

## Explaining the arena: did the Romans 'need' gladiators?

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THOMAS WIEDEMANN, *EMPERORS AND GLADIATORS* (Routledge, New York 1992). Pp. xvii + 198, 17 figs. ISBN 0-41 5-00005-X. £35.

In his brief introduction to this enterprising book, Thomas Wiedemann cites three authors of popular accounts of the Roman arena, all "hampered by their lack of sympathy for this important aspect of Roman culture" (xvi). In particular, he dismisses Michael Grant's comparison of Roman *munera* with Nazism.<sup>1</sup> Wiedemann's objections, although unstated, are clearly to a focus on killing which excludes the serious consideration of cultural context. In this book, Wiedemann attempts to rectify a long-standing tradition of negative scholarship by examining the games from a Roman, rather than modern, perspective. He aims his text, which is accessible and jargon-free, at a mixed scholarly and popular audience. While providing substantial footnotes for the academic reader, he also offers a glossary of terms, a map of the Mediterranean, and a chronology of important events in Roman history for the less well-informed. Wiedemann's aim is to "try to explore the significance of gladiatorial combat in the context of Roman ideas about society, morality, and mortality" (xvi). He is largely successful in attaining this objective, and in the process comes to some new conclusions about both the significance of the games and the reason for their eventual demise.

Disliking the notion of the noble Romans as lovers of arena-spectacles, many modern authors have minimized the significance of the arena, trivialized the events, or compartmentalized the topic as a titillating sideline to the serious study of Roman society. Wiedemann's laudable goal of interpreting the arena through Roman eyes is part of a recent trend to seek explanations for the arena in its Roman context. This book fills a gap even among the recent work, for the latter often come in the form of scholarly articles, difficult for the lay reader to find, and relatively narrow in scope.<sup>2</sup> Although several new books have been published on amphitheatres,<sup>3</sup> some of which include consideration of the rôle of gladiators, there have been no other recent in-depth analyses of the arena as an institution powered by social forces.<sup>4</sup> Wiedemann's work is also noteworthy for its non-judgmental treatment of the subject (most scholars have felt obliged to articulate their distaste for the games). Sympathy, or even discussion without severe moral judgment, has rarely been attempted. While it is increasingly common for scholars to try to identify their own biases about a subject, most authors writing on

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1 M. Grant, *Gladiators* (Harmondsworth 1970) 8.

2 For example, K. M. Coleman, "Fatal charades: Roman executions staged as mythological enactments," *JRS* 80 (1990) 44-73; S. Brown, "Death as decoration: scenes from the arena on Roman domestic mosaics," in A. Richlin (ed.), *Pornography and representation in Greece and Rome* (New York 1992) 180-211; K. M. Coleman, "Launching into history: aquatic displays in the early empire," *JRS* 83 (1993) 48-75; D. Potter, "Martyrdom as spectacle," in R. Scodel (ed.), *Theater and society in the classical world* (Ann Arbor 1993) 53-88.

3 J.-C. Golvin, *L'amphithéâtre romain* (Paris 1988); J.-C. Golvin and C. Landes, *Amphithéâtres et gladiateurs* (Paris 1990); C. Domergue, C. Landes & J.-M. Pailler (edd.), *Spectacula I* (Lattes 1990). See also K. Welch, "Roman amphitheatres revived," *JRA* 4 (1991) 272-81; D. Bomgardner, "Amphitheatres on the fringe," *JRA* 4 (1991) 282-94; D. Bomgardner, "A new era for amphitheatre studies," *JRA* 6 (1993) 375-90; K. Welch, "The Roman arena in late-republican Italy: a new interpretation," *JRA* 7 (1994) 59-80.

4 Fairly recent analyses and compilations of evidence include P. Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque* (Paris 1976); G. Ville, *La gladiature en occident* (ColleEFR 245, Rome 1981); K. Hopkins, *Death and renewal* (Cambridge 1983) 1-30.