

Nathan T. Elkins, *A Monument to Dynasty and Death: The Story of Rome's Colosseum and the Emperors Who Built It*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019, Pp. 168. Hardcover \$50.00, ISBN 9781421432540; Pbk. \$19.95, ISBN 9781421432557.

Part of the Johns Hopkins University Press series “Witness to Ancient History,” the seductively titled *A Monument to Dynasty and Death* offers both a concise introduction to an iconic structure and a useful overview of its significance within Roman culture. A narrow focus on the amphitheater’s original, Flavian context sets this book apart from other popular accounts of the Colosseum (an earlier installment in the “Witness” series, Jerry Toner’s *The Day Commodus Killed a Rhino* [2015], offers a somewhat broader perspective on Roman amphitheatrical entertainments). The material covered includes: the historical background to Vespasian’s rise to power (Chapter One), the remains and architecture of the Colosseum itself (Chapter Two), its relationship to other Flavian monuments in Rome (Chapter Three), the inaugural games held under Titus, as well as Domitian’s games (Chapter Four), and the impact of the amphitheater and its games on Flavian art and literature (Chapter Five). A short epilogue looks forward to the Colosseum’s legacy and its potential significance in the present day.

As one expects from a book of this type, the lion’s share of the discussion is given over to the repackaging of scholarly *communis opinio* through cogent summaries of the principal insights to have emerged from the specialist literature of recent decades. Elkins has done a thorough job of this, covering a wide range of topics. Anyone who has taught or researched on the subject of Roman spectacles will recognize the familiar propositions of this discourse, e.g.: that the regulation of seating by sections (as per the *lex Julia theatralis*) reinforced the hierarchical nature of the Roman social order (pp. 51–4); that the public staging of executions and the degradation of social inferiors and outsiders in the arena did likewise (pp. 95–7, 101–2); that these executions sometimes took the form of mythological reenactments (a.k.a. “fatal charades”) for added impact (pp. 98–100); and that combat to the death was perhaps less common than the modern popularity of the slogan “*morituri te salutant*” (attested only once, in Suet. *Claud.* 21) might lead one to imagine (p. 107).

More original claims, sprinkled throughout the text, serve to keep things interesting for the specialist. One novel idea, which draws on an analogy with unpublished evidence from the amphitheater of Puteoli, is that the sculptures set up in the arcades of the upper levels of the exterior façade represented scenes of mythological punishment (pp. 28–9). Elkins also reiterates his own previously published arguments for the location of the emperor’s box on the north side of the arena, along with his identification of the platform on the southern side as the *pulvinar* for images of the gods and deified Caesars (pp. 54–8; why these are imagined as separate locations—unlike in the Circus Maximus, where the emperor viewed the games from the *pulvinar* itself—is not made clear). The discussion of the

pulvinar's location is intertwined with the compelling suggestion that the inaugural games under Titus were held in celebration of Vespasian's apotheosis (pp. 81–5).

As a scholar who has published extensively on the iconography of Roman coinage, Elkins is at his best when discussing the numismatic evidence. Not only does he expertly elucidate the famous depictions of the amphitheater on Flavian *sestertii*, he also calls attention to a number of other coin types that are rarely if ever mentioned in this context. The treatment of literary evidence is somewhat more perfunctory, however. Martial's *Book of Spectacles* has obvious pride of place, especially for its account of the hunting and gladiatorial contests presented in the amphitheater, and Elkins capably avails himself of these treasures. But he gets caught up on the issue of the collection's date, noting Buttrey's arguments about the significance of the appearance of a rhinoceros on coinage under Domitian, and hedges: "it is sufficient for our purposes to note that Martial was an eye-witness to some of the earliest games held in the Colosseum; his testimony provides a sense of what the earliest games were like under the Flavian emperors, whether they were held by Titus or Domitian" (pp. 92–3).

Such a position is certainly defensible, but a firm date would seem to make more of a difference to the interpretation of the second epigram in the collection (*hic ubi sidereus propius videt astra colossus ...*), which describes the amphitheater in its topographical setting and contrasts the Flavian monuments that had been erected there with Nero's invidious Golden House, which had occupied this quarter of the city previously. Speaking for myself (*pace* Buttrey, *JRS* 2007: 106), I do not see how this celebration of the amphitheater and its surrounding structures as proof that "Rome has been returned to itself" would have made much sense if the venue had been in operation for a number of years already. Perhaps understandably, Elkins neglects to mention the chronological issue when he quotes this poem in the opening chapter (p. 20), and only comes around to it later.

Not to dwell on a single piece of evidence, but there is a further problem of interpretation that attaches to this poem to consider. As Elkins notes, scholars now generally agree that the grounds of the Golden House would have been accessible to public enjoyment and thus did not really constitute a private pleasure dome, as claimed by Martial and some of Nero's other detractors. This fact presents something of a problem for Elkins, who acknowledges the unfairness of Martial's criticisms of Nero but wants to hold on to the idea that there was something distinctive about the Flavian building program, and the Colosseum in particular (pp. 19–20), which reclaimed the legacy of Augustus and the "good" Julio-Claudians instead (pp. 69–70, 77–80). Here again, the arguments presented reside comfortably within the scholarly mainstream, but I would like to take this opportunity to briefly interrogate the notion that the Flavian amphitheater represented a radical departure from the ethos of the last of the Julio-Claudians.

K.H. Waters pointed out long ago how the rhetoric of new beginnings tended to mask the reality of enduring continuities between Domitian and the reigns of Nerva and Trajan, but the authenticity of the advertised break between Nero and the Flavians has thus far not been subjected to the same degree of scrutiny. There certainly were areas of genuine divergence, but when it comes to the Colosseum, the number of hairs that one must split in order to argue for a meaningful difference between the policies of the two regimes amounts to a sizeable pompadour. If the real reason Roman elites resented the Golden House was that Nero was currying favor with the masses, why does Martial celebrate the Colosseum and its surrounding monuments as popular benefactions? Yes, the Flavians drained the lake and demolished the vestibule of their predecessor's palace, but they kept the colossal statue of the sun-god that would later provide the basis for the amphitheater's medieval sobriquet, simply replacing Nero's face with Titus'. Indeed, if we can look past the fact that the Colosseum occupied the same area of the city as Nero's abandoned project, nothing would appear to be more Neronian in spirit than a spectacular venue for public amusement. The claim that Nero was more interested in "Greek" entertainments, such as athletics and theater, while the bloody goings-on in the Colosseum were more "Roman" in character (p. 6) is neither a compelling nor an accurate distinction. Remember that two of the most paradigmatic examples of Roman "fatal charades," the rape of a "Pasiphae" by a bull and the precipitation of a criminal in the guise of Icarus, were staged under Nero as part of his pyrrhic games (Suet., *Nero* 12.2, cf. Mart., *Lib. Spect.* 6(5), 10(8)).

Returning to an overall assessment of Elkins' book, the one feature that I would caution against is the sense of tunnel vision produced by viewing the whole of the Flavian era through the lens of a single monument. Near the end of his discussion, Elkins boldly proclaims, "the inauguration of the Colosseum in 80 CE and Titus's 100 days of games were the most significant events of that emperor's reign" (p. 127). I imagine that those killed or displaced by the eruption of Vesuvius or the great fire in Rome in that year would have taken issue with this assessment.

The latter tragedy destroyed Vespasian's rebuilt temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, a structure that receives only passing notice in Elkins' text (pp. 13, 14), despite its extraordinary ideological importance for Vespasian's efforts to restore Rome's urban fabric at the outset of his reign. The omission of this monument from the discussion of the Colosseum's relationship to the rest of the Flavian building program in Chapter Three constitutes a major shortcoming. Elkins again takes his cue from Martial (*Lib. Spect.* 2) in focusing primarily on the structures in the immediate vicinity of the Colosseum valley, but Suetonius (*Vesp.* 8.5–9.1) might have provided a more useful guide to the relative importance of Vespasian's major monuments. Besides ignoring the restoration of the Capitol, Elkins dispenses with the Temple of Peace, which Pliny the Elder regarded as one of "the most beautiful works the world had ever seen" (*N.H.* 36.102) in a single paragraph (pp. 66–7). Domitian's racetrack on the Campus Martius (preserved beneath today's Piazza Navona) likewise receives

short shrift (p. 79), leaving readers to wonder about the implications of this project for the relative significance of gladiatorial *munera* within a more extensive program of public entertainments during this emperor's reign.

It seems that Elkins regards the centrality of the Colosseum within the dynastic self-presentation of the Flavians as self-evident, and thus disregards as peripheral any evidence that might challenge or nuance this hypothesis. The result is a book that is more successful in addressing the first half of its subtitle than the second. Although useful in a lot of ways, it provides only a selective, and arguably distorted, account of the historical contexts in which the Colosseum was built.

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