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Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp: Theater der Macht

Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp has written a magisterial and engaging treatment that spans the range of Roman political spectacle, which he terms "civic ritual", from the emergence of the office-holding class (*nobiles*) in the later 4th century BC to the death of Augustus. This detailed and ambitious book revisits many of the themes that Hölkeskamp has treated in his distinguished career. At the same time, it offers more than a sophisticated synthesis in that it both goes beyond what was argued in earlier treatments and also presents a text that is accessible to a wider audience of interested readers and students. This is a book that will be the definitive treatment of the approach that Hölkeskamp has pioneered, one that focusses on the role of spectacle, self-representation, and commemoration in Roman republican political culture.

This volume is beautifully produced on cream paper and includes a ribbon bookmark that comes in very useful in negotiating its over 700 pages. Almost 80 line drawings and half-tones are fully integrated into the text in a way that makes the most of their contribution to the argument. They include coins, family trees, topographical plans, portraits, inscriptions, reliefs, and reconstructions. The placement of the footnotes at the end of the text and the inclusion of a thorough glossary makes these arguments relatively more accessible. The resulting volume reveals how much thought has gone into the final product, both on the part of the author and of the production team at Beck.

Hölkeskamp's book is divided into seven main chapters, which are framed by a methodological introduction and a succinct conclusion. In other words, it is easy to get a clear idea at the outset of what is being argued and why. In addition, the discussions of Roman spectacle are enriched by parallel digressions that afford glimpses of civic spectacle in Athens, Montpellier, Venice, Paris, and Germany at different historical periods and in diverse political situations. The inclusion of Augustus at various points in the narrative, especially in his role as an (re)interpreter of republican political spectacle and image making, adds a fresh dimension to much that has been written before. As Octavian and then as Augustus, the first *princeps* paid close attention both to the vast potential and to the numerous pitfalls that Roman traditional political culture brought with it. He was himself an expert image maker but also a synthesizer and interpreter of traditions, as this discussion reveals. Reading Augustus' choices as his own special commentary on what he had inherited and witnessed is an analytical strategy that still has many new insights to offer. While Augustus' highly self-conscious performances provide the material for a rich final chapter, he is present throughout the text as an observer of the power of images and of rituals, especially within the sacral topography of the city of Rome.

Hölkeskamp covers an impressive range of public gestures, words, and customs from the grandest to the most mundane. His main focus is, inevitably, on the great processions (*pompae*), especially the big three of the triumphal victory parade, the processions at public games, and the magnificent funerals of officer-holders and of their family members. In many ways, the triumph in and of itself takes pride of place at the heart of this story, even as it stood as the ultimate accolade within the economy of Roman political spectacle. Hölkeskamp brings out not only the impact of the celebration itself but also of the numerous echoes and reechoes of that special day in the imagination of Roman citizens.

At the same time, Hölkeskamp includes careful treatment of the many more modest rituals that functioned alongside the city's grand celebrations to infuse everyday life with customs that made republican values and hierarchies visible and integral to the city. Such practices included a general setting out for war, the morning reception (*salutatio*) of Roman senators, the movement of senators and magistrates around the city at customary times of the day, and episodes of discipline and punishment in public places. Similar rituals governed the complex and frequent manner of voting in elections or for new legislation, the public


speeches of magistrates, and the meetings of the senate. Hölkeskamp brings out the complex web of interconnections between these various practices in order to paint an intricate picture of how Roman political culture functioned.

Where Hölkeskamp breaks new ground in providing a fuller and more nuanced appreciation of the role played by the various audiences at these public events. A simpler focus on spectacle might have taken the crowds for granted or even interpreted them as passive recipients of a range of political messages that were designed to communicate the priorities of the political class. Hölkeskamp stresses their essential function as participants in each performance; only an appreciative audience could give meaning to a parade or a speech or an appearance of a politician with his entourage of lictors carrying the rods and axes (*fasces*) that symbolized the power the voters had given him for that year. A negative reaction could be politically and socially damaging.

Meanwhile, the historical narrative woven into these chapters inevitably also highlights moments of transgression, especially in the first century BC, as well as inherent tendencies towards self-destruction, most frequently in what Hölkeskamp terms "Spiralen der Steigerung". When staged according to traditional norms, such rituals could and did reinforce the political system, balance competition with cooperation, and create community consensus, especially around Rome's expanding imperialistic projects. But competition between ambitious generals and their family networks, when combined with the access to vastly increasing wealth, also created risks that societal consensus over the rules of the political game could be destabilized and ultimately upended by politicians who amassed more resources and prestige than their peers.

In many ways, this book aims to present a history of republican Rome through its spectacles, expansively conceived of and lovingly described in rich detail. This fascinating story is consistently illustrated with vignettes from Roman history and with close attention to the visual and performative culture of the Romans. According to Hölkeskamp, therefore, civic ritual provided the essential framework and the rules of the game by which politics in Rome was played over several centuries, even beyond republicanism into the early principate. Such civic rituals created and supported republican government, even as they contained many of the seeds of its eventual collapse. Republican politics was theater performed in front of an audience of citizens. The extensive use of the framework of "civic ritual" often leads Hölkeskamp to refer also to temples, priesthoods, and many aspects of traditional Roman religion. Yet the index to this book does not have an entry for "religion", a category that is here effectively subsumed within the larger context of "politics". Nevertheless, the detailed treatment this book gives to so many practices, habits, symbols, and spaces, in itself suggests that the religious sphere, with its own rituals and its relationship with the gods who supported Rome, provides a closely related frame of reference that lies open for further exploration.

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