

The rise of gladiatorial combat in rome essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Rise of Gladiatorial Combat in Rome
Gladiatorial contests (munera gladiatoria), hold a central place in our perception of Roman behavior. They were also a big influence on how Romans themselves ordered their lives. Attending the games was one of the practices that went with being a Roman. The Etruscans who introduced this type of contest in the sixth century BC, are credited with its development but it's the Romans who made it famous. A surviving feature of the Roman games was when a gladiator fell he was hauled out of the arena by a slave dressed as the Etruscan death-demon Charun. The slave would carry a hammer which was the demon's attribute. Moreover, the Latin term for a trainer-manager of gladiators (lanista), was believed to be an Etruscan word. (4: 50) Gladiators of Ancient Rome lived their lives to the absolute fullest.

Gladiatorial duels had originated from funeral games given in order to satisfy the dead man's need for blood, and for centuries their principal occasions were funerals. The first gladiatorial combats therefore, took place at the graves of those being honored, but once they became public spectacles they moved into amphitheaters. (2: 83) As for the gladiators themselves, an aura of religious sacrifice continued to hang about their combats. Obviously most spectators just enjoyed the massacre without any remorseful reflections. Even ancient writers felt no pity, they were aware that gladiators had originated from these holocausts in honor of the dead. What was offered to appease the dead was counted as a funeral rite. It is called munus (a service) from being a service due. The ancients thought that by this sort of spectacle they rendered a 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, they use to sacrifice captives or slaves of poor quality at funerals. Afterwards it seemed good to obscure their impiety by making it a pleasure. (6: 170) So after the acquired person had been trained to fight as best they can, their training was to learn to be killed! For such reasons gladiators were sometimes known as *bustuarii* or funeral men. Throughout many centuries of Roman history, these commemorations of the dead were still among the principle occasions for such combats. Men writing their wills often made provisions for gladiatorial duels in connection with their funerals. Early in the first century AD, the people of Pollentia forcibly prevented the burial of an official, until his heirs had been compelled to provide money for a gladiators' show. (1: 174) It was in Campania and Lucania that the gladiatorial games came to their full development and took on their classical form. In these new surroundings they took root and flourished, as can be seen in fourth century BC, tomb paintings. These pictures show helmeted gladiators carrying shields and lances, covered with wounds and dripping with blood. (2: 84) For Rome a decisive moment in gladiatorial history was reached in 246 BC, the year when the first Punic War began. 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 the number of fights given on a single occasion had risen to twenty two. (14: 16) In 105 BC the two consuls of the year made gladiatorial games official. There were no doubts of religious tendency, but the purpose of Roman spectacles, were a public display of power, that power was primarily military, and also to compensate the soft Greek culture which now was abroad. (8: 98) The Gladiators Those compelled to fight gladiator duels included prisoners of war, slaves and condemned criminals. Among them

<https://assignbuster.com/the-rise-of-gladiatorial-combat-in-rome-essay/>

were numerous followers of the new Christian faith. During this time persecution fell heavily on their faith, many won immortal fame as martyrs. Fighting in the arena was one of the sentences earned by the sacrilege accused against members of the Christian religion because of their refusal to sacrifice to the emperor. It was written that these Christians were forced, as gladiatorial novices to run the gauntlet. At other times they were thrown to the wild beasts. Criminals that were used had committed crimes that carried a death sentence or harsh manual labor. The crimes 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 for certain crimes which in the case of slaves would involve execution, free men or freedmen (ex-slaves) were condemned to fight in the arena instead. This did not of course make them gladiators, unless they were trained first, as those required to provide this sort of sport not always were. And indeed as gladiators became more expensive in the second century AD the use of untrained criminals in the amphitheater increased. (7: 537) Most gladiators, at Rome and elsewhere were slaves, but in addition there were always some free men who became gladiators because they wanted to. The profession was an alternative to being a social outcast. They were generally derived from the lowest ranking category of free persons, namely the freedman who had themselves been slaves or were the son of slaves. Free fighters were more sought after than slaves, presumably because they shower greater

enthusiasm in the arena. Such a volunteer was offered a bonus if he survived the term of his contract, yet he still 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 of the gladiators. For the period of his engagement, he had become no more than a slave. (7: 539) Majestic Exhibitions and Schools There 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 up to annual games and spectacles of one sort or another in the city was startlingly large, and increased continually. Already 66 in the time of Augustus, it had risen to 135 under Marcus Aurelius, and 175 or more in the fourth century. Gladiatorial amusement had become an essential feature of the services 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 were distinct, vulnerable, and subject to public pressures which could not be displayed elsewhere. That was why the games were not popular with a few rulers such as Marcus Aurelius. He directed that if a gladiator was freed as a result of popular outcry in the amphitheater the liberation was to be annulled.

Aurelius found the sport boring and indeed he was unenthusiastic about Roman entertainment in general. (10: 87) The teaching of gladiators was highly elaborate affair involving expertise appreciated by those members of the public who attended the games for something more than blood and

thrills. Gladiators were trained at gladiator schools 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 the arena. Discipline was severe, with ruthless punishments. The barracks they lived in were so low inmates could only sit or lie. (3: 68) Breaking any rule was not tolerated and resulted in strict reprimanding: shackles, flogging or even death. (2: 86) The main objective of the schools were to produce the best possible fighters for the arena, thus scrupulous attention was invested in gladiator health. Their schools were situated in favorable climates, and equipped with first class doctors. The schools were also provided with resident medical consultants to check the men's diet. Gladiators were called *hordearii*, barley men, because of the amount of barley that they ate, a muscle building food. (12: 111) The Types of Gladiators From Republican times onward, foreign prisoners were made to fight with their own weapons and in their own styles. Many of these men, were merely prisoners herded into the arena, but various classes of professional gladiators likewise came from this category. Such, for example was the origin of the gladiators known as the Samnites. Generally regarded as the prototypes of all Rome's gladiators, they are said to have come into existence after its Samnite enemies introduced a splendid new type of military equipment in 310 BC.

Gladiators were ranked in different categories according to their fighting style and the type of weapon they used. These Samnites wore the heavy,

magnificent armor of soldiers. It included a large shield (scutum), a leather or partly metal greave (ocrea) on the left leg, and a visored helmet (galea) with huge crests and plumes. To these were added sword (gladius) or lance (hasta), and the sleeve on the right arm which was part of a gladiator's general equipment. (11: 121) Sectors were armed with a sword and mace loaded with lead.

Thracians carried a curved scimitar of varying shape, and a small square or round shield. Myrmillones (Gauls') carried a shield and a short scythe and wore a distinctive fish ornament on their helmets. The Retarii were exceptionally uncovered, except sometimes for a head band. They carried a trident in one hand and 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 had the worst living quarters. (2: 86) The Myrmillo could fight against the Thracian or against the Retarius or net fighter. But the principle opponent of the Retarius was the Secutor. (12: 109) The Procedure of the Arena Gladiatorial shows were intensively promoted and advertised to raise public attention. Descriptions of upcoming contests, appeared on walls and on the grave stones beside main roads. The opening ceremonies began the day before the fights. It was then that the supporter of the show donated a splendid feast to the contestants about to appear on the following day. The proceedings of the murderous day began with a chariot drive and parade. Led and presented by the sponsor of the games. The gladiators displayed themselves in uniforms topped by cloaks dyed purple with gold embroidery. Climbing down their chariots, they marched around the arena, followed by slaves carrying their arms and armor.

Gladiators, especially those who belonged to the emperor's own troop, were often finely equipped. When the combatants arrived opposite the emperor's platform, they extended their right hands towards him and cried 'Hail, emperor, greetings from 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 was spared. Another way in which they opened the games was to tie the criminal to a pillar and lower him into a pit of hungry beasts. After these morbid killings took place, the animal events would take center stage. The most common of these fights would be a lion against bear. To make the beast ready for fighting they would starve the animals and poke them with sticks while in the cage. (5: 17) These events were followed by a break, during this break *Gladiatores Meridiani* took place. This event consisted of a fully armed gladiator against an unarmed man. The object was simple, to kill your opponent, the winner went on to fight the next combatant. The overall winner was the person that was standing in the end. (2: 88) The afternoon brought about the beginning of the gladiatorial events.

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

While the fighters were at grips, their trainers (lanista) stood beside them and hounded them on much like a modern boxers trainer would. Meanwhile the crowd shouted commands of their own including beat, kill and burn. When a man fell, the herald raised their trumpets, and spectators yelled 'Got him! He's had it!' (habet, hoc habet). The fallen fighter if he was in a state to move, laid down his shield, and raised one finger of his left hand for mercy. The decision whether his life should be spared, rested with the provider of the games, but he generally let the crowd make the decision. Thumbs up, and a waving of handkerchiefs, meant his life would be spared, thumbs down and he would be killed without hesitation. While African boys raked over the bloodstained sand, fallen gladiators were taken away. A Charon would verify the gladiators death and finish him off if it was necessary. The costumes of the Charon were designed to look like Mercury, divine guide of dead men's souls to the infernal regions. (10: 167) If a fighter's performance had not given satisfaction, or if he was a criminal whose survival was not desired, his life was sometimes risked again on the same day by orders for a repeat performance, against specially introduced understudies. When neither party won and both were spared, each was described as stans missus, and such a result was often recorded on inscriptions. The victorious gladiators were presented with palm branches as a prize, and in Greek lands 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 the games also provided prize money, according to scales stipulated in the gladiators' contracts. (10: 169) The Arenas In early times gladiators' duels took place in whatever public places a town might possess. But then, under

the emperors, the characteristic place for such a contest was the amphitheater. This was an oval auditorium surrounded by rows of seats facing on to the arena, as in modern bull rings, absorbing the blood of slaughtered men and beasts. The first permanent amphitheater known to us is not in Rome but in Campania, the country which inherited the gladiatorial games from Etruria and passed them on to the Romans. (13: 225) The largest and most famous of all such buildings was initiated by the Flavian dynasty. Opened by Titus in AD 80, this Colosseum is one of the most marvelous buildings in the world. Its massive overall measurements are 187 by 155 meters, of which the space for the arena itself comprises 86 by 54 meters. There was accommodation for 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 wild beasts, storage rooms and the mechanism by which scenery and other apparatus were hoisted into the arena. The emperor's platform was at the center of one of the long sides, facing across to the portion of the auditorium reserved for magistrates and the holder of the games. There were also places for priests, who also attended these bloodthirsty sports. (13: 227) The formula of the Colosseum helped to mold renaissance styles. In the eight century they said that: As long as it stands, Rome will stand; when it falls, Rome will fall; when Rome falls, the world will fall. The Colosseum has often been raided, but has never fallen. It has been made to serve many purposes, many of which are ironic. These have included sacred occasions, church services, and plays. Thus through all the depredation the Colosseum has faced over the years inside and outside of the arena, this indestructible

building still towers over the city today. (13: 230)The Gladiator in SocietyThe reputation of gladiators in the eyes of the public was curiously mixed. For one thing they were feared. Society was never able to forget for very long that the gladiators were a potential danger to society. So, of course were the masses of slaves in general, and that is why their crimes were so savagely punished, if one slave murdered his master, the whole household had to die. But by training the gladiators they spared the rest of the slave's 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 complete shame. When a gladiator was killed, his corpse was not permitted honorable to be buried, unless it was claimed by his family or a friend. (9: 91)However there is ample proof of the admiration and indeed excitement that the gladiators aroused. Gladiators became so ingrained in the Roman mind and soul that they believed in superstitions that resulted from munera. It was believed that the warm blood of a slaughtered gladiator would cure epilepsy.

When newly married women, parted their hair with a gladiator's spear, it brought good 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 Pompeii amphitheater reveal that members of the profession were loved with the passionate infatuation which teenage females have for pop singers today.

Although gladiators lived relatively short lives it was possible to win liberation and retire on receipt of the symbolical wooden sword (rudis). It was also

noted that some ex-gladiators moved upwards into respectable smart circles of local bourgeoisie's (9: 96) Opposition and Abolition It was probably assumed that the munera would go on forever, and that nothing would stop their growth. With the rise of Christianity a religious presence lingered about such contests once again. The Roman ruling classes began to view these contests with a favorable eye. The excuse of encouragement to warlike toughness continued to be put forward until the eve of the Middle Ages, although it started to become lame and inhumane. Another purpose present in the minds of Rome's rulers was the desire that potentially unruly and dangerous city population should be amused and kept quiet. They should be given entertainment that they wanted, no matter how disgusting it might be.

The games gradually lost its original intentions and connections to the earlier funeral games. Once defenseless human beings are thrown to wild animals, the original purpose is lost, the purpose now is blood-thirsty spectators viewing inhumane, unjust executions. (2: 87) The new religion however ended them for good. With the rise of emperor Constantine and Christianity came the fall of the gladiatorial spectacles. In AD 326, Constantine abolished gladiators' games altogether. He also stated that all criminals who would have in the past have been enrolled for the games must in the future be condemned to forced labor in the mines instead. By the end of the fourth century, gladiatorial shows had disappeared from the Eastern Empire. (2: 87) Bibliography 1. 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. Weir, 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.