

# [The rise of gladiatorial combat in rome essay](https://assignbuster.com/the-rise-of-gladiatorial-combat-in-rome-essay/)

The Rise of Gladiatorial Combat in RomeGladiatorial contests (munera gladitoria), hold a central place in ourperception of Roman behavior. They were also a big influence on how Romansthemselves ordered their lives. Attending the games was one of the practicesthat went with being a Roman. The Etruscans who introduced this type ofcontest in the sixth century BC, are credited with its development but its theRomans who made it famous. A surviving feature of the Roman games was when agladiator fell he was hauled out of the arena by a slave dressed as the Etruscandeath-demon Charun. The slave would carry a hammer which was the demon’sattribute. Moreover, the Latin term for a trainer-manager of gladiators(lanista), was believed to be an Etruscan word. (4: 50) Gladiators of AncientRome lived their lives to the absolute fullest.

Gladiatorial duels had originated from funeral games given in order tosatisfy the dead man’s need for blood, and for centuries their principleoccasions were funerals. The first gladiatorial combats therefore, took placeat the graves of those being honored, but once they became public spectaclesthey moved into amphitheaters. (2: 83) As for the gladiators themselves, an auraof religious sacrifice continued to hang about their combats. Obviously mostspectators just enjoyed the massacre without any remorseful reflections. Evenancient writers felt no pity, they were aware that gladiators had originatedfrom these holocausts in honor of the dead. What was offered to appease thedead was counted as a funeral rite. It is called munus (a service) from being aservice due. The ancients thought that by this sort of spectacle they rendereda service to the dead, after they had made it a more cultured form of cruelty.

The belief was that the souls of the dead are appeased with human blood, theyuse to sacrifice captives or slaves of poor quality at funerals. Afterwards itseemed good to obscure their impiety by making it a pleasure. (6: 170) So afterthe acquired person had been trained to fight as best they can, their trainingwas to learn to be killed! For such reasons gladiators were sometimes known asbustuarii or funeral men. Throughout many centuries of Roman history, thesecommemorations of the dead were still among the principle occasions for suchcombats. Men writing their wills often made provisions for gladiatorial duelsin connection with their funerals. Early in the first century AD, the people ofPollentia forcibly prevented the burial of an official, until his heirs had beencompelled to provide money for a gladiators’ show. (1: 174)It was in Campania and Lucania that the gladiatorial games came to theirfull development and took on their classical form. In these new surroundingsthey took root and flourished, as can be seen in fourth century BC, tombpaintings. These pictures show helmeted gladiators carrying shields and lances, covered with wounds and dripping with blood. (2: 84) For Rome a decisive momentin gladiatorial history was reached in 246 BC, the year when the first Punic Warbegan. At the funeral of Brutus Pera, his two sons for the first time exhibited, in the cattle market, three simultaneous gladiatorial combats. By 216 BC thenumber of fights given on a single occasion had risen to twenty two.(14: 16)In105 BC the two consuls of the year made gladiatorial games official. Therewere no doubts of religious tendency, but the purpose of Roman spectacles, werea public display of power, that power was primarily military, and also tocompensate the soft Greek culture which now was abroad. (8: 98)The GladiatorsThose compelled to fight gladiator duels included prisoners of war, slaves and condemned criminals. Among them were numerous followers of the newChristian faith. During this time persecution fell heavily on their faith, manywon immortal fame as martyrs. Fighting in the arena was one of the sentencesearned by the sacrilege accused against members of the Christian religionbecause of their refusal to sacrifice to the emperor. It was written that theseChristians were forced, as gladiatorial novices to run the gauntlet. At othertimes they were thrown to the wild beasts. Criminals that were used hadcommitted crimes that carried a death sentence or harsh manual labor. Thecrimes which led to the arena were murder, treason, robbery and arson.

Criminals sentenced to forced labor were often obliged to serve as gladiators, and were sentenced to three years of combat and two years in the schools.

Sometimes penalties were differentiated according to social class, thus forcertain crimes which in the case of slaves would involve execution, free men orfreedmen (ex-slaves) were condemned to fight in the arena instead. This did notof course make them gladiators, unless they were trained first, as thoserequired to provide this sort of sport not always were. And indeed asgladiators became more expensive in the second century AD the use of untrainedcriminals in the amphitheater increased.(7: 537) Most gladiators, at Rome andelsewhere were slaves, but in addition there were always some free men whobecame gladiators because they wanted to. The profession was an alternative tobeing a social outcast. They were generally derived from the lowest rankingcategory of free persons, namely the freedman who had themselves been slaves orwere the son of slaves. Free fighters were more sought after than slaves, presumably because they shower greater enthusiasm in the arena. Such avolunteer was offered a bonus if he survived the term of his contract, yet hestill had to swear the terrible oath of submission to be burnt with fire, shackled with chains, whipped with rods and killed with steel like the rest ofthe gladiators. For the period of his engagement, he had become no more than aslave. (7: 539)Majestic Exhibitions and SchoolsThere seemed no end to public entertainment’s of one sort or another at Rome.

First there were the regular functions. The number of days in each year given upto annual games and spectacles of one sort or another in the city wasstartlingly large, and increased continually. Already 66 in the time ofAugustus, it had risen to 135 under Marcus Aurelius, and 175 or more in thefourth century. Gladiatorial amusement had become an essential feature of theservices a ruler had to provide, in order to maintain his popularity and his job.

Emperors themselves had to attend the shows. Emperors watching the shows weredistinct, vulnerable, and subject to public pressures which could not bedisplayed elsewhere. That was why the games were not popular with a few rulerssuch as Marcus Aurelius. He directed that if a gladiator was freed as a resultof popular outcry in the amphitheater the liberation was to be annulled.

Aurelius found the sport boring and indeed he was unenthusiastic about Romanentertainment in general. (10: 87)The teaching of gladiators was highly elaborate affair involvingexpertise appreciated by those members of the public who attended the games forsomething more than blood and thrills. Gladiators were trained at gladiatorschools established during the late Republic at the time of Sulla 138-78 BC.

(2: 86) Novices practiced with wooden swords on a man of straw or a wooden post.

The weapons used in more adept practice were heavier than those used in thearena. Discipline was severe, with ruthless punishments. The barracks theylived in were so low inmates could only sit or lie.(3: 68) Breaking any ruleswas not tolerated and resulted in strict reprimanding: shackles, flogging oreven death. (2: 86) The main objective of the schools were to produce the bestpossible fighters for the arena, thus scrupulous attention was invested ingladiator health. Their schools were situated in favorable climates, andequipped with first class doctors. The schools were also provided with residentmedical consultants to check the men’s diet. Gladiators were called hordearii, barley men, because of the amount of barley that they ate, a muscle buildingfood. (12: 111)The Types of GladiatorsFrom Republican times onward, foreign prisoners were made to fight withtheir own weapons and in their own styles. Many of these men, were merelyprisoners herded into the arena, but various classes of professional gladiatorslikewise came from this category. Such, for example was the origin of thegladiators known as the Samnites. Generally regarded as the prototypes of allRome’s gladiators, they are said to have come into existence after its Samniteenemies introduced a splendid new type of military equipment in 310 BC.

Gladiators were ranked in different categories according to their fighting styleand the type of weapon they used. These Samnites wore the heavy, magnificentarmor of soldiers. It included a large shield (scutum), a leather or partlymetal greave (ocrea) on the left leg, and a visored helmet (galea) with hugecrests and plumes. To these were added sword (gladius) or lance (hasta), andthe sleeve on the right arm which was part of a gladiators generalequipment.(11: 121) Sectores were armed with a sword and mace loaded with lead.

Thraces carried a curved scimitar of varying shape, and a small square or roundshield. Myrmilliones (Guals’) carried a shield and a short scythe and wore adistinctive fish ornament on their helmets. The Retiarii were exceptionallyuncovered, except sometimes for a head band. They carried a trident in one handand a net in the other. Because the throwing of a net as a method of combat, was second rate the Retarii were inferior in status to the ranks, and thus hadthe worst living quarters. (2: 86) The Myrmillo could fight against the Thracianor against the Retiarius or net fighter. But the principle opponent of theRetiarius was the Secutor.(12: 109)The Procedure of the ArenaGladiatorial shows were intensively promoted and advertised to raisepublic attention. Descriptions of upcoming contests, appeared on walls and onthe grave stones beside main roads. The opening ceremonies began the day beforethe fights. It was then that the supporter of the show donated a splendid feastto the contestants about to appear on the following day. The proceedings of themurderous day began with a chariot drive and parade. Led and presented by thesponsor of the games. The gladiators displayed themselves in uniforms topped bycloaks dyed purple with gold embroidery. Climbing down their chariots, theymarched around the arena, followed by slaves carrying their arms and armor.

Gladiators, especially those who belonged to the emperor’s own troop, were oftenfinely equipped. When the combatants arrived opposite the emperor’s platform, they extended their right hands towards him and cried Hail, emperor, greetingsfrom men about to die!’ (Ave, imperator, morituri te salutant!) (7: 538)The games often opened with a convicted criminal being thrown to a lion.

The criminal was given a small sword, and if he could kill the lion his life wasspared. Another way in which they opened the games was to tie the criminal to apillar and lower him into a pit of hungry beasts. After these morbid killingstook place, the animal events would take center stage. The most common of thesefights would be a lion against bear. To make the beast ready for fighting theywould starved the animals and poked them with sticks while in the cage.(5: 17)These events were followed by a break, during this break Gladiatores Meridianetook place. This event consisted of a fully armed gladiator against an unarmedman. The object was simple, to kill your opponent, the winner went on to fightthe next combatant. The overall winner was the person that was standing in theend.(2: 88) The afternoon brought about the beginning of the gladiatorial events.

Staged with a dramatic sense of climax, the afternoon started with second ratedisplays that were bloodless. These mock fighters were calledpaegniarii.(1: 176) After these mock battles came the real fights, the tamest ofthese would be the hand to hand combats with one opponent. However, most of thecontests were worst, ranging from armed fighters against unarmed, two criminalsversus a gladiator, and even a group of gladiators versus another group.

While the fighters were at grips, their trainers (lanista) stood besidethem and hounded them on much like a modern boxers trainer would. Meanwhile thecrowd shouted commands of their own including beat, kill and burn. When a manfell, the herald raised their trumpets, and spectators yelled Got him! He’s hadit!’ (habet, hoc habet). The fallen fighter if he was in a state to move, laiddown his shield, and raised one finger of his left hand for mercy. The decisionwhether his life should be spared, rested with the provider of the games, buthe generally let the crowd make the decision. Thumbs up, and a waving ofhandkerchiefs, meant his life would be spared, thumbs down and he would bekilled without hesitation. While African boys raked over the bloodstained sand, fallen gladiators were taken away. A Charon would verify the gladiators deathand finish him off it was necessary. The costumes of the Charon were designedto look like Mercury, divine guide of dead men’s souls to the infernalregions.(10: 167)If a fighter’s performance had not given satisfaction, or if he was acriminal whose survival was not desired, his life was sometimes risked again onthe same day by orders for a repeat performance, against specially introducedunderstudies. When neither party won and both were spared, each was describedas stans missus, and such a result was often recorded on inscriptions. Thevictorious gladiators were presented with palm branches as a prize, and in Greeklands of the Empire they were given a wreath or crown in addition or instead.

Both palms and crowns are often shown on funeral monuments. The giver of thegames also provided prize money, according to scales stipulated in thegladiators’ contracts. (10: 169)The ArenasIn early times gladiators’ duels took place in whatever public places atown might posses. But then , under the emperors, the characteristic place forsuch a contest was the amphitheater. This was an oval auditorium surrounded byrows of seats facing on to the arena, as in modern bull rings, absorbing theblood of slaughtered men and beasts. The first permanent amphitheater known tous is not in Rome but in Campania, the country which inherited the gladiatorialgames from Eturia and passed them on to the Romans. (13: 225) The largest andmost famous of all such buildings was initiated by the Flavian dynasty. Openedby Titus in AD 80, this Colosseum is one of the most marvelous buildings in theworld. Its massive overall measurements are 187 by 155 meters, of which thespace for the arena itself comprises 86 by 54 meters. There was accommodationfor perhaps 45, 000 sitting spectators and at least 5, 000 more willing to stand.

Underneath the arena is a labyrinth of passages for stage effects, pens for wildbeasts, storage rooms and the mechanism by which scenery and other apparatuswere hoisted into the arena. The emperor’s platform was at the center of one ofthe long sides, facing across to the portion of the auditorium reserved formagistrates and the holder of the games. There were also places for priests, who also attended these bloodthirsty sports. (13: 227) The formula of thecollosseum helped to mold renaissance styles. In the eight century they saidthat: As long as it stands, Rome will stand; when it falls, Rome will fall; when Rome falls, the world will fallThe colosseum has often been raided, but has never fallen. It has been made toserve many purposes, many of which are ironic. These have included sacredoccasions, church services, and plays. Thus through all the depredation thecolosseum has faced over the years inside and outside of the arena, thisindestructible building still towers over the city today. (13: 230)The Gladiator in SocietyThe reputation of gladiators in the eyes of the public was curiouslymixed. For one thing they were feared. Society was never able to forget forvery long that the gladiators were a potential danger to society. So, of coursewere the masses of slaves in general, and that is why their crimes were sosavagely punished, if one slaved murdered his master, the whole household had todie. But by training the gladiators they spared the rest of the slaves family, and forced him to fight for his life in front of the community he violated.

Moreover their legal and moral position in the community was one of completeshame. When a gladiator was killed, his corpse was not permitted honorable tobe buried, unless it was claimed by his family or a friend. (9: 91)However there is ample proof of the admiration and indeed excitementthat the gladiators aroused. Gladiators became so ingrained in the Roman mindand soul that they believed in superstitions that resulted from munera. It wasbelieved that the warm blood of a slaughtered gladiator would cure epilepsy.

When newly married women, parted their hair with a gladiators spear, it broughtgood luck if this had belonged to a man mortally wounded in the arena. (8: 276)Gladiators were also seen highly upon by women, graffiti at the Pompeiiamphitheater reveal that members of the profession were loved with thepassionate infatuation which teenage females have for pop singers today.

Although gladiators lived relatively short lives it was possible to winliberation and retire on receipt of the symbolical wooden sword (rudis). It wasalso noted that some ex-gladiators moved upwards into respectable smart circlesof local bourgeoisie’s (9: 96)Opposition and AbolitionIt was probably assumed that the munera would go on forever, and thatnothing would stop their growth. With the rise of Christianity a religiouspresence lingered about such contests once again. The Roman ruling classesbegan to view these contest with a favorable eye. The excuse of encouragementto warlike toughness continued to be put forward until the eve of the MiddleAges, although it started to become lame and inhumane. Another purpose presentin the minds of Rome’s rulers was the desire that potentially unruly anddangerous city population should be amused and kept quiet. They should be givenentertainment that they wanted, no matter how disgusting if might be.

The games gradually lost its original intentions and connections to theearlier funeral games. Once defenseless human beings are thrown to wildanimals, the original purpose is lost, the purpose now is blood-thirstyspectators viewing inhumane, unjust executions. (2: 87) The new religion howeverended them for good. With the rise of emperor Constantine and Christianity camethe fall of the gladiatorial spectacles. In AD 326, Constantine abolishedgladiators’ games altogether. He also stated that all criminals who would havein the past have been enrolled for the games must in the future be condemned toforced labor in the mines instead. By the end of the fourth century, gladiatorial shows had disappeared from the Eastern Empire. (2: 87)Bibliography1. Cowell, F. Everyday Life in Ancient Rome. London: B. T Batsford Ltd., 1961.

2. Dining, M. A History of Physical Education: Ancient Rome. Toronto: CaptusPress, 1987.

3. Grant, M. The World of Rome. London: Trinity Press, 1960.

4. Hopkins, K Murderous Games. History Today v33 16-22 1983.

5. Harris, H. Sport in Greece and Rome. New York: Cornell University Press, 1972.

6. Hopkins, K. Death and Renewal. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1983.

7. Jory, E Gladiators in the Theatre. Classical Quarterly v36 537-9 1986.

8. Koestler, A. The Gladiators. New York: Macmillan, 1947.

9. Scullard, H. Festival and Ceremonies of the Roman Empire. New York: CornellUniversity Press. 198110. Whyte-Mellville, G. A Tale of Rome and Judea The Gladiators. New York: Longmans Green, 1989.

11. Mattingly, H. Roman Imperial Civilization. London: Edward Arnoldpublication. 195912. Weirdmann, T. Emperors and Gladiators. London: Routledge Press, 199213. Yonah, M Illustrated Enclylopedia of the Classical World. New York: Harperand Roe Pub, 1975.

14. Wilkonson, L. The Roman Experience, Anchor Press, 1975.

15. Compton’s Interactive Encyclopedia, Softkey Multimedia, 1996.