

Citation style

Schiemann, Konstanze: Rezension über: Alexander Puk, Das römische Spielwesen in der Spätantike, Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2014, in: Plekos. Elektronische Zeitschrift für Rezensionen und Berichte zur Erforschung der Spätantike, 21 (2019), S. 291-297, DOI: 10.21245/rec.ant.260745342, heruntergeladen über Website



copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

Alexander Puk: *Das römische Spielewesen in der Spätantike*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2014 (Millennium-Studien 48). xvi, 529 p., 123 plates. € 129.95. ISBN: 978-3-11-033745-7.

Late antique sports and spectacles have garnered much scholarly attention in recent years. Ruth Webb's work on pantomime, mime and dance from 2009 and Juan Antonio Jiménez Sánchez' book from 2010 on pagan games in the Christian Roman Empire are just two examples of the in-depth and thematically diverse studies that have appeared in this area.¹ Alexander Puk's book "Das Römische Spielewesen in der Spätantike", which is based on his dissertation at the University of Heidelberg, profits from this recent abundance of scholarship. This book brings the results and discussions together and offers a valuable synthesis of the current state of research. The scope of the book is ambitious: Puk covers almost all spectacles – chariot racing, gladiator fights, animal hunts as well as mime and pantomime – in the entire Roman Empire over a period of 350 years. Athletic competitions are notably absent in this study, as they have been the subject of a recently published dissertation by Sofie Remijsen.² In Puk's opinion, in particular the role of spectacles as a "verbindendes Element" (19), a common place, within late antique society imposes the need for further research.

Puk's aim is to fill two research gaps: to offer a cross-regional comparison of the spectacles and to explain the function of spectacles on a provincial level, prioritising this over the better studied capitals and large urban centres. Furthermore, he sets out to take into account the imperial and clerical perspective but also the perspective of the urban elite and the general public. His source corpus is equally all-encompassing, incorporating all available material including literary, archaeological, iconographic and epigraphic sources.

The book is divided in two parts. The first one consists of three chapters covering three areas of importance to the spectacles, namely church discourse ("Kirchlicher Diskurs und soziale Realität", 21–52), imperial policy

1 R. Webb: *Demons and Dancers. Performances in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge, MA 2008; J. A. Jiménez Sánchez: *Los juegos paganos en la Roma cristiana*. Treviso/Rome 2010 (*Ludica. Collana di storia del gioco* 10).

2 S. Remijsen: *The End of Greek Athletics in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge 2015.

(“Die Herrscher zwischen Kontinuität und Kompromiss”, 53–84) and organisation and financing (“Organisation und Finanzierung”, 85–160). The chapters of the second part of the book are each dedicated to one of the spectacles – chariot racing, gladiator fights and animal hunts, mime and pantomime. Each of those chapters contains a general overview of the source material and discusses specific aspects relevant to the respective type of spectacle. In his conclusion, Puk revisits some of the main themes of the book and then discusses reasons for the decline of spectacles on the threshold of the Middle Ages. In total, the volume contains almost 400 pages of text and around 250 pages of annexes, including a 120-page catalogue of mostly coloured images.

In chapter two, “Kirchlicher Diskurs und soziale Realität”, Puk dissects what he calls the discourse of dichotomy (“Diskurs der Dichotomie” (21)) between Christian identity and the attendance of Roman spectacles. This discourse, carried by the voices of prominent clerics, tried to present these two aspects of life as mutually exclusive. The continued popularity of the games, confirmed by the persistent protests of the Church officials, shows however, that their attempt to impose this dichotomy on the Christian community was unsuccessful. Puk examines this problem in two steps: first, he sketches the thematic variety of the Christian critique and the strategies that the clerics employed in their arguments against spectacles. Then, in a second step, he turns to ambivalences and contradictions within the Church discourse in which he sees the reasons for its failure to enact real life change. The chapter in general – as Puk himself points out in the chapter’s introduction – presents more of a summary of existing scholarship than a new argument. The main conclusion is that the late antique critique of spectacles was mainly based on rhetoric from a time when Christianity was far from the dominant cultural force it later became. Therefore, the discourse was too far removed from everyday reality to effect actual change.

The third chapter analyses the real-life consequences of imperial policies between the traditional form of the spectacles and the new expectations of an increasingly Christianised world. This analysis is mainly based on legal texts. The structure of the chapter mirrors some of the main points made in chapter two, for example regarding the de-sacralisation of the games (as an answer to the critique of the games as pagan festivals) and the moral reservations (as an answer to the critique of moral corruption by the games). Puk asserts that the aim of the imperial policy in Late Antiquity, as manifested in

laws, was to create a neutral third space (“neutraler Handlungsraum” (57)) and to give spectacles the status of cultural heritage (“kulturelles Erbe” (55)) free from any religious connotation. Rather, public entertainment was an important tool for an emperor to appease the general population. It was the emperor’s duty to ensure the people the provision of these amusements. Puk concludes that the late antique emperors did not cave to Christian imperatives but that, instead, they compromised where necessary, as when they forbade games on Christian holidays, and otherwise ensured the continued staging of spectacles throughout the empire. By designating the spectacles as a religiously neutral space, the emperors managed to evade some of the Christian critique.

The fourth chapter inquires how the spectacles were organised and financed, with an emphasis on the latter. The chapter is divided into two main parts, one on the imperial finances and another on the civic finances. Puk investigates the theses of fiscalisation and centralisation of the games – mainly argued by Alan Cameron³ – and aims to examine the sources that they are based on more closely. He places these changes in the organisation of the games in the broader context of strengthened control by the imperial government over municipal finances and concludes that the process of fiscalisation was not a phenomenon of the fifth century but already began earlier, in the fourth century AD. Furthermore, Puk promotes the idea that the games were financed through a piecemeal financing scheme, involving local and provincial funds. Puk also discusses the appearance of several imperial offices in Late Antiquity that were apparently charged with the supervision of the games. He stays, however, sceptical of whether the existence of such offices proves a centralisation of the organisation of spectacles, by pointing to the higher number of imperial officials in Late Antiquity in general. He concludes that there is no evidence for a major change in imperial policy concerning the organisation and financing of games in Late Antiquity compared to the high imperial period.

The second part of chapter four is mainly concerned with the state of euergetism in late antique cities. Local elite kept investing in spectacles and when imperial funding was added where needed, it always complemented private or civic funds, but did not replace them. At the end, it was this kind

3 See A. Cameron: *Circus Factions. Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium*. Oxford 1976.

of piecemeal financing that ensured the continuity of spectacles in the Eastern provinces and in North Africa up to the sixth century. Furthermore, the evidence shows that for local magistrates, spectacles still played a role in their competition for prestige. In the rest of the Western provinces, the decline of local elites, their reorientation towards the church and the instability of the political situation led to a slow end of spectacles. The chapter is concluded by a discussion of the role of the circus factions. Here, Puk offers some impulses for a necessary review of Alan Cameron's theses from his 1976 book, which hopefully inspires more research in the future.

In the first chapter of the second part, chapter five, Puk turns his attention towards chariot racing (161–228). He traces the rise of chariot racing to the most popular form of entertainment, first with its spread from Rome to the Western provinces and then, at the beginning of Late Antiquity, to the Eastern regions. Particular emphasis is put on the connection of chariot racing, especially in the Western provinces, to imperial representation, as the races were particularly popular in administrative centres. He observes that, although the hippodrome as a space of political communication allowed criticism of the emperor, it was predominantly a venue to (symbolically) manifest and consolidate the emperor's power. Since this does not only apply to chariot races but to other shows, this discussion might have been better placed in the third chapter. Puk continues to discuss typical circus imagery in detail: victorious charioteers and racehorses were generic images for triumph, success and prosperity. The elite demonstrated via the mosaics decorating their homes – a style especially popular in the Western provinces – their participation in an imperial-wide cultural institution. The fact that these kinds of decorations are not equally found in the East points to a difference in cultural values that Puk only shortly elaborates on.

The sixth chapter is divided in a part on gladiator fights (230–263) and one on animal hunts (264–287). After an overview of the practice of presenting gladiator fights in Late Antiquity, Puk concludes that the gladiatorial tradition must have declined significantly from the mid-third century onwards and came to its definite end around AD 400. In the following, Puk debates the usual theses discussed when it comes to the reasons for the end of gladiator games, namely excessive costs, the effect of a progressively Christianised society and the proposition by Georges Ville of a change in popular taste. Puk devotes most pages to the latter claim, which is often stated by scholars but seldom spelled out and properly supported by sources. In this

section, Puk points out how animal hunts and chariot races lent themselves better for imperial representational purposes. This might explain a change of spectacles in the capitals but Puk's argument does not necessarily apply to the provinces as well. More interesting but less elaborated on is the parallelism of the end of gladiator games and the end of athletics in the East. The gladiators presented themselves in a similar fashion as the athletes⁴ which might make their decline more plausible as public taste moved away from the "Körperkult" (263) of the athletes to more spectacular entertainment. The second part of chapter six on animal hunts brings together a lot of fragmentary source material in the general overview to show their continued popularity in the Roman Empire even after the end of gladiator games. In his discussion of the exotic appeal of the animal hunts, Puk repeats the claim often found in scholarly literature that the late antique animal hunts evolved to a less violent kind of show and started to resemble modern circus dressage, without sufficient evidence. Enlightening, however, is the discussion of venues being converted to accommodate animal hunts, demonstrating their continuing existence and popularity in the provinces, beyond Constantinople and Rome.

In his seventh chapter (289–375), Puk shows how mime and pantomime continued into the sixth century and how, in that time, they expanded beyond the theatre and moved into the hippodrome, as performances during intermissions between chariot races, and into the streets. Despite several recorded riots that originated at pantomime performances, they were not abolished; this was the case, as Puk sees it, because they were too popular. Puk emphasises in particular the role of the theatre as a communicative space for the urban society and as a centre of social life. One of the reasons Puk puts forward to explain the social function of the theatre is the recourse of mime and pantomime performances to mythology. Puk argues that this made the shows accessible to all because mythology was perceived as a common place that transcended potential religious lines. Puk describes the theatre in this context as a heterotopy, a term coined by Michel Foucault denoting a space in which the usual social norms and expectations are not adhered to.⁵ It is

4 See C. Mann: 'Um keinen Kranz, um das Leben kämpfen wir!' Gladiatoren im Osten des Römischen Reiches und die Frage der Romanisierung. Berlin 2011 (Studien zur Alten Geschichte 14).

5 See M. Foucault: Des espaces autres. Hétérotopies. In: Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité 5, 1984, 46–49.

not entirely clear why this concept is only discussed in connection with the theatre since it seems to be applicable to hippodromes and amphitheatres as well.

In his conclusion, Puk stresses the continuity of spectacles as an important part of urban life in the East and West of the late antique Roman Empire, despite facing criticism by church officials. In his view, all actors – even the clerics – had a vested interest in keeping the spectacles going. The population perceived the spectacles as religiously neutral and as a joined activity for all members of society. Puk rightfully insists on the structural decline of the West despite some recent emphasis on transformations instead of decline in scholarly literature. The effect of Christianity on the end of spectacles lay not so much in its moral opposition but rather in its de-emphasising of urbanity – monasteries and churches were being built in the cities' surroundings – and in producing new opportunities for the elites within the church hierarchy and away from civic liturgies. These factors explain the decline of Roman spectacles in the West but are not equally applicable to the East. Puk's analysis of the reasons for the decline is much stronger for the Western than for the Eastern provinces.

The ambitious scope of the book is both a strength and a weakness. Puk brings together an impressive amount of material but a detailed discussion and an argumentation firmly based on such a discussion is often lacking, or at least hard to trace. Many interesting thoughts are in fact hidden in the extensive footnotes instead of being properly part of the analysis. Despite Puk's declared interest in a differentiated view on the different types of spectacles a lot of the nuance is lost in the general conclusions. This is also true for his aim to include the perspectives of all social groups involved. Since the sources often do not represent the point of view of the general public, its role stays underdeveloped. Some of the theoretical concepts used, like cultural heritage and identity construction, stay likewise underdeveloped. There is a conversation to be had about what 'Christian identity' actually means when, as Puk correctly points out, religious categories apparently did not play a significant role in the decision of members of the general public to attend spectacles or not. Nevertheless, the comprehensiveness of this volume, in regard to the sources used and the scope of the bibliography, will be of great use for further research.

Konstanze Schiemann, Amsterdam
k.schiemann@uva.nl

www.plekos.de

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Konstanze Schiemann: Rezension zu: Alexander Puk: Das römische Spielewesen in der Spätantike. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2014 (Millennium-Studien 48). In: Plekos 21, 2019, 291–297 (URL: <http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2019/r-puk.pdf>).
