

“Are You Not Entertained?”: Images of the Arena (and Why they Matter)
on the Monumental Tombs at Ghirza

The ancient settlement of Ghirza, located in North Africa in the ancient Roman province of Tripolitania, was one of a series of fortified farmsteads, or *gsurs*, founded in the region during the Late Roman Empire. The focus of scholarly work on the site has been on the monumental mausolea (3rd-6th c. CE) located to the north and south of the main settlement.¹ The sculpted decoration and architectural form of the mausolea, especially, have garnered them much scholarly attention as physical examples of a hybrid Romano-Libyan cultural identity.² The subjects pressed into use to decorate the metopes, columns and friezes of the temple include agricultural scenes (sowing, reaping), scenes related to trade (camel caravans, especially) and local power structures (the “chief scenes”) and so-called “hunting” scenes which are thought to depict life in the Tripolitanian pre-desert. First studied in-depth by Olwen Brogan in the 1960’s, the mausolea have been re-examined in recent years by David Mattingly and Paul Zanker, who both emphasize that Greco-Roman images on the mausolea impart local, Libyan messages and concerns.³ Both Mattingly and Zanker emphasized the hybrid nature of the sculpted reliefs, and both argued that the scenes from the Ghirza tombs should be interpreted as reflections of cultural identity and power strategies among the local leading families.⁴ Although both acknowledged the obvious Roman influence, Zanker and Mattingly argued that the intended audience for the mausolea were undoubtedly local, and that Roman elements were adopted selectively and critically; according to Mattingly, although the style of sculpted reliefs reflected Roman culture,

¹ Brogan and Smith 1984: 47-99.

² Brogan and Smith 1984: 215-224; Smith 1985; Mattingly 1999; Mattingly 2003; Zanker 2008.

³ Mattingly 1999: 384, 390-391, 395-397; Mattingly 2003: 153-154, 170; Zanker 2008: 224-226.

⁴ Mattingly 1999: 384, 390-396; Mattingly 2003: 153-154, 159-166; Zanker 2008: 214, 216, 225-226.

the subjects of the images “may have been selected because they had a particular resonance in Libyan society.”⁵

In this paper, I use Zanker and Mattingly’s analysis of the Ghirza monumental tomb reliefs and their discursive role in reflecting the negotiation of local culture and power structures within the context of the larger Roman empire as a jumping off point to revisit the ways in which Greco-Roman “stock” scenes were used and appropriated by provincial peoples. In particular, I focus on the 16 “hunting” scenes which Brogan argued “represented something very close to the experience of the people on the frontier.”⁶ Although Brogan understood these hunting and fighting scenes to be motivated and inspired by local interests and culture (i.e. a reflection of real or idealized battles happening in the pre-desert region), Mattingly and Zanker both acknowledge that these “hunting” scenes are reminiscent of images of the Roman arena (which were popular in various media throughout the empire, especially in North Africa); however, Zanker and Mattingly argue only that arena scenes provided the *inspiration* for the hunting images at Ghirza.⁷ Instead, I argue that these “hunting” scenes should be more properly identified as scenes of the arena, deliberately selected by local elites to express not only their connection with Roman culture, but their integration into the Roman imperial power hierarchy. I begin with highlighting the compositional connections between the “hunt” scenes at Ghirza and depictions of arena and amphitheatrical games found on mosaics and sculptural reliefs from North Africa and Italy in the 2nd-5th c. CE. Next, I draw parallels between the types of activities depicted (animal hunts, executions, fights, etc), in Roman art and the Ghirza reliefs. Finally, I discuss how the arena—and depictions of it-- reinforced the power of the imperial family, and how local

⁵ Mattingly 2003: 169.

⁶ Brogan and Smith 1984: 222.

⁷ Mattingly 1999: 390-391; Zanker 2008: 220-221.

elites (in this case, those at Ghirza) utilized depictions of the arena to highlight their integration into imperial Roman culture.

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