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Gladiatores

Exhibition in the Colosseum at Rome from the 26th March – 3rd October

2010

- A review

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For several years the Colosseum at Rome has staged temporary exhibitions organised by the Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma and Electa.¹ The recent exhibition, on show from March to October 2010, was dedicated to the topic ‘*Gladiatores*’ (gladiators),² for which a new kind of approach was chosen: for the first time modern replicas, which were displayed alongside a few original archaeological artifacts, played the central role in the exhibition. Pieces of art, or archaeological findings of a certain thematic field, were in the centre of former Colosseum exhibitions.

Among these were exhibitions on ‘Eros’,³ ‘Musa Pensosa’,⁴ dealing with the depiction of the intellectual in the ancient world, and lately ‘*Divus Vespasianus*’,⁵ an exhibition on art and culture in the Flavian Age, commemorating the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Vespasian. The exhibitions tried to introduce the visitor to particular aspects of ancient cultural history, mainly showing significant examples of pieces of art focusing on the

¹ The photographs used for this review were provided by and reproduced with the kind permission of the ‘Archivio fotografico Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma’.

² <http://archeoroma.beniculturali.it/node/843>

³ <http://www.electaweb.it/mostre/scheda/eros/it>

⁴ <http://www.electaweb.it/mostre/scheda/musa-pensosa-limmagine-dellintellettuale-nellantichita/it>

⁵ <http://www.electaweb.it/mostre/focus-on/il-divo-vespasiano-il-bimillenario-dei-flavi/it>

respective themes. The temporary exhibitions do not make reference to each other.

This time a more didactic exhibition was created following the conceptual ideas of experimental archaeology.⁶ Numerous exhibits in the focus of the gladiator exhibition were not original findings but reconstructions. Original objects can be seen as semiophores, following the line of thought of K. Pomian,⁷ which are objects with an inherent 'meaning' related to their existence and materiality. While original findings are to some extent interesting per se due to their authenticity and their aura as remains of a distant past, replicas serve primarily as communication tools. Therefore, a major change of approach can be observed for the gladiator exhibition. Nevertheless, this change was not reflected in the exhibition design which followed the traditional use of glass showcases.

The aim of the exhibition was to introduce the visitor to gladiators in the ancient Roman world and in particular, the metropolis itself.⁸ Among the replicas were military armour and weapons of Roman soldiers and of peoples Rome had encountered in war as those would have inspired the equipment of certain gladiator types. The major part of the armour was attributed to different types of arena combatants. All replicas were based on archaeological findings, ancient written sources, or on depictions mainly on mosaics, paintings or reliefs.

⁶ Gladiatores 2010: 4.

⁷ Pomian, 1998.

⁸ Gladiatores 2010: 4-5.



Fig. 1: View of the exhibition. Armour replicas of the gladiator type *Provocator*.

Impressive original findings, in particular helmets, cuisses and offensive weapons accompanied the replicas. These were found for the major part at Pompeii and were on loan from the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. The respective helmets and cuisses are among the best preserved and better known pieces of their kind.



Fig. 2: View of the exhibition. Gladiator cuisses from Pompeii.

Looking at the original findings, which were exposed for millennia to corrosion and detrimental environmental influences, one might easily forget how bright and colourful dresses and armour would have looked in antiquity. The exhibition of replicas beside the originals allowed the visitor to compare and experience the visual effect of newly worked bright pieces in comparison to the archaeological findings. The colours are otherwise only visible in depictions of gladiators in mosaics or paintings.

Exhibition texts provided background information on the following thematic fields:

Gladiator games – from their origins in funeral ritual to use as political propaganda outlined the predecessors of the gladiator games in Campagna, their introduction to Rome from 264 BC onwards and the functional change the *munera* underwent as they were turned into an expression of political self-representation in Late Republican and Imperial period.

Organisation of the spectacles provided information on the different offices related to the games and the complex structure of organisation and responsibilities for different aspects of the gladiator games and hunts.

The legal condition of gladiators highlighted that gladiators could have originated from a wide range of social and ethnic backgrounds and that different ways led to life as a gladiator, either forced, as for example a prisoner of war, or out of personal choice.

Occupation: gladiator was dedicated to the life of the gladiators. The ways to glory and liberty on the one hand, or to death in the arena on the other, were described. Perspectives for the life after the end of a career as an active arena fighter were mentioned.

The types of gladiators described the different types of arena combatants with their particular armour. These explanations were helpful for the understanding of the exhibits.

A day at the amphitheatre stated the order of shows and events taking place on a day in the arena.

Venatio (hunt) was dedicated to the other type of event which would have taken place complementary to the gladiator games in the arena. The historical development was highlighted and the appearance in the arena outlined.

The texts of the exhibition were informative and communicated much key information successfully as they were easily understandable to a broad, non-expert audience. Numerous references to ancient sources allowed particularly interested visitors to look-up the respective passages. The exhibition centered on the gladiator games as events of mass entertainment in the late Republican and Imperial times. Their original relation to funerary games was less pronounced.

The dedication of an exhibition to '*Gladiatores*' seems quite convincing and suitable, given the interest of the wider public in this particular aspect of Roman culture, due to the emphasised role it plays for the perception of Roman antiquity. The arena combats may be one of the key elements associated with the Romans and are often regarded with fascination.

The popularity of gladiators can be observed from the childhood onwards: Asterix and Obelix become gladiators in one volume,⁹ Playmobil offered toy gladiators and an arena,¹⁰ computer games allow one to act as a gladiator and numerous children's books are dedicated to the description of the

⁹ *Asterix the Gladiator*, 1969 (in English); French version 1964.

¹⁰ http://www.playmobil.de/on/demandware.store/Sites-DE-Site/de_DE/Product-Show?pid=4270&cgid=Ds_Supersonderangebote

gladiator games. For adults, a huge amount of literature (scientific and fictional) is available. Even the film industry at Hollywood discovered long ago that gladiator films turn easily into blockbusters. A quite recent and widely known example is *Gladiator* (2000) directed by Ridley Scott, while *Spartacus*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, dates back to 1960. Archaeological parks organise special events to attract visitors, where experimental archaeology groups show gladiatorial combat.¹¹

The Colosseum might be the place *par excellence* to be associated with gladiator combat and therefore seems suitable to host a respective thematic exhibition. Nevertheless, the combats in the Colosseum were only one aspect: numerous other places existed that had strong ties to the life of gladiators in Rome. Among the preserved examples is the Ludus Magnus, situated close by the Colosseum. It was used from the late 1st century AD onwards as an accommodation and training area for the gladiators and incorporated a small arena.

The Amphitheatrum Castrense was another smaller amphitheatre at Rome, later incorporated in the Aurelian city wall. Finally, the Forum Romanum had been used in previous periods for gladiator combats. The exhibition did not refer to all these other sites as further places of interest, but focused on the connection between gladiators and the Colosseum.

Much care was taken to find examples for the exhibited replicas. The sources for the reconstruction and their date are always mentioned. Nevertheless, the visitor had to keep in mind that examples for the armour on show were gathered from many regions of the former Empire and that they dated to various centuries. Even if it may be assumed that the gladiator types did not undergo highly significant changes in the respective time frame, it has to be

¹¹ <http://www.carnuntum.co.at/veranstaltungen/2010/veranstaltungen/gladiatoren-in-der-arena>

pointed out that the proposed reconstructions had to be regarded as a reasoned approximation to the past reality, and were not to be taken for it.

A general archaeological and museological debate questions whether major exhibitions should be held at the Colosseum at all. As a starting point for the discussion, the number of visitors to the Colosseum and the principal museums on Roman archaeology in Rome are mentioned:

In 2005, for example, almost 4,000,000 visitors entered the Colosseum, while only a total of 208,000 visitors went to see one of the National Archaeological Museums at Rome.¹² Less than 10 percent of visitors who see the Colosseum spend time entering a museum in Rome to gain further background information on ancient Roman culture. Critics of major exhibitions in the Colosseum state that these could be much better displayed at other museums, encouraging the visit of the permanent exhibitions of these museums. No need is felt to boost Italy's number one tourist attraction even further, as the 'brand name' 'Colosseum' would sell anyway, no matter what it contains or exhibits.¹³ The attraction of additional visitors might actually be detrimental for the long term preservation of the monument, given the high number of visitors. For sure, there is a point in this argument.

The opposite point of view may be that exhibitions held in the Colosseum are able to reach visitors who would not have wanted to invest extra time and money to see the exhibition at any other location, but who are nevertheless willing to spare a few minutes, after having queued and paid the entrance fee for the Colosseum anyway. If one of the primary aims of archaeological exhibitions is the promotion and fostering of interest in ancient cultures and in archaeology and the raising of awareness of responsibilities regarding cultural heritage, it is a key interest to reach an audience as large as possible. In this

¹² Antinucci 2007: 30.

¹³ Antinucci 2007: 28.

respect, the Colosseum as a location might be particularly suitable to pursue this task.

The discussed viewpoints were mentioned as they are of general methodological interest – not only for the case of Rome. Although this issue is valid for all exhibitions in the Colosseum, this might be of particular concern regarding exhibitions on general aspects of cultural history, which do not have such an immediate relation to the location of the exhibition. The reviewed exhibition has, in contrast to these exhibitions, particular strong ties to the amphitheatre itself.

The Colosseum is connected in a circuit to the archaeological areas of the Palatine and the Forum Romanum, as all three sites can be visited with the same ticket. Visitors cannot decide to pay only for one site if they are not interested in the other two. All these sites are among the historically most relevant and archaeologically most significant archaeological remains of Rome. In addition, they are situated in close vicinity to each other and managed by the same heritage authority, so it might be seen as convenient to combine the entries. Nevertheless, the different sites of the Forum, Palatine and Colosseum included in one ticket are barely linked to each other didactically or conceptually.

The construction of amphitheatres and the inherent spatial shift of gladiator combats (formerly held as funerary games on the Forum as an open public square) to these specialized and architectonically framed spaces had an impact on and was a consequence of the changing function and perception of the Forum. Therefore, the exhibition could have been used to pronounce the link between Forum and Colosseum. The curia on the Forum is an available exhibition space, but was not used to extend the gladiator exhibition spatially and thematically.

The construction of the Metro C line will give a new impulse to the archeo-museological situation in the close vicinity of the Colosseum, affecting not only the visitor's approach to the monument, but creating as well a 3000 m²

visitors center, which shall be incorporated in the new subway station. Mainly findings discovered in the course of the Metro building activity will be displayed here.¹⁴

Comparing the content of exhibitions of the Soprintendenza Speciale at the Colosseum with the exhibition strategies of the Heritage Authority of the City of Rome (Sovrintendenza ai Beni Culturali - Comune di Roma), it can be observed that the latter follows sometimes a different agenda: the Mercati Traiani complex is frequently used for the presentation of modern art and the Ara Pacis museum was once used to celebrate the work of the Italian fashion designer Valentino.¹⁵ For these exhibitions, the archaeological surrounding is more to be seen as a stage, backdrop or as a contrast.

Exhibitions have to restrict themselves regarding possible content that can be transmitted to a visitor. Nevertheless, some aspects which might have been of interest to the public were not addressed by the Colosseum exhibition. Among these are the sociological and psychological meaning of gladiator games for Roman society, which is not limited to the historical aspects, nor to the political role, which was outlined. What did the games mean for society and why were they attractive for individuals to attend? This aspect is difficult to answer by archaeological and textual evidence, but should nevertheless be faced due to its relevance. Another issue that could have been emphasised would have been the role of gladiators in Roman popular culture. As the example for each single replica was given, it was indirectly stated that gladiators could be depicted on a wide range of different artifacts, but it did not become clear enough how prominent depictions of gladiators were in the Roman world. These would have reached from children's toys to oil lamps, mosaics, graffiti and wall paintings. Therefore it would have been interesting

¹⁴ <http://www.romametropolitane.it/articolo.asp?CodMenu=1&CodArt=98>

¹⁵ http://www.mercatiditraiano.it/mostre_ed_eventi/mostre/william_klein_roma_fotografie_1956_1960

to mention where in daily life Romans would have come across depictions of gladiators.

Facing this task would have been comparably easy, as numerous suitable artifacts exist and could have either been presented for real or as images. In the permanent exhibition of the Colosseum some oil lamps depicting gladiators are displayed, but the respective showcase is not linked to the exhibition and presents only one form of popular culture depiction anyway.

While one text is dedicated to the occupation and life of gladiators, the description of their faith seems quite remote and general. This issue was approached better in an exhibition on gladiators held at the archaeological museum at Selçuk (Ephesus) in 2002, where bones of the gladiator necropolis of Ephesus played a central role.¹⁶ These allowed anthropologists to reconstruct the wounds of single individuals, the question of which weapons caused them, and to determine how the individuals died. This approach added a personal dimension to this otherwise remote issue.¹⁷ In Rome, no gladiator necropolis is known so far, but the issue could have nevertheless been raised. A further possible gladiator necropolis was excavated few years ago at York, although the evidence is still under discussion.¹⁸ The future will show how these burials will be presented to the public.

A further interesting aspect would have been the reception of gladiator games in modern times. Why are we fascinated by this cruel form of entertainment? Given that the didactic approach was emphasised in this exhibition, this would have been particularly interesting for younger visitors, who could have been stimulated to reflect on our modern society.

¹⁶ Grossschmidt et al. 2002.

¹⁷ Grossschmidt et al. 2002.

¹⁸ Müldner et al. 2011.

While the mentioned aspects might be of interest, they seem to have been out of the primary scope of the exhibition, which was to describe the history of gladiator games, the different types and the complex organization of the combats. Therefore, the chosen approach was more descriptive than interpretative. For this task, the exhibition was successful and recommendable.

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