

**Jerry Toner, *The Day Commodus Killed a Rhino. Understanding the Roman Games.*** Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. Pp.136. ISBN 978-1-4214-1586-4.

Rehabilitating the reputation of Commodus is no easy task, since killing rhinos was but the tip of the crazed iceberg for such an unstable ruler. But by viewing Commodus in the context of what it was to be an emperor, and the need to control, impress and entertain the vast population of Rome, we begin to understand why Commodus did what he did, and why he was both admired and despised for it. Indeed the Roman ambivalence to the games and gladiators – the ability to both praise and condemn, the elite disdain versus the mass hysteria, the desire to look but not to stare, to support but not to enjoy (or not too much) – also parallels the relationship of the Roman populace with their emperor. Commodus, like the gladiator he aspired to be, was loved and loathed. For those he entertained so well, and with whom he enjoyed his spectacles, he was a good and generous ruler. For those he humiliated, for the nobility with their decorous ideals and moral codes, he was the worst of emperors. Ultimately, in terms of his reputation at least, the pen, wielded by elite historians, was mightier than Commodus' gladiatorial sword.

In this slim book, Commodus is but a side-show, and it is Rome's games, especially gladiatorial, but also circus races and theatrical shows, that take centre stage. Toner is interested in broad themes, such as why emperors put on such spectacles, why some emperors appeared in them, the vast resources involved and the expectations of the audience. In doing so Toner is set on dispelling some popular misconceptions about bloodthirsty Romans, cruel emperors, mindless violence and the mob mentality, which so often characterise depictions of the amphitheatre. While acknowledging the real suffering of the victims and the disturbing elements of arena displays, Toner highlights the centrality of the games to Roman life and identity, and the dialogue they afforded between rulers and ruled.

Toner's starting point is Commodus and the day he did indeed kill a rhino, a whole menagerie in fact, albeit from the safety of an elevated walkway in the Colosseum. Commodus was not only a crack hunting shot, but also a gladiator. He fought in the arena, admittedly armed with a wooden sword and flanked by aides, to demonstrate his fighting prowess. Thus Commodus received the adulation of the crowd for not just providing them with games, but also for performing in them. In pandering to his and the crowd's tastes Commodus was ultimately alienating himself from the senatorial elite, who were forced to watch this debasing spectacle. For the senators Commodus had 'completely lost the plot' (p.29), but perhaps he was trying to gain legitimacy from the people in an, 'innovative and direct way' (p.30). Commodus may have been an extreme case, an emperor who pushed the boundaries, but as Toner seeks to demonstrate in the remainder of the book, what Commodus was exploiting, and perhaps trying to build upon, were accepted roles, traditions and expectations.

The games, races and shows had long been venues for elite competition and the expression of popular will and discontent. The culture of benefaction meant that wealthy and distinguished citizens gave the gift of entertainment for the reward of popular support.

Under the emperors, such benefactions lay largely in the hands of one man (in Rome at least), for whom they were an important public relations exercise. Emperors needed to attend the games, and appear to be enjoying the spectacle. Doing your paper work while in the Imperial box, as Marcus Aurelius did, was an insult to the crowd. The games were the venue where the emperor met his people, listened to them and shared their passions. Good games also required extensive resources – planning, organisation, venues, animals, gladiators, prisoners and so forth. An emperor needed to spend a fortune to display his magnitude and the greatness and wealth of the empire.

And what of the crowd, what did they get out of the games? Toner is right to stress that there were differences in the scale and make-up of the audience at different venues. The Colosseum, for example, had less capacity than the Circus Maximus, and its attendees were probably skewed toward the top half of society (p.67). The crowd were not homogenous, passive recipients of what was on offer, but nor were they always aggressive hooligans. The audience could unite to express shared opinions whether related to the content of a specific show or a political issue, but it could also divide into factions (especially in the circus), and local rival groups. For Toner the audience was neither ignorant nor blood-thirsty, but partaking in events which enforced core values and Roman identity, including through the bravery, competitive spirit and military prowess of the, albeit socially debased, gladiator.

This is a volume clearly aimed at a broad audience, which draws upon and summarises much recent scholarship in areas such as attitudes towards gladiators, audience dynamics and the role of leisure and spectacle in Roman society. There may be little in the overall conclusions that surprise the specialist, but nevertheless the broad-brush strokes serve to highlight some key aspects of Roman life and society. Toner's observations on how members of the lower orders may have regarded the skills and training of the gladiator, relating them to their own trades and work, are suggestive and potentially enhance our understanding of how gladiators and performers could embody societal values and identities. The discussion of the range of reactions to the games – philosophical, elite, non-elite and Christian – also reminds that the Roman identity promoted by the arena was not always an un-problematic one, or one accepted by all.

By ranging across chronological periods and different types of evidence Toner is able to present the bigger picture, and to confront and contextualise some of the more disturbing (to modern tastes) aspects of the Roman psyche. Overall in an accessible and insightful fashion, this book succeeds in weaving the varied sources and scholarly debates together to tell the story of the complexities, and the importance, of the games within the Roman world.

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