Chapter 1

# Approaching Roman Spectacle

'*Panem et circenses*', bread and circuses, were the two things for which, according to the satirist Juvenal, the Roman mob yearned. The supply of food to the masses in Rome was always a political issue as well as a life-giving one. Rome flirted with famine, and in the later Republic this became a powerful bargaining chip in the constant political negotiations between politicians and voters. In the same way, public spectacles, the origins of which lay in religious festivals and the honouring of the dead, became a powerful mode of communication with Rome's population. They also became a potent symbol of Rome's place in the world. The plethora of buildings for public entertainment which survive across the empire stand as testament to its importance in Roman society generally, and to the willingness on the part of the emperors and local elites to provide fitting venues for a range of displays.

The study of Roman spectacle has long fascinated modern scholars and the general public alike, and it presents controversial and disturbing challenges to a modern understanding of the Roman world. However, new research and major discoveries are providing new insights into the subject and encouraging radical re-evaluation of some of our long-held views. Aside from the entertainment buildings themselves, the evidence available for the study of Roman spectacle is rich and geographically varied. It would also be a mistake to assume that provision of spectacles at Rome was the same as across the empire, or that there were not very significant regional variations.

## Archaeological evidence

Very few entertainment buildings have been fully excavated and properly published. This is unsurprising considering the size of such structures, but it has meant that their interpretation is often problematic. The venues themselves provide the largest and most obvious evidence for Roman spectacle, and there have been some exciting new discoveries in this area in the last two decades. For example, an amphitheatre was finally identified and excavated in the late 1980s and 1990s in London. In 2004, the first known circus in Roman Britain was discovered at Colchester. The

which comes to be associated in particular with gladiatorial displays was not commonly used until the first century AD when the building type itself became more physically defined. The earliest datable permanent amphitheatre is at Pompeii, and in the dedicatory inscription (*CIL* 10.852, 70-65 BC) it is called a '*spectacula*', a word usually used for the entertainments themselves. Many terms are similar in both Greek and Latin and therefore pretty much interchangeable without any misunderstanding. However, this is not the case with the Latin 'circus' and Greek 'hippodrome'. They mean essentially the same thing, a venue for various types of equestrian events, in particular chariot racing, but there is a modern tendency to use one for the Latin West and the other for the Greek East as if they indicate two different types of building.

**Literary sources**

Literary evidence is particularly important for the Republic, a period for which there is less physical evidence, and often provides the context for specific types of display. However, the bias is very much towards spectacles staged in the city of Rome, and there was almost certainly an emphasis on the really important and lavish displays; the written sources are far less informative about entertainments in the wider Roman world. Indeed, there must have been many much smaller events in Rome itself that just did not make it into the headlines, let alone elsewhere in the provinces.

There are several literary works which provide more detailed accounts of aspects of Roman spectacle. For example, the first book of Martial's epigrams, often referred to as the *Book on Spectacles* (*Liber Spectaculorum or Liber de Spectaculis*), seems to have commemorated Titus' inauguration of the Flavian Amphitheatre, the Colosseum, in AD 80. The associated games lasted for 100 days and included not only gladiators and chariot races, but also staged battles and executions, all for the delectation of the crowd and the glory of the emperor. In his work of poetry, Martial aimed to provide a glowing account of the emperor and his generosity. As such, although a tremendously valuable source, the work cannot be taken as an accurate, historical account.

Tertullian's work, *On Spectacles* (*De Spectaculis*), provides a Christian commentary on Roman spectacle in the late second/early third century AD. He found little to favour, and for the modern scholar the work's great worth is in its incidental references and the information that can be gleaned as Tertullian rages against pagan idolatry.

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1. Ephesus. Tombstone of the gladiator whose name can be translated as Black Cyril, with victor's palm branch.

social status, and thus loss of status, for any reason, meant being considered outside society with the loss of a number of public rights. This was *infamia*, originally something suffered by an individual as a result of their own wrong-doing, and it would be recorded in the census register of citizens. By the end of the second century BC, anyone who had fought in the arena or appeared on the stage was tainted with *infamia*, creating the paradox that is so clear in the context of gladiators: such people provided important social activities, and came to be much acclaimed and celebrated by the crowd, yet were also viewed with contempt by society as a whole.

**Epigraphic evidence**

There is a wealth of epigraphic evidence that supplies further information. Tombstones, for example, can provide the names of performers, their career details, their life-span and some indication of access to wealth; the choice to set up a tombstone was an expensive business for the deceased's estate or heirs (Fig. 1). Other epigraphic material gives details of the games staged, those responsible for them (the *editor*), and sometimes even including detailed costings. There are also records from gladiatorial schools (*ludi*) which supply details of individual names and fighting styles, as well as a record of a gladiator's career. Less formal in nature is the invaluable material represented by the graffiti from Pompeii, sometimes accompanied by scratched images (see Figs 9 and 10). Painted posters advertising future attractions often gave details of the different 'acts', and in several cases attracted spectators by the promise of awnings (*vela* or *velaria*) to shade the audience from the sun. An important group records the outcome of individual fights (sometimes accompanied by a visual record), while others allow insights into spectator attitudes. For example, a Thracian gladiator, Celadus, was the subject of a number of scribblings, and in many of them he was described as a 'girl's heart-throb'; another, Crescens, was described as the 'Netter of young girls by night', presumably a pun on his fighting style as a *retiarius* (*CIL* 4.4342, 4.4345).

**Iconographic evidence**

Iconographic evidence relating to Roman spectacle is immensely varied in media and rich in detail, ranging from mosaics and wall-paintings to sculptural reliefs (sometimes accompanied by inscriptions) and representations on coins, lamps and pots. When taken together, these provide a surprisingly accurate visual record of dress, equipment and weaponry, fighting styles and the range of animals involved, as well as the physical environment of the spectacles. Mosaics such as the Zliten mosaic from the Villa Dar Buc Ammera near Lepcis Magna (Libya) (Fig. 2) and the Villa Borghese mosaic from Rome are reminders that Roman spectacle was not a simple affair, that going to the games meant a programme of varied visual spectacles (for the audience), keen appreciation of the performers' skills, and marvellous exotic beasts.

**Reconstruction and re-enactment**

Unsurprisingly, the recent rise in popularity of historical re-enactment has also embraced Roman spectacle. Such work, based on the archaeological and iconographic evidence, allows practical testing of current theories. Obviously not all elements can be simulated, such as animal fights and

2. *Opus sectile* and mosaic floor from the Villa Dar Buc Ammera, Zliten, near Lepcis Magna (Libya).

executions, but many other aspects of these displays can be explored. Notably Marcus Junkelmann, a German re-enactor, after being involved in the reconstruction of Roman military equipment for many years, turned to exploring the equipment and fighting styles of different gladiators. Even if some scholars do not agree with all his interpretations, this kind of work helps to provide the evidence with a physicality that would otherwise be lacking. Equally, in the area of circus racing, reconstructions of the chariots have provided greater understanding of the practicalities of races and the differences between Greek and Roman forms. Even Hollywood has played a part in this process, albeit often with a skewed view, creating its own 'Roman' culture.

**Scientific study**

The recovery of human remains from individuals who took part in Roman spectacles is extremely rare. Some skeletons from excavations in London, Rome, Trier in Germany and Patras in Greece have been identified as those of arena fighters, but the evidence raises major doubts. In 1993, a spectacular find of a gladiator-graveyard was made at Ephesus in Turkey, identified by the conjunction of burials with gladiatorial gravestones. The subsequent scientific study of the associated human individuals has challenged long-held views and expanded knowledge, particularly concerning fighting styles, training, dietary regimes and elements of social community.

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