarchy in the mid to later first century C.E. She then turns to the so-called fabulous executions that were held there as another example of the way in which Romans refashioned an esteemed Greek template. Welch sees both the substitution of the Greek Doric order with the Italian Tuscan and the reformulation of Greek dramas as Roman morality tales as stemming from a common political impulse, partly anti-Neronian in origin (on Nero as a Hellenizing threat, cf. E. Flaig, “Gladiatorial Games: Ritual and Political Consensus,” in R. Roth and J. Keller, eds., *Roman by Integration: Dimensions of Group Identity in Material Culture and Text*. *JRA* Suppl. 66 [Portsmouth, R.I. 2007] 83–92). In the final section, she argues that the ancient sources show such hostility toward the Domus Aurea because Nero seized land previously owned by the elite and turned it over to the public, at least periodically, for popular entertainment (cf. P.J.E. Davies, “‘What Worse Than Nero, What Better Than His Baths?’ *Damnatio Memoriae* and Roman Architecture,” in E.R. Varner, ed., *From Caligula to Constantine: Tyranny and Transformation in Roman Portraiture* [Atlanta 2001] 27–44, not listed in Welch’s bibliography). By contrast, the Colosseum symbolically restored balance to the social and cultural order through its reinstatement of a Roman pecking order (seating) and its reframing of the Greek tradition (drama, art).

Chapter 6 explores how the residents of Athens and Corinth responded differently to staging the games (e.g., using an existing theater vs. building an amphitheater, or both) and how these responses reflect varying degrees of Greek rapprochement with the Roman presence. This short, illuminating chapter should be read alongside Golden’s recent study (“Greek Games and Gladiators,” in M. Golden, ed., *Greek Sport and Social Status* [Austin 2008] 68–104).

A brief concluding chapter is followed by an appendix on 19 amphitheaters of republican date, where Welch discusses her rationale

for selecting these sites and provides detailed information (description, materials, remains, dimensions, date, civic status, and bibliography) as well as plans and photographs of each. Welch’s 74-page appendix is in itself a major contribution to scholarship and should be used with the illustrated catalogue of arena sites in Tosi’s massive work (G. Tosi, ed., *Gli edifici per Spettacoli nell’Italia romana* [Rome 2003], not listed in her bibliography).

The book contains few errors and is lavishly produced with more than 200 illustrations. The author writes with remarkable clarity and brevity, though this reviewer wishes that certain issues had received fuller consideration in light of current research (e.g., the staging of *naumachiae* (naval battles) in the Colosseum; see F. Garello, “Sport or Showbiz? The *Naumachiae* at Imperial Rome,” in S. Bell and G. Davies, eds., *Games and Festivals in Classical Antiquity: Proceedings of the Conference Held in Edinburgh 10–12 July 2000* [Oxford 2004] 115–24, not cited in Welch’s bibliography). All the ancient sources are translated, and technical terms are helpfully glossed throughout; the meanings of some of these (e.g., *porta triumphalis*), however, are arguably not as clear-cut as Welch presents (see T. Hufschmid, *Amphitheatrum in Provincia et Italia: Architektur und Nutzung römischer Amphitheater von Augusta Raurica bis Puteoli* [Augsburg 2009] esp. 1:23 and following). Finally, the author fails to acknowledge that some of the ideas she brings together here (e.g., on the forum and on Athens) were previously published elsewhere. These quibbles aside, Welch’s monograph is a bold work that will shape the field of amphitheater studies for a long time to come.

Welch’s volume, along with a volume by Wilmott (*The Roman Amphitheatre in Britain* [Stroud 2008]), unfortunately appeared too late to be consulted extensively before the publication of the second volume under review here, a major monograph by Bateman et al. on the excavations at London’s Roman amphitheater. Broken into four sections (introduction, the archaeological sequence, thematic aspects, specialist appendices), this book offers a thorough history of the site from its late first-century foundation and early second-century rebuilding to its fourth-century abandonment. The volume provides a huge amount of data (with additional tables on a CD-ROM) and is clearly intended for a specialist audience. However, it is presented in such a clear and visually appealing format (including numer-

ous reconstructive bird's-eye views in color) that it is likely to attract a broader readership. I found the sections that reconstruct the amphitheater's architecture as well as its sponsors and spectators—including evidence specific to the presence of women—to be particularly insightful. So while the results of this excavation remain to be integrated into the larger history of the amphitheater in the Roman world, that task has been made all the easier—even enjoyable—by the authors of this dense yet accessible work.

Seen together, these two books fill significant gaps in the study of the Roman amphitheater—its republican origins and imperial canonization in Italy and its imperial develop-

ment in London, respectively. Neither book shies away from speculation, but each is always informed by the careful synthesis and sober analysis of a wealth of data. We are, in short, a long way from the subjective, partial tone of early work and a lot closer to achieving an objective, holistic understanding of this quintessentially Roman architectural landmark and cultural institution.

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