INTRODUCTION

The amphitheatre was one of the ancient Romans' most emblematic constructions. Yet it is such a familiar building in the Roman landscape and such a familiar fact of Roman culture that for much of the early and middle twentieth century it was either neglected by scholars or explained in general terms as a manifestation of "Roman cruelty," as either an aspect of "bread and circuses" or a mark of cultural *ennui* in the Rome of the Caesars. Most, if not all, of these interpretations drew on the fundamental and encyclopedic work of L. Friedländer, *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms in der Zeit von Augustus bis zum Ausgang der Antonine* 4 vols. (Leipzig, 1888–90) II, which usefully assembled (together with other aspects of ancient Roman social life) many important details of arena games in the city of Rome. Friedländer, although comprehensive in his discussion of the ancient evidence, framed his analysis of the games in moralizing terms, which expressed modern western Christian values as well as class and gender biases, for example (pp. 16–17: English translation, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., [London, 1908]):

> But these spectacles did not just occupy the masses, for whom they were intended . . . [they] fascinated all, infected the intellect of Rome, even the highest and most cultured circles, and especially the women. How the games pervaded every man's thought, the proverbs show. When they drew breath, they breathed in the passion for the circus, the stage, and the arena, "an original evil begotten in the womb." But, certain as are the evil moral effects of the games even on the upper classes, the demonstration of it in detail is impossible.

Friedländer's work, in both its collection and interpretation of the evidence, dominated the interpretation of the amphitheatre and its games for nearly a century.[1] Much of what was written about the amphitheatre repeated and/or reflected Friedländer's views; for example, "[the Roman arena] was one of the most appalling manifestations of evil that the world has ever

known. Nearly all the spectators wallowed unrestrainedly in blood-lust" (M. Grant, *Gladiators* [1967] 104).

This situation began to change with the publication of R. Auguet's *Cruauté et civilisation: les jeux romains* (1970) – a short, provocative essay that attempted to analyze Roman spectacles in ancient Roman terms, avoiding modern value judgments and offering the view that the arena was in fact a useful institution in Roman society. Similar in approach but more scholarly was P. Veyne's *Le pain et le cirque: sociologie historique d'un pluralisme politique* (1976), the first work to evaluate the Roman arena using a sociological method. Veyne reacted against the older view that grain distributions and public shows had been a necessary evil that helped to placate the Roman *plebs*. In Veyne's view, the arena was socially useful, even necessary, not only for ordinary Romans but also for those in positions of power.[2]

Less theoretical but very comprehensive in terms of gladiatorial spectacles was G. Ville's monumental *La gladiature en occident des origines à la mort de Domitien* (1981), which updated Friedländer's work by assembling a great deal of new information. It remains today the essential reference work on arena spectacles in the Roman West. Although much evidence is presented, the material remains undigested, and Ville does not offer a compelling explanation for the significance of arena spectacles in Roman culture.[3]

It was K. Hopkins who galvanized the field of arena studies in the 1980s with the first chapter of his book *Death and Renewal* (1983, 1–30) entitled "Murderous games." Making use of an interdisciplinary historical method, this short but penetrating essay argued that arena spectacles both reflected the traditional bellicose spirit of ancient Rome and served as a substitute for warfare and as a venue for political expression during the imperial period, when the *pax Romana* had distanced most Romans from battle and when the Roman people lost their right to vote. Since its publication, this essay has been the most influential work on the significance of the amphitheatre and its spectacles.

Since Hopkins' essay, many useful publications on the subject of the arena and its spectacles have appeared, most employing an interdisciplinary, historical method to good advantage. The interaction between the emperor and the people, for example, is central to T. Wiedemann's *Emperors and Gladiators* (1992). Wiedemann also argues that the amphitheatre was a symbol of the ordered world – a place where civilization confronted lawless nature. Other analytical works on the Roman arena include B. Bergmann and C. Kondoleon's, *The Art of Ancient Spectacle* (1999) and C. Donerque, Ch. Landes, and J.-M. Pailler's *Spectacula I: gladiateurs et amphithéâtres* (1990), both of which contain articles by different scholars on subjects

ranging across architecture and art to religion and social history; A. Futrell's *Blood in the Arena. The Spectacle of Roman Power* (1997), which explores the religious context and the connections between the arena and the imperial cult, particularly in the northern provinces of the Empire; and D. Kyle's *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (1998), which is particularly good on both the social status of gladiators and the mechanics of dealing with the bodies of dead arena combatants. Another author who has made significant contributions to our understanding of arena games is K. M. Coleman in seminal articles on the historicity, nature, and cultural significance of two particularly elaborate events forming part of the arena repertoire under the Empire: mythological executions (on which, see Chapter Five) and *naumachiae* (mock sea battles).[4] A straight-forward, common sensical book, K. Hopkins & M. Beard, *The Colosseum* (2005) debunks many modern myths about the arena.

Two books are noteworthy for their relatively daring approaches to the subject. The first is that of A. Futrell, just mentioned, which in interpreting the violent nature of Roman spectacles employs an overall anthropological approach.[5] Using cross-cultural analogies of ritual violence (for example, in Meso-America), the author suggests that the significance of gladiatorial games in Roman culture is to be explained in part by the fact that they originated in practices of human sacrifice. The analogy of human sacrifice is rather problematic, however, because in the historical period, from which our evidence for the nature of gladiatorial spectacles comes, it is plain that the Romans did not conceive of gladiatorial events in this way.[6] An anthropological approach that analyzes the violence of the Roman arena in diachronic terms does not do so well in capturing what is unique about the amphitheatre – namely, its combination of cultural institutionalization, efficiency of organization, and lavishness of production.[7] Explanations for the importance of the arena in the Roman world are best sought, in my opinion, not in cross-cultural analogies but within the peculiar social and political aspects of Roman culture itself.

C. Barton's *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans: The Gladiator and the Monster* (1993), on the other hand, uses a psychoanalytic method to try to explain the significance of the Roman arena.[8] It attempts to elucidate the gladiatorial phenomenon in terms of a collective Roman anguish and *ennui* that was characteristic of the early imperial period (Barton's Rome is very much the Rome of Nero, as described by Tacitus and Seneca) and manifested itself in displays of cruelty in the amphitheatre.[9] The popularity of gladiatorial combat is also connected with a political disillusionment and loss of *dignitas* as Rome moved from a republican to a monarchical form of government. For those who lived in a world in which everything outside the arena was a loathsome and bitter burlesque, the gladiator came to be a symbol of

self-vindication and redemption. In their obsession with arena spectacles, Barton rightly deems the Romans "surpassing strange." But, in imposing a late-twentieth-century attitude onto the Roman arena phenomenon, this book comes no closer to explaining Roman gladiatorial spectacles than did the earlier moralizing commentators such as Friedländer.

Ironically, in psychological terms Romans seem to have been considerably more foreign to our way of thinking than Barton makes them out to be. There is actually little evidence that they thought of arena activities as cruel.[10] Romans apparently cared little about most of the people who fought and died in the arena; their sympathy for another's suffering was proportional to the sufferer's social status, and most arena combatants had none.[11] Romans went to the arena not so much because they enjoyed watching people suffer, but because of the excitement of an uncertain and dramatic outcome. They also went to watch the display of aggressive manliness and fighting skills, as this book will demonstrate. The world in which the ancient Romans lived was one where violence was ordinary, both inside and outside of an arena context, and it is doubtful that viewing death in an amphitheatre held an overarching redemptive value for the Roman populace.[12] It is a guiding principle of this book that we may get closer to an understanding of the "strange" Romans if we think of violent death in Roman culture as something that was not unusual, and if we try to put aside modern notions of the inherent worth of individuals.

Although arena spectacles *per se* have been the focus of considerable scholarly interest for a long time, it was only in the late 1980s that the amphitheatre building type (in which they were held) finally received a comprehensive treatment with J.-C. Golvin's magisterial *L'amphithéâtre romain. Essai sur la théorisation de sa forme et de ses fonctions* (1988). This book contains both a catalogue of amphitheatres (with plans and extensive bibliography) and a comprehensive discussion of the building type in its formal and functional aspects.[13] Since the publication of Golvin's book, several other useful works have been published on the architecture and function of Roman amphitheatres and those of other spectator buildings.[14] There is still, however, no satisfying analysis of the amphitheatre's development framed in both architectural and historical terms (such terms are inextricable). In addition, no satisfying explanation for the importance of the arena in the Roman world, which takes into account the critical period for the institution's development, has yet been given. The explanations put forward by K. Hopkins, particularly, are especially compelling, but they have largely to do with the imperial period and they pay only scant attention to the middle and late Republic – the period of the amphitheatre's origin and initial dissemination by the Romans. This is a major gap that the present work intends to fill.

The 'Imperial' Interpretation of Arena Games

Like many scholars, and most who have followed him, Hopkins locates the significance of the arena primarily in the social and political changes that occurred with the advent of the principate. Hopkins's thesis rests on two propositions: (1) that gladiatorial games provided the Roman people with a venue for political expression after they lost the right to vote in the assembly under Tiberius and (2) that, once cut off from regular participation in battle by the *pax Romana*, the traditionally militaristic and bellicose Roman people needed to experience violence vicariously. These points are valid, but on their own they are inadequate explanations for the importance of the arena in Roman culture, as is seen in the following.

Hopkins's idea that the emperor made use of the amphitheatre and its games to demonstrate his own power and legitimize his position is surely correct,[15] but the amphitheatre was not the only venue for political dialogue between emperor and people; it also took place in both the circus and the theatre. In addition, like so much else about the early Empire, the political dimension of gladiatorial spectacles actually had its origin in the Republic, when magistrates and dynasts who competed for power staged ever more elaborate combats. It can be argued that senators under the Republic had a more immediate political stake than did emperors in how well the plebs liked their gladiatorial shows, because election to the praetorship often depended on the success of a politician's aedilician games.[16]

In fact, there is little about the imperial gladiatorial spectacles that did not originate in the Republic. The elaborate forms of entertainment associated with the games staged by the emperors, for example, cannot be fully explained in terms of the needs of the pacified population of imperial Rome,[17] because free public banquets had regularly been given in conjunction with gladiatorial games since at least the second century BC. Livy tells us: "on the occasion of the funeral of Publius Licinius [in 183 BC], there was a public distribution of meats and one hundred and twenty gladiators fought, and funeral games were given for three days and after the games a public banquet. During this, when the banqueting tables had been arranged through the whole Forum, a storm coming up with great gusts of wind drove most people to set up tents in the Forum."[18] The manner in which Livy describes the association of the banquet and the distribution of food with gladiatorial games suggests that it was not unusual. (The incident is only mentioned because of its anecdotal value.) Thus, imperial largesse is not on its own an adequate explanation for the importance of the arena to the ancient Romans.

Similarly, the social and political function of the amphitheatre as a place where the populace could voice their likes and dislikes to the emperor[19]

cannot be directly dependent on the Roman people's loss of the right to pass legislation and elect magistrates, since the former too has republican precedents. In the *Pro Sestio* (125–7), Cicero describes the lively political dialogue that took place between people and the ruling elite at a gladiatorial show. Cicero describes Appius Claudius Pulcher, (praetor 57 BC) yelling out to the crowd at a gladiatorial show: "Do you want Cicero to return [from exile]?" and the crowd shouting back, "No!" (126). Cicero objects that the people who shouted were "*Graeculi*" planted in the crowd by his enemy A. Claudius. Cicero comments "I for my part think that there has never been a greater crowd than at that gladiatorial shows, neither at any *contio* (political meeting) nor indeed any *comitium*."[20] He calls the crowd at a gladiatorial show "this countless throng of men, this unanimous expression of the whole Roman people" and exults that those who can tyrannize over the *contio* could be indicted by the Roman people at the gladiatorial shows.[21] It can even be argued that the political dimension of gladiatorial spectacles was greater under the Republic than under the Empire, because of imperial legislation – the so-called *lex Julia Theatralis*,[22] for example – that hierarchically segregated the audience according to social and political status, and that surely inhibited the type of anonymous expression of political points of view that was possible under the Republic, when most of the audience were seated *promiscue*, that is, mixed together.[23]

Nor is it clear that the frequency of gladiatorial games dramatically increased in the city of Rome during the early Empire. It was in the competitive climate of the late Republic that gladiatorial combat had become more and more lavish in scale. For example, during Caesar's aedilician games in 65 BC, he exhibited so many pairs of gladiators that it aroused anxiety among his opponents, and the senate passed a decree declaring a maximum number of gladiators that any man might own.[24] It was to restrain that kind of aristocratic competition that legislation limiting the frequency of gladiatorial games and the number of pairs of gladiators that could be shown was enacted under the Julio-Claudian emperors.[25] Augustus restricted gladiatorial games to two per year with never more than 120 combatants, and he forbade praetors from putting on shows without the senate's approval.[26] The particularly bloody *munus sine missione* (a type of combat with no reprieve for the fallen gladiator) was banned under Augustus.[27] Tiberius was even more stingy with public spectacles than was Augustus: after his death, the people threatened to burn his body in the amphitheatre, presumably to ensure that he at last provided some public entertainment.[28] Tiberius limited the number of pairs of gladiators in private exhibitions, Augustus having previously done so for public shows, and he tried to banish *venationes* (wild beast shows) from the city of Rome.[29] Similar prohibitions occurred under Nero who decreed that no provincial official could hold gladiatorial shows without imperial permission.[30] Gladiatorial games in Rome under

the Empire were generally on a more extravagant scale, but they were subject to the censorial power of the emperor. What is new and significant in the imperial period in Rome is not the popularity of arena games, but their increased scope (as is argued in Chapter One), which is a function of imperial expenditure. Any explanation for the popularity of gladiatorial games that relies on the assumption of their exponential growth in Rome during the early imperial period, therefore, is likely to be unsatisfying.

The most intriguing aspect of Hopkins' explanation for the significance and popularity of gladiatorial contests – that they were a function of a bellicose Roman populace having been deprived of the experience of battle[31] – is also the most vulnerable. It is in one sense contradicted by the numerous legionary amphitheatres, many in Roman outposts along the northern frontiers of the Empire,[32] that were built by and for soldiers, who can hardly have had the need to experience violence vicariously. But the explanatory value of Hopkins' thesis is obviated by the plain fact that the growth in the popularity and scale of gladiatorial spectacles, and the development of the amphitheatre as a building type occurred, not under the Empire but under the Republic, precisely during the period when Rome was undergoing its greatest imperial expansion and when more Romans were going to war than at any period before or after.

Hopkins' essay successfully demonstrates that gladiatorial games "suffused Roman life"[33] in imperial times, and many of the explanations he cites for the importance of the Roman arena are trenchant. The amphitheatre did perform a number of useful functions in the imperial period: it facilitated social ordering and interaction; it was a place where the emperor could display his power and munificence to the Roman populace; it recreated battlefield conditions for the amusement of the urban population. These are all fortuitous symptoms of the amphitheatre in Roman culture, however, not its determining causes.

It is the lack of detailed consideration of the social significance of gladiatorial games and of the buildings in which they were held during the republican period that has, in my view, kept us from a full understanding of the amphitheatre and the gladiatorial phenomenon. The neglect of the third to first centuries BC (roughly the middle and late republican periods) has partly to do with the fact that the historical sources for this time are scanty and lacunose, but it is also connected with a widespread but mistaken assumption that the amphitheatre as a building type was not particularly important before the imperial period. This book demonstrates that such an assumption is unfounded and that the Republic gives important insight for understanding the amphitheatre and its games. It is the cultural circumstances of the genesis of the Roman amphitheatre building, more than anything else, that holds the key to understanding why the arena assumed such an important place in Roman culture, as will be argued in the first three chapters. It is the

1. Amphitheatre at Arles (*D.A.I.* Rome neg. 58.2794).

very deep-rooted nature of the amphitheatre in Italy, and the pervasiveness of its bloody spectacles throughout the Empire, that – I believe – make it critical to gaining fresh insights into the distinctive character of Roman culture and Rome's spectacular amassing of empire.

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The approach I take in this book is 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. This book does not contain a comprehensive survey of amphitheatre architecture[34]; rather, it is an interpretive essay on the development of the amphitheatre building type and an exploration of how the cultural circumstances of this development can help us to understand the architectural iconography and the importance of the arena to ancient Romans.

The book begins with an examination of a neglected but critical aspect of arena studies – the genesis and early development of the amphitheatre building, both in Rome itself and in Italy (Chapters Two and Three). The most imposing surviving amphitheatres, such as the Colosseum, and those at Nîmes and Arles (Figure 1), are of the imperial period. Consequently,

2. Colosseum: façade (American Academy in Rome, Fototeca Unione 6162).

they have received the most attention.[35] But many amphitheatres of a less monumental nature were built beforehand, in republican times. By examining these little-known republican amphitheatres (see Appendix), most of which I had the opportunity to study firsthand, and by placing them in their social and historical settings, it is demonstrated that the Republic is in fact a critical period for understanding the amphitheatre building.

Architecturally, the amphitheatre was more than a purely functional building type. Gladiatorial games could be and (as we know from literature and inscriptions) often were held in venues other than the amphitheatre. Any place that could accommodate crowds – a circus, a theatre, or even a public square – could and did serve as a place for men to fight and kill each other as public entertainment.[36] Buildings of intricate construction with façades sheathed in columnar orders and filled with statues, such as the Colosseum of AD 80 (Figure 2 and Plate 1), were not necessary for the staging of gladiatorial games. This suggests that the significance of the amphitheatre went beyond simply providing a place to hold gladiatorial shows – that by the first century AD the building had become, in some way, a

representational architectural form. The representational aspects of the building type are explored in Chapters Four and Five, whereas the reception of this building type in the Greek world is examined in Chapter Six.

In the brief survey of the scholarly literature here, it has been shown that the institution of the arena is often explained in terms of social and political conditions specific to the Empire. A consideration of a wide range of evidence, however, will indicate that the significance of the amphitheatre in Roman culture cannot adequately be explained in such a way. Ancient texts show that arena games were popular in Italy not only during the relatively peaceful period of the early Empire but also during the Republic, Rome's most active period of military expansion; and archaeology informs us that it was the Republic, not the Empire, that witnessed the appearance and initial proliferation of the amphitheatre as a building type in Italy over the course of the first century BC. Our investigation begins with an examination of the evidence for the origins of arena spectacles, and for their frequency in Rome during the middle and late republican periods.