

Roles of gladiators in roman society

Society



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Gladiators were mostly unfree individuals either condemned criminals, prisoners of wars who had lost their citizenship rights, although, some of them were volunteers who were mostly freedmen or very low classes of freeborn men who chose to be a slave for monetary rewards or for the fame. Gladiators were brought for the purpose of gladiatorial combat and would endure branding, chains, flogging or death by the sword and subjected to a rigorous training, fed on a high-energy diet, and given expert medical attention.

Gladiators were famously popular in ancient Rome for seven centuries, from the 3rd century BC to the 4th century AD. In the Roman Republic, they occupied a prominent position in Roman society, they would fight in massive amphitheatres, the most famous being the Colosseum in Rome. The games slowly transformed into spectacles, a form of public execution and was seen by the public as entertainment in simpler, rougher times. It escalated as the Romans valued the art of killing and acted as a distraction for its citizens, allowed them to release their violent impulses and aggression within a completely separate social realm.

We can assume that there were gladiatorial fights before this in Rome but were not recorded and the tradition of gladiatorial combats did not evolve in Rome but considered to have come from the Etruscans. The first recorded gladiatorial fight was in Rome during 264 BC at the funeral of Decimus Junius Brutus Pera and was organised by his sons to pay honour to their deceased father. Three pairs of gladiators fought against each other to the death at his funeral pyre. It was believed that the ritually shed blood reconciled the dead with the living.

We can assume that there were gladiatorial fights before this in Rome, but were not recorded and the tradition of gladiatorial combats did not evolve in Rome but considered to have come from the Etruscans. In Tomb 7 of the necropolis Gaudio near Paestum shows fighting between two men wearing attic helmets of South-Italian type, armour and shields attacking each other with spears. This painting could depict the early types of gladiators and provides evidence that suggest Campania may be the origins of gladiators since the first amphitheatre was built there.

Also, the historians Livius, Strabo and Silius Italicus state that at Campanian banquets gladiators fought to entertain the evening party. Gladiators were formed into troupes called “ Familia gladiatorium” and owned by a person called lanista who recruited, arranged for training and made decisions of where and when the gladiators fought. The gladiators were first asses by a Lanista, adocrand gladiator trainers when entering gladiator school to commence training. Gladiator trainers who worked in schools were often retired gladiators who specialised in specific combat styles and weapons.

There were different types of gladiators who focussed on different fighting styles and weapons that suited them. For example, those who fought in heavy armour weighed them down and were slower which made them require different techniques, while gladiators in light armour were fast and light. The gladiators did not wear Roman military amour since it would send the wrong political signal to the people. Instead they used the weaponry of non-Roman people, to play the role of the enemies. A wooden pole called a palus was used to practice moves with a sword, it allowed a gladiator o practise various strokes such as thrusting, cutting, and slicing.

Trained gladiators had the possibility of surviving and even thriving. Some gladiators did not fight more than two or three times a year, and the best of them became popular heroes. After each fight they were paid, plus donations from the crowd and if he was able to outlive his opponents in the arena for 5 years, he would be free and granted citizenship which he could then become a gladiator trainer or a freelance bodyguard. Gladiators were distinguished by the kind of armour they wore, the weapon they use and they style of fighting.

Usually gladiators stayed in one category, and matches were played so that they were 2 different categories of gladiators. Some classes are the Eques began their matches on horseback, but ended in hand-to-hand combat. They wore tunics, bronze helmets, round shields and a long sword. Another class was the Hoplomachus who fought with a long spear as well as a short sword or dagger; he wore a visored helmet with crest and long greaves over both legs to protect them since he carried only a small shield, usually round.

The attacking class was the Provocator was the most heavily armed and the only one who wore a pectoral covering; the extent of the armour hindered the gladiator's ability to dodge making it slower and agile. However, he was pair with another gladiator to assist him. Battles generally took place on the Roman Forum, until the mid 1st-century BC since there was no permanent amphitheatre. In the imperial period, gladiatorial games were traditionally held twice a year in December and March to mark the end of the year and beginning of spring.

Gladiatorial combat involved beast hunting where the Romans had passion for hunting. For fighting beast, Romans preferred big and dangerous animals

- bears, bulls, elephants and lions from the far reaches of the Roman Empire. Rarely did the animals survive these hunts though occasionally very few animals survived these hunts and defeat the hunter. Many of wild animals would be slaughter in a day. Usually criminals would battle the animals without weapons or armour and were considered the lowest class of participants in the games.

Entry to the games was free. It was seen as a citizen's right to see the games, not a luxury. However, there was frequently not enough room, leading to angry scuffles outside. Gladiatorial combat can be seen as an education of Roman values, notably, strength, courage, training/discipline, endurance and the contempt of death. In other words, it demonstrated soldierly values by illustrating military ideas by punishing cowardly gladiators and praising the victors.

The games served as a distraction to the general public of Roman society, by entertaining them was shows that kept them in good humour. The spectacles symbolised the emperor's power, behaved contrary to their nature, such as the lions which allowed the hares to play in their mouths, and could be interpreted as a clear sign that they had been overwhelmed by a force greater than nature, the emperor. During spectacles, execution of criminals were displayed to make it clear that law and order were upheld, and served as a warning to the consequences to any law breakers.

The pain inflicted was partnered with the criminal's suffering served as a social order by degrading the criminal for the public to witness and regarded as someone who arrogates to himself certain rights to which he is not entitled. Additionally, provided excitement that the Romans enjoyed -

indulging violence, bloodlust and cruelty, this was significant since the citizens of Rome was uneventful the military pursuits and civil war which had kept them entertained were by then over. Whatever happened in the arena, the spectators were on the winning side. They found comfort for death' wrote Tertullian with typical insight, 'in murder'. Various well know Romans had different attitudes towards the games. Writers like Seneca may have expressed disapproval, but they attended the arena where the games were in process. He described the display as boring and therefore unworthy of the attention of a well-reasoned man. In a letter to a friend, he describes what he saw in the arena during the reign of Emperor Caligula: " There is nothing so ruinous to good character as to idle away one's time at some spectacle. Vices have a way of creeping in because of the feeling of pleasure that it brings.

Why do you think that I say that I personally return from shows greedier, more ambitious and more given to luxury, and I might add, with thoughts of greater cruelty and less humanity, simply because I have been among humans? " Seneca was not alone in his view, Cicero, is widely opposed to gladiatorial games, wrote, " A gladiatorial show is apt to seem cruel and brutal to some eyes, and I incline to think that it is, as now conducted, but in the days when it was criminals who crossed swords in the death struggled there could be no better schooling against pain and death".

Ultimately, Cicero was not totally opposed to the idea of gladiatorial games but the concept of using free men as gladiators was cruel. The attitudes of high culture Romans, Cicero and Seneca differed to those of the general public. Their opinion on gladiatorial games was that they were flawed and

inhumane and disapproved of it. A century and a half later, Pliny the younger too had no taste for the brutalities and viciousness of the gladiatorial shows.

In his letter to Sempronius Rufus, he states that he wished that they would be abolished in Rome, as they degrade the character and morals of the whole world. Recommendations were given to soldiers to watch gladiatorial displays to take note of how gladiators fought without fear, because they represented the moral qualities which were required for a good soldier. Victorious gladiators conquered death by displaying his superiority over his opponent. Even if the gladiator had to die he died the death of a Roman citizen through the sword.

Besides, their lives were seen as models of courage and military discipline. One can conclude that, gladiators were criminals, having lost their citizen rights, who had no choice to become a gladiator, although, some citizens freely accepted being a gladiator for the rewards. The public admired and worshiped gladiators even though they were criminals; they displayed great courage and strength in their battles. It took the public's minds of things providing them with a great spectacle entertained them and taking their minds of other issues.

This was extremely popular to the Romans since they enjoyed violence and cruelty. Executions, made upheld Roman law for the public to witness serving as the possible consequences if an individual breached it. Soldiers took note of the valiance and heroism fighting with no fear displaying qualities essentially for any Roman soldier. Thus, gladiatorial combat was a display of nerve and skill which held a lot of importance in the culture and history of Ancient Rome.