Martial, Liber Spectaculorum III

The international and polyglot crowd paying tribute to the emperor in the Flavian amphitheatre.

Name of the author: Martial
Date: 80 CE
Date: 1st CE
Place: Rome
Language: Latin
Category: Roman
Literary genre: Poetry
Title of work: Liber Spectaculorum
Reference: III

Commentary:
The Liber Spectaculorum, or De Spectaculis, is a problematic work. First, its title appears only in some medieval anthologies of Martial’s writings, which have preserved some sequences of his epigrams dealing with a common theme: the spectacles and celebrations organised by the emperors. According to Kathleen Coleman, Martial may have initially written some libelli, that is small groups of epigrams (dealing with celebrations but also with other themes), and presented them to the emperors during some solemn occasions. After having written various libelli, Martial may have gathered them in a bigger collection; an operation which may have happened at the beginning of his career, before the publication of most of his numbered books of Epigrams (Coleman, M. Valerii, p. xxv-xliv). The identity of the Caesar praised in the Liber Spectaculorum is also debated. According to a traditional opinion, all the epigrams would have been composed for a single occasion, the inauguration of the Flavian amphitheatre in 80 CE, and for a unique Caesar, Titus. Kathleen Coleman is opposed to such a reading and has convincingly shown that only a few epigrams can be associated with the inauguration of 80 CE and with Titus. The others may have been composed for Domitian for other festivities. The first three epigrams of the Liber Spectaculorum form a coherent group, and they may have been composed for the inauguration in 80 CE. After a first epigram in which Martial celebrates this amphitheatre as superior to the Wonders of the World, and a second one in which he presents its location in the Roman topography, the poet dedicates a third epigram to its cosmopolitan audience which mirrors the universal dimension of the Empire.

In the introductory question (v. 1-2), Martial sets the main theme of his epigram: Rome and the new Flavian amphitheatre gathered peoples from very remote regions of the oikoumenē. With this hyperbolic statement, the poet implicitly says that the boundaries of the Roman Empire have spread out so far away, that it is perfectly logical that Rome could be perceived as the capital of the oikoumenē. The idea according to which Rome becomes a kind of miniature earth during festivities is not new. For instance, when he describes the naumachia (that is the staging of a naval battle) of Augustus re-enacting the Battle of Salamis, Ovid stresses the numerous young men and women who came from everywhere to attend the spectacle, a situation giving him the impression that “the mighty world was in the City” (atque ingens orbis in Urbe fuit, Ovid, The Art of Love I.174; Coleman, M. Valerii, p. 39). Both authors emphasize the universal dimension of the crowd gathered in the amphitheatre to praise the emperor, but there is one difference. In Ovid, the world is made one with “the City,” whereas Martial presents Rome as the personal property of the emperor, which was a very common feature under Nero and the Flavian emperors (see the allusion to Domitian’s Rome in Statius, Silvae IV.1.18-19; Coleman, M. Valerii, p. 43).

Afterwards, Martial starts his enumeration of the foreign peoples present in the arena. In verses 3 to 6, he lists four peoples, each of which refers to a cardinal direction. The Thracians, here symbolized by the two main mountain ranges of their region (v. 3), may refer to the East. The special diet of the Sarmatians, that of drinking horses’ blood (v. 4), is characteristic of the nomad people from the North. The most remote southern regions are here embodied by the people drinking the water from the Nile’s source (a reference which has to be put in relation to the Neronian operations to discover the source of the Nile, see Lucan, The Civil War I.1-32). Finally, the West is represented by the peoples living on the shores of a “farthest sea” (referring probably to the North Sea), and which
Among the other peoples mentioned (v. 7-10), the reference to the Arabs and the Sabaeans is very interesting as it directly echoes *Aeneid* VII.704-706, when Virgil describes the scenes represented on the shield given by Venus to Aeneas, especially the one in which Apollo threatens some foreign peoples, among whom “all Arabians, all Sabaeans, turned to flee” (*M. Valerii*, p. 46-47; Hinds, “Martial’s Ovid,” p. 152). Whereas Arabians and Sabaeans are represented in the *Aeneid* as frightened by Roman power and as on the verge of being subjected, Martial insists on the fact that they run to Rome (*festinare*, v. 7) to celebrate its greatness. Honora Howell Chapman has also rightly noticed about the presence of Arabs in Martial’s listing that, thanks to Josephus, we know that they had been allied with the Romans during the Judean War, and that they committed war crimes against Judean refugees at Jerusalem during the siege of the city (*Josephus, Jewish War* III.168; V.551-561). Another interesting fact is that we know, also thanks to Josephus, that, during the celebrations of Roman victory in Middle East, many Judeans had been condemned to die in the arenas (*Josephus, Jewish War* VII.24; VII.38-39; VII.96). Thus, Honora Howell Chapman has put in relation these various elements with a striking fact of Martial’s listing of the peoples coming to the amphitheatre in Rome, namely the fact that Judeans are not mentioned. The scholar explains their absence by the fact that they may have not been part of the audience of the amphitheatre, but, on the contrary, the object of the spectacles inside the arena (*Howell Chapman, “Reading the Judeans,”* p. 99-101). Such an interpretation of the epigram may fit in with the restitution made by Géza Alföldy of the text of an imperial dedication which may have been exposed on one of the four main gates inside the arena the Flavian amphitheatre, and which may have mentioned that the emperor ordered the construction of this monument [*ex* *manubis*, “out of the spoils”] of the Judean war (see *Imperial dedication of the Flavian amphitheatre*).

Moreover, this motif of Rome’s former enemies who, once submitted, hurry themselves to celebrate the Roman emperor is not specific to Martial or to the Flavian period. The motif was already used in Horace, *Odes IV*, 14.41-52 (written in celebration of Tiberius’s victory over the Vindelici) when the poet lists all the peoples which were now submitted to Augustus’s power, and who were praising him. Among them, he describes the Sygambri (also mentioned by Martial in verse 9) “with grounded weapons” and who were now worshiping (*venerantur*) Augustus. The only important difference that we can notice between Martial and Horace’s representations of the Sygambri is that Horace insists on their aggressive and ruthless nature, (*caede gaudentes*, “delighting in slaughter”), whereas Martial depicts them as docile spectators only. This difference can be explained logically by the fact that the two poets adapt the Sygambri’s attitude to the narrative context. For Horace, the depiction of the triumph becomes more impressive if the *Sygambri* were still represented as an aggressive people. For Martial however, it works better in a context of imperial celebration, if the Germans were depicted as submitted, even awestruck onlookers.

The most interesting passage of the epigram stands in the last sentence: *Vox diversa sonat populorum, tum tamen una est, cum verus patriae diceres esse pater*; (v. 11-12) “The speech of the peoples sounds different, and yet it is one when you are acclaimed as the true father of the fatherland” (this translation is closer to the Latin text than Walter Ker’s). This crowd is first logically described by Martial as polyglot, as most of the peoples enounced previously came from regions where Latin or Greek were not the languages commonly used. This idea echoes another passage from the depiction of Aeneas’s shield in *Virgil, Aeneid* VIII.720-723, as the last scene carved on the shield represents Augustus’s triumph in Rome and the procession of the submitted nations before him. These nations are said to be “diverse in fashion of dress and arms as in tongues” (Hinds, “Martial’s Ovid,” p. 152). In Martial’s epigram, behind the cosmopolitan crowd gathered in the amphitheatre, the poet implicitly alludes to nations which had been submitted (more or less by force) to Rome’s power. In that perspective, the peoples running to Rome to praise the emperor were not in fact so different from the nations taking part in the procession during Augustus’s triumph (on this subject, see Moretti, “L’arena,” p. 56). However, Martial deliberately chooses not to represent these foreign peoples as forced or despised. Leaving aside the martial aspect of Rome’s hegemony, Martial presents it through a more advanced aspect, the political unification of the Empire.

In the last verse, the poet describes a sort of miracle: that of the polyglot crowd starting to speak as one while it was acclaiming the emperor as *pater patriae*, “father of the fatherland”. This honorific title was granted to some very prominent characters under the Republic, as Cicero or Julius Caesar, and it became one of the usual titles given to nearly every Roman emperor from Augustus onward. Titus received this title probably at the end of the year 79 CE and it was for instance mentioned on coins minted in 80-81 CE to commemorate the dedication of the Flavian amphitheatre (see *Sestertius depicting Titus on a sella curule and the Coliseum, 80-81 CE*). By ending the epigram with this title of *pater patriae*, which appears as a sort of rallying point for the polyglot crowd, Martial may have wanted to stress the paternal figure of the emperor, provider of games for his subjects. This construction obviously echoes the structure of the *Res Gestae*, a text which also enumerates a great number of peoples submitted by the emperor and which also ends with a reference to the fact that the Senate, the equestrian order...
and the Roman people awarded the title *pater patriae* to Augustus (Coleman, *M. Valerii*, p. 41-42). In Martial's epigram, the acclamation of the emperor Titus as the father of the fatherland is ideally staged as a sort of unanimous reward from his polyglot subjects which, for most of them, were not Roman citizens. The celebration of the emperor is thus presented as the element unifying every nation on earth under one principle, the recognition of Rome's political hegemony.

Keywords in the original language:

- Aethiopes
- Arabes
- Caesar
- Cilices
diversus
- festino
gens barbara
- Haemus
- Nius
- pater patriae
- populus
- Rhodope
- Sarmata
- spectator
- Sygambri
- Tethys
urbs
- vox

Thematic keywords in English:

- Coliseum
cosmopolitanism
father of the fatherland
festival
Flavians
oikoumenè
polyglotism
Roman empire
Roman hegemony
Rome (city)
Titus

Bibliographical references:  Howell Chapman, Honora, “Reading the Judeans and the Judean War in Martial’s *Liber spectaculorum*”, Journal for the study of the pseudepigrapha 22/2 (2012) : 91-113


Other sources connected with this document:  Text

**Horace, Odes IV.14.1-52**

Drusus and Tiberius and the superiority of Imperial Rome
Numismatic item

**Sestertius depicting Titus on a sella curule and the Coliseum (80-81 CE)**

- [Read more about Sestertius depicting Titus on a sella curule and the Coliseum (80-81 CE)]

Text

**Virgil, *Aeneid* VIII.615-731**

Aeneas receives his shield, made by Vulcan, from Venus

- [Read more about Virgil, *Aeneid* VIII.615-731]

Inscription

**Imperial dedication of the Flavian amphitheatre (CIL VI, 40454a)**

Reconstruction of the inscription produced for the inauguration of the Flavian amphitheatre under Vespasian and then under Titus.

- [Read more about Imperial dedication of the Flavian amphitheatre (CIL VI, 40454a)]

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