

BOOK REVIEW

The Day Commodus Killed a Rhino: Understanding the Roman Games. By JERRY TONER. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. Pp. 136. Paper, \$19.95. ISBN 978-1-4214-1586-4.

In this book, Jerry Toner aims “to understand the importance of the games within a wider social context and explain the various different attributes that enabled them to play such a role” (5). To accomplish this, Toner combines the analysis and judgment of a critical scholar with the eloquence and humor of a storyteller. *The Day Commodus Killed a Rhino* is divided into six chapters with a prologue and an epilogue, and although only containing 120 pages, it provides an ample introduction to Roman culture and the games.

Beginning with a vividly descriptive retelling of Commodus’ Colosseum escapades from Dio Cassius, Toner attempts throughout the rest of his book to create the historical context in which these games took place. Following this prologue, Toner introduces the reader to the people and animals involved in the games, and specifically addresses Commodus’ special place in history as the only Roman Emperor to appear publicly as a gladiator. In the second chapter, Toner gives a brief assessment of Dio’s account of Commodus. Combining humor and historical analysis, Toner places Dio’s history within the context of an increasingly centralized authority of the emperor over and against the traditional Senate, of which Dio is a member. Dio’s history, presented as a Senatorial assassination of Commodus’ character, tempered with the rehabilitation of Commodus’ memory by future emperors, is used by Toner to help general audiences recognize the work historians do in evaluating sources.

Moving on in chapter three to the connection between imperial authority and the people of Rome, Toner demonstrates how “the games sat at the heart of politics in the Roman Empire” (45). He encourages readers to shed their modern preconceptions about Roman “bread and circuses,” and to recognize how the games were a method of emphasizing not only the legitimacy of the emperor, but also the embodiment of the order within society that Augustus had restored in the wake of the civil wars of the late republic. In his fourth chapter, after demonstrating no real differences between bad and good emperors on their extravagant

expenditures, Toner briefly recounts the logistics of the games. Using comparisons between the size of seats in the Colosseum versus seats on airplanes or in stadiums today, or between the number of animals in zoos today versus the number killed during festivals in Rome, Toner brings the physical experience of the games to his readers with such vibrant detail that readers may find themselves rereading some portions of this chapter in order to absorb fully the sheer magnitude of the numbers of animals hunted and killed, and in some cases, driven to complete extinction.

The heart of Toner's book appears in his fifth and sixth chapters. Beginning with the question, "who was the Roman crowd?", Toner explores the differences in audiences between the Colosseum, the Circus, and the theater, and demonstrates the underlying commonality among the social strata that personified popular virtues in heroic terms within the games, and embodied the strengths and weaknesses of the varied groups within Roman society. Although gladiators were regarded as worthless, they acted as symbols of Roman masculinity and military virtue, fusing together the different aspects of Rome's diverse society. Toner demonstrates that violence was the medium not the message of the games, and it was through these acts of violence that gladiators demonstrated that even the worst of society could be transformed by Roman virtues and habits. This was the ultimate importance of the games, and why all emperors, not just Commodus, sought to use them for their connection to the Roman people.

Toner gives examples of resistance to the games in his Epilogue. The beginning of this chapter is dedicated to a colorful retelling of the executions of the Christian saints, Perpetua and Felicitas, however, the chapter does not deal exclusively with just Christian resistance. In this final chapter, Toner places the resistance to the games within the context of Roman culture that has been explored throughout the book. This epilogue seamlessly connects all the previous chapters into demonstrating the centrality of the games for Roman identity while cautioning modern readers from skewing their interpretations with their own modern cultural mores, or their experiences with inaccurate portrayals of the games within movies.

Toner concludes that the games are not indications that the Romans were bloodthirsty automatons, but rather, were expressions of an internalized culture of honor and bravery. The resistance to these games, or the inability or unwillingness to support these games, was interpreted as a rejection of the virtues and values the Romans identified as intrinsic to being Roman. Emperors used the games as means to connect to their people, and the people enjoyed the games as

a means to connect to their Romanness. As an introductory book, it is, of course, limited in its scope, but the foundational elements have been competently and eloquently presented so as to inspire further study and interest within its readers.

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