

Spectacle and ideology in the relief decorations of the *Anfiteatro Campano* at Capua

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The *Anfiteatro Campano* at Capua (fig. 1), with its protome busts on the entrance keystones, freestanding statues in the arcade of the façade, and carved marble balustrades and figural relief panels, provides the best-preserved decorative program from any Roman amphitheater. This material is contemporary, dating to the second quarter of the 2nd c. A.D., and almost certainly conceived of as a decorative whole. This article analyzes and contextualizes the largest extant component of its decoration, the 40 figural relief balustrades from the interior, by their subjects and according to the ideological statements they project. It concludes that a majority of the reliefs are mythological, that they seem to reference particular activities within the amphitheater, and that subsidiary figures, landscape elements and compositional details show that the myths are not the canonical Greek accounts, but re-enactments occurring in the arena perhaps in the context of *venationes* and prisoner executions, many of them *ad bestias*. In combination with the reliefs of processions and other rituals that occurred outside the amphitheater, the sculptures create a self-referential decoration for the building. The imagery serves both to remind viewers of events in the mythical past and to reinforce the activities that took place in a set of games while strengthening Roman values of order, *pietas* and *virtus* through the ritualized acts of violence committed on a variety of human and animal outsiders.

I begin with a brief synopsis of the history and construction of the amphitheater, considering especially the evidence for the date of the sculptural program.

Anfiteatro Campano: history and construction

Gladiatorial combat and spectacle entertainment had a long history at Capua. Its gladiatorial schools were the premier ones of Italy. Some modern scholars place the origins of gladiatorial combat at Capua, with its mix of Etruscan and Samnite influences.¹ The origins of the amphitheater itself as a building type are often set in this region.² The *Anfiteatro Campano*, the second amphitheater built at the city, was probably begun under Domitian during a time of extensive construction in the region with new amphitheaters at Puteoli and Cumae, the extension of the Via Appia, new temples to the deified Flavian emperors, and a vast array of public buildings.³ The *Anfiteatro Campano* was second in size (167 x 137 m) and proportional to the Colosseum, on which it was clearly modeled; for example, they are the only amphitheaters that share double peripheral galleries.⁴ Each has 80 arched entrances and identical façades, with arched openings on the second and third levels directly above the ground-level entrances. Although only the two lower storeys at Capua are well preserved, the building originally had three full storeys as well as an attic level. The first storey is articulated by Tuscan columns, the second and third probably by attached half- or full Ionic and Corinthian columns, as on the Colosseum. The openings in the arcade are characterized by highly articulated impostes that project from the piers (fig. 1). The attic storey is the least understood component, but it included windows as well as some type of supports for the awning. The form of the façade is critical for identifying subjects and interpreting the reliefs to be considered here.

1 Jacobelli (2003, 5-6) cites the standard interpretation and evidence, both literary and artistic.

2 Etienne 1965, 213-20. See also Welch 2007, chapt. 2.

3 The bibliography of Domitianic construction in N Campania is vast. For Cumae, see Caputo 1996, 169 on the amphitheater, 116 on the Via Domitiana, 153-58 on the temple of the imperial cult in the Forum; Fears (1975, 1-21) also explores these buildings. For literary accounts and archaeological finds, see D'Arms 1970, 116. Statius (*Silv.* 4.3.61-66) celebrates much of Domitian's construction efforts including the Via Domitiana, which extended the Via Appia to Cumae.

4 Golvin 1988, 204; Hönlle and Henze 1981, 142. The first to attribute a Flavian date to the amphitheater was S. De Caro (in De Caro and Greco 1981, 216-17); beforehand it was considered Augustan (Pesce 1941, 6).