

Entertainment in ancient rome

People



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Entertainment was an essential part of everyday life in ancient Rome. Massive monuments were built for the sole purpose of distracting the average Roman. Evidence of their existence today, long after the Empire has fallen, indicate that the Romans took entertainment very seriously, and devoted a large portion of their time and finances for this endeavour. The spectacles ranged in size and splendour, from the modest but technically advanced theatre performances to the massive and brutal gladiatorial battles pitched in the Colosseum. Juvenal, a poet of ancient Rome, once said that all the Romans cared about was “panem et circenses” (bread and circuses) - meaning that as long as a Roman had nourishment and diversions, they were happy. But why? It is reasonable to say that living in ancient Rome was not always a world of luxurious comfort for all, yet all Romans, regardless of class could enjoy the entertainment that was arranged. Even though most forms of entertainment were financed by the wealthy, they were usually available to all inhabitants of Rome. Massive amounts of funds were poured into keeping the average Roman busy and unquestioning, arguably leaving the true leaders of Rome to employ the considerable power they had over the known world. It is clear that the entertainment of Rome served more than just the purpose of being a pleasant relaxation of the average citizen, but was a tool wielded by the powerful to gain or maintain influence and also subdue the masses so that they were not challenged. It is clear that in terms of arena spectacles, there were games offered to demonstrate the power of the Emperor to the average Roman, meant to instill fear and obedience. Spectacles also offered the Roman a view of glorious and noble death, one that could, hypothetically be theirs through extreme dedication to the state. It could be said that the

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more violent spectacles served as propaganda for the powers of Rome, and were a useful tool in their arsenal. Those who financed the spectacles were usually well known to the public, and became champions for the regular citizen in an attempt to curry favour from the masses. Many spectacles were purely for the benefit of the leader of Rome. Though they were usually metaphorical in nature, the message was clear: Obey your leader, or terrible things will happen to you. There are various examples of spectacles used as a warning to others, ranging from the subtle to the obvious. An example of subtle propaganda would be a theatrical piece, staged to demonstrate the punishment that occurs when one does not obey the leader. An example from the other end of the spectrum is as simple as public executions. The end result for both was the same. In *Entertainment and Violence in Ancient Rome*, Magnus Wistrand explains how this was used by the powerful. “ In this first book of epigrams Martial repeatedly describes a stunning show of lions and hares; the lions were seen to play with the hares holding them carefully in their giant jaws or letting them jump peacefully around in their mouths. The scene is interpreted in several ways by the poet. When he first describes it, Martial places it side by side with a reference to Jupiter’s eagle flying away with the boy Ganymedes without harming him and then asks the reader: “ Which miracle do you think is the greatest? ” He does not answer the question, but comments: there is the highest authority for both, since the emperor is behind one, Jupiter the other. What Martial is really saying here is that the emperor is Jupiter incarnate. In the next epigram, depicting the peaceful and idyllic performance, the question is asked: “ What makes the rapacious lion spare his prey? ” The answer follows immediately: “ The lion is said to be your animal, Caesar, that is why! ” The idea is, of course, that the

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King of the Beasts - *nemorum dominus et rex* in Martial's own words- is subject to the emperor, whose godlike power or *numen* pervades all of nature. Thus the show demonstrates the omnipresent, overwhelming power of the emperor. Elsewhere the scene is understood as proof of the emperor's greatness: just as the mighty lions do not bother with small game such as hare, the proper prey of gods, the emperor does not concern himself with trivial enemies. " (Wistrand, P. 20) This clearly exemplifies the measures taken by the powerful to ensure they were never crossed. Wistrand also expostulates that " Executions should be public so that the spectators might improve and be deterred from further wrongdoing. " (Wistrand, p. 18) The consequence of disobeying the ruler were displayed for all to see without any attempt at subtlety. " Roman society was one in which the infliction of pain and the mutilation of another's body were considered appropriate methods of establishing the authority of the ruling class. " writes Shelton in *As the Romans Did*. " Most citizens had few rights, but slaves and prisoners of war had no rights at all. People who themselves felt powerless and brutalized found some satisfaction in watching the infliction of pain of others. " (Shelton, p. 349) The Romans were helpless in dealing with their ruler. In a society built upon conquering, retaliation against a ruler was not always an option. However, venting frustrations in the form of taking in a gladiatorial show would have been normal. In this way, the population was controlled even further. The evidence that I have found indicates that the entertainment available in ancient Rome was intended to influence and subdue the average Roman. This was done metaphorically, through arena shows which portrayed a simple storyline that could easily transpose into a number of plausible metaphors in which the Emperor was always victorious

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over the enemy, as pointed out in the first piece of evidence. In the second piece of evidence, it says that public executions were meant as a deterrent for crimes against the Empire. Public executions were considered entertainment in ancient Rome, and they demonstrated very obviously what happened to those who incited the Empire's rage. " Summing up then, all types of arena shows might be describes as having symbolic values; gladiators demonstrate virtus, animals shows illustrate numen caesaris (the godlike power of the emperor), and public executions are necessary to maintain law and order in society. Seen in this light, it is not startling to find that such performances were not only better appreciated than the traditional low respect shown for entertainment generally would lead one to expect, but even looked upon as good. " (Wistrand, p. 29) These things serve to prove the point that entertainment in ancient Rome was meant to underline who was in charge, and how they were to be obeyed. In the first quote, we see that the Emperor would like to be viewed as omnipotent, not unlike a god. Furthermore, we see that those who did not obey the command of the Emperor were disposed of in a manner that would deter all would-be dissenters. In this, entertainment was clearly used as a means of controlling the population. Romans were also kept under the thumb of the ruler through the available entertainment, which acted as completely effective propaganda. Gladiatorial battles were immensely popular. " The first known gladiatorial games were staged during the funeral of Decimus Junius Brutus in 264; by the end of the third century, the sons of Marcus Aemilius Lepidus would put on combats with twenty-two pairs of gladiators. " (Boatwright, p. 58) Gladiatorial combats would feature fighters paired against other fighters, but also sometimes various animals. Today, society would frown upon such

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bloodsport but in ancient times it was an indispensable part of life. Wistrand states that “ The show incited the spectators to “ beautiful” wounds (*pulchra vulnera*) and contempt of death, since love of glory (*amor laudis*) and desire to win (*cupido victoriae*) could be seen even in the bodies of slaves and criminals. It is obvious that Pliny appreciated the edifying qualities of gladiatorial shows, not of the participants themselves. The wounds were of course seen as morally or philosophically, rather than aesthetically ‘ beautiful’; in other words they were noble or glorious. The fact that the performers were outcasts far from lessened the value of the show; on the contrary the educational element was strengthened, the implicit argument being that is those poor wretches could provide examples of courage and determination to win glory and victory in the face of death, there was all the more reason for real men (*viri*) to emulate them. ” (Wistrand, p. 15) The Romans were being indirectly told that a death from violence, with courage, could achieve glory and was preferable to a life spent in the shadows. It is obvious that “ Entertainment was chosen as a favourite means of social control since it was the most effective vehicle of propaganda in a pre-mass society. ” (Wistrand, p. 79) The audience at certain arena spectacles were not immune to the effects of the show. A passage by Augustine cleared demonstrates how the audience could be manipulated into a fervor by the activities they were witnessing. “ Alypius’s friends too him to the amphitheater on a day of cruel and bloody events, even though he was protesting vehemently and resisting and saying, “ You may drag my body into that place but can you focus my mind and eyes on those spectacles? Though present in body, I will be absent, and I will thus prevail over you and the spectacles.... When they arrived and took seats, the whole place was

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feverish with blood-lust. Alypius closed his eyes, and forbade his mind to pay attention to such atrocities.... When a huge shout from the entire crowd hit him hard, he was overwhelmed by curiosity..... he drank in the savagery. He did not turn away, but rather fixed his gaze on the sight, and swallowed the madness, and lost rational control. He was thrilled by the viciousness of the combat and became drunk with blood-lust. And now he was not the man he had been when he arrived, but was one of the crowd which he had joined... What more can I say? He watched, he shouted, he became inflamed, and he took away from the spectacle an insanity which then goaded him to return. " (Augustine, Confessions, 6. 9) In this we see how easily malleable a person can be when in a group faced with savagery in a spectacle. The mindlessness could easily take over, and persuade a person to become someone they were not, because that is who those around them were also turning into. In supplying the population with violent, bloody entertainment, the ruling faction was keeping the violent persona current and in everyday thought. The ideal ' death with courage' was never far from their thoughts. It would have been quite impossible to think about much else. An important point to mention would be that all spectacles did not miraculously happen. Entertainment was not free, but organised by the elite, and used as a political tool. The wealthy would finance both private and public spectacles to demonstrate their wealth and influence, which could be later used as leverage in the political arena. This encompassed arena displays but was also centred on theatrical events and religious festival events. " Romans spent next to nothing but their time on entertainment; most people went to the arena, theatre or circus because they were invited to go there either for free or for only a small fee. Those who paid for and arranged the shows were

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relatively few. " (Wistrand p. 62) In *Unwritten Rome*, T. P Wisemen states that " festivals or ' games' (ludi) were put on a regular dates throughout the year, in honour of the gods of Rome. These were the occasions when the Roman community met en masse to honour its gods and celebrate its identity. They were a powerful force for social cohesion, and the right to ' view' them was one of the chief privileges of citizenship (Wisemen, p. 175) Make no mistake, the Romans frequented stage shows, despite the contempt they had for actors. In *The Mother-in Law*, Terence spoke at length to his audience. " Now, please listen politely to my request. I am again introducing Terence's play *The Mother-in-Law*, although I have never yet been able to find a quiet, attentive audience for it.... Please, understand his situation and give us your undivided attention, so that other playwrights may be willing to write and so that I may be encouraged in the future to buy and produce new plays. " (Terence, *The Mother-in-Law*, 28-57) It is obvious that there was a demand for theatrical performances, given that there is an audience to whom this person is speaking. However, the theatre was not treated with respect, as the person introducing the play had to beg the audience for silence. Advertising was also employed, to inform the populace of upcoming events, but also as to who the masses could thank for paying for the spectacle itself. " The gladiatorial troop hired by Aulus Suettius Certus will fight in Pompeii on March 31. There will also be a wild animal hunt. The awnings will be used. " (CIL 4. 1190) There are many such examples of advertising in ancient Rome of naming the man funding the entertainment. It can be certain that these men expected some return on their good deeds, and more likely saw it as an investment against power they may have gained from being seen as a public benefactor. " Standard opinion has it that the

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ludi scaenici played a key role in the working of Roman politics. Aediles held responsibility for the organization and supervision of the games. Aspiring politicians, so it is argued, could capitalize upon the aedileship, a notable station on the *cursus honorum*. Fame and popularity accruing from sponsorship of shows that stimulated the *populus* could boost a senatorial career and facilitate movement to the higher magistracies. " (Gruen, p. 188)

It is also worth noting that games and spectacles were organized to keep the ruler in the eye of the public. " Nero presented a large number of different types of entertainments: youth athletic meets, chariot races, theatrical performances, and gladiatorial shows..... And throughout the entire period of the Greatest Games, gifts were distributed among the people; every single day a thousand birds, all different kinds, were given away, as well as vouchers for grain, clothing, gold, silver, and, finally, for ships, apartment buildings, and farms. " (Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars*: Nero 11, 12).

Fronto states that " Because of his shrewd understanding of political science, the emperor [Trajan] gave his attention even to actors and other performers on stage or on the race track or in the arena, since he knew that the Roman people are held in control principally by two things - free grain and shows- that political support depends as much on the entertainment as on matters of serious import..... the shows placate everyone. " (Fronto, *Elements of History* 18) Clearly, beyond a shadow of a doubt, there is irrefutable proof that entertainments were staged to maintain the public image of a ruler and show his goodwill towards the population. It is plain to see that while the average Roman in ancient times could be kept content with diversions in the theatre, circus or arena, there were many forces at work behind entertainment of the time. Through metaphorical (or literal) demonstrations,

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the Emperor would show the populace who the boss was, and exactly what would happen to anyone who dared defy him. Spectacles, chiefly gladiatorial bouts and executions, also discretely informed the average Roman of the type of person they should be- one who died in battle with glory. Given that the Empire grew through military victories, this is not altogether surprising. Lastly, aspiring politicians were able to use the system of public entertainment in their favour, to improve their public standing and begin the machinations of a career in politics, which would lead to wealth and power. While entertainment in ancient Rome set the groundwork for the entertainment of future generations, we know now that the entertainment was also a gilded cage in which the ancient Romans gladly sat, so that they may have their ' Bread and Circuses'. BIBLIOGRAPHY -Boatwright, Mary Taliaferro, Daniel J. Gargola, and Richard J. A. Talbert. A Brief History of the Romans. New York: Oxford UP, 2006. Print. pp 239-242 -Gruen, Erich S. Culture and National Identity in Republican Rome. New York, Cornell University Press, 1992. Print. pp 183-222 -Shelton, Jo-Ann. As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. Print. pp 307-359 -Wiseman, T. P. Unwritten Rome. UK: University of Exeter Press, 2008. Print. pp 175-210. -Wistrand, Magnus. Entertainment and Violence in Ancient Rome. Sweden: Ekbas, extols , 1992. Print. 2 9-79 -Terence, The Mother-in-Law, 28-57 - CIL 4. 1190 (taken from As the Romans Did, p. 351) - Augustine, Confessions, 6. 9 - Suetonius, The Lives of the Caesars: Nero 11, 12 - Fronto, Elements of History 18