

# Bravery in the Face of Death: Gladiatorial Games and Those Who Watched Them

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The gladiatorial games—often portrayed in modern media as brutish spectacles enjoyed by bloodthirsty crowds—were rather a rule-bound sport focused on the Roman ideal of bravery in the face of death. Wildly entertaining, the games were a popular venue for the Roman people, and played an important role within the political structure of republican and imperial Rome. This paper intends to examine why the games were so popular; to reveal the way in which Romans viewed gladiators themselves; and to demonstrate that the games were technical and skill-based, not pure blood sport. It will discuss the contradictions and ambivalent attitudes of the Romans towards the gladiators and explain why this was the case.

It is difficult to give a comprehensive and accurate account of what the gladiatorial games meant to the Romans due to the ever-evolving social and political climate that existed over the long lifespan of the games. The first games were held in Rome in 264 B.C.E., but they did not gain great popularity until the late Republican Period.<sup>1</sup> Their attractiveness greatly increased through the Imperial Period, from which most of the secondary source material used in this essay originates. This paper will draw on multiple ancient sources from different time periods that both laud and decry the games and the gladiators in an effort to gain a basic understanding of what the games truly were and subsequently represented to the Romans. Sources examined include Tertullian, Seneca, Cicero, and Livy, amongst others. Tertullian was a Christian writing around the year 200 C.E. He was critical of the gladiatorial games, so we must view his statements under that light. Similarly, Seneca—writing in the first century C.E.—saw himself as an elite above the base pleasures of the common people, and therefore his descriptions of the games are usually negative. Cicero, a politician and orator in the late Republican Period, expressed ambivalent view towards gladiators, at times using the term as an insult and at others lauding their bravery. Livy’s historical accounts are only sometimes accurate; although we must consult his statements with scrutiny, for this paper’s purposes, his description of the pleasures of the gladiatorial games can be used to supplement other primary evidence.

The gladiatorial games were extremely popular in the Imperial Period. Attending the games was “one of the practices that went with being a Roman,”<sup>2</sup> and an

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Dillon and Lynda Garland, *Ancient Rome: From the Early Republic to the Assassination of Julius Caesar*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 106.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Wiedermann, *Emperors and Gladiators* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1.

essential aspect of being Roman was taking the games seriously.<sup>3</sup> Cicero tells us that gladiatorial games delighted the people “above all things.”<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Livy describes the gladiatorial games first as terrifying, but then intensely pleasurable, similar to their description by Tertullian, who also depicts the games as being filled with pleasures.<sup>5</sup> These sources represent the views of individuals from multiple time periods—the Late Republic (Cicero), Early Imperial Rome (Livy), and Mid-Imperial Rome (Tertullian)—showing that the games were popular over a long spread of time. The games provided different things for different people: spectators appreciated how well gladiators faced death, the punishment of criminals, the ability to interact with the emperor, and the ability to view foreign peoples and animals.<sup>6</sup> The foreign peoples described came not only in the form of personal ethnicities of the gladiators but also in the ethnic nature of the fighting styles. Many of the gladiators that fought were dressed as ethnic warriors such as the Thracians, Samnites, and Gauls—all of whom represented some of Rome’s toughest adversaries.<sup>7</sup>

The games’ role in the political sphere helps to elucidate their vast popularity. There are multiple examples of politicians who put on games to gain public support. During the Late Republican Period, Cicero describes in his defense of Murena how he (Murena) won over the populace by putting on gladiatorial games.<sup>8</sup> We see a similar example in Suetonius’ *Life of Divus Julius*, where he describes how Caesar put on lavish gladiatorial games in order to gain the recognition of common people.<sup>9</sup> This issue became so serious that in 63 B.C.E. a law was enacted that prevented games from being put on within two years of candidacy, but most candidates found a way around this law.<sup>10</sup> The fact that a law needed to be created to regulate these games illustrates how much popular support could be gained from holding them; the law would not have been enacted had it not been such a problem. This suggests that the gladiatorial games were highly popular amongst the people.

During the Imperial Period, Augustus attempted to gain a monopoly on gladiatorial games, and by the time of Domitian they were controlled in totality by the emperors.<sup>11</sup> In this way, the emperors maintained power over the popularity that could be gained from the games. Interestingly enough, the arena was a place where the voice of the people could be heard during the Imperial Period. In gladiatorial matches, the crowd decided who would live and who would die, and this decision came down to how well

<sup>3</sup> Valerie M. Hope, “Negotiating Identity and Status, The Gladiators of Roman Nîmes” in *Cultural Identity in the Roman Empire*, ed. Ray Laurence and Joanne Berry (New York: Routledge, 1998), 191.

<sup>4</sup> Cic. *Sest.* 124 Cicero repeats that the people enjoy games in *Leg. Agr.* 2.71.

<sup>5</sup> Liv. 41.20.10-12. And Tert. *De Spect.* 1. This is part of the reason why Tertullian is so critical of the games—the extreme pleasures gained through watching the bloody sport was un-Christian in his opinion.

<sup>6</sup> Donald G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 50.

<sup>8</sup> Cic. *Mur.* 38-40.

<sup>9</sup> Suet. *Jul.* 26.

<sup>10</sup> Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, 50.

<sup>11</sup> Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, 84. And Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 49.

gladiators fought.<sup>12</sup> If a gladiator fell, the crowd would give a response. If he fought bravely and was well liked, there was a good chance the crowd would cheer for him. But if he fought in a cowardly manner, the crowd might boo and jeer. The emperor would often bow to the wishes of the people and the gladiator in question would subsequently live or die. This show of deference by the emperor helped to boost the relationship between him and his people.<sup>13</sup> Deciding the fate of gladiators was not the only way the people interacted with the government within the venue of the arena: crowds would cheer or jeer depending on whether or not they approved of a political individual's social promotion, sometimes forcing men to leave their seats.<sup>14</sup> There was a high entertainment value for the people as explained by the ancient authors above, and based upon the evidence of politicians utilizing gladiatorial games to successfully gain popular support; we can discern the level of enjoyment felt by the Roman people in relation to the gladiatorial games. We can also see the important role the games played in the political sphere both during the Republic and the Imperial Period. The arena was one of the few places where people could voice their opinion and be heard, therefore it was extremely important in the political relations of politicians, emperors, and the people.

In order to understand why the games were so popular, we must first look at how the Romans viewed the gladiators. People were highly ambivalent. Archaeological evidence shows that children may have played with clay gladiators in the same way that children today play with action figures.<sup>15</sup> Children would also pretend to be gladiators while at the same time the games served as a stock subject of conversation for Roman elites.<sup>16</sup> As we have seen, the games were wildly popular amongst the people and in some cases individual gladiators were elevated to the point of stardom, with genuine fans.<sup>17</sup>

However, they were also intensely despised. Gladiators suffered much *infamia*—they occupied the lowest strata of society. They had segregated gravesites; they were considered untrustworthy; and they were compared to prostitutes in that they were selling and exploiting their bodies.<sup>18</sup> Being called a gladiator was an insult, and volunteering as a gladiator was debasing.<sup>19</sup> Tertullian interestingly points out the ambivalence shown towards gladiators:<sup>20</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 54.

<sup>14</sup> J.C. Edmondson, "Dynamic Arenas: Gladiatorial Presentations in the City of Rome and the Construction of Roman Society during the Early Empire" in *Roman Theater and Society*, ed. W. J. Slater, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 109.

<sup>15</sup> David S. Potter, "Spectacle" in *A Companion to the Roman Empire*, ed. David S. Potter, (Oxford: Blackwell 2006), 403.

<sup>16</sup> Wiedermann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 49. And Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, 85.

<sup>18</sup> See inscription on page 171 of Dillon and Garland for a description of separate gravesites. This idea is reinforced in Hope 184; untrustworthiness in Wiedermann 30; similar to prostitution in Hope "Negotiating Identity and Status", 184

<sup>19</sup> Wiedermann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 28. And Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Tert. *De Spect.* 22

...look at their attitude to the charioteers, players, gladiators, most loving of men, to whom men surrender their souls and women their bodies as well, for whose sake they commit the sins they blame; on one and the same account they glorify them and they degrade and diminish them; yes, further, they openly condemn them to disgrace and civil degradation; they keep them religiously excluded from council chamber, rostrum, senate, knighthood, and every other kind of office and a good many distinctions. The perversity of it! They love whom they lower; they despise whom they approve; the art they glorify, the artist they disgrace.

As mentioned above, Tertullian was a Christian who did not approve of the gladiatorial games and criticizing them; we must be aware of this when analyzing this quotation. His words gesture to the differing attitudes towards the gladiators—they are loved above all, glorified, and yet excluded politically and religiously. Taking this into account, we can gain a better perspective as to why the gladiatorial games were so revered. One possible argument is that the Romans wanted a feeling of superiority.<sup>21</sup> Seeing one's fiercest enemies fighting one another for one's own entertainment could easily make an individual feel powerful. To see such "fierce" warriors as their playthings must have made the Roman people feel more secure within their state while at the same time solidifying their feeling of dominance over their neighbors. These psychological effects were compounded, although contradictorily, with the fact that the gladiators exemplified the martial virtues of the Roman state.

The Roman people held skill, training, and bravery in high esteem—all of which were prerequisites for being a successful gladiator. There is a clear connection between fighting and virtue in the Roman system of values.<sup>22</sup> The courage to confront an opponent together with the technical expertise to kill or maim him was highly regarded by the Romans and gladiatorial combat isolated and illustrated these virtues.<sup>23</sup> As explained above, there were different types of gladiator based upon ethnic backgrounds. For example, the *Thraex* (Thracian) was covered in armor, wielded a curved sword, and advanced when he fought, whereas the *Retarius* was lightly armored and fought with a trident and net.<sup>24</sup> The Roman people understood the challenges that come along with fighting different types of adversaries along with the skill required to wield diverse types

<sup>21</sup> Kyle (*Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, 7-10) has a very interesting discussion about the reasons why gladiatorial games were so enjoyed. He goes through an in-depth historiographical discussion about the various views held by different scholars, both ancient and modern, in an attempt to understand the Romans' mindset. Such a discussion is too large for this essay and the following is my view of the Roman's mindset towards the gladiatorial games based upon primary sources indicated above and below and Kyle's critique.

<sup>22</sup> Wiedermann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 35.

<sup>23</sup> Wiedermann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 37, and Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 49, and Hope "Negotiating Identity and Status, 191, and Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, 80 all agree.

<sup>24</sup> For a description of Thracian style, see Artemidorus *Oneirocritica* 2.32; For *retarius* style, see David S. Potter and D. J. Mattingly, *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 314.

of weaponry.<sup>25</sup> They recognized and appreciated these abilities in the gladiators. Such skills required training and were learned in gladiatorial schools called *ludi*.<sup>26</sup> These men would train and learn the fighting styles of the different types of gladiators while at the same time learning how to put on a good show. Part of this education included learning how to land a proper deathblow, and part of this was learning to properly receive one. The most important aspect of being a gladiator was bravery—especially bravery in the face of death. These reasons help us understand why the Romans enjoyed the gladiatorial games: the gladiators clearly embodied the Romans’ ideals of skill, training, and, as we shall see, bravery.

Above all, the most important aspect of the arena was the ability to face the sword unflinchingly. This statement comes with some qualifications—I say “in the face of death” because not all gladiators died. Indeed, “elite gladiators had a chance, perhaps a good chance, of survival.”<sup>27</sup> Gladiators were not necessarily expected to kill defeated opponents—this was largely up to the crowd.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, Seneca writes that when he attended a gladiatorial game, the people were shouting for a gladiator to be killed because he “meets the sword in so cowardly a way.”<sup>29</sup> In this context Seneca is explaining the horridness of crowds, so we must read his observations carefully. However, the fact that he indicates the reason for the crowd’s insistence upon the man’s death as cowardliness shows what the Roman people were looking for in a match—bravery on the part of the combatants. The crowd demanded the man’s death not because he lost, but because he was acting like a coward. This clearly shows what the Romans wanted from gladiatorial combat: bravery in the face of death. Cicero further explains this point:<sup>30</sup>

In battles of gladiators, and in the case of men of the very lowest class and condition and fortune, we are accustomed to dislike those who are timid and suppliant, and who pray to be allowed to live, and we wish to save those who are brave and courageous, and who offer themselves cheerfully to death...we feel more pity for those men who do not ask our pity, than for those who entreat it.

Here again we see exactly what the Romans respected in gladiatorial combat. The people disliked the cowards and attempted to save fighters who bravely accepted death. Both of these examples illustrate the fact that the people did not attend the games only for bloodshed. Rather, they wanted to see men fight bravely in dire circumstances.

Taking off of this point, we see that the most important part of a gladiatorial match was in fact not the death of one of the combatants, but the match itself. “Serious wounds and death were possible, but they were not the point of the show. Rather,

<sup>25</sup> Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, 84-85.

<sup>26</sup> Potter, *Life*, 321.

<sup>27</sup> Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, 86.

<sup>28</sup> M. J. Carter, “Gladiatorial Combat: The Rules of Engagement.” *The Classical Journal*, vol. 102, no. 2 (2006/2007) 109. See section above on relationship between emperor and people.

<sup>29</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 7.

<sup>30</sup> Cic. *Mil.* 92.

gladiatorial combat was an exciting, rule-bound contest of martial excellence: a demonstration of bravery in the face of death, and of discipline and skill with arms.”<sup>31</sup> There were two referees per match who signaled fouls and determined when combat should be stopped. Some matches ended before a gladiator surrendered if there was fear of injury to one of the combatants.<sup>32</sup>

Gladiators were significant investments and represented a serious financial loss if killed or wounded. The penalty for injury or death when renting a gladiator could be as much as fifty times the original rental price.<sup>33</sup> From these examples we can see the importance of maintaining the health of a gladiator and the consequences that could come along with allowing them to die. If the penalties were so high, gladiators could not have died as frequently as we might think. Many scholars discuss matches that held the rule *sine missione* and interpret this to mean a fight to the death. However, this is a mistranslation. A bout that resulted in a draw was considered *stantes missi*, released standing. A battle that was *sine missione* meant only that it could not result in a draw. One gladiator was not required to kill another; there were no mandatory fights to the death between gladiators.<sup>34</sup> Death was a possibility—that is what made the games so intense and exciting—but it was not a requirement. The real enjoyment came from the appreciation of the gladiators’ skill with weapons, martial excellence, and bravery while facing such dire consequences.

Yet, the simultaneity of the Roman’s feelings of superiority contradicted the Roman identification with the ideals that the gladiators upheld. This paper would argue that although gladiators as a whole represented something deplorable to the Romans, a slave class who fought for gold, the Romans recognized the difficulties that came along with such a life and respected the fact that, at least in one sense, gladiators could be seen as equals. If a gladiator faced death bravely, he deserved to live. If he faced death bravely, he could earn wealth and fame. In some cases, if a gladiator faced death bravely, he could even gain his freedom. There was a great stigma attached to the way gladiators lived, but based upon the way they were willing to die they had a claim to be Roman.<sup>35</sup>

Gladiatorial games were not about killing. They were not even solely about death. Rather, they were about the ability to overcome death. Instead of the slogging matches represented in modern media that always end in one man killing another, the gladiatorial games were intense, enjoyable contests between individuals that displayed the martial virtues of the Romans, and reminded them of their hegemonic position in the

<sup>31</sup> Carter, “Gladiatorial Combat”, 101.

<sup>32</sup> Carter, “Gladiatorial Combat”, 103, and Potter, *Life*, 314-315, discuss the roles of the referees and how they determine the end of a gladiatorial match.

<sup>33</sup> Potter, *Spectacle*, 391.

<sup>34</sup> Potter, *Life*, 307.

<sup>35</sup> There are many different opinions about this point. Wiedermann (38) points out that the martial virtues of the gladiators give them a claim to be Roman. Potter (*Spectacle*) argues that the military virtues were held by the elites and the gladiators brought the virtues to the people. All of the sources listed in the bibliography discuss how the games represented the martial ideals of the Romans. Again, Kyle (7-10) has an interesting discussion about the ambivalence of the Romans and the way that has been viewed by various scholars. I have developed this argument based upon the arguments of these sources.

Mediterranean world. The games served as an important part of gaining political office during the Republican Era and offered a venue for the emperor and the people to communicate during the Imperial Period. Ultimately, the gladiatorial games helped to define what it means to be Roman: train, fight, and show bravery in the face of death.

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