

# History of the roman gladiator history essay



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“ Hail Caesar, those who are about to die salute you.” Thousands of men and possibly women uttered this noble salute before they fought for their lives in bloody battle. Those courageous men and women were gladiators.

Throughout history, gladiator battles were used as ways to celebrate events or a convenient way to get rid of conquered enemies. Gladiators were trained combatants who fought fellow human beings, and sometimes animals, to the death to entertain the people of Rome. Most of these fighting spectacles were held at a large Amphitheater called the Coliseum. The majority of these warriors were slaves who were auctioned off and sold to gladiator schools where they were trained to become gladiators. While training at the gladiator schools, the fighters were put in different classes that determined what type of a gladiator they would be. Even though some of them became wealthy by competing and winning fights, most gladiators died in the violent combat and were never able to enjoy fame and fortune. The gladiator of Rome was more than just a warrior; he was one of the many things that defined Rome and its people.

Roman gladiatorial combat originated as a religious event, much like sporting events in many ancient cultures. The Etruscans were the first great power in Italy and many things that seem unique to Rome were actually borrowed from the Etruscans, including the tradition of gladiatorial games. The Greeks also would hold funeral games in honor soldiers or men of importance. These games ended in the symbolic deaths of defeated athletes, and not in the actual death of the participants, like the later Roman games.

The Roman historian Livy wrote about the first known gladiatorial games, held in 310 BCE by the Campanians. These games symbolized the re-

enactment of the Campanians' military success over the Samnites, which the Romans had aided them in. The first Roman gladiatorial games were held in 246 BCE by Marcus and Decimus Brutus in honor of their father, Junius Brutus, as a munus or funeral gift for the dead. It was a relatively small gladiator battle, compared to the future games and just included the combat of three pairs of slaves. From their religious origins, gladiatorial games evolved into defining symbols of Roman culture and became an important part of their culture for nearly seven centuries. Eventually they became so large and popular that the building of a large amphitheatre was required to house all the combatants and their numerous spectators.

Emperor Titus wanted to create more entertainment for the people of Rome by providing more Amphitheatres and other public facilities. A

huge Amphitheater was built in the center of Rome called the Coliseum. It was 50 meters high, 86 meters long and 54 meters wide. It took over ten years to construct and could house almost 50,000 spectators. Many other arenas were built all over the empire, but none of them ever compared to the glory and magnificence of the Coliseum. It was opened on 80 A.D. with emperor Titus there to begin the first games, which lasted 100 days. Most emperors enjoyed gladiator matches and often attended them at the Coliseum. They would oversee most of the games and at some points be the final say in whether the loser was to live or die. Before the games a huge feast was held for the gladiators; for many it was their last meal. Every day for 100 days, day would usually begin with fights between animals or other activities. But the biggest attraction at the Coliseum was of course the gladiator competitions where hundreds of men would die every day for the

amusement of the Roman people. Rome was a very violent society and Gladiators became renowned throughout the empire, despite maybe being low in society.

Most commonly, gladiators were condemned criminals, prisoners of war, or slaves bought for the purpose of gladiatorial combat by an owner of gladiators. There were some men who were not slaves or criminals but professional gladiators. Professional gladiators were free men who volunteered to participate in the games. Though low on the social scale, free men often found popularity and support of wealthy Roman citizens by becoming gladiators. The emperor Augustus sought to preserve the soldier class and Roman senate by forbidding them to participate in gladiatorial combat. Condemned criminals, who committed a capital crime, entered the gladiatorial arena weaponless. Those criminals who did not commit a capital crime were trained in private gladiator schools. At these gladiator schools, gladiators became specialist in combat techniques that disabled and captured their opponents rather than killed them quickly. Criminals trained in gladiator schools fought with the weapons and armor of their choice and could earn their freedom if they survived three to five years of combat. Though a gladiator was only required to fight two or three times a year, few survived the three to five years to earn their freedom. When a gladiator won a match the emperor would reward him with prizes of gold and silver. As a gladiator a poor slave or commoner could suddenly become rich. If a combatant won five fights in a row, he was awarded a wooden sword called a “Rudis” which made him a free man.

As a gladiator, a man gained immediate status even though the gladiatorial oath forced him to act as a slave to his master and “to endure branding, chains, flogging, or death by the sword”. Gladiators were required to do what their owner or gladiator trainer ordered and therefore were honored for their loyalty, courage and discipline in battle and also in gladiator school.

The Gladiators schools were well equipped with trainers, doctors and training equipment to keep the men fit. Most of the men enjoyed their life at the school and as a gladiator much better than when they were free. This is because they were kept comfortable, well fed and clothed and were allowed, on some occasions, to leave the school. Gladiators were placed under the control of their trainers. They all became skilled warriors who spent most of their time with their trainer getting ready for their next fight, which could very well be their last. Most of the trainers were former gladiators and passed the knowledge of their experience down to their students. They were taught naval warfare for when the Coliseum was flooded with water and boats were brought in. Gladiators trained like true athletes, working hard, day in and day out. They received medical attention and three meals a day. Their training included learning how to use various weapons, including the war chain, net, trident, dagger, and lasso. The new gladiators were taught the main fighting skills and then the particular class of fighting which they were the best at. Below is a picture of the Gladiatorial Barracks at Pompeii.

Not all gladiators had the same weapons and armor. There were different classes of gladiators based on size, strength and skill, which determined what type of weapons and armor the gladiator would use in combat. The larger, stronger men were usually trained to become Murmillo or Samnite

gladiators. The Murmillo was heavily armored, carried a rectangular shield and a short sword. The Samnite class was very similar except that he carried a much larger shield. Then there were the Retiarii and Thracian gladiators who were usually smaller and lightly armed. The Retiarii had a net, trident and dagger, while the Thracian was armed with a small round shield and a curved razor-sharp dagger. Most matches were between fighters of different classes to add variety to the fight. Such as a Samnite would fight a Retiarii, where the more lightly armed Retiarii would have more speed and agility. The heavily armed Samnite would be slower but more protected by his armor. There for the Samnite was better equipped for defense and the Retiarii for attack. Even though combat between different classes of gladiators was entertaining to the public, they were also entertained when the fighting involved animals.

Another form of gladiatorial combat involved the “ hunting” and slaying of wild animals, call the venatio, or hunt. Foreign wild animals from all around the Roman empire were brought to Rome and hunts were held to entertain spectators before the main gladiatorial combat. The hunts were not held in the Coliseum but instead in the Forum or the Circus Maximus. Unfortunately none of these locations offered protection to the crowd from the wild animals being hunted. Some onlookers were unlucky enough to become more than just a spectator of the hunt. Special precautions were taken to prevent the animals from escaping, such as the creation of barriers and the digging of ditches. Very few animals survived these hunts though they did sometimes defeat the hunters. Not all the animals in the hunt were vicious but in most cases they were. Animals that appeared included lions, elephants, bears,

deer, wild goats, dogs, and camels. Some of these animals were trained, and instead of fighting performed tricks. Those that did battle with the animals were usually criminals and would have to fight the animals without weapons or armor. These were the lowest class of participants in the games. But low or not, most gladiators were admired by the Roman people.

In ancient Rome, gladiators could earn the idolized status of a hero. Even though a gladiator's social status was barely better than a slave, many Roman citizens, soldiers, and even Roman emperors fought in the gladiatorial arena because of their love of the aggressive sport and their desire to be loved by the people. The Romans seemed unaware to the violent nature of the gladiatorial games and enjoyed them with enthusiasm. The gladiators were the heroes of their time, especially during the years of peace under the Augustans in the first and second centuries. Without war heroes, the Romans needed someone to look up to and adore and this role fell to the gladiators. Roman women especially loved the gladiators, sometimes to the disappointment of their husbands. The mother of Commodus, Faustina, is said to have preferred the gladiator Martianus over her husband, Marcus Aurelius. There is an inscription on a wall in Pompeii that says the Thracian gladiator Celadus was "suspirum et decus puellarum," literally "the sigh and glory of the girls." The Roman people enjoyed the spectacle of the games and especially loved their gladiators.

The gladiator of Rome was more than just a warrior; he was one of the many things that defined Rome and its people. Thousands of men lost their lives in bloody battle to entertain the masses of Rome. Throughout history, gladiator battles were used as ways to celebrate events or a convenient way to get rid

of conquered enemies. Rome changed it to a spectator sport for its people. The gladiator was a trained combatant who fought fellow gladiators, and sometimes animals, to the death. Most of these fighting spectacles were held at a large Amphitheater called the Coliseum. The majority of these warriors were slaves who were auctioned off and sold to gladiator schools where they were trained to become gladiators. The gladiator schools helped decide their future as gladiators and their fate in the arena. Even though some of them became wealthy by competing and winning fights, most gladiators died in the violent combat and were never able to enjoy fame and fortune. For these brave men no amount of freedom or fortune can replace being admired and respected by thousands.