

Spectacles in the Roman World

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A Sourcebook

Siobhán McElduff



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“There is no meaner condition among the people than that of gladiator”

Calpurnius Flaccus, 2nd century CE

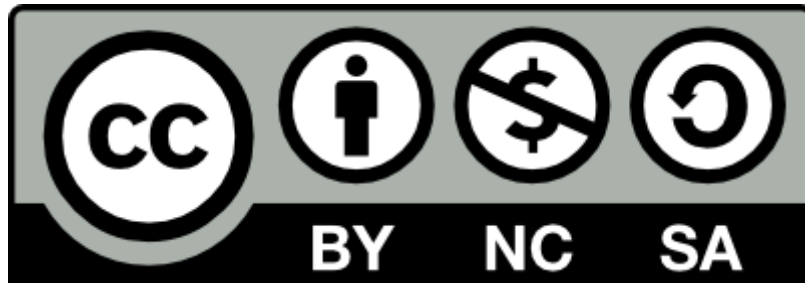
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This is an anthology of primary sources¹ on Roman games and spectacles in some of their various forms, created for a second year undergraduate class on spectacles in Greece and Rome (CLST 260; this book covers the Roman section of that course) at the University of British Columbia.

The sources are grouped thematically, although there is overlap between the sections; the sources come from a wide range of periods, genres, and individuals and not all are equally reliable, in that many report on things they haven't seen or are (like some of the Christian authors) deeply hostile to spectacles because they were often connected with the worship of various pagan deities. But taken together, along with the images and other information provided, they will give you some picture of the importance and complexity of spectacle for the Romans and many of the peoples they conquered or interacted with. We have tried to footnote and add information so that even if you know nothing about either Rome or the ancient Mediterranean you can still understand and follow along.

However, it is important to realize the Romans were not very nice people on the whole (you might have realized that if you know they conquered a *lot* of territory). They were willing to inflict terrible cruelties on people and animals, and our sources reflect that, while rarely reflecting on the violence they saw. And when they do, it is usually so they can reflect on themselves and their issues, so it is very self-absorbed. Even if gladiators didn't die at the rate that movies and TV insist they did, they were still often enslaved men and women forced to fight in a very risky profession with extremely sharp objects. Very few people went into playing a part in most Roman spectacles of their own free will.

1. Most translations are either adapted versions of out of copyright translations or my own; at the end of the reader there is an appendix where I list the various sources of the translations, and I am incredibly grateful that so many people made them available for me to use.

A Very Basic History of Rome

It's really, really basic: I advise you to read a short history of Rome.¹ to fill out the background, otherwise some of this material won't make much sense.

According to legend, Rome was founded in 753 BCE, on April 21st (Rome's birthday was celebrated at a festival called the Parilia² each year). It took its name from its founder, Romulus, who was also its first king – and also, again according to legend, the first person to hold a triumph (a type of military parade; [see here for more details](#)). It remained a monarchy until 509 BCE, with Etruscan kings ruling from the fifth monarch, L. Tarquinius Priscus, on. The last king, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, was driven out of Rome after his son raped Lucretia, the wife of a Roman nobleman; the story of Etruscan kings and the expulsion of those kings reflects Rome's early dominance by the Etruscans to the north.

In its early days Rome was a small city-state, surrounded by other far more powerful and developed civilizations and powers, especially the Etruscans to the north and the Greeks of Magna Graecia to the South. It had ties and alliances with other Latin speaking city-states. However, gradually Rome became the dominant power in central Italy, scoring major victories over its neighbours and acquiring more and more manpower along the way. Rome's history after the fall of the kings is usually divided into four periods: the Early Republic; the Mid-Republic; the Late Republic; and the Imperial Period.



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1. The one given by [Wikipedia](#) is fine.

2. This was dedicated to god Pales, a shepherd god of indeterminate gender.

The Early Republic (509-275)

After expelling the kings, Rome was governed by elected officials, the consuls, two of whom were elected each year; there was also a Senate of varying numbers. This was a period marked by patrician control of the Roman government, although that control was challenged during the [conflict of the orders](#), which resulted in plebeians gaining more rights to hold various offices and authority. The praetorship was created, as was the office of the Tribune of the Plebs in 494 BCE; the job of the latter was to protect the interests of the plebeians, and although it did not hold *imperium*, its holders had a powerful right to veto any legislation that they believed not to be in the interest of the people. Rome joined the Latin League, a league of Latin speaking states in central Italy, in 493 BCE after defeating the forces of the League at the Battle of Lake Regillus; the league was dissolved in 338 after the Latin War between Rome and the League. In 281 Rome faced off against King Pyrrhus of Epirus who had come to support Greek cities in the south of Italy worried about Roman expansion; from the war with Pyrrhus came the first elephants to be brought to Rome.



Carthaginian war elephants engage Roman infantry at the Battle of Zama (202 BC).

The Mid-Republic (274-133)



Hannibal Barca counting the rings of the Roman knights killed at the Battle of Cannae (216 BCE). Marble, 1704.

On the whole, spectacles of the type this book covers date from the Mid-Republic on, and it is those periods where our sources begin to place gladiatorial shows and other forms of spectacle (except chariot racing, which dated back to the time of the monarchy). During this period Rome conquered the entire peninsula of Italy, scoring victories over the Greek cities to the south. This was also a period of intense Hellenization: an influx of Greek slaves and culture led to the creation of Latin literature³ and to an elite which embraced Greek culture and art and used those as a major building block in aristocratic identity. Rome's expansion led it into conflict with Carthage, a large mercantile empire based in Carthage (modern Tunis). Its first overseas province was the island of Sicily, which it gained as a result of victory over the Carthaginians in the First Punic War. It took advantage of internal weaknesses in Carthage after that war to seize Corsica and Sardinia in an action of great legal dubiousness that Carthaginians deeply resented. Further conflict with Carthage ensued: the great Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca brought war to Italy during the Second Punic War (216-202 BCE), and inflicted a number of great defeats on Rome, many of which Rome dealt with by holding games or spectacles aimed at appeasing the gods; Carthage lost that war at the battle of Zama in 202 BCE. Carthage was wiped out as in 146 BCE,

when Romans picked a fight, besieged the city, and then razed it to the ground. In the same year they captured and destroyed of Corinth, a Greek city which was later refounded as a Roman colony by Julius Caesar, and the Romans were the dominant power of much of the Mediterranean.

The Late Republic (133-43 or 31 BCE)

In 133 a Tribune of the Plebs by the name of Tiberius Gracchus, a man of an ancient and famous family, was lynched by a senatorial mob for trying to enact a series of agrarian reforms which would have affected many of the elite who rented large land holdings from the state.⁴ A new and violent phase of Roman politics had started and murder became an increasingly popular political tool. In 122 Tiberius' brother, Gaius, who also held the position of Tribune of the Plebs, was murdered by a senatorial faction.⁵ The next hundred years was to see Rome expand her power,

3. Invented, according to our records, more or less by Livius Andronicus, originally a Greek prisoner of war from Tarentum, a Greek city state in the south of Italy.

4. They were charged very little, and even then most of them didn't pay.

5. The Gracchi Brothers are often seen as heroes by those who struggled to get land off the rich, not just in Rome but much later.

gobbling up Hellenistic kingdoms in the east and conquering Gaul, much of Spain, and (briefly) part of Britain. It was also to see her beset by a series of internal crises and civil wars as various warlords fought over the rewards of empire.

Marius (156-86 BCE), a *novus homo* who went from relative obscurity to hold the consulship seven times, fought it out with Lucius Cornelius Sulla, one of his ex-quaestors,⁶ in a Civil War which saw Sulla march on Rome with his army (88 BCE). Elite competition was fierce and often bloody, but to gain offices one needed to appeal to the people by providing increasingly elaborate spectacles, which exploded in size and expense. Further civil wars were fought between Julius Caesar and his erstwhile son-in-law Pompey the Great, who led the senatorial faction (49-45 BCE), and between Octavian and Mark Antony (32-30 BCE), finally resulting in Octavian being the sole ruler of the Roman world, and the first Roman emperor, ruling under the name Augustus.



A Monument to the Gracchi by Eugene Guillaume

6. A quaestor was an elected position – holding this allowed one to sit in the Senate; they were in charge of financial affairs for governors or the military.

The Empire (31 BCE-476 CE)

Octavian's victory at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE resulted in one man rule; because the Romans found the name of king reprehensible, Octavian styled himself as *princeps*,⁷ rather than king. He took the title of Augustus in 27 BCE; the Julio-Claudian dynasty retained control of the empire until the suicide of Nero in 68 CE, whereupon they were replaced after a period of civil war and three short-lived emperors by Vespasian and the Flavian dynasty; it was the Flavians who built the Colosseum from proceeds from the First Roman-Jewish War (66-73 CE). After this a succession of short dynasties ruled the empire and for each emperor (with the exception of Tiberius, Augustus' successor, who hated to spend money) spectacle formed a vital way to communicate with and appease the people. Over time, spectacles increased in size and lavishness, involving thousands of animals and people; some emperors such as Nero and Commodus took spectacle one step further by taking part in them, and getting criticized by our sources for it. Many other emperors were dedicated fans, supporting different chariot factions, actors, gladiators, and gladly pouring money into spectacles of all sorts.

The empire used its vast resources and networks to bring people, animals, and materials to Rome, employing the army to help along with networks of indigenous hunters and trackers. Spectacles might have been free for many Romans, but they came at a significant cost to the societies that were called on to supply them.



Commodus as Hercules. Musei Capitolini, Rome

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7. This is where we get the word prince from, but it was not a royal title. It was an informal Latin title given originally to the most important man in a group, the principal or leader, among them.

Timeline of Roman History



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BCE

Any date that specifically relates to the games is in bold.

753	Legendary foundation of Rome by Romulus, the first king of Rome
629	Reign of L. Tarquinius Priscus, fifth king of Rome and the first Etruscan king; Circus Maximus supposedly laid out during his reign
509	Tarquinius Superbus, last king of Rome, expelled; Rome becomes a Republic. Creation of the office of consul
500-450	Creation of the office of Tribune of the Plebs
c. 496	Rome defeats Latin League forces and Tarquinius Superbus and sons at the Battle of Lake Regillus
396	Rome sacks and destroys the Etruscan city of Veii
390	Rome sacked by the Gauls
343-341	First Samnite War ends with Rome capturing Capua and northern Campania
338	Dissolution of the Latin League
326-304	Second Samnite War ends with Rome conquering most of central and southern Italy
298-290	Third Samnite War ends with Rome in control of most of the Peninsula of Italy, with only Greek cities in the extreme south and the Po Valley in the North outside that control
280-275	Pyrrhic War. War against the Greek city of Tarentum and King Pyrrhus of Epirus. First time elephants are seen Italy
275	M. Curius Dentatus displays 4 elephants in Rome
264-241	First Punic War (against Carthage) fought in Sicily and North Africa
264	Decimus Junius Brutus has 3 pairs of Thracian type gladiators at <i>munera</i> for his father
252	Lucius Metellus displays and slaughters 100 elephants captured from Carthaginian forces in the First Punic War
229-228	First Illyrian War; ends with the surrender of Queen Teuta of Illyria
220-219	Second Illyrian War ends with the defeat of Demetrius of Pharos and Roman victory
220	Circus Flaminius built by Gaius Flaminius¹
218-202	Second Punic War fought in Italy, Spain, and North Africa
216	Battle of Cannae. Roman defeat at the hands of Hannibal, the Carthaginian general results in c.50,000 Roman deaths
216	Lucius, Marcus, and Quintus Lepidus have 22 pairs of gladiators fight over 3 days for their father, Marcus Aemilius Lepidus

1. He was either censor or consul in that year; although labeled a circus it may not have been used for chariot racing, but only for horse racing during the *Ludi Tauri*. It soon became built up.

206	Scipio Africanus gives a gladiatorial type show for his father and uncle in New Carthage, Spain. (The participants were his soldiers, rather than gladiators, and they were volunteers.)
202	Battle of Zama results in the victory of Scipio Africanus the Younger over the Carthaginian general Hannibal
201	25 pairs of gladiators appear at the <i>munus</i> for M. Valerius Laevinus
200-197	Second Macedonian war against Philip V of Macedon
197	Philip V defeated at Battle of Cynoscephalae by Rome and her allies, including the Aetolian League, led by Titus Flamininus
192-188	War with Antiochus the Great of Syria
189	M. Fulvius Nobilior defeats the Aetolians at Ambracia
186	M. Fulvius Nobilior holds 10 days of <i>ludi</i>, including a hunt with lions and leopards at a cost of 80,000 sesterces, to celebrate his victory in the Aetolian War
183	60 pairs of gladiators fight over 3 days in the <i>munus</i> for Publius Licinius
174	Titus Flamininus has 74 pairs of gladiators fight over 4 days at his father's <i>munus</i>
171-168	Third Macedonian War ends with the defeat of the Perseus, King of Macedon, and the Aetolian League
169	First <i>venatio</i> held as part of annual <i>ludi circenses</i>²
168	Third Illyrian War
149-146	Third Punic War
107	Gaius Marius elected consul for the first time
91-88	Social War between Rome's Italian Allies (the <i>Socii</i>) and Rome
88	Sulla's march on Rome
74-66	Third Mithridatic War ends with Pompey the Great's victory over Mithridates VI of Pontus
73-71	Spartacus revolt (Third Servile War)
70	Stone amphitheatre built in Pompeii
67	Pompey the Great clears the Mediterranean of pirates
67	Lex Acilia Calpurnia permanently excludes candidates convicted of electoral bribery from office. Lex Roscia sets aside 14 rows of seats in the theatre for members of the Equestrian order

65	Julius Caesar proposes to have 320 pairs of gladiators fight at his <i>munus</i> in honour of his father; number scaled back due to senatorial fears
63	<i>Lex Tullia</i> is passed prohibiting candidates holding <i>munera</i> during their campaigns for office (some exceptions were allowed)
58	M. Aemilius Scaurus builds a magnificent temporary theatre in Rome
55	Pompey the Great finishes his stone theatre, the first permanent theatre in Rome, and holds games for its opening
52	Gaius Curio builds a revolving wooden theatre for his games in Rome
49-45	Civil War between Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great
48	Julius Caesar defeats the senatorial forces under Pompey the Great at the Battle of Pharsalus
46-5	Tunnels are created under the Forum Romanum at the orders of Julius Caesar
45	Julius Caesar holds games in honour of his daughter Julia (d. 54)
44	Julius Caesar assassinated
42	The aediles for the <i>Ludi Ceriales</i> hold gladiatorial shows instead of the normal chariot races, marking the first appearance of <i>munera</i> in regular shows. Battle of Philippi ends with the defeat of senatorial forces under Brutus and Cassius by the army of Mark Antony and Octavian
31	Battle of Actium and Octavian's defeat of Mark Antony and Cleopatra makes Octavian the sole ruler of the Roman world
29	Statilius Taurus builds the first permanent, stone amphitheatre in the Campus Martius
27	Octavian is voted the title of Augustus and becomes the first emperor of Rome
22	A decree of Augustus bans the appearance of elites in the arena (this law may cover women as well as men)
9	Fires and repaving of the Forum Romanum result in the destruction of Caesar's tunnel system

CE

Any date that specifically relates to the games is in bold.

- 11 **A law forbidding freeborn girls under 20 from appearing in the arena is passed (the law is not extant, but is mentioned in the senatorial decree from Larinum; see below)**
- 14 Death of Augustus. Tiberius becomes emperor
- 19 **A senatorial decree found in Larinum, a town in Southern Italy, repeats Augustus' ban on equestrians and the sons and grandsons of senators appearing on the arena floor or on stage and specifically says that the daughters, grand-daughters and great-grand-daughters of senators cannot appear on stage or in the arena and that law applies to the wives, daughters, and grand-daughters of equestrians**
- 27 **Collapse of a temporary amphitheatre at Fidenae kills 50,000 people**
- 40 **Circus Vaticanus (also known as the Circus of Caligula and Nero) built (roughly) where the Vatican now stands. At this stage this was probably only a race track surrounded by statues, rather than a built up Circus**
- 41 Caligula assassinated; Claudius becomes emperor
- 54 Claudius dies; Nero becomes emperor
- 57 **Nero's wooden amphitheatre built in the Campus Martius (later burns down during the great fire of Rome); Nero forbids provincial governors and procurators from giving *munera*, *venationes* and theatrical shows in their provinces**
- 59 **A riot in the amphitheatre in Pompeii between the residents of Pompeii and those of Nuceria, a local town, results in Nero banning games from Pompeii for ten years**
- 64 Great Fire of Rome
- 66-73 First Jewish War
- 68 Nero's suicide means the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty
- 69 Year of the four emperors (Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and, finally, Vespasian). Vespasian becomes the first Flavian emperor
- 79 Death of Vespasian; Titus becomes emperor
- 80 **Titus holds inaugural games at the Colosseum (the construction was completed later under Domitian); 5,000 animals are killed and an unknown number of gladiators fight**
- 81 Titus dies; Domitian becomes emperor
- 86 **Founding of the [Capitoline Games](#) by Domitian; these features both athletic and literary competitions and chariot racing**
- 96 Domitian assassinated; end of the Flavian dynasty. A sixty-five year old senator called Nerva becomes emperor
- 97 Nerva adopts Trajan as his heir
- 98 Nerva dies; Trajan becomes emperor
- 100-150 **An inscription by Hostilianus from Ostia, Rome's port, mentions that he was the first to exhibit female gladiators there**
- 107 **Trajan's triumph celebrating his victory over Dacia; 10,000 gladiators fight and 11,000 animals are killed**
- 109 **Games are held for the opening of the Baths of Trajan which last 117 days; 8,000 gladiators fight, and more than 10,000 animals are killed**

117	Trajan dies; Hadrian becomes emperor after Trajan appoints him on his death bed
138	In his dying days Hadrian adopts Antonius Pius; Antonius Pius becomes emperor
177	Legislation sponsored by the co-emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus tries to limit the cost of gladiatorial shows
192	Assassination of Commodus
193	Septimius Severus becomes emperor, beginning of the Severan Dynasty
200	A decree of Septimius Severus bans female gladiators
202	Martyrdom of Perpetua
211	Caracalla becomes emperor with his brother Geta; Caracalla kills Geta
213	Caracalla extends citizenship to all freeborn residents of the Roman Empire
218	Elagabalus becomes emperor
c. 220	Sessorian Circus built beside Severan palace in Rome
222	Elagabalus assassinated. Alexander Severus becomes emperor
306-312	Circus of Maxentius built just outside Rome on the Via Appia
330	Constantinople becomes the imperial capital
397	Last reference to the imperial gladiatorial <i>ludi</i>
417-423	Valentinian III restores the Colosseum, which had been damaged in an earthquake
523	Maximus, a Roman aristocrat, holds the last recorded <i>venatio</i> in Rome
532	Nika riot in Constantinople involving faction supporters causes major havoc and destruction

Essential facts about Roman society

Some essential Facts to know about Roman society

- It was **incredibly** competitive, hierarchical, and, by modern standards, extremely violent.
- Rome was a slave-owning society and the enslaved had no legal status. Under law they were considered property; if you injured or killed a slave, you paid the owner a fine dependent on the value of the slave.
- In the Late Republic in particular elite competition was fierce; families and individuals would bankrupt themselves to gain the consulship, the most significant magistracy; competition was also fierce for lower positions. Spectacle became a vital way for elites to compete with each other. In addition to running for aedile and then being responsible for presenting public *ludi*, elites vowed private *munera*, meant to fulfill a vow given in battle, to honour a fallen father, or to mark a victory, which were entirely presented using their private means. Spectacles might have started off small, but they rapidly escalated due to elite competition.
- Rome was an empire, and in such a set up, the provinces' function is to send money and goods to the centre of the empire. So wealth was sent from all over to the capital to fund it.
- Romans were far more used to seeing death and the threat of death than most of us in Western society are: not only was physical abuse common from those of higher status towards those of inferior rank (even among free people), but disease was rife, injuries were easily fatal, and many, many children died young.
- All people who sold their bodies for a living – a category that included prostitutes, actors, gladiators, and pimps – were *infamis*, a legal category that meant they lost their legal status as Roman citizens, though, not their civic status.
- Rome, the city, was an extremely dangerous place to live; there was no police force and most people either did not venture out after dark or travelled in groups to protect themselves. The same was true of other urban centres.
- Spectacles cost real money to put on; the money either came from the individual putting them on or the state (with people usually adding their own money into what the state provided as it was never enough). Almost all of the spectacles described here seem to have been non profit generating, and, in fact, represented one of the most serious non-military costs of the Roman state and Emperor.
- Rome was not a capitalist society, not because they didn't like money, but because capitalism is a modern creation. So trying to think of Roman spectacles in modern economic terms, is generally an unfruitful idea.

Gladiators

The following sections will take you through the history of how gladiators came to Rome, the creation and design of arenas, including the Colosseum, and how gladiators were trained and advertised, among other elements of their lives.

There is an enormous amount out there on gladiators, as you might imagine. (Probably more than the actual popularity of gladiatorial combats in Rome really requires.) Some of it is accurate, some of it is entertaining and accurate, some of it is entertaining and not accurate, and much of it is just terrible. The following is a shortlist of academic books that might prove helpful to you if want a general history; it is not at all exhaustive, so don't take it as prescriptive.



Bibliography and Further Readings

Many sections will have their own specific bibliographies but here are some suggestions for general reading:

- Dunkle, Roger. 2008. *Gladiators: Violence and spectacle in ancient Rome*. Harlow, UK: Pearson.
- Fagan, Garrett, (2011). *The Lure of the Arena: Social Psychology and the Crowd at the Roman Games*. Cambridge University Press,.
- Futrell, Alison. (1997). *Blood in the arena: The spectacle of Roman power*. Austin: Univ. of Texas Press.
- Kyle, Donald G. (1998). *Spectacles of death in ancient Rome*. London: Routledge.
- Meijer, Fik. (2004). *The gladiators: History's most deadly sport*. London: Souvenir.
- Plass, Paul. (1995). *The game of death in ancient Rome: Arena sport and political suicide*. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press.
- Wiedemann, Thomas. 1992. *Emperors and gladiators*. London: Routledge.

Origins of Gladiatorial Munera

In this section you will learn

- The many ancient theories of the origins of Roman gladiatorial games
- How the Romans themselves explained where these games came from and why they liked them

There were a range of spectacles in ancient Rome: gladiatorial shows; chariot racing; theatre; and so on. Of these spectacles gladiatorial *munera* are often seen as uniquely Roman; while, for example, the Greeks engaged enthusiastically in chariot racing (it was an Olympic event as well as being celebrated at a number of other games), they could not supply an origin for the *munera*. While we are uncertain of their true beginnings, we do know that our first records of gladiators in Rome show that gladiatorial fights were given as part of *munera*, games vowed by private individuals, usually to mark the death of a close male relative. As private games, the expense was borne entirely by the person holding them: unlike chariot racing or theatre you could not access public funds (you also did not need to have a current position as an elected magistrate, which turned out to be helpful for people who wanted to get favour among the people). Various origins were proposed for the *munera*; sometimes they were said to be an importation from Etruria; others said they came from the Samnites (an Italian tribe, once great enemies of the Romans). Modern scholars debate precisely where the games came from with very few agreeing on their initial source. However, it must be said that it was convenient for the Romans to insist shows of all sorts – including theatre – as coming from outside Rome, especially when passing moral judgment on the expense and lavishness of these events. In the passage below Tertullian (c.160-c 240), a Christian author, fumes about the origins of the gladiatorial games in an extract from his work *On Spectacles*. Tertullian came from Carthage and was vehement in his disgust at what he called idolatry; how reliable he is, given his agenda, is a moot point.



Funeral Stele with Figure Guiding a Horse and Rider.

We still have to examine the most famed and popular spectacle: it is called *munus* from being an *officium*, for *munus* and *officium* are synonyms.¹ People in the past thought they were performing a duty to the dead with this form of spectacle after they moderated its nature with a more refined form of cruelty. Long ago, since they believed that the souls of the dead are appeased by human blood, they purchased captives or slaves of poor quality and sacrificed them at funerals. Afterwards, they preferred to disguise this unholy practice by making it something to enjoy. Thus, after they trained the people they had obtained these ways to wield the weapons they had as best they could (training them to learn how to die!), they then exposed them to death at the tombs on the day appointed for sacrifices in honor of the dead. And so it was that they consoled themselves with murder. *That* is the origin of the gladiatorial *munus*. But gradually their refinement developed along with their cruelty; these inhuman people could not rest satisfied or gain pleasure unless wild animals tore humans to pieces. What was then a sacrifice offered for the appeasement of the dead was no doubt considered a rite in honor of the dead. This sort of thing is, therefore, idolatry, because idolatry, too, is a kind of rite in honor of the dead: both are services rendered to the dead.

Additionally, demons live in the images of the dead. And now consider the titles also: although this type of exhibition has moved from being an act to honor the dead to one which honours the living (for example, those who hold quaestorships, magistracies, flaminates,² and priesthoods) still, since the guilt of idolatry taints the dignity of the title, whatever is carried out in the name of this dignity shares necessarily in the taint of its origin. We must also consider the paraphernalia which are thought to belong to the ceremonies of the actual offices as also being idolatrous. For the purple robes, the fasces,³ the fillets,⁴ and crowns—finally, also, the announcements made in meetings and on advertisements⁵ and the final dinners⁶ given the evening before games—have the Devil’s pageantry and the invocation of demons. In conclusion, what shall I say about that horrible place which not even perjurers can bear? For the amphitheatre is consecrated to more numerous and more terrible names than the Capitol, although the Capitol is the temple of all demons.⁷ There as many unclean spirits live as there are seats. And to say a final word about the arts concerned, we know that Mars and Diana are the patrons of both types of *ludi*.

[Tertullian](#), *On Spectacles* 12

The events the Roman historian Livy describes below took place in 308 BCE after the Second Samnite War; Livy places the origin of the games – and of the type of gladiator known as Samnite, which was later to die out – in Campania, to the South of Rome.

The Senate voted a triumph for the Dictator. The armour he had captured was by far the greatest sight in the procession and they thought them so magnificent that the gilded shields were distributed amongst the owners of the silversmiths’ shops to adorn the Forum. People say this is the origin of the aediles’ custom of decorating the Forum when the covered chariots of the three Capitoline deities⁸ are conducted in procession through the Forum. The Romans used this armour to honour the gods, but the Campanians, who despised and hated the Samnites, made the gladiators who performed at their banquets wear it, and they then called these gladiators “Samnites.”

[Livy](#), *From the Founding of the City* 9.40

1. No, they’re not. Both mean duty, but *munus* also means gift, especially a gift given to the dead.

2. A type of priesthood.

3. Certain Roman magistrates (consuls, praetors, curule aediles, quaestors) were entitled to be accompanied by lictors who carried fasces, a bundle of rods with an axe sticking out. These symbolized their power to punish as part of their duties.

4. The bands of wool priests and priestesses wore on their heads when performing ceremonies.

5. We actually have some advertisements for these shows from Pompeii; see the section on advertising and marketing gladiators.

6. The *cena libera*, a public feast given the night before *ludi* to gladiators and those who were due to be executed in the arena.

7. The Capitoline Hill held many temples for various deities and in particular the temple to Jupiter Optimus Maximus.

8. The Capitoline triad: Juno; Jupiter; and Minerva.

The Romans sometimes said the games came specifically from Capua, a Campanian city, which was where most of the gladiatorial *ludi* (training schools) were later located.

It was then their [the people of Capua] ancient custom to make their feasts more exciting with the slaughter of men and they combined with their dining the vicious spectacle of armed men fighting. Often the fighters died right among the wine goblets of the feasters and their tables dripped with gushing blood.

Silius Italicus, *Punica* 11.51-54

However, others claimed the Etruscans to the north of Rome were the originators of the gladiatorial *munera*. In the following the Greek writer Athenaus quotes people on the various theories of the origins of single combat and gladiatorial games:

Some Campanian groups practice single combat at their drinking parties. But Nicolas of Damascus, one of the philosophers of the Peripatetic school,⁹ in the hundred-and-tenth book of his *History*, relates that the Romans at their feasts practise single combats, writing as follows, “The Romans used to put on spectacles of single combats, not only in their public shows and in their theatres, having taken the custom from the Etruscans, but they did so also at their banquets. And so, people often invited their friends to an entertainment, promising them, in addition to other things that they should see two or three pairs of single combatants. And when they had had enough of eating and drinking, they then called in the combatants: and as soon as one of them was killed, the guests clapped, being delighted at the show. In one case a man left it in his will that some beautiful women, whom he had purchased as slaves, should engage in single combat: and in another case a man desired that some youthful boys whom he had loved should do so; but the people would not tolerate such notorious proceedings, and declared the will invalid.” And Eratosthenes says, in the first book of his *Catalogue of the Victors at Olympia*, that the Etruscans used to box to the music of the flute.



Map of Italy at 500AD. Capua is south-east of the centre.

9. A philosophical school founded by Aristotle in the 4th century BCE; Nicolaus was a Jewish philosopher of the 1st century CE.



Gladiators at a Banquet, by Giovanni Lanfranco

But Poseidonius,¹⁰ in the twenty-third book of his *Histories*, says, “The Celts sometimes have single combats at their entertainments. After gathering armed, they go through their exercises, and make feints at, and sometimes they even go so far as to wound each another. And being irritated by this, if the bystanders do not stop them, they will proceed even to kill one another. But in ancient times,” he continues, “there was a custom that a hind quarter of pork was put on the table, and the bravest man took it; and if any one else laid claim to it, then the two rose up to fight till one of them was killed. And other men in the theatre having received some silver or gold money, and some even for a number of earthen vessels full of wine, having been guaranteed that the gifts promised would really be given and distributed them among their nearest and dearest, laid down on doors with their faces upwards, and then allowed some bystander to cut their throats with a sword.”

And Euphorion the Chalcidian¹¹ in his *Historical Memorials*, writes this: “However, among the Romans it is common for five minae to be offered to any one who chooses to take it, to allow his head to be cut off with an axe, so that his heirs might receive the reward: and very often many have returned their names as willing, so that there has been a regular contest between them as to who had the best right to be beaten to death.”¹²

And Hermippus, in the first book of his treatise on *Lawgivers*, asserts that the Mantineians¹³ were the original inventors of men fighting in single combat, and that Demonax, one of their citizens, was the original one to come up with this idea;¹⁴ and that the Cyrenaeans were the next to follow their example. And Ephorus, in the sixth book of his *History*, says- “The Mantineians and Arcadians were in the habit of practising warlike exercises, and even to this day they call the military dress and the ancient fashion of arming ‘the Mantineian’, since they invented it. And in addition to this, the exercises of single combat were first invented in Mantinea, and Demeas was the first to come up with the idea.”

10. A Greek philosopher and historian who lived c. 150s-50s BCE.

11. Euphorion of Chalcis, a Greek historian born in the 270s BCE.

12. It would be wise not to believe this or the claim in the previous paragraph. A minae is about 100 drachmas, and is not very much. The Greeks did not always think very highly of the Romans.

13. Mantinea was a city in Arcadia in Greece.

14. Not actually a reliable historical fact.

Athenaeus, 4.153f-154a¹⁵

Wherever the fights came from, the Romans embraced gladiatorial combat very rapidly. The historian Tacitus blamed passion for the games and spectacles for taking the Roman people away from more important matters:

And indeed there are characteristic and specific vices in this city, which I think are formed in the mother's womb: a love of actors and madness for gladiators and horses. How can someone totally occupied by and obsessed with these have time for the noble arts?

[Tacitus](#), *Dialogue on Oratory* 29

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Development of the Munera

In this section you will learn

- The first gladiatorial games in Rome
- How fast they developed and the rise in the numbers of fighters involved
- How the elite used these games in their funerals and other events

It is in the Mid-Republic that gladiatorial *munera* appear, and once they had first appeared, they were embraced; along with other events, they were vowed by relatives to commemorate close male kin as part of funeral celebrations; they could be held during the funeral or delayed until they would help the holder in a political campaign. The first we know of occurred in 264 at games Decimus Junius Brutus held for his father; there three pairs of gladiators fought in the Thracian style.

To honor his father, Decimus Junius Brutus was the first one to organize a gladiatorial *munus*.

Livy, *Periochae* Book 16¹

The three first gladiator fights were Thracians matched in three pairs as an offering made by the sons of Junius at their father's grave.

Ausonius, *Griphus* 36-7

The numbers soon increased: in 216 22 pairs of gladiators fought at the funeral of Marcus Aemilius Lepidus:

After the death of M. Aemilius Lepidus, who had been an augur² and also consul twice, his three sons, Lucius, Marcus, and Quintus, celebrated funeral games in his honour for three days and exhibited twenty-two pairs of gladiators in the Forum.

Livy, *From the Founding of the City* 23.30.15

During his campaign against the Carthaginians in Spain in 206 BCE, Scipio Africanus the Elder had soldiers volunteer to fight as gladiators

In New Carthage, Scipio organized a gladiatorial contest to commemorate his father and uncle. But no



Mosaic Medallion showing a Thracian gladiator.

1. Livy's history is not extant for this period; what we have are summaries of the content called the *Periochae*.

2. The augurs were priests whose role was to advise on bird omens; it was a prestigious college of priests (one of 4 in Rome) and membership was by nomination and election.

gladiators took part: the fighters were men who descended into the arena to honour their commander or accept a challenge.

Livy, *Periochae* 28

By 200 BCE the numbers of gladiators fighting had increased to 50

At the death of Marcus Valerius Laevinus his sons, Publius and Marcus, gave funeral games in the Forum for four days; they also gave a gladiatorial *munus* in which twenty-five pairs fought together.

Livy, *From the Founding of the City* 31.50.4

By 183 BCE 120 gladiators fought at one event:

On the day of the funeral of Publius Licinius a public distribution of meat was made, and a hundred and twenty gladiators fought in the funeral games which lasted for three days and after the games there was a public feast. The couches³ had been spread all over the Forum when a violent storm of wind and rain burst and forced most people to put up tents for shelter there. When the sky cleared, everywhere soon after they were removed, and it was commonly said that the people had fulfilled a prediction, which the seers had given, that it was necessary for tents to be set up in the Forum.

Livy, *From the Founding of the City* 39.46

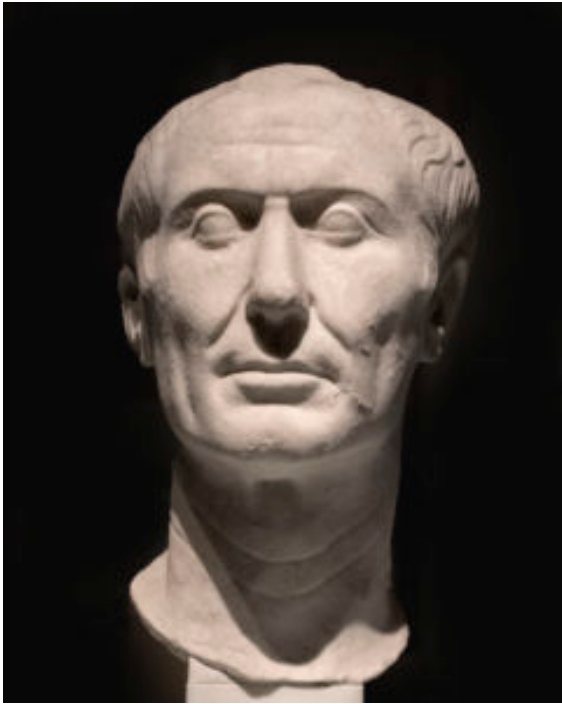
In 174 BCE 74 gladiators fought in a *munus* given by Titus Flamininus

Several gladiatorial *munera* were given this year, most of them not very large; the one given by Titus Flamininus was far more lavish than the rest. 11 When his father died he gave this spectacle for four days, and it was accompanied by a distribution of meat, a funeral feast, and dramas. But even in this magnificent exhibition only 74 men fought.

Livy, *From the Founding of the City* 41.28

In the Late Republic the games grew increasingly spectacular. Politicians like Julius Caesar put on larger and larger *munera*, using all sorts of excuses.

3. Romans dined reclining on couches.



Gaius Julius Caesar

When he was aedile Julius Caesar decorated not only the *Comitium* and the Forum with its adjacent basilicas, but the Capitoline Hill as well, and built temporary colonnades to display a part of his material. He provided *venationes* and stage-plays too, both with his colleague and independently. The result was that Caesar alone took all the credit even for what they spent in common, and his colleague Marcus Bibulus openly said that his was the fate of Pollux: “For,” said he, “just as the temple erected in the Forum to the twin brothers bears only Castor’s name, so the joint generosity of Caesar and myself is credited to Caesar alone.” Caesar also gave a gladiatorial show in addition to this, but with somewhat fewer pairs of fighters than he had planned; for the huge number he gathered from everywhere possible terrified his opponents so much that they passed a law limiting the number of gladiators which anyone was allowed to keep in Rome.

[Suetonius](#), *Julius Caesar* 10

When Cicero’s brother was in Gaul in November 54 BCE, fighting with Julius Caesar in the Gallic Wars, Cicero wrote this letter to him about games and the danger of holding too many of them, as he feared his friend Milo, an ambitious politician, was doing. (According to Cicero in his *In Defence of Milo*, over the course of his career Milo spent three entire fortunes on spectacles for the people.)

Now about Milo. Pompey gives him no support, and has thrown himself behind Gutta, saying also that he will get Caesar on his side.⁴ Milo is alarmed at this, and no wonder, and almost gives up hope if Pompey is created dictator. If he assists anyone who vetoes the dictatorship with his entourage and bodyguard, he fears he may attract Pompey’s hostility: if he doesn’t do so, he fears the proposal may be carried by force. He is preparing games on a most magnificent scale, at a cost, I assure you, that no one has ever exceeded. It is foolish for two or even three reasons to give games that were not demanded—he has already given a magnificent show of gladiators: he cannot afford it: he is only an executor, and might have reflected that he is now an executor, not an aedile. That is about all I had to write. Take care of yourself, dearest brother.

[Cicero](#), *Letters to Quintus* 3.8.6

Julius Caesar had his own gladiatorial school in Capua; in this letter from Cicero to his friend Atticus written in January of 49 BCE, the same year and month in which Caesar led his troops across the Rubicon and began a civil war, Cicero talks about fears that those gladiators would break out and fight for Caesar against Pompey and the senatorial faction.

I write this letter, though suffering from slight inflammation of the eyes, as I am just about to leave Caes for Capua. Lucius Caesar brought Caesar’s message to Pompey on the 23rd, while the latter was at Teanum with the consuls. His proposal was accepted, but on condition that he withdrew his garrisons from the towns which he had occupied outside his province. If he did this, they said in their answer that we would return to Rome and conclude the negotiation in the Senate. I hope for the present we have peace: for Caesar is not quite easy about his mad enterprise, nor our general about the amount of his forces. Pompey has told me to come to Capua and assist the levy, to which the Campanian settlers are not

4. Milo (full name: Titus Annius Milo). ran for the office of consul in 53; as it happened, riots and the imposition of the tribunes’ veto a number of times meant that the elections couldn’t be held. We know nothing else about Gutta and he may not even have ended up running. Because of the chaos of that year which meant the continual postponement of the elections, the Romans considered appointing Pompey as dictator until things calmed down enough and elections could be held (the dictatorship could only legally be held for six months).

making a very eager response. Pompey has very cleverly distributed Caesar's gladiators (about whom I gave you some incorrect information on the authority of a letter from A. Torquatus) at Capua among the heads of families, two to each family. There were 5,000 shields in the *ludus*: they were said to be contemplating breaking out. Pompey's measure was a very wise precaution for the safety of the Republic.

Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 7.14

Here is Caesar's account of the situation:

At Capua they [the senatorial forces] first began to take courage and to rally, and determined to raise levies in the colonies, which had been established under Julian law: and Lentulus⁵ brought into the public market place the gladiators which Caesar maintained there for the entertainment of the people, and confirmed them in their liberty, and gave them horses and ordered them to accompany him; but afterward, being warned by his friends that everyone was criticizing his action, he distributed them among the slaves of the district of Campania, to keep guard there.

Julius Caesar, *Civil War* 1.14



Remains of the Roman Forum

The games that Julius Caesar held for his daughter in 46 BCE were incredibly elaborate and involved creating tunnels under the Forum to channel animals and gladiators to temporary arenas set up there. They were also held years after her death, marking a new stage in the near complete detachment of the games from funeral ritual.

Within this same period he lost first his mother, then his daughter, and soon afterwards his grandchild.⁶ Meanwhile, as the community was horrified at the murder of Publius Clodius,⁷ the Senate had voted that only one consul should be chosen, and expressly named Gnaeus Pompey [the Great]. When the tribunes planned to make him Pompey's colleague, Caesar urged them rather to propose to the people that he be permitted to stand for a second consulship without coming to Rome, when the term of his governorship drew near its end, to prevent his being forced for the sake of the office to leave his province prematurely and without finishing the war.⁸ On the granting of this, aiming still higher and flushed with hope, he

5. One of the consuls, who was attempting to recruit troops.

6. Julia, Caesar's only daughter, was married to Pompey the Great. She died in childbirth and the child did not survive long.

7. A very powerful Tribune of the Plebs from an old and distinguished family, he had originally been born a patrician, but had himself adopted by a plebeian so he could hold that office; Cicero loathed him as he was responsible for Cicero's exile in 58. He was killed in 52 BCE by Milo after their entourages met on the Appian Way. Clodius was wounded in the shoulder by a gladiator named Birria who was part of Milo's entourage and then dragged wounded from an inn and murdered on the road. The use of gladiators as bodyguards and members of street gangs controlled by politicians was common during this period.

8. Julius Caesar wanted to run for consul without leaving Gaul (his province) because while he was in his province and still held *imperium*, no one could prosecute him. There were a large number of people who were waiting for him to enter Rome (for which he would have to give up his

neglected nothing in the way of lavish expenditure or of favours to anyone, either in his public capacity or privately. He began a forum with the proceeds of his spoils, the ground for which cost more than a hundred million sesterces. He announced a combat of gladiators and a feast for the people in memory of his daughter, a thing quite without precedent. To raise the expectation of these events to the highest possible pitch, he had the material for the banquet prepared in part by his own household, although he had let contracts to the markets as well. He gave orders that whenever famous gladiators fought without winning the favour of the people, they should be rescued by force and kept for him. He had the novices trained, not in a gladiatorial school by professionals, but in private houses by Roman equestrians and even by senators who were skilled in fighting, earnestly begging them, as is shown by his own letters, to give the recruits individual attention and personally direct their exercises. He doubled the pay of the legions. Whenever grain was plentiful, he distributed it generously⁹ and in unlimited quantities to them, and now and then gave each man a slave from among the captives.

Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 26.1-3

Bibliography and Further Reading

In addition to the below most biographies of figures like Julius Caesar and Pompey will discuss their use of spectacles in some detail, as they were of considerable political use. The same is true of many histories of the Roman Republic and especially of the Late Republic.

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imperium) so they could bring various cases against him. It was Roman law that in order to run for consul you had to be in the city of Rome, hence Caesar's request.

9. That is if they enslaved people during a war, he gave each soldier a slave from the prisoners, rather than selling them all, which was the usual practice. The money from such sales was supposed to make its way in part to the state.

Development and Design of Arenas

In this section you will learn

- where the Romans staged the first gladiatorial fights
- why they had no permanent, stone arena in Rome until very late
- the impact the Colosseum had when it was built and after

The first stone amphitheatre in Italy was built in Pompeii, a colony for Roman military veterans, in 70 BCE; it could seat perhaps as many as 24,000 spectators – enough for all of Pompeii's population. An inscription from the amphitheatre tells who first built it.

Gaius Quinctius Valgus, son of Gaius, and Marcus Porcius, son of Marcus, quinquennial duumvirs, for the honour of the colony [of Pompeii], saw to the construction of the amphitheatre at their own expense and gave the area to the colonists in perpetuity.

CIL¹ 10 852



Inside of the amphitheater of Pompeii, Italy.

1. *Corpus Inscriptorum Latinorum*, a record of Latin inscriptions, including graffiti.

The Romans, however, were extremely reluctant to build a stone amphitheatre in Rome itself (or, indeed, a stone theatre for less murderous drama), because they argued a permanent location of this sort would corrupt public morality.² This did not stop people building incredibly elaborate temporary structures to host games. In 52 BCE Gaius Scribonius Curio created revolving wooden theatres that came together to form an amphitheatre.

Curio (who died during the Civil War while fighting for Caesar)³ had no hope of outdoing Scaurus⁴ in expensive decorations in his games for his father...so he had to think hard and come up with some new scheme. It's a valuable lesson for us to know what he came up with and to be pleased with *our* values and, in a shift from what is usual, to call ourselves [moral] ancestors. He constructed two large wooden theatres right beside each other, each of which pivoted on a revolving point. In the morning each one hosted a play, and each half faced away from the other so that the plays did not drown each other out. And, then, suddenly each one revolved (and the sources say that after the first few days some spectators kept sitting as it did so) and the corners met and the whole became an amphitheatre in which he gave gladiatorial battles – although the gladiators were less for sale than the Roman people as they whirled around. [Pliny then goes on a long rant about the sheer immorality of this.]

[Pliny the Elder](#), *Natural History* 36.117

Julius Caesar also built a wooden amphitheatre in 46 BCE for his own spectacles:

After completing this new forum and the temple to Venus, as the founder of his family,⁵ he dedicated them at this very time, and in their honour founded many contests of all kinds. He built a kind of hunting-theatre of wood, which was called an amphitheatre from the fact that it had seats all around without any stage. In honour of this and of his daughter⁶ he exhibited combats of wild beasts and gladiators; but anyone who cared to record their number would find his task a burden without being able, in all probability, to present the truth, as people regularly exaggerate these things in order to boast.

[Cassius Dio](#) 43.22

The first stone amphitheatre in Rome was built by Statilius Taurus in 29 BCE and was probably located in the south of the Campus Martius, which was outside the city walls; it seems to have been rather unsatisfactory and eventually burned down in the great fire of Rome in 68 CE. It was built alongside a number of other public buildings during the reign of Augustus and was paid for by Taurus' spoils of war from his campaign in Africa in 34 BCE.

2. This was not the case outside Rome: locations in the south of Italy had stone arenas long before Rome.

3. He died in 49 BCE.

4. [See here for more about that theatre.](#)

5. The Julian *gens* claimed descent from the Trojan prince Aeneas, the son of Venus and the mortal hero Anchises.

6. Julia, who had died in childbirth several years before.

More than that, Augustus often urged other prominent men to adorn the city with new monuments or to restore and improve old ones, each according to his means. 5 Many such public works were undertaken at that time by many men; for example, the Temple of Hercules and the Muses but by Marcius Philippus, the Temple of Diana by Lucius Cornificius, the Hall of Liberty by Asinius Pollio, the Temple of Saturn by Munatius Plancus, a theatre by Cornelius Balbus, an amphitheatre by Statilius Taurus, and by Marcus Agrippa⁷ in particular many magnificent buildings.

[Suetonius](#), *Augustus* 29.4-5



Reconstruction of the Amphitheater of Statilius Taurus, Rome, Italy.

These were the events of those days. And while Caesar was still in his fourth consulship, Statilius Taurus both constructed at his own expense and dedicated with a gladiatorial combat a hunting-theatre of stone in the Campus Martius. Because of this he was permitted by the people to choose one of the praetors each year.

Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 51.23

Despite the fact that this amphitheatre was unsatisfactory, it was not until Caligula that we hear of another stone amphitheatre being started. This was abandoned by his successor Claudius.

Caligula completed the public works which had been half finished under Tiberius, namely the temple of Augustus and the theatre of Pompey. He likewise began an aqueduct in the region near Tibur and an amphitheatre beside the Saepta [Julia], the former finished by his successor Claudius, while the latter was abandoned. At Syracuse he repaired the city walls, which had fallen into ruin though lapse of time, and the temples of the gods. He had planned, besides, to rebuild the palace of Polycrates at Samos, to finish the temple of Didymaeon Apollo at Ephesus, to found a city high up in the Alps, but, above all, to dig a canal through the Isthmus in Greece, and he had already sent a chief centurion to survey the work.

Suetonius, *Caligula* 21

7. Augustus' friend and son-in-law.



136. Pianta della III regione (Isis et Serapis).

Map showing the location of the Colosseum, the baths of Trajan, and the Domus Aurea, Nero's Golden House. The Colosseum was built over the artificial lake Nero had constructed in the grounds of the Domus Aurea.

Agrippina, but almost completely destroyed by Nero; also an amphitheatre in the heart of the city, a plan which he learned that Augustus had cherished.⁸

Suetonius, *Augustus* 9.1

The poet Martial wrote a book of poems on the opening of the Colosseum, which gives some idea of its impact on many people of the period and the desire of the builders to make sure it was celebrated as a sign of Roman (and their) power. In his first poem he claims that the Colosseum has surpassed all the wonders of the ancient world.

Let barbarian Memphis⁹ be silent of the wonders of the pyramids, and Assyrian labour not boast of its Babylon; let us not praise the soft Ionians for Diana's temple;¹⁰ let the altar made of many horns keep hid its Delos;¹¹ nor the Carians boast to the heavens the Mausoleum¹² poised on empty air with excessive praise. All labour yields to Caesar's amphitheatre: Fame will speak of one work instead of all the others

[Martial](#), *Book of Spectacles* 1

Exercise

Think of your favourite arena or space for spectacles (any spectacle or activity could take place there – it doesn't need to be a sport).

Now try and create a list of its features, and see if you can compare them to any modern wonder of the **modern** world.* What does this look like? Does it seem like a good way to describe or praise a location of this sort.

* Any wonder of the world: but it must currently exist.

8. It was surprisingly common for later emperors to declare that they were doing something that Augustus had planned, and thus it was fine.

9. An ancient city even by Egyptian standards, filled with many, many temples.

10. The Temple of Diana at Ephesus, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

11. This altar, made of the horns of sacrificed goats, was one of the attractions on the island of Delos, an island dedicated to the god Apollo.

12. The Mausoleum of Halicarnassus (in Southwest Caria) was a massive tomb built for Mausolus by his wife Artemisia in the mid-4th century BCE; it was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world.

The video below tries to give you a sense for the size and impressiveness of the Colosseum, but it is a bit cheesy, I find. Still, you get a sense of its varied spaces, lighting, and the various features:



A YouTube element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/spectaclesintheromanworldsourcebook/?p=63>

In his second poem Martial reflects on how the space where the Colosseum now stands was private land occupied by the grounds of Nero's infamous Golden House and, specifically a lake, which was now returned to the public.

Here where, the starry Colossus¹³ now looks at the heavens and tall scaffolds rise in the middle, the palace of a savage king— a loathsome thing — gleamed and only a single home stood. Here, where the far-seen amphitheatre lifts its lofty mass was Nero's lake. Here, where we admire the warm baths,¹⁴ a rapidly built gift, a proud estate once robbed the poor of their homes. Where the Claudian Colonnade extends its outspread shade was the furthest edge of the palace. Rome has been restored to herself, and under your power, Caesar, what once belonged to our master is now the delight of the people.

Martial, *Book of Spectacles 2*

The games to celebrate the opening of the Colosseum were incredibly lavish:

During his reign Titus did little that was exceptional, apart from the incredible shows he gave for the dedication ceremonies of the hunting theater [the Colosseum] and the baths that are named after him. One

13. The statue of Nero (later turned into the Sun God) that stood outside the arena

14. The Baths of Titus built in 81 CE; these were built over some of the *Domus Aurea* and were located beside where you can still view the remains of the Baths of Trajan.

contest pitted whooping cranes against each other; in another four elephants fought. Animals both tame and wild were slaughtered, to the number of 9,000. Women (though none of any standing) took part in the killing; many men fought in single combat, but many others fought in squads, on both foot and in boats, since Titus had this same theater quickly flooded ... Others also fought on boats in the basin in the Gardens of Gaius and Lucius [the Naumachia], which Augustus had excavated for just such battles.... Such spectacles lasted for one hundred days. Titus supplemented them with some more useful entertainment: he threw little wooden balls down on the audience of the amphitheater, each inscribed with a little picture of the prize that those who caught the balls could pick up from the appropriate officials: the prizes included food, clothing, vessels of silver and gold, horses, mules, cattle, and slaves.

On the last day of his games, Titus was seen to weep. When they were over, he accomplished nothing great, dying the following year.

Cassius Dio, *History* 66.25

Long after the Flavian dynasty was no more, the Colosseum kept standing – and occasionally burning down.

Macrinus¹⁵ was not destined to live long, either, as, indeed, it had been foretold to him. For a mule gave birth to a mule in Rome and a sow to a little pig with four ears, two tongues, and feet, a great earthquake occurred, blood flowed from a pipe, and bees formed honeycomb in the forum Boarium. 2 The Colosseum was struck by thunderbolts on the very day of the Vulcanalia, and such a blaze followed that its entire upper circuit and everything in the arena was consumed, and the rest of the structure was ravaged by the flames and reduced to ruins. Neither human aid could stop the conflagration, though practically every aqueduct was emptied, nor could the downpour from the sky, which was extremely heavy and violent, accomplish anything — to such an extent was the water from both sources consumed by the power of the thunderbolts, and, in fact, actually contributed in a measure to the damage done. For several years, gladiatorial combats had to be put on in [Domitian's] Stadium.

Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 79.25.2, 3

The Emperor Alexander Severus¹⁶ placed a tax on pimps and both male and female prostitutes, with the stipulation that the income thus raised go not into the public treasury but towards the cost of restoring the Theatre, the Circus, the Colosseum, and the Stadium.

[*Historia Augusta*, Severus Alexander 24.3](#)

Constantius II gazed over the regions of Rome and the suburban estates that ringed it, thinking, as each object met his view in turn, that it excelled everything else in height: the Temple of Jupiter, rising above its surroundings the way divine things rise over earthly; the imperial baths, piled high to the volume of a province; the sturdy mass of the Colosseum encased in its frame of travertine marble, soaring to heights difficult to reach with the human eye.

Ammianus, *History* 16.10.1

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16. Emperor 222-235.

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The Spread of the Munera Outside Rome

In this section you will learn

- how the gladiatorial games spread outside Rome
- how some, with little success, condemned the games for being non-Greek
- about laws in Roman colonies governing the giving of various *munera*

We tend to think of gladiatorial *munera* as particularly Roman and (sometimes) as disdained by the Greeks in the Eastern part of the empire; the truth is they were popular all over the Eastern and Western parts of the empire. Sometimes that had to do with the Romanization of provinces, but at other times it preceded the Roman government – and, in fact, the first gladiatorial show in the East was given by Antiochus IV, King of Syria (175-164 BCE). Note that despite Livy’s assurance that he only gave a gladiatorial show once, it seems clear from what he says that Antiochus gave such *munera* more than that:

In the magnificence of public shows of every kind Antiochus surpassed all former kings; these spectacles, with only one exception, involved Greek performers, the one exception being a gladiatorial contest exhibited in Roman fashion, which frightened the spectators, who were unused to such sights, more than it pleased them. However, by frequently giving these exhibitions, in which the gladiators sometimes only wounded one another and at other times fought to the death, he familiarised the eyes of his people to them and they learned to enjoy them. In this way he created amongst most of the younger men an enthusiasm for weapons, and while at first hired gladiators from Rome at a great cost, he now hired from his own people.

[Livy](#), *From the Founding of the City* 41.20

The philosopher and holy man Apollonius of Tyana (1st century CE) attacked the Athenians for their fondness for gladiatorial *munera* and their use of the Theatre of Dionysus for such shows:

He also corrected the following abuse at Athens. The Athenians ran in crowds to the theatre beneath the Acropolis to witness humans killed, and the passion for such gladiatorial sports was stronger there than it is in Corinth today, for they would buy adulterers, fornicators, burglars, robbers, and kidnappers and similar rabble for large sums, and then they took them and armed them and made them fight with one another. Apollonius then attacked these practices, and when the Athenians invited him to attend their assembly, he refused to enter a place so impure and reeking with gore.



Theatre of Dionysus at Athens

And he this said in a letter to them; he said that he was surprised that “the goddess Athena had not already fled from Acropolis, when you shed such blood

before her eyes. For I suspect that soon, when you are conducting the pan-Atheniac procession,¹ you will no longer be content with bulls, but will be sacrificing hecatombs of men to the goddess. And you, Dionysus, do you attend their theatre after such bloodshed? And do the wise among the Athenians pour libations to you there? No! Depart, Dionysus! Holier and purer is your Cithaeron.”

Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 22

In the following the philosopher and orator Dio Chrysostom speaks to the people of Rhodes in the 1st century CE and compares them favourably with the Athenians and their love of gladiatorial combats.

Moreover, if you were superior to the Athenians in no other way, perhaps you would not find it necessary to feel any jealousy of them in this one matter and to consider how you might have a reputation better than theirs. But as the situation now is, there is no practice current in Athens which would *not* cause anyone to feel ashamed. For instance, in regard to the gladiatorial shows the Athenians have imitated the Corinthians so enthusiastically, or rather, have so surpassed both them and all others in their mad infatuation, that whereas the Corinthians watch these combats outside the city in a valley, a place that is able to hold a crowd but otherwise is dirty and such that no one would even bury any freeborn citizens there, the Athenians watch this fine spectacle in their theatre under the very walls of the Acropolis, in the place where they bring their Dionysus into the orchestra and stand him up, so that often a fighter is slaughtered among the very seats in which the Hierophant and the other priests must sit.² And they refused to obey and did not even applaud the philosopher [probably Musonius Rufus] who spoke about this matter and rebuked them; on the contrary, they were so angry that, although in blood he was inferior to no Roman but enjoyed a reputation greater than any one man has attained for generations, and was admittedly the only man who since the time of the ancients had lived most nearly in conformity with reason, this man was forced to leave the city and preferred to go and live somewhere else in Greece. But you, men of Rhodes, would not tolerate anything of that sort, since you have a law which orders that the executioner must never enter the city.

Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* 31.121-122

In Apuleius’ novel of the 2nd century CE, the *Golden Ass*, the hero is turned into a donkey; it is in that shape that he relates the following story – he is being used as a pack animal by a band of robbers. (Those interested in the role of spectacle in the Apuleius should look at [The Spectacles of Apuleius](#))

After we lost two of our companions, we did not like Thebes,³ but marched towards the next city called Plataea, where we found everyone was talking about a man named Demochares who planned to hold great games, where there would be a contest of all kinds of weapons. He was from a good family, incredibly rich, generous, and well deserved what he had, and had prepared many shows and pleasures for the common people. So great were his preparations that there is no one who could by wit or eloquence describe in suitable language all the different shapes of his preparations, for first he had provided gladiators from a famous *ludus*, then all manner of swift hunters, then criminals without hope of reprieve whose had been condemned for their punishment to be food for wild beasts. He had ordered a machine made of beams fixed together, with great towers and platforms like a house, to move here and there, very nicely painted, which would contain all the quarry: he had ready a great number of wild beasts of many varieties, and he had brought from abroad those noble creatures that were soon to be the death of so many condemned persons. But among these great and lavish preparations, he spent the most part of his patrimony in buying up a vast number of great bears, which he had either trapped himself, or had spent a great deal of money on, or which were given him by different friends, who competed with each other to give him such gifts: and all these he kept and fed at very great cost. However, for all his concern for the public pleasure, he could not be free from the malicious eyes of envy: for some of the bears were almost

1. An annual festival with athletic games in honour of the goddess Athena.

2. The cult statue of Dionysus was taken to the theatre so he could watch the games; his priests sat in the orchestra.

3. This is the Greek Thebes, not to be confused with the one in Egypt.

dead because they had been caged too long; some were thin with the blistering heat of the sun; some languished with long lying, but all (having a range of diseases) were so afflicted that they died one after another, and there were almost none left, and you could see their wrecks piteously lying in the streets and all but dead. Then the common people, having no other meat to eat and forced by harsh poverty to find any new meat and cheap feasts, would come and fill their bellies with the flesh of the bears.

Apuleius, *Golden Ass* 4.13



Map of Spain and Portugal at 30AD. Urso was located near Osuna (not on map), east of Hispalis.

In addition to Greek cities, Roman colonies put considerable effort into ensuring that spectacles not only took place, but that they took place on a suitable scale and in a regular fashion. A law from 44 establishing a Roman colony at Urso, southern Spain, took great care to ensure that the duumvirs, the two magistrates who would be the senior magistrates in the colony, and the aediles would know the extent of their responsibilities for giving games. (The inscription is written in legalese and hence can make for rather difficult reading, but the sections below show a concern that the correct amount of money is spent on the games, that they last for a decided time, and that the magistrates and citizens of the colony get their proper seats.)

70. All duumvirs (except the first to be appointed after this law) shall celebrate during their magistracy at the discretion of the decurions⁴ a gladiatorial *munus* or dramatic shows for Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva,⁵ and all the gods and the goddesses, or such part of these shows as shall be possible, over four days, for the greater part of each day. These persons shall spend no less than 2,000 sesterces of their own money and on these spectacles and for the said show each of the said persons shall expend from his own money, and from the public money it shall be lawful for each several duumvir to spend not more than 2,000 sesterces, and it shall be lawful for these persons so to do without prejudice to themselves, always provided that no person shall expend or make assignment of any portion of the money, which in accordance with this law properly shall be given or assigned for those sacrifices which are performed publicly in the forum or in any other place.

71. During their magistracy all aediles shall celebrate a gladiatorial *munus* or dramatic shows for Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, or whatever portion of the said shows shall be possible, over three days, for the greater part of each day, and during one day games in the circus or the forum for Venus, and on these spectacles and show each of these persons shall expend not less than 2,000 sesterces from his own money, and from the public fund it shall be lawful for each aedile to expend 1000 sesterces, and a duumvir or a prefect shall provide that the money shall be given and assigned, and it shall be lawful for the aediles to receive the same without prejudice to themselves...

125. At the games no person shall occupy any place given, assigned, or left to the decurions, from which it is proper for decurions to view the games, except the one who is at that time a decurion of the colony Genetiva,⁶ or who holds at that time a magistracy or authority or power by the votes of the colonists or by the command of Gaius [Julius] Caesar dictator, consul, or proconsul, or who at the time has some promagistracy or power in the colony Genetiva, or to whom it is proper for places to be assigned among the decurions by decree of the decurions of Genetiva, such a decree being passed when not less than one

4. Decurions were members of the colony's senate.

5. As the Capitoline Triad these were often linked together.

6. The colony's name was colonia Julia Genetiva.

half of the decurions are present at the discussion. Nor shall any person, with malice aforethought, introduce or order to be introduced into the said place any others except the aforesaid persons. If any person with malice aforethought occupies such places in breach of this law, or introduces another person into the same, or orders with malice aforethought another person to be so introduced, for every such act against this law, he shall be condemned to pay 5,000 sesterces to the colonists of the colony Genetiva Julia and any of the colonists, at will, shall have the right and the power to bring an action, a claim, and a suit for that amount of money, in accordance with this law, in a recuperatory action, before a duumvir or a prefect. 126. Every duumvir, aedile, or prefect of the colony Genetiva Julia, or any other person of the colony Genetiva Julia, celebrating dramatic spectacles, shall accommodate the colonists of the colony Genetiva, resident aliens, guests, and strangers in such manner as the decurions decree and determine, without malicious deception, not less than fifty decurions being present when the said matter is discussed. Whatsoever is so decreed and determined by the decurions shall be legal and valid in accordance with this law. Nor shall the person celebrating the games seat the aforesaid persons, nor order the same to be seated otherwise or in other manner, nor give, nor apportion, nor assign places, nor order places to be given, apportioned, or assigned in another manner, nor shall he do anything nor order anything to be done, whereby the said persons shall sit otherwise or in another manner than in the places to be given, apportioned or assigned, nor whereby any person with malice aforethought shall sit in a place reserved for others. Any person acting in contravention of this regulation, for each and every other act, shall be condemned to pay to the colonists, at will, who shall have the right and the power to bring an action, a claim, and a suit for that amount of money, in accordance with this law, in a recuperatory action, before a duumvir or a prefect.

127. Regarding any dramatic shows in the colony Genetiva Julia: no person shall sit in the orchestra to view the performance except a magistrate or a promagistrate of the Roman people, or a Roman official charged with jurisdiction, or a person who is or shall be or has been a senator of the Roman people, or the son of such senator, or the overseer of the workmen of the magistrate or promagistrate holding the province of Farther Spain, or Baetica, or those persons who properly by this law shall sit in the place assigned to the decurions. Nor shall any person introduce into the said place nor allow to sit therein any persons other than the aforesaid persons.

Lex Ursonensis (ILS 6087)

A number of emperors spent money and effort in giving shows outside as well as inside the city of Rome

Caligula also gave shows in foreign lands, Athenian games at Syracuse in Sicily, and miscellaneous games at Lugdunum in Gallia; at the latter place also a contest in Greek and Latin oratory, in which, they say, the losers gave prizes to the victors and were forced to compose eulogies upon them, while those who were least successful were ordered to erase their writings with a sponge or with their tongue unless they elected rather to be beaten with rods or thrown into the neighboring river.

[Suetonius](#), *Caligula*

Not content with showing his proficiency in these arts⁷ at Rome, Nero went to Achaia, as I have said, influenced especially by the following consideration. The cities in which it was the custom to hold contests in music had adopted the rule of sending all the lyric prizes to him. These he received with the greatest delight, not only giving audience to the envoys who brought them before he saw anyone else, but even inviting them to his private table. When some of them begged him to sing after dinner and greeted his performance with extravagant applause, he declared that “the Greeks were the only ones who had an ear for music and that they alone were worthy of his efforts.” So he took ship without delay and immediately on arriving at Cassiope made a preliminary appearance as a singer at the altar of Jupiter Cassius, and then went the round of all the contests.⁸

To make this possible, he gave orders that even those which were widely separated in time should be brought together in a single year, so that some had even to be given twice, and he introduced a musical competition at Olympia also, contrary to custom. To avoid being distracted or hindered in any way while busy with these contests, he replied to his freedman Helius, who reminded him that the affairs of the city required his presence, in these words: “However much it may be your advice and your wish that I should return speedily, yet you ought rather to counsel me and to hope that I may return worthy of Nero.” ...He also drove a chariot in many places, at Olympia even a ten-horse team, although in one of his own poems he had criticised Mithridates for just that thing. But after he had been thrown from the car and put back in it, he was unable to hold out and gave up before the end of the course; but he received the crown just the same. On his departure he presented the entire province with freedom and at the same time gave the judges Roman citizenship and a large sum of money. These favours he announced in person on the day of the Isthmian Games, standing in the middle of the stadium.

Suetonius, *Nero* 22-24

In almost every city Hadrian built some building and gave public games. At Athens he exhibited in the stadium a *venatio* of a thousand wild beasts, but he never called away from Rome a single *venator* or actor. In Rome, in addition to popular entertainments of unbounded extravagance, he gave spices to the people in honour of his mother-in-law, and in honour of Trajan he caused essences of balsam and saffron to be poured over the seats of the theatre. And in the theatre he presented plays of all kinds in the ancient manner and had the court—actors appear before the public. In the Circus he had many wild beasts killed and often a whole hundred of lions. He often gave the people exhibitions of military Pyrrhic dances and he frequently attended gladiatorial shows.

[Historia Augusta](#) 19.2-8

The Greek satirist Lucian (2nd century CE) also tells of a novel form of spectacle that one Cynic



Bust of Caligula

7. Singing, lyre-playing, and acting.

8. The circuit of the four major crowd games (Delphi, Nemea, Olympia, Isthmia) was called the *periodos*. As the games did not overlap with each other, Nero had them all moved into the same year so he could go from one to other and perform at each.

philosopher, Proteus Peregrinus, came up with at the Olympic games: self-immolation. Lucian hated Peregrinus so his spin cannot exactly be trusted, but the story does show that Greeks would watch some rather horrific events.



Lucianus (fictional portrait).

On our arrival at Olympia, we found the vestibule full of people all talking about Proteus. Some were criticizing him, others praised his intention; and most of them had come to blows about it when, just after the heralds' contest,⁹ in came Proteus himself, with a multitudinous escort, and gave us a speech, all about himself – the life he had lived, the risks he had run, the trials he had undergone in the cause of philosophy. He had a great deal to say, but I heard very little of it; there was such a crowd. Presently I began to think I should be squeezed to death in the crush (I saw this actually happen to several people), so off I went, having had enough of this sophist in love with death, and his anticipatory epitaph. Thus much I heard, however. Upon a golden life he desired to set a golden crown. He had lived like Heracles: like Heracles he must die, and mingle with the upper air.¹⁰ 'It is my aim,' he continued, 'to benefit mankind; to teach them how contemptible a thing is death. To this end, the world shall be my Philoctetes.' The simpler souls among his audience wept, crying, 'Live, Proteus; live for Greece!' Others were of sterner stuff, and expressed hearty approval of his determination. This discomposed the old man considerably. His plan had been that they would never let him go near the pyre and that they would all cling about him and insist on his continuing a compulsory existence. He had the complexion of a corpse before,

but this wholly unexpected blow of approbation made him turn several degrees paler and he trembled—and stopped speaking.

Think of my amusement! It was impossible to feel pity for such morbid vanity: among all who have ever been afflicted with this scourge, Proteus stands pre-eminent. However, he had a fine following, and drank his fill of notoriety, as he gazed on the host of his admirers; poor man! He forgot that criminals on the way to the cross, or in the executioner's hands, have a greater escort by far. And now the games were over. They were the best I had ever; seen, though this makes my fourth visit to Olympia. In the general rush of departure, I got left behind, finding it impossible to procure a conveyance. After repeated postponements, Proteus had finally announced a late hour of the night for his exhibition. Accordingly, at about midnight I got up (I had found lodgings with a friend), and set out for Harpine; for here was the pyre, just two miles and a half from Olympia, going East along the racecourse. We found on arrival that the pyre had been placed in a hole, about six feet deep. To ensure speedy ignition, it had been composed chiefly of pine-torches, with brushwood stuffed in between. As soon as the moon had risen—for her presence too was required at the glorious spectacle—Proteus advanced, in his usual costume, accompanied by the chiefs of the Cynics; conspicuous among them came the pride of Patrae, torch in hand; nobly qualified for the part he was to play. Proteus too had his torch. They drew near to the pyre, and kindled it at several points; as it contained nothing but torches and brushwood, a fine blaze was the result. Then Proteus—are you listening, Cronius?—Proteus threw aside his bag, cloak, and club—'his club of Heracles—and stood before us in scrupulously unclean linen. He demanded frankincense, to throw upon the fire; being supplied he first threw it on, then, turning to the South (another tragic touch, this of the South), he exclaimed: 'Gods of my mother, gods of my father, receive me with favour.' And with these words he leapt into the pyre. There was nothing more to be seen, however; the towering mass of flames enveloped him completely.

Again, sweet sir, you smile over the conclusion of my tragedy. As for me, I saw nothing much in his appealing to his mother's gods, but when he included his *father's* in the appeal, I laughed out loud; it reminded me of the parricide story. The Cynics stood dry-eyed about the pyre, gazing upon the flames in silent manifestation of their grief. At last, when I was half dead with suppressed laughter, I addressed

9. The first competition at Olympia was that of the heralds who would then go on to announce events and winners at the games.

10. Heracles committed suicide on a pyre and was then raised into the heavens and became a god. The pyre was lit by his friend and squire Philoctetes.

them. ‘Intelligent sirs,’ I said, ‘let us go away. No pleasure is to be derived from seeing an old man roasted, and there is a horrible smell of burning. Are you waiting for some painter to come along and take a sketch of you, to match the pictures of Socrates in prison, with his companions at his side?’ They were very angry and abusive at first, and some took to their sticks: but when I threatened to pick a few of them up and throw them on to the fire to keep their master company, they quieted down and peace was restored.

Curious reflections were running in my mind, Cronius, as I made my way back. ‘How strange a thing is this same ambition!’ I said to myself; ‘it is the one irresistible passion; irresistible to the noblest of mankind, as we account them,—how much more to such as Proteus, whose wild, foolish life may well end upon the pyre!’ At this point I met a number of people coming out to assist at the spectacle, thinking to find Proteus still alive; for among the various rumours of the preceding day, one had been, that before entering the fire he was to greet the rising sun, which to be sure is said to be the Brahmin practice. Most of them turned back when I told them that all was over; all but those enthusiasts who could not rest without seeing the identical spot, and snatching some relic from the flames. After this, you may be sure, my work was cut out for me: I had to tell them all about it, and to undergo a minute cross-examination from everybody. If it was some one I liked the look of, I confined myself to plain prose, as in the present narrative: but for the benefit of the curious simple, I put in a few dramatic touches on my own account. No sooner had Proteus thrown himself upon the kindled pyre, than there was a tremendous earthquake, I informed them; the ground rumbled beneath us; and a vulture flew out from the midst of the flames and away into the sky, exclaiming in a human voice

‘I rise from Earth, I seek Olympus.’

They listened with amazement and shuddering reverence. ‘Did the vulture fly East or West?’ they wanted to know. I answered whichever came uppermost. On getting back to Olympia, I stopped to listen to an old man who was giving an account of these proceedings; a credible witness, if ever there was one, to judge by his long beard and dignified appearance in general. He told us, among other things, that only a short time before, just after the cremation, Proteus had appeared to him in white raiment; and that he had now left him walking with serene countenance in the Colonnade of Echoes, crowned with olive; and on the top of all this he brought in the vulture, solemnly swore that he had seen it himself flying away from the pyre,—my own vulture, which I had but just let fly, as a satire on crass stupidity!

Lucian, *The Death of Peregrinus*

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Seating in the Arena and Society

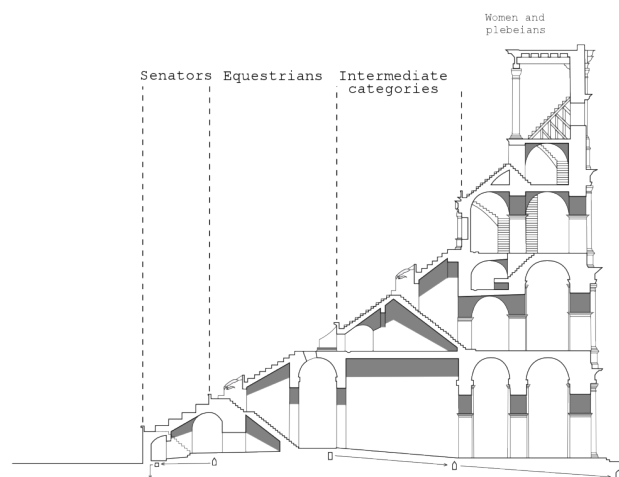
In this section you will learn

- How seating in Roman arenas and theatres went from being mixed gender and with different classes sitting next to or close to each other to being highly organized according to rank by the Emperor Augustus and others.
- About the exclusion of Roman women from some events, and their placement at the back of the arena for others
- The unique status of chariot racing which allowed men and women of all classes to sit together

Rome was an incredibly hierarchical society and eventually seating evolved to show that in detail. Although seating was fairly indiscriminate in the early days of games and festivals, gradually over time separate seating sections were created for senators and then equestrians in the various theatres, amphitheatres, and Circus Maximus. In 194 BCE seating¹ was set aside for the Senate at performances, segregating them from the common people.

Atilius Serranus and L. Scribonius Libo were the first aediles who brought dramas to the [Ludi Megalenses](#). It was when these same aediles held the [Ludi Romani](#) that the Senate for the first time sat apart from the people. This, like all innovations, generated a great deal of comment. Some regarded it as a tribute which had long been due to the highest order in the Republic; others considered that whatever enhanced the greatness of the patricians detracted from the dignity of the people, and that all such distinctions as mark off the different orders in the State impair the concord and liberty which all ought equally to enjoy. For 557 years the spectators had sat wherever they wanted, what, people asked, had happened all of a sudden that the patricians refused to have the plebeians amongst them? Why should a rich man object to a poor man sitting by his side? It was a piece of unheard-of arrogance neither adopted nor wished for by any other Senate in the world. Even [Scipio] Africanus himself, who when consul was responsible for the change, was said to have regretted it. So distasteful is any departure from past behaviour; so much do men prefer to cling to the old ways except where they are clearly condemned by experience.

[Livy](#), *From the Founding of the City* 34.54



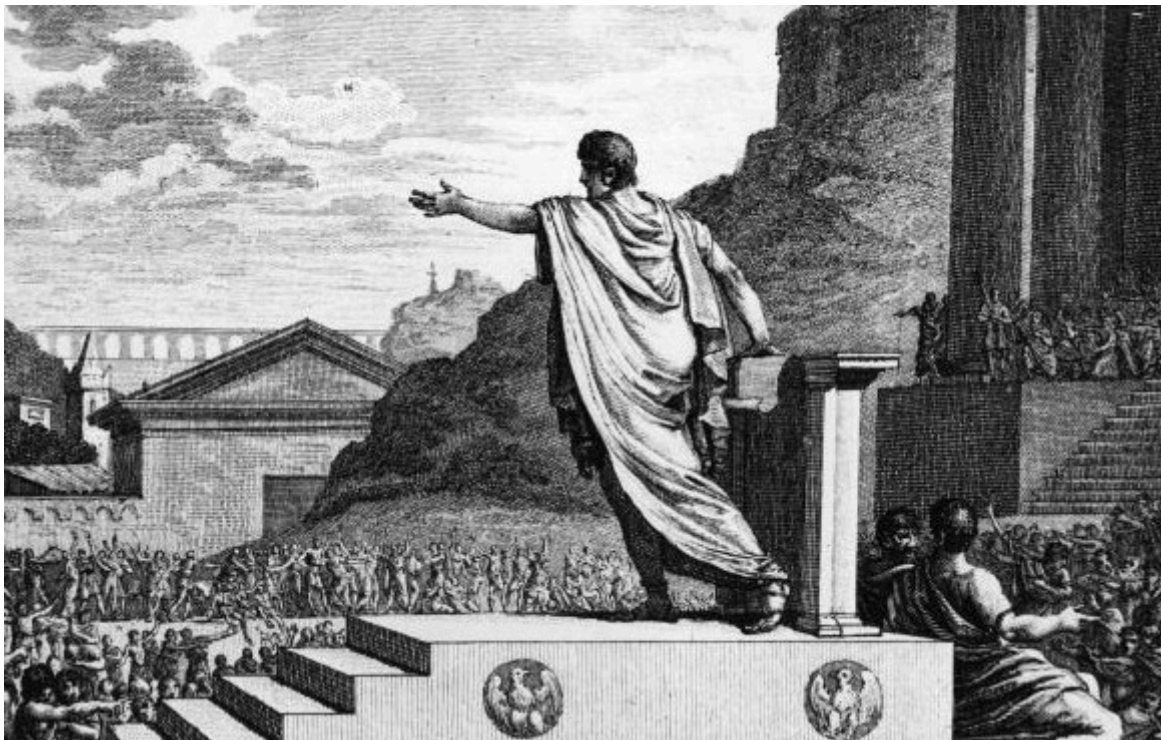
A cross section of the Colosseum showing the rough seating arrangements

1. It is important to remember that Rome had no permanent theatre, so we are frequently referring to seats set up in an ad hoc fashion, around the Forum and on the steps of temples and various buildings.

As seating became more restricted some politicians courted the people by tearing down the expensive seats. Gaius Gracchus, a tribune of the plebs in 123 and 122, did just this; although popular with the people, it was less popular with other elites.

Moreover, it happened that Gaius had incurred the anger of the other tribunes, for the following reason. The people were going to enjoy an exhibition of gladiators in the Forum, and most of the magistrates had constructed seats for the show round about, and were offering them for a fee. Gaius ordered them to take down these seats, so the poor could to enjoy the spectacle from those places without paying. But since no one paid any attention to his command, he waited till the night before the spectacle, and then, taking all the workmen whom he had under his orders in public contracts, he pulled down the seats, and when day came he had the place all clear for the people. Because of this the people thought him a man, but his colleagues were annoyed and thought him reckless and violent. It was believed also that this conduct cost him his election to the tribunate for the third time, since, although he got a majority of the votes, his colleagues were unjust and fraudulent in their proclamation and returns. This, however, was disputed.

[Plutarch](#), *Gaius Gracchus* 12.3-4



Gaius Gracchus, tribune of the people, presiding over the Plebeian Council

In 67 BCE 14 rows of seats were set aside in the theatre for equestrians under the *Lex Roscia*, a law proposed by Marcus Otho Roscius, a tribune of the plebs. This was not popular with the people, though it was with the equestrians. (Bankrupt equestrians were made to sit in a different section.)

In earlier times, it seems, the men of the equestrian order were mixed in with the mob in the theatres and saw the spectacles along with the people, seated as luck would have it; Marcus Otho was the first to separate in point of honour the equestrians from the rest of the citizens, which he did when he was praetor, and gave them a particular place of their own at the spectacles, which they still keep. 3 The people took this as an insult to themselves, and when Otho appeared in the theatre they hissed him insultingly, while the equestrians greeted him with loud applause. The people renewed and increased their hisses, and then the equestrians their applause.

Plutarch, *Cicero* 13

Augustus, who was concerned with reforming Rome after the political, social, and military chaos of

the Late Republic, completely stratified audiences at theatrical and gladiatorial shows. He not only reaffirmed the old seating rules in a law passed sometime after 5 CE, the *lex Julia theatralis*, but added new ones and moved women to the back rows, although previously they had sat with their families.

At the elections for tribunes if there were not candidates enough of senatorial rank, Augustus made appointments from among the equestrians, with the understanding that after their term they might remain in whichever order they wished. Moreover, since many equestrians whose property was diminished during the civil wars did not dare to view the games from the fourteen rows through fear of the penalty of the law regarding theatres, he declared that none were liable to its provisions, if they themselves or their parents had ever possessed a equestrian's estate.

[Suetonius](#), *Augustus* 44

Using special regulations he ended the disorderly, haphazard fashion of viewing the games; he did this because he was unhappy at the insult to a senator, to whom no one offered a seat in a crowded arena at some very heavily attended games in Puteoli. Because of this the Senate decreed that, whenever any public show was given anywhere, the first row of seats should be reserved for senators. At Rome Augustus would not allow the ambassadors of the free and allied nations to sit in the orchestra, since he was told that sometimes freedmen bought those positions. He separated the army from the people. He assigned special seats to the married men of the plebs, gave their own section to underage boys and the adjoining one to their teachers; and he decreed that no one wearing a dark cloak should sit in the middle of the audience. He would not allow women to view even the gladiators except from the upper seats, though it had been the custom for men and women to sit together at such shows. Only the Vestal Virgins were assigned a place to themselves, opposite the praetor's tribunal.² As for the athletic contests,³ he excluded women from them so strictly, that when a contest between a pair of boxers had been called for at the games in honour of his appointment as Pontifex Maximus,⁴ he postponed it until early the following day, making proclamation that it was his desire that women should not come to the theatre before the fifth hour.

Suetonius *Augustus* 44.1-3

Nero added separate seating for the equestrians in the Circus Maximus, where previously they had sat with the crowd.

He gave many different types of entertainments: the Juvenalia;⁵ chariot races in the Circus; plays; and a gladiatorial show. At the Juvenalia he had even old men of consular rank and aged matrons take part. For the games in the Circus he gave seats to the equestrians apart from the rest of the people, and even raced chariots drawn by four camels against each other.

Suetonius, *Nero* 11.1

2. The praetor's box would become the imperial box at the Colosseum; the Vestals had their own box facing it. (We are not sure of the exact location of either box.)

3. Greek athletics at which athletes were naked.

4. The Chief Priest of Rome. Augustus took the position in 13 BCE after the death of Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, the triumvir, who had held the position from 44.

5. This festival, instituted by Nero in 59 BCE when he was, commemorated the first time he had shaved his beard.

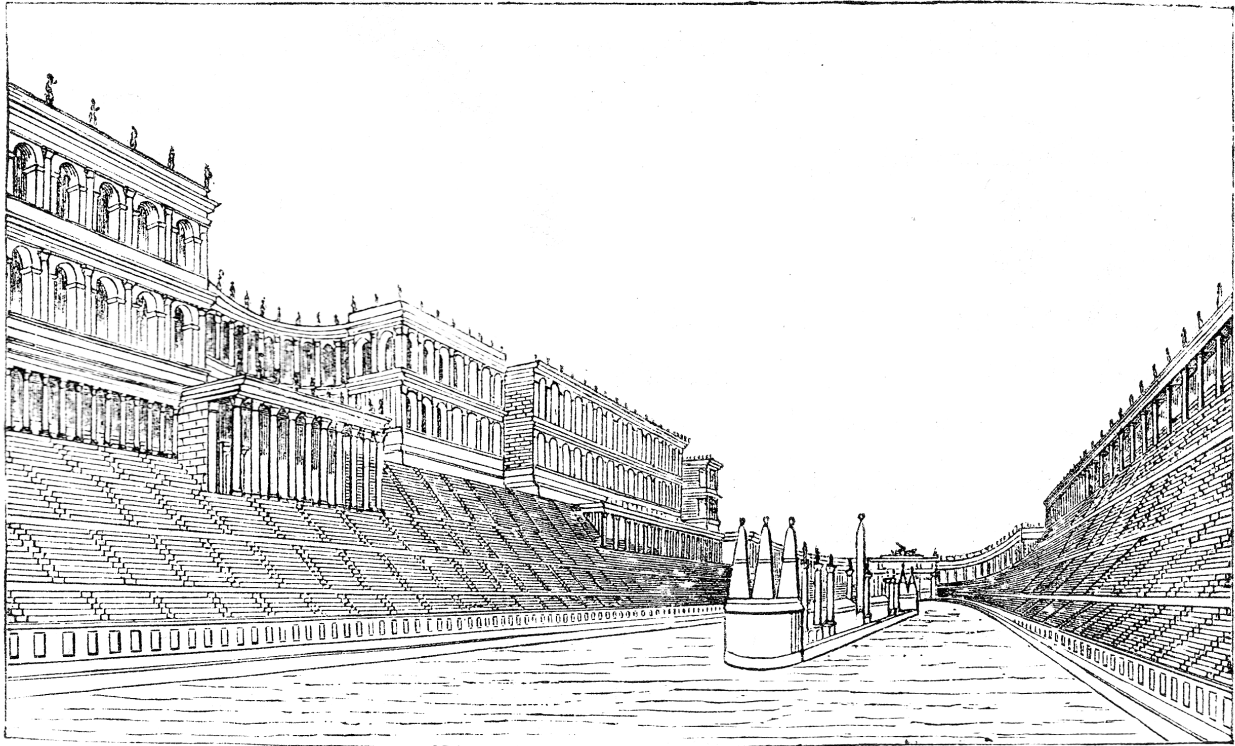


Illustration from “*Illustrerad världshistoria utgifven av E. Wallis, Volume II*”: Circus Maximus.

Spectators in the Colosseum were supposed to wear togas in the lower seats; those who could only afford dark clothing were relegated to the back. When the emperor attended it was especially important to make an effort, and wear the heavy hot toga – and that went double for members of the senate. In the following poem we hear of a poor man who went to the arena in dark clothes and thanks to a snow shower in the middle found himself in white:⁶

A second ago, Horatius was watching the games, the only one there wearing in a dark outfit, while the plebs and the lower and highest classes along with our shining leader were sitting dressed in white. Suddenly snow fell from all over the sky; now Horatius watches dressed in white.

[Martial](#), *Epigrams* 4.2

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6. This is a bit wittier of a poem in Latin, but not much.

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Costs of Munera and Other Spectacles

In this section you will learn

- that is is very difficult to understand exactly how much various games cost
- how some games were funded, at least in part, by the Roman state
- how spectacles were used by elite politicians to ‘share’ their wealth and triumphs with the non-elite
- how spectacles could bankrupt politicians due to their cost

Putting on shows was an expensive exercise. It’s hard to put the cost into exact figures, let alone convert those figures into modern money, except for the occasional game, but those who gave these games in the Late Republic (and sometimes in the empire) were willing to incur spectacular costs, sometimes ruining themselves in the process. This ensured a constantly evolving set of public expectations, with every set of games expected to exceed the previous set and so forth. The major *ludi* were funded by the state, but if a show was held to fulfill a private vow then the giver paid for the entire expense; before the empire gladiatorial shows were not part of any of the state festivals and were entirely funded by the giver. However, even in the case of games funded by the state, the magistrates in charge were supposed to use their own money to supplement state funding.

Speaking of a show in 160 BCE Polybius gives early evidence for the rising costs of shows.

The total expense of such a show costs not less than thirty talents [750,000 sesterces] if it is done on such a lavish scale

[Polybius](#), *Histories* 31.28.6

Various laws were passed to stop aspiring politicians using games to promote their candidacies and getting around bribery laws by holding spectacles and handing out free seats (and food); they were all completely ineffective. In the following speech Cicero, who had passed his own law limiting when people could hold games, the *Lex Tullia*, in 63 BCE, was defending Lucius Licinius Murena on a charge of electoral bribery. He tries to pass off responsibility for spending on feasts and shows on Murena’s friends and, in case that doesn’t work, claims that such spending is entirely legitimate and in accord with Roman tradition.

What is your charge? Are you accusing Murena of bribery? I am not defending bribery. You blame me because you say I am defending behaviour which I passed in a law to punish. I punished bribery, not innocence, and will join with you in prosecuting any honest case of bribery. You have said that at my urging a resolution of the Senate was passed, “that if any men who had been bribed had met with the

In modern terms

It’s difficult to compare prices between the Romans modern-day currency because of the differences between the Roman market system and the current economical system.

750,000 sesterces is **roughly** equivalent to \$200,000 CAD

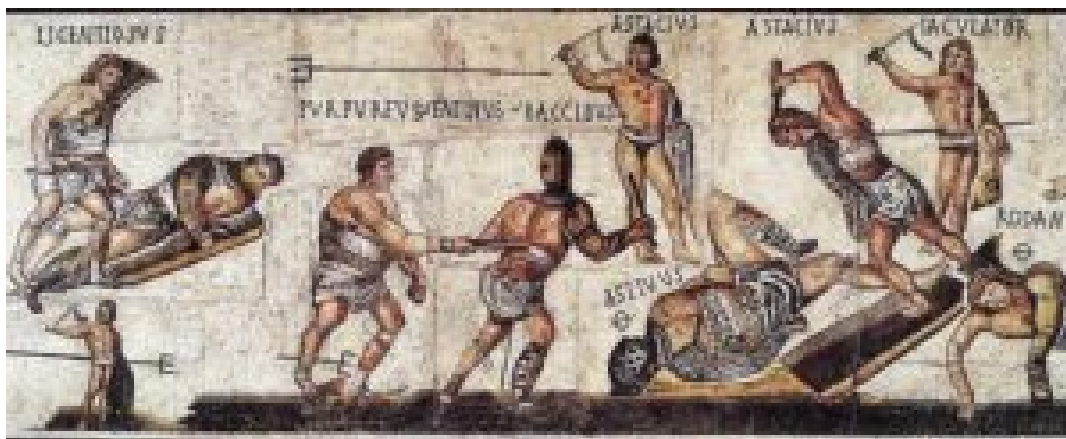
candidates, if any hired men followed them, if seats were given men to see the shows of gladiators according to their tribes, and also, if dinners were given to the masses, that appeared to be a violation of the Calpurnian law.”¹ Therefore the Senate decides that these things were done in violation of the Calpurnian law if they were done at all it, decides what there is not the least occasion for, out of kindness for the candidates. For there is a great question whether such things have been done or not. That if they have been done, they were done in violation of the law, no one can doubt.

[Cicero](#), *In Defence of Murena* 67

Cicero continues on discussing the role of spectacles, their costs, and public expectations about their magnificence.

“But spectacles were exhibited to the people who sat in their tribes, and crowds of the common people were invited to dinner.” Although this, members of the jury, was not done by Murena at all, but done in accordance with all usage and precedent by his friends, still, being reminded of the fact, I recollect how many votes these investigations held in the Senate have lost us, Servius. For what time was there ever, either within our own recollection or that of our fathers, in which this, whether you call it ambition or generosity, did not exist to the extent of giving a place in the circus and in the Forum to one’s friends, and to the men of one’s own tribe?

Cicero, *In Defence of Murena* 72



A mosaic shows gladiators fighting and the outcomes of the bouts (death is marked by a Ø) found in the Villa Borghese outside Rome. It probably dates to the early 4th century CE. Image from Wikimedia.

In a philosophical text written in 44 BCE, Cicero talked about the need to provide spectacles to the people for electoral success.

Still, I realize that in Rome, even in the good old days, it was an established custom to expect magnificent entertainments from the very best men in the year they were aedile. So both Publius Crassus,² whose cognomen was not just “Rich” but was actually rich, gave splendid games when he was aedile; and a little later Lucius Crassus (whose colleague was Quintus Mucius, the most unpretentious man in the world) gave the

most magnificent entertainments while aedile [212/211 BCE]. Then came Gaius Claudius, the son of Appius, and, after him, many others – the Luculli, Hortensius, and Silanus. Publius Lentulus, however, in the year of my consulship, eclipsed all that

Key Takeaways

1. A law passed in 149 BCE which seems to have created fines for bribery.
2. This Crassus was the ancestor of the more famous Marcus Licinius Crassus who defeated Spartacus; there were a number of Crassi and wealth seems to have run in the family. This Crassus was aedile and consul in 205 BCE and was given the extra cognomen of *Dives* (Rich); confusingly Marcus Licinius Crassus also had the same cognomen.

had gone before him, and Scaurus emulated him. And my friend Pompey's exhibitions in his second consulship were the most magnificent of all. And so you see what I think about all this sort of thing. 58 Still we should avoid any suspicion that we are cheap. Mamercus was a very wealthy man, and his refusal to run for aedile was why he didn't win the race for consul.³ If, therefore, the people demand such entertainment, men of proper judgment must at least consent to supply it, even if they do not like the idea. But in so doing they should keep within their means, as I myself did. They should also pay for such entertainment, if gifts of money to the people will enable them to secure in the future some more important or more useful end.

Cicero, *On Moral Duties* 2.57-58

Elites were expected to give spectacles as part of their politician careers by the people of Rome

Faced with the potentially massive costs of giving spectacles, some might cheap out. In the following extract from a Roman novel of the age of Nero, a character who is a freedman talks about his expectations for an upcoming spectacle and his disappointment at a particularly thrifty one.



The group comprises four silver denarii. The earliest, showing some wear, is of Domitian whilst the other three are in crisper condition and show very little signs of circulation. All of these three date to the reign of Antoninus Pius. It seems likely that the four coins went into the ground together, either lost as part of a purse, or concealed as a hoard. This loss or deposition, on the basis of the condition of the coins, presumably occurred in the 150s or 160s.

that I gave more than I got! One hand washes the other.”

Petronius, *Satyricon* 45

“Look out for it! We'll soon have a fine *munus* for three days, no *lanista*'s bunch – but lots of freedmen. Our Titus has a hot head and lots of courage and it will go to a finish. I'm pretty familiar with him, and he'll not stand for any frame-ups. It will be cold steel in the best style, no running away, the slaughter will be in the middle of the amphitheatre where all the crowd can see. And what's more, he has the money, for he came into thirty million when his father had the bad luck to die. He could spend four hundred thousand and never damage his inheritance, but his name would live forever. He has some dwarfs already and a female *essedarius*. Then, there's Glyco's steward; he was caught pleasuring Glyco's wife. You'll see some battle between jealous husbands and favoured lovers. Anyhow, that miser Glyco condemned his steward to the beasts – and so made public his own shame. How could the slave go wrong when he was only doing what he was told to do? It would have been better if that woman – who is only fit for a pisspot – had been tossed by the bull, but when someone can't beat the donkey, he'll beat the saddle. How could Glyco ever imagine that one of Hermogenes' brats could turn out well?...I can smell a feast from Mammaea coming and there will be two *denarii* each for me and mine! If he does that he'll steal Norbanus' thunder completely. You know that it's to his interest to go full speed ahead to squash Norbanus. Honestly, what did he ever do for us? He exhibited some cheap gladiators that were so near dead that they'd have collapsed if you breathed on them. I've seen better at the beast hunts! He killed his cavalry by lamp; you would have taken them for henhouse cockerels! One was decrepit; another was bandy-legged, and a third who took the place of a dead man was pretty dead himself – and hamstringed too. There was only one that had any life, and he was a Thracian, but he only fought to command. The whole lot of them were whipped to shreds after and the whole crowd shouted 'give it to them!' They were nothing but runaways. And at that he had the nerve to say, "I've given you a show." "And I've applauded," I answered; "count it up and you'll find

3. In other words people believed he had avoided running for aedile so he would not have to use his own money to supplement the public funding given to the aediles for putting on the public games.

In 177 the co-emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus tried to standardize the costs of gladiators in an attempt to ensure more people in the provinces didn't ruin themselves paying for them. This text (176-178 CE) is inscribed on a bronze table which comes from Andalusia, Spain. The decree is called Senatorial Decree on the Reduction of the Cost of Gladiatorial Games or, in Latin, the *Senatus Consultum de Pretiis Gladiatorum Minuendis*.

Our leaders [Marcus Aurelius and Commodus] decreed that the games which are called *assiforana*⁴ should stay as they are but they should not exceed 30,000 sesterces in cost; but to those who give games which cost between 30-60,000 sesterces, gladiators should be offered in three categories with the same number in each category: those in the first group should cost at most 5,000; those in the second at most 4,000; those in the third 3,000. For those giving games whose cost ranges from 60,000-100,000 sesterces there should be three ranks of gladiators and in the first rank the highest cost should be 8,000, for the second 6,000, for the third 5,000. For games costing from 100,00-150,000 sesterces there should be five ranks of gladiators: the highest cost for the first rank should be 12,000, for the second 10,000, for the third 7,000, for the fourth 6,000, and for the fifth 5,000. For games costing 150,000-200,000 sesterces and above the cheapest gladiator should be 6,000, for the next rank up 6,000, for the next 7,000, for the next 9,000, for the next 12,000 and then up to 15,000. This should be the fixed amount for the best, most appealing gladiator.

In addition, in all *munera* marked by ranks, the *lanista* must supply half the total number of gladiators from the regular ranks or the herd. The better members of the herd may fight as a group for 2,000 sesterces each, and no one of the herd will fight for less than 1,000.

Since the *lanista* in an attempt to increase profits may say they cannot provide enough gladiators from the herd, they must know they will be required to transfer as many as required from those they rank as better to make up the required number from the herd. So on any event the entire *familia* will be divided into equal parts and on any particular day at least half of them will be in the flock...

...⁴⁵ I also recommend the following rule regarding the proceeds: each gladiator should make an individual bargain for the money he gets for his fighting, and a free man should receive one quarter, a slave one fifth. Regarding the cost of gladiators, I have already advised the recommendations of the divine speech be followed, but that these prices should apply to those cities that suffered from relatively high prices for gladiators.

In the following passage from Gaius' *Institutes* (c. 160s CE), an ancient guide and textbook for Roman law, the author describes a vast difference for what one paid to hire a gladiator who survived and for one who died.

If I provide gladiators to you under the condition that twenty *denarii* shall be paid to me for the exertions of every one who leaves the arena safe and sound and a thousand *denarii* for every one who is killed or disabled, the question arises whether this is a contract of purchase and sale or one of leasing and hiring. The better opinion is that of those who say that in the case of those who survive, a contract of leasing and hiring was agreed on; but so far as those who have been killed or disabled are concerned the contract is one of purchase and sale.

Institutes 3.146

4. Private games for which admission was charged

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Getting and Training Gladiators

In this section you will learn

- the sources for gladiators
- what little we know about how they were trained

Where did gladiators come from? A variety of sources: prisoners-of-war; slaves; criminals; and even some free men who sold themselves into service. However, this story about the brother of Titus Flamininus, the man who had 74 gladiators fight at his father's *munera* in 174 BCE, shows how some unfortunates might find themselves in the role of 'gladiator' at an aristocrat's whim:

Titus had a brother, Lucius, who was unlike him in all other ways, and especially in his shameful addiction to pleasure and his utter contempt for decency. 3 This brother had as a companion a young boy whom he loved, and took him about and kept him always in his entourage, whether he was commanding an army or administering a province. At some drinking party, then, this boy was flirting with Lucius, and said he loved him so madly that he had come away from a show of gladiators in order to be with him, although he had never in all his life seen a man killed; and he had done so, he said, because he cared more for his lover's pleasure than for his own. Lucius was delighted at this, and said: "Don't worry about that! I will give what you want most of all." 4 Then he ordered a man who had been condemned to death to be brought from his cell, and sending for a lictor, he commanded him to strike off the man's head there in the banquet-hall. Valerius Antias, however, says it was not a male lover, but a mistress whom Lucius wanted to please in this way. And Livy says that in a speech of Cato himself it is written that a Gaulish deserter had come to the door with his wife and children, and that Lucius admitted him into the banquet-hall and killed him with his own hand to please his lover. 5 This feature, however, was probably introduced by Cato to strengthen the force of his denunciation; for that it was not a deserter, but a prisoner, who was put to death, and one who had been condemned to die, is the testimony of many others, and especially of Cicero the orator in his treatise "On Old Age," where he puts the story in the mouth of Cato himself.

[Plutarch](#), *Titus Flamininus* 18.2-5

Some slaves were sold or condemned to gladiatorial schools as a punishment or at the whim of their masters. The short-lived Emperor Vitellius once sold a favourite slave of his to a gladiatorial slave (obviously he wasn't so favourite when he was being sold).

After starting this way he regulated the greater part of his rule wholly according to the advice and whims of the lowest actors and charioteers, and in particular of his freedman Asiaticus. When he was a youth Asiaticus had been willingly ravished by him but soon grew tired of him and ran away.¹ When Vitellius came upon him selling *posca*² at Puteoli, he had him put in chains but at once freed him again and again made him his favourite. Then annoyed once more by his excessive insolence and thievishness, and he sold him to a travelling *lanista*. When, however, he was once reserved for the end of a gladiatorial show, Vitellius suddenly snatched him away, and finally on getting his province, set him free. On the first day of his reign he presented him with the golden ring at a banquet,³ although in the morning, when there was a general demand that Asiaticus be given that honour, he had deprecated in the strongest terms such a stain on the equestrian order.



Portrait of Vitellius on a coin.

[Suetonius](#), *Vitellius* 12

The Emperor Hadrian put some restrictions on people selling their slaves to gladiatorial *ludi* as a punishment.

He stopped masters from killing their slaves, and ordered that any who deserved it should be sentenced by the courts. He forbid anyone to sell a slave or a female slave to a pimp or *lanista* without giving a reason for it. He ordered that those who had wasted their property, if legally responsible, should be flogged in the amphitheatre and then let go.

[Historia Augusta](#), *Hadrian* 18

We know incredibly little about how gladiators were trained, as no source talks about it and we have no training manuals. The following text talks a little about training in general and mentions gladiators in passing.

1. Slaves had little choice but to accede to their masters' demands, whatever they were; it is very likely that the relationship was not consensual on the part of the Asiaticus, who had no say in the matter.
2. A popular drink of sour wine mixed with herbs and water.
3. The awarding of the gold ring was to show that Asiaticus had been elevated to the rank of equestrian.



Mosaic from the Roman villa at Nennig: "Two gladiators, a retiarius and a mirmillo, are fighting, while the lanista superintends."

In every act consider what precedes and what follows, and then proceed to the act. If you do not consider, you will at first begin with spirit, since you have not thought at all of the things which follow; but afterward, when some consequences have shown themselves, you will stop which is shameful. "I wish to win at the Olympics." "And I too, by the gods: for it is a fine thing." But consider here what precedes and what follows; and then, if it is for your good, undertake the action. You must behave according to rules, follow a strict diet, abstain from delicacies, force yourself to exercise at fixed times, in heat, in cold; you can not drink cold water or wine. In a word, you must surrender yourself to the trainer as you do to a physician. Next in the contest, you must be covered with sand, sometimes dislocate a hand, sprain an ankle, swallow a quantity of dust, be struck with a whip;⁴ and after undergoing all this, you will sometimes lose. After adding up all these things, if you have still an inclination, go to the athletic practice. If you do not add them up, you are behaving like children who at one time you will play as wrestlers, then as gladiators, then blow a trumpet, then act a tragedy, when they have seen and admired such things. So you also do: you are at one time a wrestler, then a gladiator, then a philosopher, then a rhetorician; but

with your whole soul you are nothing: like the ape, you imitate all that you see; and always one thing after another pleases you, but that which becomes familiar displeases you.

Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.15

Many wealthy Romans owned gladiators, and seem to have often bought them as troops more than individuals. In the following letter from 56 BCE to his friend Atticus, Cicero talks about Atticus' gladiatorial troop.

My word! You have purchased a fine troop! Your gladiators, I am told, fight superbly. If you had chosen to hire them out you would have cleared your expenses by the last two spectacles. But we will talk about this later on. Be sure to come, and, as you love me, see about the library slaves.⁵

[Cicero](#), *Letters to Atticus* 4.4b.

In another letter from 56 BCE Cicero refers to another troop owned by a politician, Gaius Cato, tribune of the plebs for that year (not to be confused to the more famous Cato the Younger, also a politician of the same period; this Cato was an ally of Clodius, one of Cicero's enemies.)

In this way the passing of most mischievous laws is prevented, especially that of Cato [the Younger], on whom, however, our friend Milo played a very funny trick. For that defender of the employment of gladiators and *venatores* had bought some *venatores*, Cosconius and Pomponius, and had never appeared in public without them in their full armour. He could not afford to maintain them, and accordingly had great difficulty in keeping them together. Milo found this out. He commissioned an individual, with whom he was not close, to buy this troop from Cato without making him suspicious. As soon as it had been removed, Racilius—at this time quite the only real tribune—revealed the truth, acknowledged that the men

4. In the Olympics those who broke the rules or committed fouls could be whipped by the judges.

5. Cicero wanted to borrow some slaves to help with gluing items in his library and to make title pages.

had been purchased for himself—for this is what they had agreed—and put up a notice that he intended to sell “Cato’s troop.” This notice caused much laughter.

Cicero, *Letters to his Brother Quintus* 2.4

Many of these troops and schools were located in Capua, where you can still see the remains of a theatre built during the reign of the Emperor Augustus.

There were some in Rome itself, including one of an Aemilius mentioned in passing by the poet Horace (*Art of Poetry* 32) and there were several imperial schools. Ravenna, a town in northern Italy, was also a popular location for ludi, especially under the emperors:

The largest city in the marshes, however, is Ravenna, a city built entirely of wood and crisscrossed by rivers, and it is provided with streets by means of bridges and ferries. The city experiences very high sea tides, so that, since the filth is all washed out by these as well as the rivers, the city is cleared of foul air. At any rate, the place has been found to be so healthy that the emperors have given orders to feed and train the gladiators there.

Strabo, *Geography* 4.1.7

Under the emperors there was a procurator for gladiators; we hear about this person being punished under the Emperor Claudius, but little else about them:

The same penalty was inflicted also on Decrius Calpurnianus, prefect of the city-watch; on Sulpicius Rufus, procurator of the school of gladiators; and on the senator Juncus Vergilianus.

[Tacitus](#), *Annales* 11.35



Map of Italy at 500AD. Ravenna is along the north-eastern coast.

Why do we know so little about gladiatorial training?

Give the importance of gladiators to Roman society, why do you think we do not know more about how they trained? You may want to think about the following as you try to answer this question:

- Not everything survives from Roman antiquity; many important writings that the Romans valued have been lost thanks to time. We have lost even more that the Romans, and the people that came after, them did not value or understand
- Gladiatorial schools were to a certain degree in competition with each other and so may not have wanted to share trade secrets
- Romans may have visited gladiatorial training schools in their communities often

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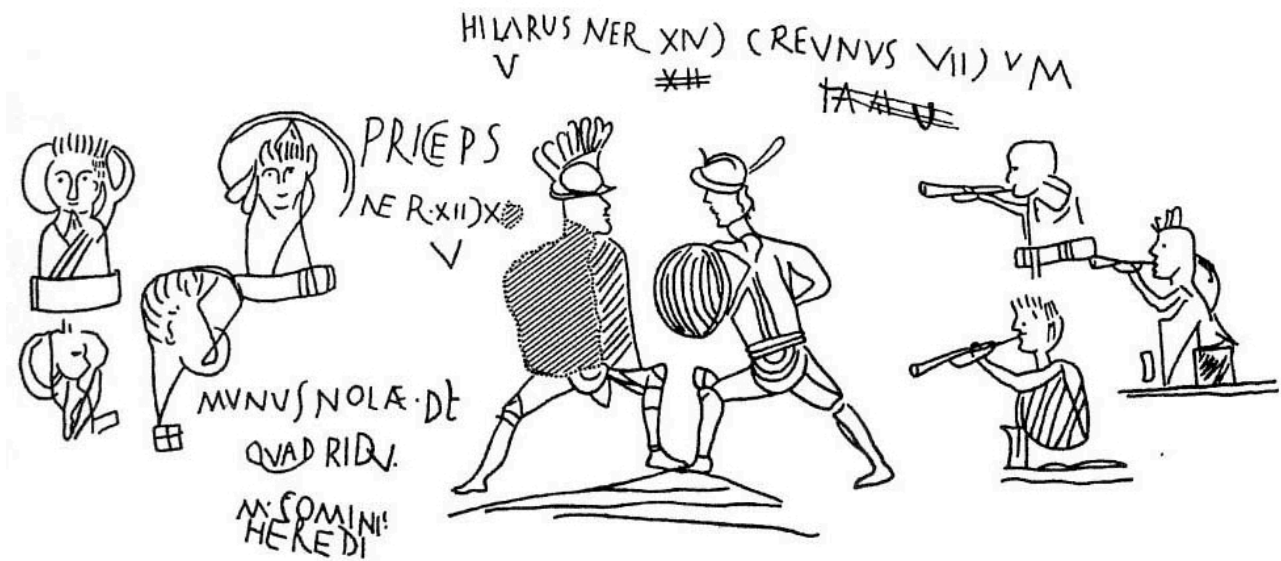
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Marketing and Advertising

In this section you will learn

- how the Romans advertised gladiatorial shows
- what information advertisements for such events shows and thought was important
- gladiatorial programs

Once you'd hired your gladiators and *venatores*, you had to advertise them. Various public notices were put up to ensure that people not only knew of *munera* but who was sponsoring them, from what *ludus* the gladiators were trained in, and what could be expected in terms of numbers and facilities (in a hot climate like Italy, awnings were very welcome and feature in many of these advertisements). There were also handbooks one could obtain listing further details of wins and losses: these, unfortunately, do not survive. However, because of the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE, we have several posters (or, rather, hand written notices) advertising shows in Pompeii.



Source: CIL IV, 10237

The above graffiti comes from Pompeii and advertises a *munus* in the nearby town of Nola. The image shows a Thracian with small shield (right) fighting a secutor, the usual pairing for these gladiators. The text says

At Nola there will be a *munus* of Marcus Cominius Heres for four days. Princeps of the Neronian

ludus fought 13, 10 wins; Hilarius of the Neronian *ludus* fought 14, 12 victories, Creunus fought 7, 5 wins.

CIL 4.10237

The following announcements are also from Pompeii and advertise a range of munera. Many of the editors (givers of the games) are mentioned in multiple advertisements and were clearly leading residents of the city:

The gladiatorial *familia* of the aedile Aulus Suettius Certus will fight at Pompeii on May 31. There will be a *venatio*, and also awnings.

CIL 4.1189

The gladiatorial *familia* of Aulus Suettius Certus will fight at Pompeii on May 31. There will be a *venatio* and also awnings. May Nero be happy in all his *munera*.

CIL 4.1190

Twenty pairs of gladiators provided by Decimus Lucretius Satrius Valens perpetual priest of Nero, the son of the Emperor, and ten pairs of gladiators provided by Decimus Lucretius Valens his son, will fight at Pompeii April 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12. There will be a big *venatio* and awnings. Aemilius Celer wrote this by the light of the moon.

CIL 4.7795

There will be a *venatio* and 20 pairs of gladiators belonging to Marcus Tullius will fight at Pompeii, November 4-7.

CIL IV. 3.4 9979

Aulus Clodius Flaccus, son of Aulus, Tribe Menenia,¹ duovir three times (once as Quinquennial), military tribune elected by the People. He presented at the *Ludi Appollinares* during his first duovirate in the Forum a procession, bulls, bullfighters and their helpers,² three pairs of platform fighting gladiators³, boxers in groups, and games with music and pantomimes and Pylades,⁴ and gave 10,000 sesterces to the public during his duumvirate. In his second (Quinquennial) term, at the *Ludi Appollinares* in the Forum he presented a procession, bullfighters and their helpers, and group boxers; on the next day he exhibited on his own at the spectacles 30 pairs of athletes, 5 pairs of gladiators, and with his colleague he presented 25 pairs of gladiators and the *venationes*, bullfighting, bull-baiting, wild boars, bears, and other wild animals in various hunts. In his third term along with his colleague he presented games [or dramas] from a foremost group with added music.

CIL 10.1074d

1. This inscription dates to before 3 BCE.

2. The word I have translated as helpers is *succursores*, which is of uncertain meaning, so it may refer to some other type of animal fighter.

3. The Latin refers to the gladiators as *pontarii*, which appears to refer to any gladiator who fought from a raised platform.

4. A famous mime artist; notice he is the only performer important enough to be mentioned by name.

Some posters advertised *munera* in nearby towns:

Twenty pairs of gladiators provided by Quintus Monnius Rufus will fight. Nola May 1st, 2nd, 3rd.
There will be a *venatio*.

CIL 4.3881.

Thirty six pairs of gladiators of Constantia (?) will fight. October 31 and November 1-4 Nuceria (?).

CIL 4. 3.

Twenty pairs of Gladiators, belonging to Aulus Suettius Antenio and to his freedman Niger, will fight at Puteoli on the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th of March. There will also be a *venatio* and athletic contests.

CIL 4. 3,4

We also know that there were programs for the games issued in advance as the following passages show. The first is Ovid's guide to romance in ancient Rome:

While talking, touching hands, checking the program, and asking which one will win after he's placed his bed, he groans from his wound as he feels the flying arrow and becomes a part of the show he's watching.

[Ovid](#), *Art of Love*, 1.167-171

The philosopher Seneca the Younger, who lived during the era of Nero (he was actually his tutor), mentions programs in several passages:

No man who is desperately running to get a midwife for his daughter in her birth-pangs will stop to read a praetor's edict or the order of events at the games.

Seneca the Younger, *Letters* 117.30

And so they strive for something else to occupy them, and all the intervening time is irksome; exactly as they do when a gladiatorial exhibition is announced, or when they are waiting for the appointed time of some other show or amusement, they want to skip over the days that lie between.

Seneca the Younger, *On the Shortness of Life* 16.3

The programs contained pairings and the names of individual gladiators as the following very late source shows:

For Gallus Antipater, the slave of honours and the dishonour of historians, composed a preface about Aureolus which began like this: "We have now come to an emperor who was like his own name." A marvelous thing, for sure, to get one's name from gold! I, however, know well that among gladiators this name has often been given to courageous fighters. Indeed, only recently your own announcement of games contained in the list of the combatants this name.

[Historia Augusta](#), *Claudius Gothicus* 5

This graffiti from Pompeii (CIL IV 2508) may resemble the information that was given on such programs, giving the names of the fighters, the pairings, and the ludus they trained at:

? versus *Hoplomachus*

(*missio*) ...ciens Neronian *ludus*, 20 [bouts]

(won) Nobilior, Julian *ludus*, 2....14

Thracian versus *Murmillo*

(won) Pugnax, Neronian *ludus*, 3 [bouts]

(died) Murranus, Neronian *ludus*, 3 [bouts]

Hoplomachus versus Thracian

(won) Cynus of the Julian *ludus* 9 [bouts]

(*missio*) Atticus, Julian *ludus* 14 [bouts]

Thracian versus *Murmillo*

(won) Herma, Julian *ludus*, 4 [bouts]

(*missio*) Quintus Petillus....

Essedarii

(*missio*) Publius Ostorius, 51 [bouts]

(won) Scylax, Julian *ludus*, 26 [bouts]

Thracian vs. *Murmillo*

(died) Lucius Fabius, 9 [bouts]

(won) Astus, Julian *Ludus*, 14 [bouts]



Mosaic at the National Archaeological Museum in Madrid showing a retiarius (net-fighter) named Kalendio fighting a secutor named Astyanax. In the bottom image, the secutor is covered in the retiarius's net, but doesn't seem to be hindered. In the upper image, apparently the conclusion of the skirmish, Kalendio is on the ground, wounded, and raises his dagger to surrender. The arena employees await his fate from the editor, not pictured. The inscription above reads ASTYANAX VICIT, as well as name of Kalendio followed by the symbol ? (null), implying that he was killed by Astyanax.

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- [Astyanax vs Kalendio mosaic](#) is licensed under a [Public Domain](#) license

Types of Gladiators

There were a range of different gladiators, who were matched carefully in traditional pairings. Some were rarer than others, like the *essedarius*, a type of gladiator who fought from a war chariot. Others, like the Thracians, were far more common. Unfortunately we're not always that sure how some of the gladiators fought, because some like the scissor were so rare. And the types of gladiators changed over the years; some early forms, like the Samnites, were dropped once the Roman people and the Samnites became allies.

The following inscription from near Rome and dating to 117 CE gives a record of different types of gladiators, organised into *decuria*, groups of ten men.



In the consulship of the Emperor Caesar Lucius Aurelius Commodus and Marcus Plautius Quintillus. The leaders of the *collegium* of Silvanus Aurelianus, overseers Marcus Hilarus, freedman of Augustus and Coelius Magnus the *cryptarius*.

Decuria I

Borysthenes,¹ veteran Thracian

Clonius, veteran *hoplomachus*

Callisthenes, veteran Thracian

Zosimus, veteran *essedarius*

Plution, veteran *essedarius*

Pertinax, veteran *contraretiarius*

Carpophorus, veteran *murmillo*

Crispinus, veteran *murmillo*

Pardus, veteran *provocator*

Miletus, veteran *murmillo*

1. The single name indicates that the gladiator was a slave.

Decuria II

Vitulus, veteran *murmillio*

Demosthenes, *manicarius*²

Felicianus, novice *retiarius*

Servandus, novice *retiarius*

Iuvenes, *murmillio* with one fight

Ripanus, novice *contraretiarius*

Silvanus, novice *contraretiarius*

Eleuther, novice Thracian

Pirata, *unctor*³

Decuria III

Barosus, novice *contraretiarius*

Aemilianus, *contraretiarius*

Ulpus Europoras

Proshodus, novice *contraretiarius*

Aurelius Felicianus

Aurelius Felix

Zoilus, *paganus*

Flavius Mariscus

Flavius Sanctus

Diodrus *paganus*

Decuria IV

Aprilis, *paganus*

Zosimus Thracian with one fight...

CIL 6.331, 6.332

2. A type of gladiator who tried to manacle his opponent.

3. An *unctor* was someone who oiled up or provided oil for the gladiators.

This following inscription lists the members of a gladiatorial familia and was found in Venusia, a town in Southern Italy. Some of these gladiators, like the scissor, were incredibly rare.

Oceanus, slave of Avilius, novice.

Sagittarius: Dorus, slave of Pisius, 6 wins, 4 crowns

Veles: Mycter, slave of Ofilius, 2 wins

Hoplomachus: Phaeder, slave of Avilius, novice.

Thracians: Donatus, slave of Nerius, 12 wins, 8 crowns; Hilario, Arrius' slave, 7 wins, 5 crowns; Aquilia, slave of Pisius, 12 wins, 6 crowns; Quartio, slave of Munilius, 1 win; Gaius Perpenius, novice

Murmillones: Amicus, slave of Munilius, 1 win; Quintus Fabius, 5 wins, 3 crowns; Eleuther, slave of Munilius, 1 win; Gaius Memmius, 3 wins, 2 crowns; Anteros, slave of Munilius, 2 wins; Atlans, slave of Donius, 4 wins, 1 crown;

Essedarius: Inclutus, Arrius' slave, 5 wins, 2 crowns

Samnite: Strabo, slave of Donius, 3 wins, 2 crowns

Retiarius: Gaius Clodius, 2 wins

Scissor: Marius Caecilius, novice

Gallus:⁴ Quintus Granius, novice

CIL 9.466 = ILS 5083a

4. A type of gladiator based on Gallic soldiers. It did not survive the early imperial period, being replaced by the *murmillio*.



A Thracian (left) fights a murmillo (right) in a mosaic of the 3rd century CE from Römerhalle, Bad Kreuznach, Germany.

In his *Dream Book*, an ancient guide on how to interpret dreams, Artemidorus gives a little information of the fighting style of the Thracian.

I have often observed that this dream [of fighting gladiators] indicates that a man will marry a woman whose character matches the weapons that he dreams he is using or the type of opponent he is fighting...For example, if a man fights a Thracian he will marry a rich, cunning wife, fond of being first. She will be rich because the Thracian's body is covered all over by his armour; cunning because his sword is curved, and fond of being first because the Thracian advances when he fights.

Artemidorus, *Dream Book* 2.32

Other types of gladiators: *andabata* and *laquearius*.

Exercise

How many different types of gladiators did an average gladiatorial school have?. What does that mean about how many an audience would have expected to see at a show?

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Female Gladiators and Venatores

In this section you will learn

- female gladiators and *venatores*
- when they were introduced to Rome
- who they fought alongside
- public reaction to women in the arena



This is the only inscription we have showing female gladiators; it shows two women, Amazonia and Achillea, and says that they were *stantes* [pb_glossary id="101"]*missones* [pb_glossary] – released after they had fought to a standstill. We do however have another inscription from Ostia that refers to the first fight involving female gladiators there, and several literary references.

It is difficult to talk about the reality of life for female gladiators, because our sources often dwell on their sexy or unusual aspects, as a way to show what a special treat the audience is being given. (Special in gladiatorial games means expensive.) And the amount of sexy female gladiators in modern reimagining of the games shows that we haven't changed that much. Kathleen Coleman (2000), however, argues that female gladiators were, on the whole, professionally trained speciality gladiators. Her work is invaluable for any discussion of female gladiators and I follow her in what I say below.

It is also difficult to say for sure when women appeared in the arena as gladiators first. We have a law from 19 CE, called the *Senatus Consultum from Larinum*; Larinum (modern Larino) was a town in the South of Italy. It says, among other things, that the daughters, grand-daughters, and great-grand-daughters of senators cannot appear on stage or in the arena – nor can the wives, daughters, and grand-daughters of equestrians. This law mentions an earlier one of 11 CE that forbid freeborn girls under 20 from entering the arena. As generally you don't forbid things unless they are actually happening it seems likely that some elite women were appearing in the arena.

Later, the historian Tacitus mentions elite women appearing in the arena under Nero in the year 63 CE:

To the Roman equestrians he assigned places in the circus in front of the seats of the people, for up to that time they used to enter in an indiscriminate mass, as the Roscian law extended only to fourteen rows in the theatre. The same year witnessed shows of gladiators as magnificent as those of the past. However, many prominent matrons and senators disgraced themselves by appearing in the amphitheatre.

[Tacitus](#), *Annales* 15.32



Either Gladiator Venator or Hunter fighting a bear

women against each other.

Cassius Dio, *Epitome* Book 67

In modern terms

We have no specific word for a female gladiator, the closest is the rare word, *ludia*, used for a female slave attached to a gladiatorial school, but this word is used for the girlfriend or lover of a gladiator rather than a female gladiator.

The Emperor Titus held games for the inauguration of the Colosseum; these games included *venationes* with female *venatores*.

There was a battle between cranes and also between four elephants; nine thousand animals both domestic and wild were killed and women (not those of any prominence, however) took part in dispatching them.

Cassius Dio, *Epitome* Book 66

His brother and successor Domitian also had female gladiators fight in the Colosseum, along with dwarfs.

Domitian would also frequently stage the games also at night, and sometimes he would pit dwarfs and

In the middle of this noise and the new luxuries there appear women trained to wield the sword wildly daring to fight like men. You would believe that the Amazons of Thermodon were fighting wildly by Tanais or savage Phasis.¹ Now a bold unit of dwarfs appears, whose growth nature suddenly cut short, binding them in one movement into a knotted lump. They give and receive wounds and threaten death with tiny hands. Mars, our father, and bloody *Virtus* laugh and cranes hover over the scattered loot marvel at the tiny fighters.

[Statius](#), *Silvae* 1.6.52-64

Martial's poems on Domitian's games in the Colosseum also mention female gladiators and *venatores*.

That warlike Mars serves you with his unconquerable weapons, Caesar, is not enough: Venus herself also serves you.

[Martial](#), *On Spectacles* 6

Legend used to sing of the lion killed in the great valley, a feat worthy of Hercules – let ancient belief be silent! For after your *munera*, Caesar, for we now admit that this has been done by a woman warrior.

Martial, *On Spectacles* 6b



Two Venatores fighting a tiger.

1. The Amazons, a legendary race of female warriors, were thought to have lived by the River Thermodon. Tanais and Phasis are rivers in Scythia – the Tanais is the modern Don and Phasis is the river Bion.

Juvenal, in a satire on the evils of women,² talks of high-born ladies running off and training with gladiators.

Decorate your doors and doorposts with wreaths of laurel,³ so your noble son, Lentulus, may show in his tortoiseshell cradle the face of Euryalus⁴ or of a *murmillo*!

When Eppia, the senator's wife, ran off with a gladiator to Pharos and the Nile and the ill-famed city of Lagos, Canopus itself cried shame upon the monstrous morals of our town. Forgetting her home, husband, and sister, without thinking of her country, she shamelessly abandoned her weeping children; and—something that will astonish you—deserted Paris⁵ and the games. Though born wealthy, though as a tiny body she slept in a gaudy cradle on the paternal down, she cared nothing about the sea, just as she had long cared nothing for her good name—a loss thought trivial among our soft, litter-riding matrons. And so she bravely endured the tossing and the roaring of the Tyrrhenian and Ionian Seas, and all the many seas she had to cross. For when danger comes in a right and honourable way, a woman's heart freezes with fear and dread and she cannot stand upon her trembling feet: but if she be doing a bold, bad thing, her courage fails not. For a husband to order his wife on board ship is cruelty: the bilge-water sickens her and the sky goes round and round. But if she is running away with a lover, she feels no qualms: then she vomits over her husband; now she messes around with the sailors, she roams about the deck, and loves hauling at hard ropes. And what were the youthful charms which captivated Eppia? What did she see in him to allow herself to be called a *ludia*?⁶ Her darling Sergius had already begun to shave; a wounded arm gave promise of a discharge, and there were a range of deformities in his face: a scar caused by the helmet; a huge boil on his nose; and a nasty fluid always dribbling from his eye. But then he was a gladiator! It is this that transforms these fellows into Hyacinths!⁷ It was this that she preferred to children and to country, to sister and to husband. What these women love is the sword: had this same Sergius no longer been a gladiator, he would have been no better than a Veiento....

2. Juvenal wrote a number of satires, all about the various evils of different groups.

3. Laurels being display was a Roman sign of victory.

4. Presumably the name of a famous gladiator.

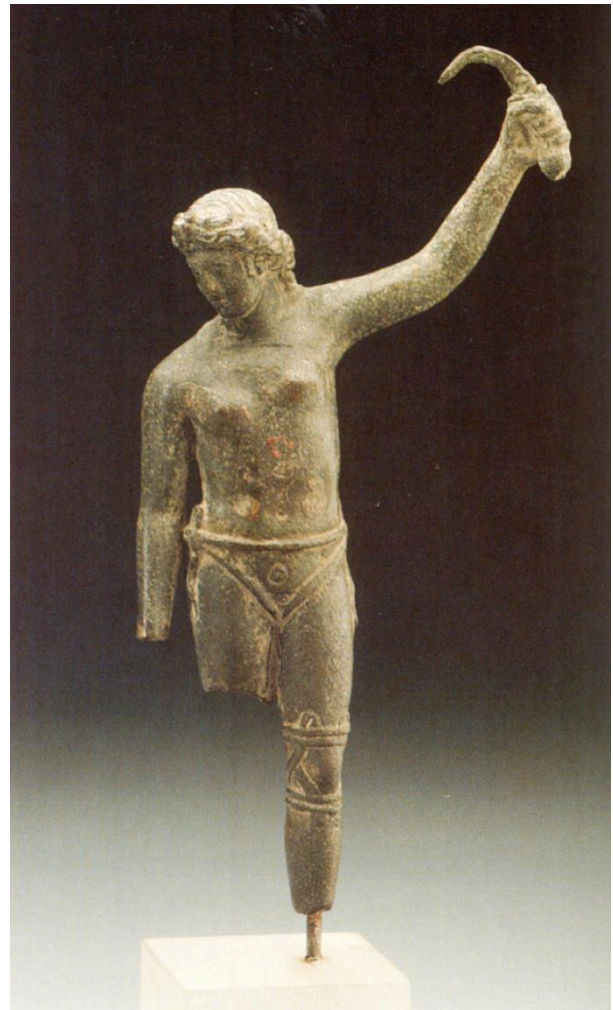
5. Paris is a traditional name for a mime. Juvenal believed women were especially prone to losing themselves completely over mimes and their sexy dancing.

6. *Ludia* can refer to an actress, a female gladiator or a gladiator's wife.

7. A mythical boy of great beauty, whom the god Apollo loved.

Why do I need to talk of the woollen cloaks⁸ and the wrestling-oils used by women? Who has not seen one of them striking a stump, piercing it through and through with a blade, lunging at it with a shield, and going through all the proper motions?—a matron truly qualified to blow a trumpet at the [Floralia](#)! Unless, indeed, she is nursing some further ambition in her bosom, and is practising for the real arena. What modesty can you expect in a woman who wears a helmet, rejects her gender, and delights in feats of strength? Yet she would not choose to be a man, knowing the superior joys of womanhood. What a fine thing for a husband, at an auction of his wife's effects, to see her belt and armlets and plumes put up for sale, with a greave that covers half the left leg; or if she fights another sort of battle, how charmed you will be to see your young wife disposing of her greaves! Yet these are the women who find the thinnest of thin robes too hot for them; whose delicate flesh is chafed by the finest of silk cloth. See how she pants as she goes through her prescribed exercises; how she bends under the weight of her helmet; how big and coarse are the bandages which enclose her haunches; and then laugh when she lays down her arms and shows herself to be a woman!

Juvenal, *Satire 6* (extracts; translation adapted from A.S. Kline)



Victorious gladiator brandishing a sica.

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Online

- Natalie Hayes discusses the Hunger Games and female gladiators in Rome for the [BBC](#)
- [Female Gladiators](#) – an informative and well referenced article from the [Notae](#) section of Penelope.

8. The reference is to a type of coarse cloak worn by athletes.

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Spartacus

In this section you will learn

- what little we know about the life of Spartacus
- how he led a slave army in the Third Servile War
- how his army defeated a number of Roman generals
- his eventual defeat and the violent destruction of his army

The most famous gladiator of all is Spartacus. Although we know little of his actions in the arena or of his personality – in fact, we know far less about him than we do of other leaders of the two previous slave revolts (both of which occurred in Sicily) – we know quite a bit about the revolt he led. It took place on mainland Italy and Spartacus from 73-71 BCE and his followers caused havoc throughout the peninsula until they were destroyed by Marcus Licinius Crassus (Dives), the richest man in Rome at the time; this is the same Crassus who was killed along with most of his army at Carrhae.¹ Below are a number of sources that touch on the revolt; they all differ to some degree, including in the names they give of the first Roman commanders Spartacus defeated. The first is a biography of Crassus, the Roman general who finally defeated him, written by the Greek author Plutarch, who omits some of the stories about Spartacus' cruelties and is the most sympathetic account we have.²



Statue of Spartacus

The rebellion of the gladiators and the devastation of Italy, commonly called the war of Spartacus,³ began in this way. A man called Lentulus Batiates trained a large number of gladiators in Capua, most of them Gauls and Thracians, who were kept imprisoned for this object of fighting one with another, not for any fault they had committed, but simply because of the cruelty of their masters. Two hundred of these formed a plan to escape, but when their plan was discovered, seventy-eight men who became aware of the discovery in time to anticipate their master got chopping knives and spits from a kitchen and made their way through the city; encountering several wagons that were carrying gladiators' arms to another city,

1. His head was later used as a theatrical prop in Euripides' *Bacchae* by the Parthians.
2. No ancient account of a slave war is going to be very sympathetic: generally speaking, those who are inclined not to believe Spartacus was a font of all evils argue that he was unfairly condemned to slavery.
3. Now it is often called the Third Servile/Slave war.

they seized these and armed themselves. Seizing upon a place they could defend, they chose three leaders, of whom the chief was Spartacus, a Thracian from one of the nomad tribes, and a man not only of great courage and brave, but in understanding and gentleness superior to his condition, and more of a Greek than the people of his country usually are.⁴ When he first was sold at Rome, they say a snake coiled itself upon his face as he lay asleep, and his wife, also a Thracian, who at this latter time also accompanied him in his flight, a kind of prophetess and one of those possessed with the bacchanal frenzy,⁵ declared that it was a sign predicting great and formidable power to him with no happy result.

First routing those that came out of Capua to fight them, and so getting a quantity of proper soldiers' weapons, they gladly threw away the ones they had as barbarous and dishonourable. Afterwards the praetor Clodius took command against them with a force of three thousand men from Rome, and besieged them within a mountain accessible only by one narrow and difficult passage, which Clodius kept guarded, surrounded on all other sides with steep and slippery precipices. Upon the top, however, grew a great many wild vines, and cutting down as many of their boughs as they needed, they twisted them into strong ladders long enough to reach from there to the bottom, and thus without any danger all of them but one they got down – one stayed there to throw them down their weapons, and after this succeeded in saving himself. The Romans were ignorant of all this, and, so when the gladiators attacked them from the rear, they assaulted them unawares and took their camp. Additionally some of the shepherds and herdsmen⁶ who were there and were strong, nimble individuals, revolted also and the gladiators gave complete arms to some of these while making use of others as scouts and light-armed soldiers. The praetor Publius Varinius was now sent against them; they fought and routed his lieutenant, Furius, and his two thousand soldiers. Then Cossinius⁷ was sent with considerable forces to give his assistance and advice, Spartacus barely missed capturing him in person as he was bathing at Salinae and Cossinius made his escape with great difficulty while Spartacus captured his baggage. Following the pursuit with a great slaughter, Spartacus stormed and captured his camp and Cossinius himself was killed in the camp. After many successful skirmishes with the praetor himself, in one of which he took the praetor's lictors and horse, he began to be great and terrible; however, wisely considering that he could not match Rome's force, he marched his army towards the Alps, intending, when he had passed them, that every man should go to his own home, some to Thrace, some to Gaul. But they, grown confident in their numbers, and over confident because of their success, would not obey him, but went about and ravaged Italy. The result was that now the Senate was not only moved at the indignity and baseness of the enemy and of the insurrection, but thought of it as a matter of alarm and potentially dangerous and sent both the consuls as if to a great and difficult enterprise.⁸ The consul Gellius, falling suddenly upon a party of Germans,⁹ who through contempt and confidence had wandered off from Spartacus, cut them all to pieces. But when Lentulus¹⁰ besieged Spartacus with a large army, he sallied out upon him, and, joining battle, defeated his chief officers, and captured all his baggage. As he made toward the Alps, Cassius, who was praetor of that part of Gaul that lies about the Po, met him with ten thousand men, but being overcome in the battle, he barely escaped himself with the loss of a great many of his men.

4. The Greeks considered Thracians barbarians and feared them greatly.

5. The worship of Bacchus (=Dionysus) featured frenzied and manic actions and states.

6. Most of these were probably slaves also.

7. Lucius Cossinius was another praetor; we know nothing else about him.

8. The date is now 72 BCE. They were probably given 2 legions each, the standard for a consular army.

9. Led by Crixus; Spartacus seems to have had an endless problem in getting the various ethnic groups who made up his army to stick together.

10. The consul; not to be confused with Lentulus Batiates who owned the gladiatorial school that Spartacus broke out of.



Bust of Marcus Licinius Crassus

When the Senate heard this they were displeased at the consuls and, ordering them to meddle no further, appointed Crassus general of the war,¹¹ and a great many of the nobility went as volunteers with him, partly out of friendship, and partly to get honour. He stayed himself on the borders of Picenum, expecting Spartacus would come that way, and sent his lieutenant, Mummius with two legions ordering him to wheel about and observe the enemy's movements, but upon no account to engage or skirmish with him. But Mummius joined battle at the first opportunity and was routed with a great loss of life of his men, a great many of whom only saved their lives by throwing away their weapons. Crassus rebuked him severely and when he had armed the soldiers again he made them find pledges for their weapons, that they would part with them no more, and the five hundred that were the beginners of the flight he divided into fifty tens, one of each which was to die by lot, thus reviving the ancient Roman punishment of decimation, where humiliation is added to the penalty of death, with a variety of appalling and terrible circumstances, presented before the eyes of the

whole army, who had been assembled to watch. When he had thus reclaimed his men he led them against the enemy; however, Spartacus retreated through Lucania toward the sea, and in the straits meeting with some Cilician pirate ships, he thought about trying to get to Sicily, where by landing two thousand men¹² he hoped to rekindle the war of the slaves, which was but lately extinguished,¹³ and seemed to need but little fuel to set it burning again. But after the pirates had struck a bargain with him, and received his pledge, they deceived him and sailed away. He then retreated again from the sea, and established his army in the peninsula of Rhegium; Crassus found him there and examining the nature of the place, which of itself suggested the undertaking,¹⁴ he set to work to build a wall across the isthmus; thus keeping his soldiers at once from idleness and his foes from foraging.¹⁵ This great and difficult work he perfected in a space of time shorter than any expectation, making a ditch from one sea to the other, over the neck of land, three hundred furlongs long, fifteen feet broad and deep, and above it he built a very high and strong wall. All which Spartacus at first ignored and despised, but when provisions began to fail and he tried to pass further, he found he was walled in and no more was to be had in the peninsula; so taking the opportunity provided by a snowy, stormy night, he filled up part of the ditch with earth and boughs of trees, and so got a third of his army over.

11. Crassus had been praetor in 73 and appears to have put a lot of effort into getting himself appointed commander of the new campaign against the slaves. He was given 2 legions (the usual for a praetor/propraetor was 1) and raised 6 more using his own resources.
12. It seems very unlikely that Spartacus planned to try and take Sicily with only 2,000 men and desert the rest of his own troops, if only for the reason that it would take far more men to take Sicily.
13. There had been two previous major slave wars in Sicily.
14. It was a narrow peninsula.
15. Supply problems were always acute even for official Roman armies; they must have been much worse for Spartacus' forces.

Crassus was afraid that Spartacus would march directly against Rome, but was soon relieved of that fear when he saw many of Spartacus' men break out in a mutiny and leave him and camp by themselves upon the Lucanian lake. This lake they say changes at intervals of time, and is sometimes sweet, and sometimes so salty that it cannot be drunk. Falling upon these Crassus beat them from the lake, but he could not pursue the slaughter, because of Spartacus suddenly coming up and checking the flight. Now he began to regret that he had previously written to the Senate to call Lucullus out of Thrace and Pompey out of Spain; as a result he did all he could to finish the war before they came, knowing that the honour of the action would redound to the man that helped him out. Resolving, therefore, first to set upon those that had mutinied and encamped apart, whom Gaius Cannicius and Castus commanded, he sent six thousand men before to secure a little hill, and to do it as privately as possible, which that they might do they covered their helmets, but being discovered by two women that were sacrificing for the enemy, they had been in great danger if Crassus had not immediately appeared and engaged in a battle which proved to be a very bloody one. Of 12,300 whom he killed, two only were found wounded in their backs, the rest all having died standing in their ranks and fighting bravely. After this setback Spartacus retired to the mountains of Petelia, but Quintus, one of Crassus' officers, and Scrofa, the quaestor, pursued and overtook him. But when Spartacus rallied and faced them, they were utterly routed and fled, and struggled to carry off their quaestor, who was wounded. This success however, ruined Spartacus, because it encouraged the slaves, who now disdained any longer to avoid fighting or to obey their officers, but as they were upon the march, they came to them with their swords in their hands, and compelled them to lead them back again through Lucania against the Romans, the very thing Crassus was eager for. For he already had news that Pompey was nearby and people began to talk openly that the honour of this war would go to him who would come and at once force the enemy to fight and put an end to the war. Crassus, therefore, eager to fight a decisive battle, camped very near the enemy and began to make lines of circumvallation, but the slaves made a sally and attacked those who were there first. As fresh supplies came in on either side, Spartacus, seeing there was no avoiding it, arranged his army in battle order and when his horse was brought him, he drew out his sword and killed it, saying that if he was victorious he should have a great many better horses from the enemies, and if he lost, he should have no need of this. And so making directly for Crassus himself through the middle of weapons and wounds, he missed him but killed two centurions that attacked him together. At last being deserted by those that were about him, he himself stood his ground, and, surrounded by the enemy, was cut in pieces while bravely defending himself. But though Crassus had good fortune and not only fought like a good general but gallantly exposed himself to danger, yet Pompey got most of the credit of the battle. For he met with many of the fugitives and killed them, and wrote to the Senate that Crassus indeed had defeated the slaves in a pitched battle, but that he had put an end to the war. Pompey was honoured with a magnificent triumph for his conquest over Sertorius and Spain, while Crassus could not himself as much as desire a triumph in its full form and, indeed, it was thought that it reflected poorly on him that he accepted the lesser honour, called the *ovatio*, for a slave war and performed a procession on foot.

[Plutarch](#), *Crassus* 8-11



1 - Gellius' defeats Crixus
2 - Spartacus defeats Lentulus
3 - Spartacus defeats Cassius

Crixus' followers
Spartacus' followers
Gellius' Legion
Lentulus' Legion

The events of 72 BC, according to Plutarch's version of events.

The next source, Florus, was (probably) a friend of Emperor Hadrian. He wrote an epitome of Roman history, which concentrated on the wars up to the reign of Augustus, summarizing the work

of earlier historians in a concentrated form. As you can see from the first few lines Florus felt that Spartacus and his war were entirely evil and against the settled order of how things should be.

We may, however, live with the dishonour of a war with slaves, for though they are by their circumstances subjected to all kinds of treatment, they are yet, as it were, a second class of men, and may be admitted to the enjoyment of liberty with ourselves. But I know not by what name to call the war started by the efforts of Spartacus, for the soldiers in it were slaves and the commanders gladiators; the former being persons of the lowest condition and the latter men of the worst character, and adding to the calamity of their profession by its contemptibleness. Spartacus, Crixus, and Oenomaus breaking out of the *ludus* of Lentulus escaped from Capua with not more than thirty other gladiators, and, having called the slaves to their standard and collected a force of more than 10,000 were not content with merely having escaped but were eager to take vengeance on their masters. The first theatre for action that attracted them was Mount Vesuvius where, being besieged by Clodius Glaber, they slid down a passage in the hollow part of the mountain by means of ropes made of vine branches, and reached its very bottom; when, bursting out from an apparently impossible outlet they captured the camp of the Roman general, who expected no assault, by a sudden attack. They afterwards took other camps, and spread to Cora, and through the whole of Campania. Not content with plundering villas and villages, they ravaged, with terrible devastation, Nola and Nuceria, Thurii and Metapontum.¹⁶ Being joined by new forces day after day and forming themselves into a regular army, they made themselves out of willows and beasts' hides a rude kind of shield, and out of the iron from the slave-houses forged swords and other weapons. And that nothing proper might be forgotten for fitting out their army, they got a cavalry by breaking in the herds of horses that they encountered and gave their leader the ensigns and fasces that they took from the praetors. Nor did he, who had gone from being a mercenary Thracian to a Roman soldier, from a soldier to a deserter and robber, and afterwards, because of his strength, a gladiator, refuse to receive them. He afterwards, indeed, celebrated the funerals of his own officers who died in battle with the ceremonies used for Roman generals, and obliged the prisoners to fight with arms at their funeral pyres, just as if he could atone for all past dishonour by becoming from a gladiator an exhibitor of shows of gladiators. Engaging next with the armies of the consuls, he cut to pieces that of Lentulus near the Apennines and destroyed the camp of Gaius Cassius at Mutina. Elated by these successes, he thought (which is sufficient disgrace for us) about attacking Rome.¹⁷ At length, an effort was made against this swordsman with the whole force of the empire, and Licinius Crassus avenged the honour of Rome, by whom the enemies (I am ashamed to call them so) being routed and put to flight, fled to the furthest parts of Italy. Here, being shut up in a corner of Bruttium and attempting to escape to Sicily, but having no ships, and having in vain tried to sail across the swift current of the strait on rafts made of hurdles and casks tied together with twigs, they at last sallied out, and died a death worthy of men. As was fitting for a gladiator leader, they fought without sparing themselves. Spartacus himself, fighting with the utmost bravery in the front of the battle, fell as became their general.

[Florus, Epitome 2.8.20](#)

The next source, Appian, a Greek historian from Alexandria who became a Roman citizen, relates the story of Spartacus as part of his narrative of the wars of the last century of the Republic. Some of his details are clearly incorrect and do not match up with other information we have; we know, for example, that Crassus was praetor in 73, not 72, as Appian suggests.

16. If this is true then Spartacus was besieging and sacking towns, a rather remarkable feat for an army created as his was and one without proper equipment.

17. This seems rather unlikely: although he had taken smaller towns, there is no way he could have thought that he would capture Rome without proper siege equipment.

At the same time Spartacus, a Thracian by birth, who had once served as a soldier with the Romans, but had since been a prisoner and sold to become a gladiator and was in the gladiatorial training-school at Capua, persuaded about seventy of his comrades to fight for their own freedom rather than for the amusement of spectators. They overcame the guards and ran away, arming themselves with clubs and daggers that they took from people on the roads and took refuge on Mount Vesuvius. There many fugitive slaves and even some freemen from the fields joined Spartacus and he plundered the neighbouring country, having Oenomaus and Crixus, both gladiators, as his lieutenants. As he divided the plunder impartially he soon had plenty of men. Varinius Faber was first sent against him and afterward Publius Valerius¹⁸ – these did not have regular armies, but forces gathered quickly and at random, for the Romans did not consider this a war as yet, but a raid, something like an outbreak of robbery. When they attacked Spartacus they were beaten. Spartacus even captured Varinius' horse; that was how close a Roman praetor came to being captured by a gladiator. After this even more people flocked to Spartacus till his army numbered 70,000 men. For these he manufactured weapons and collected gear.



- | | |
|--|---------------------------|
| 1 - Gellius' defeats Crixus | Crixus' followers |
| 2 - Spartacus defeats Lentulus | Spartacus' followers |
| 3 - Spartacus defeats Gellius | Gellius' Legion |
| 4 - Spartacus defeats combined consular legions. | Lentulus' Legion |
| | Combined Consular Legions |

The events of 72 BC, according to Appian's version of events.

Rome now sent out the consuls with two legions each. One of them defeated Crixus and his 30,000 men near Mount Garganus; two-thirds of his men died with him. Spartacus tried to make his way through the Apennines to the Alps and Gaul, but one of the consuls anticipated him and hindered his march while the other hung upon his rear. He turned upon them one after the other and beat them in detail. They retreated in confusion in different directions. Spartacus sacrificed 300 Roman prisoners to the shade of Crixus, and marched on Rome with 120,000 infantry, having burned all his useless material, killed all his prisoners, and butchered his pack animals in order to expedite his movement. Many deserters offered themselves to him, but he would not accept them. The consuls again met him in the country of Picenum. Here was fought another great battle and there was too, a great defeat for the Romans. Spartacus changed his intention of marching on Rome. He did not consider himself ready as yet for that kind of a fight, as his whole force was not suitably armed because no city had joined him, but only slaves, deserters, and riffraff. However, he occupied the mountains around Thurii and captured the city itself. He prohibited the bringing in of gold or silver by merchants, and would not allow his own men to acquire any, but he bought mainly iron and brass and did not interfere with those who dealt in these articles. Supplied with abundant material from this source his men provided themselves with plenty of weapons and continued as robbers for the time being. When they next came to an engagement with the Romans they were again victorious, and returned laden with spoils.

This war, so formidable to the Romans (although ridiculous and contemptible in the beginning as it was thought of as the work of gladiators), had now lasted three years. When the election of new praetors came on, everyone was afraid and nobody offered himself as a candidate until Licinius Crassus, a man distinguished among the Romans for birth and wealth, assumed the praetorship and marched against Spartacus with six new legions. When he arrived at his destination he received also the two legions of the consuls whom he decimated by lot for their bad conduct in several battles. Some say that Crassus, too, having engaged in battle with his whole army, and having been defeated, decimated the whole army and was not deterred by their numbers, but destroyed about 4,000 of them. However it happened, he demonstrated to them that he was more dangerous to them than the enemy. Presently he overcame 10,000 of the Spartacans, who were camped somewhere apart from the main army, and killed two-thirds of them.

18. This is an error by Appian; it should be Varinius; Appian seems to gotten Glaber mixed up with Varinius.

He then marched boldly against Spartacus himself, defeated him in a brilliant battle, and pursued his fleeing forces to the sea, where they tried to get to Sicily. He overtook them and enclosed them with a line of circumvallation consisting of ditch, wall, and paling.

Spartacus tried to break through and make an incursion into the Samnite country, but Crassus killed about 6,000 of his men in the morning and as many more towards evening. Only three of the Roman army were killed and seven wounded, so great was the improvement in their morale inspired by the recent punishment. Spartacus, who was expecting from somewhere a reinforcement of horse no longer went into battle with his whole army, but harassed the besiegers by frequent sallies here and there. He fell upon them unexpectedly and continually threw bundles of twigs into the ditch and set them on fire and made their labour difficult. He crucified a Roman prisoner in the space between the two armies to show his own men what fate awaited them if they did not conquer. When the Romans in the city heard of the siege they thought it would be disgraceful if this war against gladiators should be prolonged. Believing also that the work still to be done against Spartacus was great and severe they ordered up the army of Pompey, which had just arrived from Spain, as a reinforcement.

On account of this vote Crassus tried in every way to come to an engagement with Spartacus so that Pompey might not get the glory from the war. Spartacus himself, hoping to anticipate Pompey, invited Crassus to come to terms with him. When his proposals were scornfully rejected, he decided to risk a battle, and as his cavalry had arrived he made a dash with his whole army through the lines of the besieging force and pushed on to Brundisium with Crassus in pursuit. When Spartacus learned that Lucullus had just arrived in Brundisium fresh from his victory over Mithridates, he despaired of everything and brought his forces, which were even then very large, to close quarters with Crassus. The battle was long and bloody, as might have been expected with so many thousands of desperate men. Spartacus was wounded in the thigh with a spear and sank upon his knee, holding his shield in front of him and contending in this way against his assailants until he and the great mass of those with him were surrounded and killed. The remainder of his army was thrown into confusion and butchered in crowds. So great was the slaughter that it was impossible to count them. The Roman loss was about 1,000. The body of Spartacus was not found.

A large number of his men fled from the battlefield to the mountains and Crassus followed them thither. They divided themselves in four parts, and continued to fight until they all perished except 6,000, who were captured and crucified along the whole road from Capua to Rome. 121. Crassus accomplished his task within six months, which created a contention for honours between himself and Pompey.

Appian, *Civil Wars* 116-212

The next source is a little different than the others. It is not a history but a collection of successful military strategies compiled by Frontinus (30-104 CE), who also wrote a treatise on military matters (no longer extant). He intended this collection for the use of officers who wanted to educate themselves on how others had dealt with problematic situations.

When Marcus Crassus had built a ditch around the forces of Spartacus, the latter filled it at night with the bodies of prisoners and cattle that he had killed, and marched across it. The same Spartacus, when besieged on the slopes of Vesuvius at the point where the mountain was steepest and because of that,



The last events of the war in 71 BC, where the army of Spartacus broke the siege by Crassus' legions and retreated toward the mountains near Petelia. Shows the initial skirmishes between elements of the two sides, the turn-about of the Spartacan forces for the final confrontation. Note the legions of Pompey moving in from the north to capture survivors.

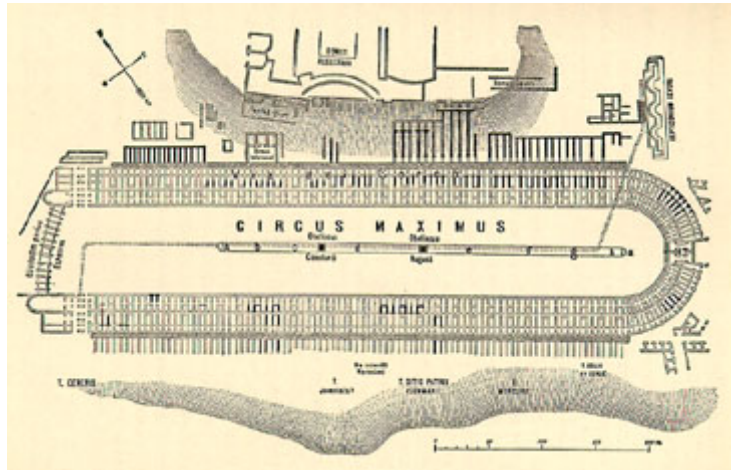
unguarded, plaited ropes of willows from the woods. Letting himself down by these, he not only made his escape, but by appearing in another area struck such terror into Clodius that several cohorts gave way before a force of only seventy-four gladiators. This Spartacus, when surrounded by the troops of the proconsul Publius Varinius, placed stakes at short intervals before the gate of the camp; then setting up corpses, dressed in clothes and furnished with weapons, he tied these to the stakes to give the appearance of sentries when viewed from a distance. He also lit fires throughout the whole camp. Deceiving the enemy with this empty show, Spartacus silently led out his troops during the night.

Frontinus, *Stratagems* 1.20-22

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Chariot Racing



Floorplan of the Circus Maximus. Made by Samuel Platner in 1911. Image from VRoma Archive.

Plan of the Circus Maximus, the “Greatest Circus”, located in the valley between the Palatine and Aventine hills in Rome.

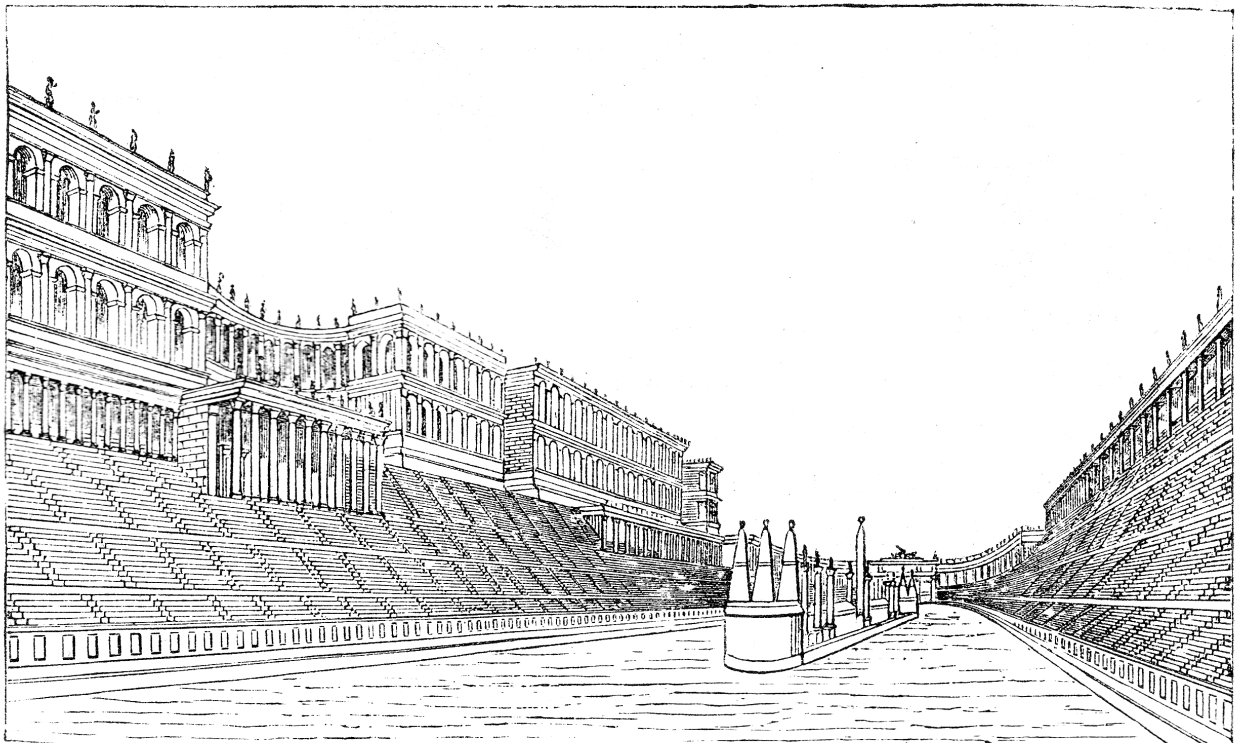


Illustration from “Illustrerad världshistoria utgifven av E. Wallis, Volume II”: Circus Maximus.

Illustration of the Circus Maximus from *Illustrerad världshistoria utgifven Vol II*, E. Wallis.

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The Circus Maximus

In this section you will learn

- the history of the Circus Maximus, Rome's largest performance space
- the connection of the Circus and games with Roman religion
- the behaviour and make-up of crowds at Rome
- how often the Circus burned down and/or flooded (a lot)



Model of Rome in the 4th century AD, by Paul Bigot. The Circus lies between the Aventine (left) and Palatine (right); the oval structure to the far right is the Colosseum.

The Circus Maximus was the oldest and largest circus in Rome: it could seat 250,000 people and another 250,000 could watch events there from the surrounding hills – which meant that even when Rome was at its biggest, around about a 1/3 of its population could conceivably view events in it. Although it was said to have been laid out by a later king, this was also where Romulus, the founder

of Rome and its first king, was said to have seized and raped the Sabine Women, at a festival for Consus, the Roman god of grain storage. As Livy tells the story, the trouble started because people did not want to marry their daughters into a state that was an asylum for criminals and exiles, and the Romans, offended at this, decided just to take their women where they wanted:

The Roman state had now become so strong that it was a match for any of its neighbours in war, but its greatness threatened to last for only one generation, since as they had no women¹ they had no hope of children and no right to intermarry with their neighbours. Acting on the advice of the Senate, Romulus sent messengers to the surrounding nations to ask for alliances and the right of intermarriage on behalf of his new community. These said that these cities, like everything else, sprung from the humblest beginnings, and those who were helped on by their own courage and the favour of heaven won for themselves great power and great fame. But as for the origin of Rome, it was well known that while it had received divine assistance,² it did not lack courage and self-reliance. There should, therefore, be no reluctance for men to mingle their blood with their fellow-men. Nowhere did the messengers meet with a welcoming reception. Whilst their proposals were treated sneeringly, people felt great worry at the power so rapidly growing among them. Usually they were dismissed with the question, “whether they had opened an asylum for women, because except that would get them intermarriage on equal terms.” The Roman youth could barely tolerate such insults, and it began to look like there would be war. To secure a favourable place and time for such an attempt, Romulus, hiding his resentment, made elaborate preparations for the celebration of games in honour of “Equestrian Neptune,”³ which he called “[the Consualia](#).” He ordered public notice of the spectacle to be sent to neighbouring cities, and his people supported him in making the celebration as magnificent as their knowledge and resources allowed, so that expectations were raised to the highest level. There was a great gathering; people were eager to see the new City, all their nearest neighbours – the people of Caenina, Antemnae, and Crustumerium – were there, and the whole Sabine population came along with their wives and families. They were invited to accept hospitality at different houses and, after examining the situation of Rome, its walls and the large number of homes it included, they were astonished at the rapidity with which the Roman state had grown.

When the time for the games had come, and their eyes and minds were alike riveted on the spectacle before them, a prearranged signal was given and the Roman youth dashed in all directions to carry off the girls who were present. The larger part were carried off indiscriminately, but some particularly beautiful girls who had been marked out for the leading patricians were carried to their houses by plebeians who had been instructed to do so. One, surpassing all others for grace and beauty, is reported to have been carried off by a group led by a certain Talassius, and to the many inquiries as to whom she was intended for, the invariable answer was given, “For Talassius.” Hence the use of this word in the marriage rites. Alarm and consternation broke up the games, and the parents of the girls fled distracted with grief and uttering bitter reproaches on the violators of the laws of hospitality and appealing to the god to whose solemn games they had come, only to be the victims of impious perfidy. The abducted maidens were quite as despondent and indignant.

[Livy](#), *From the Founding of the City* 1.9

However, others claimed the Circus Maximus was laid out not by Romulus, but by Lucius Tarquinius Priscus, King of Rome from 614 BCE.

1. It is never explained why they have no women, given that women too could be criminals and exiles.

2. Supposedly Romulus' father was the god Mars.

3. Consus was sometimes associated with Neptune (Greek Poseidon), who was both god of the sea and of horses. During his festival horses and mules – apart from those running in the races to celebrate his festival – did no work and were garlanded with flowers; the festival took place on the 21st of August.

Tarquinius also built the Circus Maximus, which is located between the Aventine and Palatine Hills;⁴ he was the first to place covered seats around it on bleachers supported by beams – before then spectators had to stand. He divided these seats among Rome's 30 curiae⁵ and gave each one a particular section so that every spectator sat in his proper place. This structure was fated to later become one of the most gorgeous and impressive structures in Rome. The Circus is three and a half stades⁶ long and four plethra.⁷ On the two longer sides and on one of the shorter sides a canal has been dug around the Circus; this is 10 feet deep and wide and is there for water. Behind that canal there are porticos of three stories high; the lower story has stone seats, which rise, just as they do in the theatres, one after another. The two upper stories have wooden seats. The two longer porticos are joined by the curved, shorter one, making a single array of seats, just as in an amphitheatre: this is eight stades long and can seat 150,000. The other, shorter side is open and holds arched starting gates, and these are opened with a single rope. On the outside of the Circus there is another portico of one story containing shops and apartments over them; this portico also holds the entrances and stairs for spectators, which are located by every shop. This means that the thousands who attend can enter and leave easily.



Modern image of the Circus Maximus

[Dionysius of Halicarnassus](#) 3.68

Tarquinius' first war was with the Latins, whose town of Apiolae he captured by storm. He returned from there with more loot than the rumours about the war had led people to expect and held games on a more splendid and elaborate scale than former kings had done. It was then that the ground was first marked out for the circus now called Maximus. Places were divided among the senators and the equestrians where they might each make seats for themselves; these were called 'rows.' They got their view from seats raised on props to a height of twelve feet from the ground. The entertainment was supplied by horses and boxers, most of whom were brought from Etruria. From that time the Games continued to be a regular annual show, and were called either the [Ludi Romani](#) or the *Ludi Magni*.

Livy, *From the Founding of the City* 1.35.7-10

Although the chariot races were of ancient origin (they were probably one of the original forms of spectacle), they developed considerably over time, as the Romans expanded the number of *ludi* they celebrated. During the Second Punic War the Romans suffered a number of defeats at the hands of Hannibal, the Carthaginian general, losing almost 50,000 men at the Battle of Cannae in 216 alone. The Romans attributed their loss to the anger of the gods and went looking for ways to propitiate them; the Senate consulted the Sibylline Prophecies, a collection of prophecies in Greek of exceeding obscurity. The end result of this consultation was the instituting of a new set of games in honour of the god Apollo,⁸ the [Ludi Apollinares](#) in 212, at which (among other events) chariot racing took place.

Then the second prophecy was read. It was not only more obscure than the first because the future is more uncertain than the past, but it was also more unintelligible because of the language it used. It ran as follows:

4. This was known Murcian Valley, after the goddess Murcia.

5. According to legend Romulus had divided the Roman people into 30 *curiae*.

6. The stade is a Greek unit of measurement; unfortunately it varied in size from 176-185 metres, so it is hard to be precise.

7. A plethrum was about 30 metres.

8. Apollo was the god of prophecy and healing among other things.

“If, Romans, you desire to drive out the enemy who came from far away to mar your land, then see that *ludi* be held in honour of Apollo as each fourth year comes round; and your Republic shall bear its part and all your people shall share this sacred work, each for himself and his. Your praetor, who shall justice do for each and all, shall be in charge. Then let there be *Decemviri*⁹ selected who shall offer sacrifice in Greek fashion. If you will do this then you shall always rejoice and your state shall prosper; and the god will destroy the enemies who now consume your land. Then shall you rejoice forever.”

They spent one day interpreting this prophecy; the day after that, the Senate passed a resolution that the *Decemviri* should inspect the sacred books with reference to the institution of Games to Apollo and the proper form of sacrifice. After the *Decemviri* had completed their investigations and reported to the Senate, a resolution was passed “that Games be vowed and celebrated in honour of Apollo, and that when they were finished, 12,000 asses¹⁰ were to be given to the praetor for the expenses of the sacrifice and two large sacrificial victims.” They also passed a second resolution that “the Ten should sacrifice according to Greek ritual the following victims: to Apollo, an ox with gilded horns and two white she-goats with gilded horns, and to Latona¹¹ a heifer with gilded horns.” When the praetor was about to celebrate the Games in the Circus Maximus he gave notice that during the Games the people should contribute a gift to Apollo according to the amount they each wished. Such is the origin of the *Ludi Apollinares*, which were founded for the cause of victory and not, as is generally thought, in the interests of the public health.

Livy, *From the Founding of the City* 25.12



Map of ancient Rome around 320 AD

9. A board of ten.

10. A small, copper Roman coin.

11. Another name for the goddess Diana, who was Apollo's sister.

The map above shows the location of the Circus Maximus (XI). Due to its proximity to the Tiber it had a perennial issue with flooding, which even occurred in the middle of games, resulting in their abandonment. Starting gates were added in 329 BCE, and the spina, the central barrier, around the same time; the starting gates helped a little with blocking the flooding. Further construction continued: in 196 BCE an arch was built and so forth. However, its final form took shape only under Julius Caesar and Augustus. In 33 BCE Augustus' friend (and later son-in-law) Agrippa added lap counters in the form of dolphins and eggs to the Circus Maximus as Cassius Dio relates below:

In the following year Agrippa agreed to be elected aedile and repaired all the public buildings and all the streets, cleaned out the sewers and made sure they went underground to the Tiber, without asking for money from public funds. And seeing that in the Circus Maximus spectators made mistakes about the number of laps completed, he set up the dolphins and egg-shaped objects, so that the number of times the course had been circled might be clearly shown with their assistance.

[Cassius Dio](#), *Roman History* 49.43.1-2



Coin depicting the Circus Maximus

The coin above shows the obelisk and the metae (turning posts); it dates from the reign of Caracalla (211-17). In addition to these features there was also the pulvinar, originally the place where the statues of the gods, which had been paraded into the circus, were kept. Augustus constructed it¹²; it became the imperial box, although emperors might watch from other locations as the below shows:

Augustus himself usually watched the games in the Circus from the upper rooms of his friends and freedmen, but sometimes from the *pulvinar*, and also sat with his wife and children. He was sometimes absent for several hours, and now and then for entire days, asking for pardon and appointing presiding officers to take his place. But whenever he was present he did nothing except watch the games, either to avoid the popular criticism to which he remembered his father Julius Caesar had been exposed, because he spent his time in reading or answering letters and petitions or from his interest and pleasure in the spectacle, which he never lied about but often frankly confessed.

[Suetonius](#), *Augustus* 44.1-2

12. He lists it as one of his many building projects in his *Res Gestae*/Autobiography.

It wasn't all gods and emperors and their hangers on around the pulvinar, though; we also have an epitaph for a fruit seller who sold fruit before it.

Gaius Julius Epaphra, a fruit-seller Circus Maximus in front of the *pulvinar* at the, set this up for himself and his wife Venuleia Helena, a freedwoman of Caesar.

CIL 6.9822

The Circus Maximus was more than just a race-track, however, it was also a religious site, which held many temples and shrines for a wide number of deities, including the Sun, the Moon, the goddess Murcia, the god Consus, among many others. The Christian author Tertullian, in fine pagan loathing form, attacks it for this:

The Circus is primarily consecrated to the Sun. His temple stands in the middle of it, and his image shines forth from the pediment of the temple. For they did not think it proper to worship beneath a roof a god whom they see above them in the open sky. Those who argue that the first circus show was given by Circe in honor of the Sun, her father, as they will have it, conclude also that its name is derived from her. Plainly, the sorceress undoubtedly transacted the business in behalf of those whose priestess she was, namely, the demons and evil spirits. How many evidences of idol worship do you recognize accordingly in the decoration of the place? Every ornament of the circus is a temple by itself. The eggs are regarded as sacred to Castor and Pollux by people who do not feel ashamed to believe the story of their origin from the egg made fertile by the swan, Jupiter.¹³ The dolphins spout water in honor of Neptune; the columns bear aloft images of Seia, so called from "sementatio" ('sowing'); of Messia, so called as deity of "messis" ('reaping'); and of Tutulina, so called as 'tutelary spirit' of the crops.¹⁴

In front of these are seen three altars for the triple gods: the Great, the Potent, the Prevailing. They think these deities are Samothracean. The huge obelisk, as Hermateles says, is set up in honor of the Sun.¹⁵ Its inscription which, like its origin, is Egyptian, contains a superstition. The gathering of the demons would be dull without their Great Mother, so she presides there over the ditch.

Consus,¹⁶ as we have mentioned, keeps in hiding underground at the Murcian Goals. The latter are also the work of an idol. For Murcia, as they will have it, is a goddess of love to whom they have dedicated a temple in that part (of the valley).¹⁷ Take note, Christian, how many unclean deities have taken possession of the circus. You should have nothing to do with a place which so many diabolic spirits have made their own.



The Flaminio Obelisk, which now stands in the Piazza del Popolo in Rome, used to be on the spina of the Circus Maximus. It was placed there by the Emperor Augustus in 10 BCE, after he stole it from Egypt. It was originally created to honour Egyptian pharaohs in the 1200s BCE.

13. Jupiter raped Leda in the form of a swan and she laid eggs from which Helen and Pollux were born.

14. These three goddesses are rather obscure, but were native Italic goddesses connected with grain production and protection.

15. This obelisk was set up by Augustus.

16. His altar was buried in the Circus Maximus and uncovered during his feast day.

17. A native goddess, she was identified with Venus, the goddess of love.

[Tertullian](#), *On Spectacles* 8.1-5

Another late (5th century) Christian source discusses the Circus Maximus as a reflection of the cosmos:

Oenomaus is said first to have exhibited this sport [chariot racing] at Elis, a city in Asia,¹⁸ and afterwards Romulus, at the time of the rape of the Sabines, displayed it in rural fashion to Italy, as there were not yet any buildings for the purpose. Long after, Augustus, the lord of the world, raising his works to the same high level as his power, built a building marvellous even to Romans, which stretched far into the Murcian Valley. This immense mass, firmly surrounded with hills, enclosed a space which was fitted to be the theatre for great events.

Twelve *ostia*¹⁹ at the entrance represent the twelve signs of the zodiac. These are suddenly and equally opened by ropes let down by the *hermulae*.²⁰ The four colours worn by the four factions of charioteers denote the seasons: green for verdant spring, blue for cloudy winter, red for flaming summer, white for frosty autumn. Thus, throughout the spectacle we see a determination to represent the works of nature. The two-horse chariot is made in imitation of the moon, the four horse chariot of the sun.²¹ The circus horses, which the slaves of the Circus use to announce the races, imitate the swiftness of the morning star. Thus it came to pass that while they deemed they were worshipping the stars, they profaned their religion by parodying it in their games.



Racing chariots entering the Circus Maximus

A white line is drawn not far from the starting gate to each *podium*, so the race begins when the four horse chariots pass it, in case they should interrupt the view of the spectators by their attempts to get before each other. There are always seven laps round the turning posts in one race, matching the days of the week. The goals themselves have, like the constellations of the zodiac, each three pinnacles, round which the swift four horse chariots circle like the sun. The wheels indicate the boundaries of East and West. The channel which surrounds the Circus presents us with an image of the glassy sea, whence come

the dolphins which swim here through the waters. The tall obelisks lift their height towards heaven; but the upper one is dedicated to the Sun, the lower one to the Moon: and upon them the sacred rites of the ancients are indicated with Chaldean signs for letters.

The *spina*²²—The central barrier that ran down the Circus. It was there to prevent headlong crashes — noticeably Greek chariot races had no central barrier, making their races often a far more bloody experience, especially as they would often race large numbers of chariots. represents the lot of the unhappy captives, inasmuch as the generals of the Romans, marching over the backs of their enemies, reaped the joy which was the reward of their labours. This is how the *mappa* [=napkin], which is still seen to give the signal at the games, came to be used: once when Nero was lingering over his dinner, and the people, as usual, were impatient for the spectacle to begin, he ordered the napkin which he had used for wiping his fingers to be thrown out of window, as a signal that he gave the required permission. Hence it became a custom that the display of a napkin gave a certain promise of future *circenses*.

The *circus* is so called from “circuitus:” *circenses* is, as it were, *circu-enses*, because in the primitive ages of antiquity, before an elaborate building had been prepared for the purpose, the races were run on the

18. Elis is in Greece and was the town that controlled the Olympic games. Oenomaus was said to have challenged all those who wanted to marry his daughter to a chariot race; he was eventually beaten by Pelops. Who cheated.

19. Starting gates.

20. A type of column that is built into a wall, but juts out slightly from it.

21. The moon goddess, often identified with Diana, drove a two-horse chariot, the sun god a four horse one. Sometimes the sun god was sometimes identified with Apollo, but was frequently worshipped as a deity in his own right.

22.

green grass, and the multitude were protected by the river on one side and the swords (*enses*) of the soldiers on the other. We observe, too, that the rule of this contest is that it be decided in twenty-four heats, the same numbers as the hours of day and night. Nor let it be accounted meaningless that the number of circuits round the goals is expressed by the putting up of eggs, since that emblem, pregnant as it is with many superstitions, indicates that something will be born from there. And in truth we may well see that the most fickle and inconstant characters, well typified by the birds who have laid those eggs, will spring from attendance on these spectacles. It would take too long to describe in detail all the other elements of the Circus, since each appears to arise from some special cause. This only will we remark upon as extremely strange, that in these beyond all other spectacles men's minds are hurried into excitement without any regard to a fitting sobriety of character. The Green charioteer flashes by: part of the people is in despair. The Blue gets a lead: a larger part of the City is in misery. They cheer frantically when they have gained nothing; they are cut to the heart when they have received no loss; and they plunge with as much eagerness into these empty contests as if the whole welfare of a threatened fatherland were at stake. No wonder that such a departure from all sensible behaviour should be attributed to a superstitious origin. We are compelled to support this institution by the necessity of humouring the majority of the people, who are passionately fond of it; for it is always the few who are led by reason, while the many crave excitement and oblivion of their cares. Therefore, as we too must sometimes share the folly of our people, we will freely provide for the expenses of the Circus, however little our judgment approves of this institution.

[Cassiodorus](#), *Variae* 3.51

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A Day at the Races

In this section you will learn

- what the structure of a day of chariot racing looked like
- the parade, called the *pompa circensis*, that preceded the races
- what it was like to watch as a spectator as the day unfolded

Before looking at the factions and the charioteers, it is important to know what a day at the chariot races looked like. First, it started with a procession called the *pompa circensis* in which the statues of the gods, statues of deified emperors, and charioteers, horses and others took part. This made its way through the city into the Circus Maximus in a great show. ([This site](#) maps the route of the *Pompa* and gives more details.) The author of the following passage was a Greek who believed that the Romans were descended from Greeks, and much of his discussion attempts to prove the Romans have many elements in common with the Greeks.



The presiding magistrate at the pompa circensis rode in a two-horse chariot; behind him are the young nobles who led the parade on horseback.

Before beginning the games the principal magistrates conducted a procession in honour of the gods from the Capitoline Hill through the Forum to the Circus Maximus. Those who led the procession were, first, the Romans' sons who were nearing manhood and were of an age to take part in this ceremony, who rode on horseback if their fathers were entitled by their fortunes to be equestrians, while the others, who were destined to serve in the infantry, went on foot, the former in squadrons and troops, and the latter in divisions and companies, as if they were going to school; this was done in order that strangers might see the number and beauty of the youths of the Republic who were approaching manhood. These were followed by charioteers, some of whom drove four horses abreast, some two, and others rode unyoked horses. After them came the contestants in both the light and the heavy games, their whole bodies naked except their loins. This custom continued even in my days at Rome, as it was originally practised by the Greeks; but it is now abolished in Greece, the Spartans having put an end to it¹... Thus it is plain that the Romans, who retain this ancient Greek custom to this day, did not learn it from us afterwards nor even change it over time, as we have done.

The contestants were followed by numerous bands of dancers arranged in three divisions, the first consisting of men, the second of youths, and the third of boys. These were accompanied by flute-players, who used ancient flutes that were small and short, as is done even to this day, and by lyre-players, who plucked ivory lyres of seven strings and the instruments called *barbita*.² The use of these has ceased in my

1. Unlike the Romans, Greek athletes competed in the nude. One legend said that this started with a Spartan who believed that a naked man could run faster than one in a loin-cloth; his victory in the Olympics started a trend.

2. A type of lyre.

time among the Greeks, though traditional with them, but is preserved by the Romans in all their ancient religious ceremonies. The dancers were dressed in scarlet tunics belted with bronze ties, wore swords hung by their sides, and carried spears shorter than average length; the men also had bronze helmets adorned with conspicuous crests and plumes. Each group was led by one man who gave the figures of the dance to the rest, taking the lead in representing their warlike and rapid movements, usually in the proceleusmatic rhythms. This also was in fact a very ancient Greek institution — I mean the armed dance called the Pyrrhic³ ... But it is not alone from the warlike and serious dance of these bands which the Romans used in their sacrificial ceremonies and processions that we can observe their kinship to the Greeks, but also from that which is of a mocking and obscene nature. For after the armed dancers others marched in procession impersonating satyrs and portraying the Greek dance called *sicinnis*. Those who represented Sileni⁴ were dressed in shaggy tunics, called by some *chortaioi*, and in mantles of flowers of every sort; and those who represented satyrs wore girdles and goatskins, and on their heads manes that stood upright, with other things of that type. These mocked and mimicked the serious movements of the others, turning them into laughter-provoking performances. The triumphal entrances also show that mockery and joking in the manner of satyrs were an ancient practice native to the Romans; for the soldiers who take part in the triumphs are allowed to satirise and ridicule the most distinguished men, including even the generals, just like those who ride in procession in carts at Athens; the soldiers once joked in prose as they played around, but now they sing improvised verses.⁵ And even at the funerals of illustrious persons I have seen, along with the other participants, bands of dancers impersonating satyrs who preceded the bier⁶ and imitated in their motions the dance called *sicinnis* — this particularly happens at the funerals of the rich. This joking and dancing in the manner of satyrs, then, was not the invention either of the Ligurians, of the Umbrians, or of any other barbarians who dwelt in Italy, but of the Greeks; but I fear that some readers would grow bored if I endeavoured to confirm by more arguments something generally conceded.

After these bands of dancers came a crowd of lyre-players and many flute-players, and after them the people who carried the censers in which perfumes and frankincense were burned along the whole processional route and the men who bore the show-vessels made of silver and gold, both those that were sacred owing to the gods and those that belonged to the state. Last of all in the procession came the images of the gods, carried on men's shoulders, showing the same likenesses as those made by the Greeks and having the same dress, the same symbols, and the same gifts which tradition says each of them invented and bestowed on mankind. These were the images not only of Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Neptune, and of the rest whom the Greeks reckon among the twelve gods,⁷ but also of the son of still more ancient from whom legend says the twelve were sprung, namely, Saturn, Ops, Themis, Latona, the Parcae, Mnemosynê, and all the rest to whom temples and holy places are dedicated among the Greeks; and also of those whom legend represents as living later, after Jupiter took power, such as Proserpina, Lucina, the Nymphs, the Muses, the Seasons, the Graces, Bacchus, and the demigods whose souls after they had left their mortal bodies are said to have ascended to Heaven and to have obtained the same honours as the gods, such as Hercules, Aesculapius, Castor and Pollux, Helen, Pan, and countless others. Yet if those who founded Rome and instituted this festival were barbarians, how could they properly worship all the gods and other divinities of the Greeks and scorn their own ancestral gods? Let someone show us any other people besides the Greeks among whom these rites are traditional, and then let him criticize this demonstration as unsound.

After the procession was ended the consuls and the priests whose responsibility it was sacrificed oxen and their way of performing the sacrifices was the same as with us: after washing their hands they purified the victims with clear water and sprinkled corn on their heads, after which they prayed and gave orders to their assistants to sacrifice them. Some of these assistants, while the victim was still standing, struck it on the temple with a club, and others received it upon the sacrificial knives as it fell. After this they flayed it and cut it up, taking off a piece from each of the inwards and also from every limb as a first-offering, which they sprinkled with grits of spelt and carried in baskets to the officiating priests. These placed them

3. This was a war dance, supposedly invented by the goddess Athena herself.

4. Followers of the god Bacchus, with human heads and legs, but with horse tails.

5. It was traditional in the Roman triumph for soldiers to sing highly obscene songs about their commanders.

6. The litter on which the dead body was carried to be cremated.

7. That is, the twelve Olympian deities.

on the altars, and making a fire under them, poured wine over them while they were burning. It is easy to see from Homer's poems that every one of these ceremonies was performed according to the customs established by the Greeks with reference to sacrifices. For he introduces the heroes washing their hands and using barley grits, where he said... These rites I am acquainted with from having seen the Romans perform them at their sacrifices even in my time; and contented with this single proof, I have become convinced that the founders of Rome were not barbarians, but Greeks who had come together out of many places. It is possible, indeed, that some barbarians also may observe a few customs relating to sacrifices and festivals in the same manner as the Greeks, but that they should do everything in the same way is hard to believe.



Winner of a Roman chariot race

Now I should give a brief account of the games which the Romans performed after the procession. The first was a race of four-horse chariots, two-horse chariots, and of unyoked horses, as has been the custom among the Greeks, both at Olympia in the distant past and now. In the chariot races two very ancient customs continue to be observed by the Romans down to my time in the same manner as they were first established. The first relates to the chariots drawn by three horses, a type of race the Greeks no longer have, though it was an ancient institution of heroic times, which Homer represents the Greeks as using in battle. For running beside two horses yoked together in the same manner as in the case of a two-horse chariot was a third horse attached by a trace; this trace-horse the ancients called *parêoros* or "tracerunner," because he was "hitched besides the traces" and not yoked to the others. The other

custom is the race run by those who have ridden in the chariots, a race which is still performed in a few Greek states upon the occasion of some ancient sacrifices. For after the chariot races are ended, those who have ridden with the charioteers, whom the poets call *parabatai* and the Athenians *apobatai*, leap down from their chariots and run a race with one another the length of the stadium. And after the chariot races were over, those who contended in their own persons entered the lists, that is, runners, boxers, and wrestlers; for these three contests were in use among the ancient Greeks, as Homer shows in describing the funeral of Patroclus. And in the intervals between the contests they observed a custom which was typically Greek and the most commendable of all customs, that of awarding crowns and proclaiming the honours with which they rewarded their benefactors, just as was done at Athens during the festivals of Dionysus, and displaying to all who had assembled for the spectacle the spoils they had taken in war. But as regards these customs, just as it would not have been right to make no mention of them when the subject required it, so it would not be fitting to extend my account farther than is necessary.

[Dionysius Halicarnassus](#), *Roman Antiquities* 7.72

Julius Caesar had his image added to the *Pompa*, where it was carried along with those of the other gods, and after this it became customary to carry the images of the deified emperors in the procession:

Despite all he did, given all his other actions and words the balance of opinion is that Caesar abused his power and was justly killed. For not only did he accept excessive honours, such as an uninterrupted consulship, the dictatorship for life, and the position of censor, as well as the forename *Imperator*, the surname of *Father of his Country*, a statue among those of the kings, and a raised couch in the orchestra; but he also allowed honours too great for mortal men to be bestowed on him: a golden throne in the Senate and when in court; a chariot and litter in the procession at the circus; temples, altars, and statues beside those of the gods; a special priest, an additional college of the *Luperci*, and the calling of one of the months by his name. In fact, there were no honours which he did not receive or grant at his whim.

[Suetonius](#), *Julius Caesar* 76

The following was written for Consentius of Narbo (modern Narbonne) c. 460 CE, to celebrate games being raced by amateurs, rather than professionals (the rules, however, are those in for professionals and they are racing with the colours of the professional factions). It gives a sense for what it was like to sit down and watch the races as they progressed.



The Sun was beginning a new year, and two-faced Janus was bringing back his Calends, the day when the new magistrates take their seats.⁸ It is Caesar's custom to provide games (called "private") twice in that day. Then a company of young men, all nobles, goes through a grim imitation of the field of Elis with four-horse chariots racing over the course. Now the lot demanded you and the whistling cheers of the hoarse onlookers summoned you. At this, in the part where the door is and the seat of the consuls, round which there runs a wall with six vaulted chambers on each side, where the starting gates are, you chose one of the four chariots by lot and stood in it, laying a tight grip on the hanging reins.⁹ Your partner did the same, so did the opposing side. Brightly gleam the colours, white and blue, green and red, your different insignia. Slaves' hands hold mouth and reins and with knotted cords force the twisted manes to hide themselves, and all the while they incite the steeds, eagerly cheering them with encouraging pats and instilling an insane frenzy. There behind the barriers chafe those beasts, pressing against the fastenings, while a windy blast blows between the wooden bars and even before the race the track they have not yet entered is filled with their panting breath. They push, they stamp, they drag, they struggle, they rage, they jump, they fear and are feared; never are their feet still, but restlessly they lash the hardened timber. At last the herald with loud blare of trumpet calls the impatient teams out and launches the fleet chariots into the track. The swoop of forked lightning, the arrow flying from a Scythian boy, the trail of the swiftly-falling star, the leaden hurricane of bullets whirled from Balearic slings has never so rapidly split the airy paths of the sky. The ground gives way under the wheels and the air is dense with the dust that rises behind them. The drivers, while they held the reins, whip the horses; now they stretch forward over the chariots with stooping chests, and so they sweep along, striking the horses' rumps and leaving their backs untouched. The charioteers lie so flat you would

8. New magistrates took their positions on January 1st, the Calends of the month dedicated to Janus.

9. Professional charioteers, however, tied the reins around themselves, meaning that if the chariot crashed they were dragged with it.

find it hard to say whether they were more supported by the pole or by the wheels. Now as if flying out of sight on wings, you had crossed the more open part, and you were hemmed in by the space that is cramped by craft, where the central barrier has extended its long low double-walled structure. When the farther turning-post freed you all from restraint once more, your partner went ahead of the two others,¹⁰ who had passed you so then, according to the law of the circling course, you had to take the fourth track. The drivers in the middle were intent that if by chance the first man, embarrassed by a dash of his steeds too much to the right, should leave a space open on the left by heading for the surrounding seats, he should be passed by a chariot driven in on the near side. As for you, bending double with the very force of the effort you keep a tight rein on your team and with consummate skill wisely reserve them for the seventh lap. The others are busy with hand and voice, and everywhere the sweat of drivers and flying steeds falls in drops on to the field. The hoarse roar from applauding partisans stirs the heart, and the contestants, both horses and men, are warmed by the race and chilled by fear. Thus they go once round, then a second time; thus goes the third lap, thus the fourth; but in the fifth turn the foremost man, unable to bear the pressure of his pursuers, swerved his car aside, for he had found, as he gave command to his fleet team, that their strength was exhausted. Now the return half of the sixth course was completed and the crowd was already clamouring for the award of the prizes; your adversaries, with no fear of any effort from you, were scouring the track in front with no cares, when suddenly you tautened the curbs all together, tautened your chest, planted your feet firmly in front, and chafed the mouths of your swift horses as fiercely as was the habit of that famed charioteer of old when he swept Oenomaus along with him and all Pisa trembled.¹¹ Just then one of the others, clinging to the shortest route round the turning-post, was hustled by you, and his team, carried away beyond control by their onward rush, could no more be turned round in a harmonious course. As you saw him pass before you in disorder, you got ahead of him by remaining where you were, cunningly reining up. The other adversary, exulting in the applause, ran too far to the right, close to the spectators; then as he turned aslant and all too late after long indifference urged his horses with the whip, you sped straight past your swerving rival. Then the enemy in reckless haste overtook you and, fondly thinking that the first man had already gone ahead, shamelessly made for your wheel with a sidelong dash. His horses were brought down, a multitude of intruding legs entered the wheels, and the twelve spokes were crowded, until a crackle came from those cramped spaces and the revolving rim shattered the entangled feet; then he, a fifth victim, flung from his chariot, which fell upon him, caused a mountain of manifold havoc, and blood disfigured his prostrate brow. At this there arose a riot of renewed shouting such as neither Lycaeus with its cypresses ever raises, nor the forests of Ossa, troubled though they be by many a hurricane; such echoing roar as not even the Sicilian sea, rolled onward in billows by the south wind, gives forth, nor Propontis, whose wild deeps are a rampart to the Bosphorus. Next the just emperor ordered silken ribbon to be added to the victors' palms and crowns to the necklets of gold, and true merit to have its reward; while he ordered rugs of many-coloured threads to be awarded to the defeated in their wounded disgrace.

Apollinaris Sidonius, *Poems* 23.307-427

Some people came to watch the games, others came for different reasons. Circus were also prime locations to meet women and to flirt; unlike in the theatre and the amphitheatres men and women sat together as did different social classes (the senators had reserved seating at the front but could mix with the crowd). In his *Art of Love*, a poetical pick up guide of the first century CE, Ovid recommends the Circus as an excellent place to meet and woo women.

10. They were racing two teams against two other teams.

11. Pelops, a Greek hero and the son of Tantalus, was king of Pisa, a town in Greece. This was one of the towns associated with the Olympics and this race was also part of the foundation legends of the Olympic Games.



Statue of Roman poet Ovid in Constanța (ancient Tomis, the city where he was exiled).

Don't avoid the chariots and the horse races; the circus is convenient and holds a large number. You don't need to use your fingers to send secret messages, nor do you have to rely on nods. Sit right down next to your mistress with no one in the way; meld your side to hers as far as you can – it's good that you are forced to sit close even if you don't want to be because your girl *must* be touched by the rules of the place. Now find some reason to start a conversation and the words that will help you take first steps. Eagerly ask whose horses those are which are entering and instantly support her favourite. When the huge *pompa* goes by with the ivory statues of the gods applaud Venus eagerly. A speck of dust may fall into your girl's lap; flick it away with your fingers. If there's nothing there, flick it away anyway – pick on whatever reason you can for doing her a favour. If her cloak is dragging on the ground, gather it up and raise it off the dusty earth. If your girl allows it, you'll get the reward for your duty – your eyes will catch a glimpse of her ankles. Look back and see who is sitting behind you so he doesn't touch her back with his knees. Small things appeal to frivolous minds. It's very useful to plump up her cushion with a ready hand. It's also useful to fan her with a thin paper and to place a footrest beneath her delicate feet. The Circus brings new help for blossoming

love as does the scattered sand in the grim and harsh arena – he who watches wounds being given is often wounded himself. While talking, touching hands, checking the programme, and asking as you place a bet who will win, you are wounded, groan, feel the arrow, and become a part of the show you're watching.

Ovid, *Art of Love* 1.135-170; see also [this passage](#) from Ovid.

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The Charioteers, the Teams and the Horses

In this section you will learn

- the organization of chariot racing into four factions
- the importance of the factions to fans of chariot racing
- some of the famous chariot horses

There were four racing factions in Rome: the Reds; the Greens; the Blues; and the Whites. Domitian added two more (Purple and Gold) but they did not have last long. Unlike supporting gladiators, supporting factions brought **very, very** strong passions to the fore. Fans were incredibly devoted to their factions, which were run as private enterprises owned by those of equestrian status until quite late, only being taken over the emperors in the 300s CE. Most races involved all four factions racing against each other either in two or four horse chariots (there could be chariot teams that had up to 10 horses, but those were not used regularly). Sometimes the factions raced pairs of chariots or teamed up against each other, racing two against two. In addition to horses there were more exotic forms of chariot racing, with animals like elephants and camels. Once, when the charioteers refused to race until they were paid more money, one aedile threatened to race dogs; two crumbled but the Blues and Greens held out. Charioteers were the superstars of the ancient sporting world – far more so than gladiators – and some earned immense sums (see, for example, Diocles’ inscription below), although they risked life and limb to do so. We are not sure when the factions started, but our first mention of them is from the 70s BCE when one of the supporters of the Reds threw himself in the funeral pyre of the charioteer Felix:



From top left to bottom right, the Roman parties: the “Greens”, “Reds”, “Whites” and “Blue”

We find it stated in the *Annals*, that when Felix, a charioteer of the Reds, was placed on the funeral pile, one of his admirers threw himself upon the pile; a very stupid way to behave. In case, however, that this event might not be attributed to the great excellence of the dead man in his art, and so add to his glory, the other parties all declared that he had been overpowered by the strength of the perfumes.

[Pliny the Elder](#), *Natural History* 7.54

Like sports, factions were the sort of subject you'd talk about over dinner, as the poet [Martial](#) mentions in this invitation to a dinner party:

Everything will be seasoned with pleasantry free from bitterness; there shall be no unchecked conversation that brings regret the next day, and nothing said that we should wish unsaid. But my guests may speak of the rival factions in the circus, and my drink shall make no man guilty.

Martius, *Epigrams* 10.48

[Ovid](#)'s poem about supporting his mistress's teams show a little of the enthusiasm for the various factions

I'm not sitting here studying the horses' form: though I still hope that the one you like wins. I come to speak to you, and sit with you, in case you don't notice how my love's on fire. You watch the track, and I watch you: we'll both see what delights us, and both feast our eyes. Happy the charioteer you like! What's he got, to make him dear to you? Let it be me, flung from the starting gate, I'd be the brave driver urging the horses on, now I'd give them their heads, now touch their backs with the whip, now scrape the turning post with my inside wheel. If I caught sight of you as I rushed by, I'd falter, and the slack reins would fall from my hands. As when the Pisan's spear nearly killed Pelops, when he glanced at your face, Hippodamia! Of course he still won because of his girl's favour. May each of us win through the favour of his lady! Why move away, in vain? The rows force us together. The circus rules give something useful at least – but you on the right though, whoever you are, be careful of my girl: the poking of your elbow's hurting her. You too, sitting behind us, if you've any shame, draw your legs up, don't press our backs with your bony knees! But your dress is trailing on the ground too much. Gather it up – or I'll lift it with my fingers! You're a jealous dress to hide such lovely legs: the more you look – you are a jealous dress! Just like the legs of swift-footed Atalanta,¹ that Milanion longed to hold in his hands. Just like the legs of Diana, her dress tucked-up, chasing the wild beasts, wilder still herself. I blazed when I couldn't see them: what shall I do now? You add fire to the fire, water to the sea. I suspect from these that the rest might please, what's well hidden, concealed by your thin dress. Would you like a quick breeze stirred while you wait? I can make one with the programme in my hand. Or is the heat more in my mind than in the air, my captive heart scorched by love of a girl? While I spoke, a speck of dust settled on your white dress. Vile dust, away from her snowy body! But now the procession comes – silence minds and tongues! Time for applause – the golden procession comes. Victory's in the lead, with outstretched wings – approach Goddess, and make my love conquer! Cheer for Neptune, you who trust the waves too much! No sea for me: my country captivates me. Soldiers, cheer for Mars! I hate all warfare: I delight in peace, and to find love in its midst. Phoebus for the augurs, Phoebe for huntsmen!² Let craftsmen turn their hands to you, Minerva! Let farmers honour Ceres³ and tender Bacchus! Boxers please Pollux: horsemen please Castor! I cheer for you, charming Venus, and the boy with the powerful bow:⁴ goddess help this venture and change my new girl's mind! Let her agree to be loved! She nodded, and gave me a favourable sign. What the goddess promised, I ask you to promise: don't talk of Venus, you'll be a greater goddess. I swear to you, by the crowd and the gods' procession, I want you to be my girl for all time! But your legs are dangling. Perhaps it would help to stick your toes on the rail in front. Now the track is clear for the main event, the praetor's started the four-horse chariots. I can see yours. Let the one you fancy, win. The horses themselves seem to know what you want. Oh dear, he's taking the turning post too wide! What are you doing? The next chariot's overtaking. What are you doing, fool? You'll lose the girl's best hopes. Curses, pull hard on the left rein with your hand! We've backed a nobody – call them back, Roman, everyone give the signal by waving your togas! Yes, they're recalled! – But don't let those togas ruin your hair, hide deep in my cloak, that's fine. Now the starting gates are open again: the horses fly out, a multi-coloured crowd. Now take the lead, and fly into empty space! Make my hopes, and my girl's, a sure bet! My girl's hopes are certain, mine are unsure. He wins the palm: my palm's still to win. She smiled, and promised something with those bright eyes. That's enough now, pay me the rest elsewhere!⁵

1. A mythical huntress and follower of the goddess Diana.

2. Phoebus = Apollo, god of prophecy; Phoebe = Diana, goddess of the hunt. They were twins.

3. The goddess of grain.

4. Cupid.

5. Translation adapted from that of AS Kline.

The top two factions seem to have been the Blues and the Greens. Caligula was a devoted supporter of the Greens, a devotion that extended even to one of the horses in the Green stable.⁶

Caligula was so passionately devoted to the Greens that he constantly dined and spent the night in their stable, and in one of his parties with them he gave the driver Eutychus two million sesterces in gifts. He used to send his soldiers on the day before the games and order silence in the neighbourhood, to prevent the horse Incitatus from being disturbed. Besides a stall of marble, a manger of ivory, purple blankets and a collar of precious stones, he even gave this horse a house, a household of slaves and furniture, so he could entertain the guests invited in his name more elegantly – it is also said that he planned to make him consul.

[Suetonius](#), *Caligula* 55.2

The Emperor Domitian added two extra (and short lived) teams to the four factions:



Statue of the Roman Emperor Domitian

However, being still more inflated in his self-importance by his folly, Domitian was elected consul for ten years in succession and censor for life, being the first and only man, whether private citizen or emperor, to be given the latter honour; he also received the privilege of twenty-four lictors and wearing the triumphal regalia whenever he entered the Senate. He changed the name of October to Domitianus because he had been born in that month. He created two more factions among the charioteers, calling one Gold and the other Purple. He used to make many presents to the spectators by means of the little balls; and once he gave them a banquet while they remained in their seats and at night provided for them wine that flowed freely in many different places. All this naturally gave pleasure to the populace, but it was a cause of ruin to the powerful. For, as he had no funds from which to make his expenditures, he murdered many men, hauling some of them before the Senate, and bringing charges against others when they were not even present in Rome. He even went so far as to put some out of the way treacherously using secretly administered drugs.

[Cassius Dio](#). *Epitome of Roman History* 67.3-5

Some people thought they were above such petty concerns as the factions. Pliny the Younger wrote rather smugly to his friend Calvisius about how superior he was to the regular, faction mad members of the Circus Maximus' audience:

I have spent the past few days among my papers with the most pleasing serenity you could dream of. You will ask how that can be possible in the middle of Rome? Why, the *Ludi Circenses* were taking place, a form of entertainment which does not appeal to me at all. The games have no novelty, no variety, nothing, in short, anyone would want to see again. This makes me even more astonished that so many thousands of grown men should be repeatedly possessed with a childish passion to look at galloping horses and men standing upright in their chariots. If, indeed, they were attracted by the swiftness of the horses or the skill of the men, we could account for such passions. But it is actually a scrap of cloth they favour, a scrap of cloth that captivates them. And if during the running the racers were to exchange colours, their supporters would change sides, and instantly abandon the very drivers and horses whom they were just before recognizing from afar, and loudly cheering by name. And that is the level of favour, of weighty influence, that one cheap tunic has with not only the common crowd who are more worthless than the tunics they wear, but with certain important people! When I observe such men so insatiably fond of so silly, so low, so uninteresting, so common an entertainment, I congratulate myself that I am insensible to these

6. See also the section Imperial Fans.

pleasures and am glad to devote the leisure of this season, which others throw away upon the most idle employment, to literature. Farewell.

[Pliny the Younger](#), *Letters* 9.6

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Famous Charioteers

In this section you will learn

- the (often short) careers of famous charioteers
- the enormous amount of money charioteers could earn over their careers

Charioteers could gain wide celebrity and have long careers, moving from faction to faction over the course of their time racing. However, they started their careers as slaves and could be sold to another faction by their masters, rather than picking and choosing between offers like a modern athlete (once freed they could presumably move as they wished). Given the incredibly dangerous nature of chariot racing many of them could also die as slaves, never managing to be given or buy their freedom. One short lived but extremely successful charioteer of the 1st century CE was Scorus, about whom Martial wrote several poems; the two on his death show the extent of Scorus' celebrity.

Poor Gaurus begged Praetor, a man he knew well from a long-standing friendship, for a hundred thousand sesterces, and told him that he only needed that sum to add to his three hundred thousand and qualify him to applaud the emperor as a full equestrian.¹ Praetor replies, "You know, I shall have to give some money to Scorus and Thallus;² and would that I had only a hundred thousand sesterces to give them!" Ah! shame, shame on your ungrateful chests, filled to no good purpose! That which you refuse to an equestrian, Praetor, will you give to a horse?

[Martial](#), *Epigrams* 5.67

Tragic Victory: shatter your Idumaeen palms.³ Favour, strike your bare chest with wild blows. Honour, change your clothing. Sad Glory, cast your crowned locks as a gift for the unjust funeral pyre. Alas for the shame of it! Scorus, cheated and cut down in your youth and so quickly yoking the horses of death. Your wheels always hastened the race – but why was the finishing line of your life so close?

Martial, *Epigrams* 10.50

O Rome, I am Scorus, the glory of your noisy circus, the object of your applause, your short-lived favourite. The envious Lachesis,⁴ when she cut me off in my twenty-seventh year, considered me, judging by the number of my victories, to be an old man.

Martial, *Epigrams* 10.53

This inscription, which commemorates the charioteer Scirtis and his wife, Carisia Nassis, a

1. Equestrians had to have 400,000 sesterces in property to qualify for that rank.

2. Thallus is not mentioned elsewhere by Martial, although there is an inscription from 90 CE to a charioteer Thallus (ILS 3532).

3. Victory, Favour, Honour, and Glory were all Roman gods. Palms were often called Idumaeen, because although they could be found in Southern Italy, they were said to be from Idumaea, a region in Judea.

4. One of the three Fates and the one responsible for allotting people the years that they would live.

freedwoman, dates from 13-25 CE and shows the fondness for listing all victories in exhaustive detail that the more detailed honorific inscriptions for charioteers have; however, the sum total of wins is not great and reflects that this was not a good period for spectacles – Scirtis raced during Tiberius' reign and Tiberius was notoriously cheap about giving spectacles.

Scirtis, freedman, charioteer for the Whites.

In the consulship of Lucius Munatius and Gaius Silius,⁵ in the *four horse chariot* 1 victory, 2nd 1 time, 3rd 1 ...

In the consulship of Sextus Pompeius and Sextus Appuleius, 1 victory, 2nd 1 time, 3rd 2 times

In the consulship of Drusus Caesar and Gaius Norbanus, 2 victories, was recalled once, 2nd 5 times, 3rd 3 times

In the consulship of Gaius Caelius and Lucius Pomponius, 2 victories, was recalled once, 2nd 8 times, 3rd 6 times

In the 3rd consulship of Titus Caesar and the 2nd of Germanicus Caesar, 2nd 7 times, 3rd 12 times

In the consulship of Marcus Silanus and Lucius Norbanus, was recalled once, 2nd 5 times, 3rd 5 times

In the consulship of Marcus Valerius and Marcus Marcus Aurelius, 2nd 3 times, 3rd 4 times

In the 4th consulship of Titus Caesar and the 2nd of Drusus Caesar, 2nd 2 times, 3rd 5 times

In the consulship of Decimus Haterius Agrippa and Sulpicius 2nd 3, 3rd 4

In the consulship of Gaius Asinius and Gaius Antistius Vetus, was recalled once, 2nd 1 time, 3rd 5 times

In the consulship of Servilius Cornelius Cethegus and Lucius Visellenius 2nd 1 time, 3rd 4 times

In the consulship of Cossus Cornelius Lentulus and Marcus Asinius 3rd 2 times

... Grand total: 7 victories in a four horse chariot, was recalled 4 times, second 39, third 60. He once raced during an official suspension of public business, and twice raced in a six horse chariot.

CIL 6.10051

The following inscription is from 35 CE and comes from Rome; given that his career was quite short, Fuscus was clearly quite successful, although he died without gaining his freedom.

Fuscus, charioteer for the Greens, lived 24 years, he won 53 times at Rome, twice in the *ludi* for

5. 13 CE; each consulship after that represents a year.

the goddess Dia,⁶ once in the *ludus* given at Bovillae. He won one palm, after he was called back twice.⁷ He was the first of all the drivers to win on the first day he raced. His fellow slave, Machao, set this up in the consulship of Gaius Cestius and Marcus Servilius to preserve his memory.

CIL 6.33950

The following inscription was found at the Porta Flaminia on the Via Flaminia in Rome; the inscription itself has been largely destroyed, although some fragments remain, including the reliefs of five horses (Palmatus, Danaus, Ocean, Victor, Vindex). It dates from the late second century CE.

Publius Aelius Gutta Calpurnianus, son of Marcus Rogatus. I won with these horses for the Blues: Germinator, black from Africa, 92; Silvanus, roan from Africa, 105 times; Nitidus, chestnut from Africa, 52 times; Saxo, black from Africa, 60 to,es. And I won major purses: 50,000 sesterces once, 40,000 9 times, 30,000 17 times.

Publius Aelius Gutta Calpurnianus, son of Marcus Rogatus. I won 1,000 palms for the Greens with these horses: Danaus, bay from Africa, 19 times; Ocianus, black, 209 times. Victor, roan 429 times; Vindex, bay 157 times. And I won major purses: 40,000 sesterces 3 times. 30,000 3 times.

I won 1,127 palms as described above.

For the Whites I won 102 times, was called back 2 times, won 30,000 sesterces once, 40,000 sesterces once, in the first race of the day 4, times with novice horses 1 time, in races for single chariots 83 times, in races for pairs of chariots 17 times, in races for chariots 3 times, for four 1 time.

For the Reds I won 78 times, was called back 1 time, 30,000 sesterces 1 time, in races for single chariot 42 times, in races for pairs of chariots 32 times, in races for three 3 times, for four 1 time.

For the Blues I won 583, 30,000 sesterces 17 times, once with six horses, 40,000 sesterces 9 times, 50,000 1 time, in the first races of the day 35 times, with three horse chariot won 10,000 sesterces 1 time, 25,000 sesterces 1 time, with novice horses 1 time, at the quinquennial sacred games⁸ 1 time, called back 1 time. In races for single chariots 334 times, for pairs 184 times, for three chariots 64 times.

I set up this monument for myself while alive.

CIL 6.10047

Diocles raced from the age of 18 and achieved immense success over the 24 years his career spanned as this monument from 146 CE details:

6. Her sanctuary was around five miles south of Rome; Bovillae was 11 miles southeast of Rome on the Via Appia.

7. Charioteers were often called back for false starts.

8. Probably the *agon Capitolinus* or [Capitolia](#), a Roman version of the Olympic games which occurred every four years; it was instituted by Domitian in 86 CE.

Gaius Appuleius Diocles, charioteer for the Reds, born in Lusitania, Spain, aged 42 years, 7 months, 23 days. He first drove for the Whites during the consulship of Acilius Aviola and Corellius Pansa [122 CE]. He first won for the same faction during the consulship of Manlius Acilius Glabrio and Gaius Bellicius Torquatus [124 CE]. He first drove for the Greens during the second consulship of Torquatus Asprenatis and the first of Annius Libo [128 CE]. He first won for the Reds during the consulship of Laenatis Pontianus and Antonius Rufino [131 CE].

His wins: drove a four-horse chariot for 24 years. He started 4,257 races, won 1,462, he won the first race of the day 110 times.⁹ In races for single four horse chariots he won 1,064 times, and in this he took the largest purse 92 times; he won the 30,000 sesterces prize 32 times (3 of them in a 6 horse chariot), the 40,000 sesterces prize 28 times (twice in a 6 horse chariot), the 50,000 prize 28 times (one in a 6 horse chariot), the 60,000 sesterces prize three times. In races for pairs of four horse chariots he won 347 times; and won 15,000 4 times in a three horse chariot. In races for three chariots he won 51 times. He gained honours 1,000 times.

He was second 861 times, third 576, fourth with 1,000 sesterces once, and took no prize 1,351 times. He won jointly with a charioteer for the Blues ten times; with one from the White 91, and shared the 20,000 purse twice. His total winnings were 35,863,120 sesterces. He also won 1,000 sesterces in a two-horse chariot, jointly with a White charioteer once and with a Green twice.

He won while leading from the gate 815 times, coming from behind 67, after being passed 36, in different ways 42, and at the finishing line 502. He won against the Greens 216 times, against the Blues 205, and against the Whites 81 times. Nine horses had 100 wins with him and one had 200.

His notable achievements:

In the year when he first won twice driving a four horse chariot, he won at the finishing line twice. The *acta* say that Avilius Teres was the first in his faction to win 1,011, and he won most often in one year for single chariots, but in that year Diocles won over 100 victories, winning 103 races, 83 of them for single chariots. Increasing his fame he passed Tallus of his faction, who was the first in the Reds to...But Diocles is the most distinguished of the charioteers, since in one year he won 134 races with another charioteer's lead horse, 118 races for single chariot, which puts him ahead of all the charioteers who compete in the games.

It is noted by all, with well-deserved admiration, that in one year with unfamiliar lead horses, with Cotynes and Pompeianus as the inside pair, he won 99 times, winning the 60,000 purse once, the 50,000 four times, 40,000 once, and 30,000 twice.

...for the Greens winner 1025 times, Flavius Scopus, winner 2048 times, and Pompeius Musclosus, winner 3550 times. Those three charioteers won 6,652 times and won the 50,000 purse 28 times, but Diocles, the greatest charioteer ever, won the 50,000 purse 29 times in 1,462 wins.

CIL 6.10048

The following inscription features a family of charioteers (a father and two sons); the inscriptions for the sons are translated below. In addition there is an inscription which says that both sons met their fate together and that the father had met a similar end.

9. The Latin says he won from the *pompa*, that is right after the parade that opened the races.

Marcus Aurelius Polynices, slave by origin, lived 29 years, 9 months, and 5 days and won the victory palm 739 times in the following ways: he won 655 times as a Red, 55 as a Green, 12 as a Blue, 17 as a White; he won the 40,000 sesterces prize 3 times, the 30,000 sesterces prize 26 times, and the basic prize 11 times.¹⁰ He won with an eight-horse chariot 8 times, with a ten-horse chariot 9, with a 6 horse chariot three times.

Marcus Aurelius Mollicus Tatianus, slave by origin, lived 20 years, 8 months, 7 days and won the victory palm 125 times. He won 89 as Red, 24 as a Green, 5 as Blue, 7 as a White; he won the 40,000 sesterces prize twice.

CIL 6.10049, found on the Via Praenestina, Rome.

Not all charioteers met their end in the Circus; some went on to be trainers after retiring, as the following undated inscription from Rome notes.

Sacred to the memory of Aurelius Heraclides, charioteer for the Blues and trainer for the Blues and Greens. Marcus Ulpus Aposlaustianus set this up for a worthy colleague.

CIL 6.10057

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10. Perhaps the 15,000 sesterces purse.

Imperial Fans

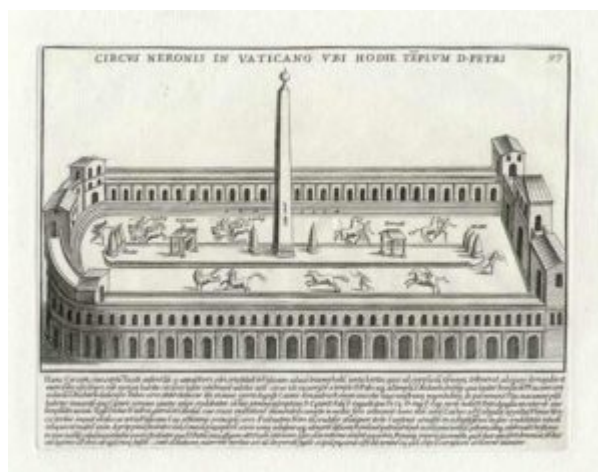
In this section you will learn about:

- imperial fans of chariot racing and how they expressed their love of the races
- emperors who raced their own chariots and how shocking that was to the Romans (or, at least, the Romans who wrote about it)

Many emperors were enthusiastic spectators of the races; some even went so far as to train as charioteers, building their own private racetracks in the city for the purpose; Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, better known as Caligula, built his own on the Vatican Hill, which stood roughly where St Peter's now stands.

Caligula also gave many games in the Circus which lasted from early morning until evening; at one time he'd introduce between the races a baiting of panthers and now the manoeuvres of the game called Troy;¹ some, too, of remarkable splendour, in which the Circus race floor was strewn with red and green,² while the charioteers were all senators. He also started some games at random, such as when a few people called for them from the neighbouring balconies,³ as he was inspecting the outfit of the Circus from the Gelotian house.⁴

[Suetonius](#), *Caligula* 18.3



Caligula's Circus was also known as the Circus of Nero

1. This, the *lusus Troia*, was a complicated set of equestrian manoeuvres by aristocratic youths. It usually took place on the Campus Martius and sometimes resulted in major injuries.
2. To match the colours of the Red and Green teams respectively.
3. Referring to the buildings surrounding the Circus Maximus.
4. Located on the Palatine Hill. It was originally a private house owned by a wealthy freedman of Augustus, called Gelos, but was incorporated into the imperial palace at some point.



This shows the circus overlaid on the current plan of St Peter's. This was outside the walls of Rome, although it was only the other side of the Tiber. Image from Wikimedia Commons, by José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro.

Caligula's short reign was marked by his mental instability, and his treatment of people at the games was not consistently generous and kind:

He treated the other classes⁵ with similar disdain and cruelty. When he was disturbed by the noise made by those who came in the middle of the night to get free seats in the Circus [Maximus], he drove them all out with clubs,⁶ and in the confusion more than twenty Roman equestrians were crushed to death, with as many matrons⁶ and a countless number of others. At the plays in the theatre, he scattered the gift tickets ahead of time to create animosity between the plebs and the equestrians to induce the mob to steal seats reserved for equestrians.⁷

Suetonius, *Caligula* 26.4

The 2nd century CE historian Cassius Dio adds more detail to our picture of Caligula's enthusiasm for the games:

This was the kind of emperor into whose hands the Romans then fell into. Hence the deeds of Tiberius,⁸ though they were felt to have been very harsh, were nevertheless as far superior to those of Gaius [Caligula] as the deeds of Augustus were to those of Tiberius. For Tiberius always kept power in his own hands and used others as agents for carrying out his wishes; whereas Gaius was ruled by the charioteers and gladiators, and was the slave of the actors and others connected with the stage. Indeed, he always kept Apelles, the most famous of the tragic actors of that day, with him even in public.⁹ So he by himself and they by themselves did without any restraints all that people like that naturally dare to do when given power. He organized and arranged everything relevant to their art in the most lavish manner at the slightest excuse, and he forced the praetors and the consuls to do the same, so that almost every day some performance of the kind was sure to be given. At first he was but a spectator and listener at these and

5. Previous to this Suetonius had been talking about his treatment of the elites.

6. In other words, women considered respectable by the Romans.

7. Tickets were normally tossed out to the crowds during the course of events, a bit like t-shirts are now. Some tickets could be for huge prizes, and quite naturally if the poorer folk came in first and saw tickets on the seats kept for the elite, they would rush to sit in those seats and ignore any security trying to get them out.

8. The previous emperor, who was not well liked.

9. The modern cult of celebrity makes this seem innocuous, but in Rome actors were *infamis*, that is they were not at all respectable company for a senator, let alone an emperor. Not that that really stopped most people.

would take sides for or against various performers like one of the crowd; and one time, when he was annoyed with those who didn't agree with him, he did not go to the spectacle. But as time went on, he came to imitate, and to compete in many events, driving chariots, fighting as a gladiator, giving exhibitions of [pantomimic dancing](#), and acting in tragedy. So much for how he normally behaved. Once he sent an urgent summons at night to the leading men of the Senate, as if for some important discussion, and then danced before them.¹⁰

Yet after doing all this he later killed the best and the most famous of these slaves by poisoning. He did the same also with the horses and charioteers of the rival factions; for he was strongly attached to the Greens, which from this colour was called also the Faction of the Leek. Even to-day the place where he used to practise driving the chariots is called the Gaianum after him.¹¹ He used to invite one of the horses, which he named Incitatus, to dinner, where he would offer him golden barley and drink his health in wine from golden goblets; he swore by the animal's life and fortune and even promised to appoint him consul, a promise that he would certainly have carried out if he had lived longer.

[Cassius Dio](#), *Roman History* 59

Exercise

In many of the ancient discussions of Caligula's behaviour at the games we see him publicly humiliate or harm a number of groups. Try to create a list of the different groups he humiliates and think about why he targeted them.

After Caligula, came Claudius, and then Claudius' stepson Nero (of whom more can be read [here](#)). Nero was also very fond of chariot racing, even going so far as to invent a 10 horse chariot race which he competed in at the Olympics – he fell out of the chariot and had to be popped back in; although didn't complete the race he still won. It's good to be the emperor.

Even when Nero was very young he had a deep passion for horses and talked constantly about the games in the Circus, though he was forbidden to do so. Once when he was lamenting with his fellow pupils the fate of a charioteer of the Greens, who was dragged by his horses, and his teacher scolded him, he lied and pretended that he was talking about Hector.¹² When he first became emperor he used to play every day with ivory chariots on a board, and he came from the country to all the games, even the most insignificant, at first secretly and then so openly that no one doubted that he would be in Rome on days when races were held. He made no secret of his wish to have the number of prizes increased, and in consequence more races were added and the performance was continued until very late, while the managers of the factions no longer thought it worth while to produce their drivers at all except for a full day's racing. He soon longed to drive a chariot himself and even to show himself frequently before the public. After a trial exhibition in his gardens before his slaves and the dregs of the people, he gave everyone an opportunity of seeing him in the Circus Maximus, one of his freedmen dropping the napkin from the place usually occupied by the magistrates.

Suetonius, *Nero* 21

After Nero took his show on the road, touring Greece, and competing at various games there (always victoriously, of course), he gave a show in Naples.

10. Whenever I try and visualize this words fail me.

11. Originally, an open racetrack it became a circus and was known as the Circus of Gaius or the Vatican Circus.

12. The mythical Greek hero Achilles dragged Hector's body behind his chariot after he had killed him at Troy, an episode that is recounted in Homer's *Odyssey*, which was a text elite Romans read as part of their education.



Bust of Nero

Returning from Greece, since it was at Naples that he had made his first appearance, he entered that city with white horses through a part of the wall which had been knocked down, as is customary with victors in the sacred games.¹³ In the same way he entered Antium, then Albanum, and finally Rome; but at Rome he rode in the chariot which Augustus had used in his triumphs in the past, and wore a purple robe and a Greek cloak adorned with stars of gold, bearing on his head the Olympic crown and in his right hand the Pythian one, while the other crowns were carried before him with inscriptions telling where he had won them and against what competitors, and giving the titles of the songs or of the subject of the plays.¹⁴ His chariot was followed by his supporters as by the escort of a triumphal procession, who shouted that they were the attendants of Augustus and the soldiers of his triumph. Then from through the arch of the Circus Maximus, which had been knocked down, he made his way across the Velabrum and the Forum to the Palatine and the temple of Apollo. All along the route sacrificial victims were killed, the streets were sprinkled from time to time with perfume, while birds,¹⁵ ribbons, and sweets were showered upon him. He placed the sacred crowns

in his bedrooms around the couches, as well as statues representing him as a lyre-player, and he had a coin struck showing the same design.

Suetonius, *Nero* 25.1-2

Nero committed suicide in 68 CE, and that ended the Julio-Claudian dynasty. After a period of chaos and civil wars, the Flavian dynasty under Vespasian ruled Rome. Titus, the second emperor of the dynasty, had also an interest in the races, but did not indulge it publicly to such a degree.

He was brought up at court in company with Britannicus¹⁶ and taught the same subjects by the same teachers. At that time, so they say, a physiognomist was brought in by Narcissus, Claudius' freedman, to examine Britannicus and declared most positively that he would never become emperor; but that Titus, who was standing nearby at the time, would surely rule. The boys were so friendly that it is believed that when Britannicus drained the fatal drink, Titus, who was reclining at his side, also tasted the potion and for a long time suffered from a lingering illness. Titus did not forget any of this and later set up a golden statue of his friend in the Palace, and dedicated another equestrian statue of ivory,¹⁷ which is to this day carried in the procession in the Circus, and he attended it on its first appearance.

Suetonius, *Titus* 2

Domitian, Titus' younger brother and successor (and also the final Flavian emperor), also enjoyed the chariot races and expanded their number by dropping the number of laps in a race:

13. All Greek games – the Olympics, the Pythian, the Nemean, and so forth – were held in honour of different gods, hence they were called sacred.

14. Some Greek games, like the Pythian, included artistic competitions, which Nero competed in. In others which did not have this component, like the Olympics, he just added them in. And he rearranged the entire circuit of the games so that all the major games were held in the same year so he could win them all in one go. Again, it is good to be the emperor.

15. People released birds as he went through town, like they sometimes do at weddings now. They did not throw birds at him as he went by.

16. The Emperor Claudius' son, poisoned by Nero at a dinner party.

17. It is entirely possible that all of this is true. It is also true that commemorating his friendship with Britannicus was politically very convenient after Nero's death and disgrace.

He also celebrated Secular games,¹⁸ calculating the time, not according to the year when Claudius had last given them, but by the previous calculation of Augustus. In the course of these he reduced the number of laps from seven to five to make it possible to finish a hundred races on the day of contests in the Circus.

Suetonius, *Domitian* 4.3

He also added two new, short-lived factions:

He also made many innovations in common customs. He did away with the distribution of food to the people and revived the custom of formal dinners.¹⁹ He added two factions of drivers in the Circus, with gold and purple as their colours, to the four former ones.²⁰

Suetonius, *Domitian* 7.1



Hippodrome of Domitian



Stadium of Domitian (Rome)



Full-scale reconstruction model (1:100) of the Stadium of the Domitian (north side).

Emperors and dynasties came and went, with all emperors understanding the importance of giving the people different types of spectacles, and especially chariot racing. This not only entertained people but allowed food and (sometimes) money to be distributed, but also gave emperors an unparalleled opportunity to address the people of Rome en masse.²¹ Caracalla was emperor of Rome from 198-217; he was supposed to rule with his brother Geta. He had him killed instead, which was efficient, although not an action calculated to improve family feeling. He is probably best known now as the emperor who extended Roman citizenship to all the free born men in the Roman Empire, which helped him raise the tax to build his [baths](#) (still standing in part) in Rome. He was also immensely fond of chariot racing.

After this²² Antoninus [Caracalla] ruled alone; nominally, it is true, he shared it with his brother, but in reality he ruled alone from the first days. He drew up treaties with the enemy, withdrew from their territory, and abandoned the forts; as for his own people, he dismissed some, including Papinian, the prefect, and killed others, among them Euodus his tutor, Castor, and his wife Plautilla, and her brother Plautius. Even in Rome itself he killed a man who was renowned for no other reason than his profession, which made him very conspicuous. I refer to Euprepes the charioteer. He killed him because he supported the opposite faction to the one he himself favoured. So Euprepes was put to death in his old age, after

18. The *Ludi Saeculares* were celebrated by Augustus in 15 BCE; as they were supposed to be held only every 110 years so the next time they should have been held would have been 94/5 CE. However, Claudius said that Augustus had wrongly calculated and held them during his reign. Domitian insisted Augustus had been right and so held the games according to the schedule set up by Augustus. Basically these games were extra special and being able to throw them for the people would bring great popularity.
19. That is, instead of giving them food that they might have to go away and cook themselves, he set up mass dinners for the people where it was served cooked to them. (Many Romans did not have access to cooking facilities in their residences, so they would have to take meat to be cooked somewhere.)
20. These new factions appear to have been very short-lived.
21. With no PA system available, information could also be relayed by cards or announcers.
22. The death of Septimius Severus in 211; Severus took power after the assassination of Commodus. Caracalla ruled until 217; the Severan dynasty ruled (with interruptions) until 235).

having won the crown in a vast number of races; for he had won seven hundred and eighty-two races, a record equalled by no one else.

The emperor [Caracalla] himself kept spending the money upon the army, as we have said, and upon wild beasts and horses; for he was for ever killing vast numbers of animals, both wild and domesticated, forcing us to supply most of them, though he did buy a few. One day he killed a hundred boars at one time with his own hands. He also used to drive chariots, wearing the Blue costume. In everything he was very hot-headed and very erratic, and he furthermore possessed the craftiness of his mother and the Syrians, to which race she belonged. He would appoint some freedman or other wealthy person to be director of the games in order that the man might spend money in this way also; and he would salute the spectators with his whip from the arena below and beg for gold pieces like a performer of the lowest class. He claimed that he used the Sun god's method in driving, and prided himself upon it. To such an extent was the entire world, so far as it owned his sway, devastated throughout his whole reign, that on one occasion the Romans at a horse-race shouted in unison this, among other things: "We shall do the living to death, that we may bury the dead."

Cassius Dio, *Epitome of Roman History* 78

See also [the section on emperors and the games](#).

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Riots at Munera and the Circus

In this section you will learn

- our only information about a riot at a gladiatorial show
- the many riots and disturbances that took place in circuses and chariot races

There were very few disturbances at gladiatorial shows. The only one we know about took place at Pompeii in 59 CE; as a result Pompeii was forbidden to have gladiatorial shows for ten years by decree from Rome. The cause of the riot was not gladiatorial supporters fighting over favourites, but disagreements between Pompeii and a neighbouring town.

Around the same date, a trivial incident led to a serious riot between the inhabitants of the colonies of Nuceria and Pompeii, at a gladiatorial show given by Livineius Regulus, whose expulsion from the Senate I have mentioned. During an exchange of insults, typical of the touchiness of country towns, they turned to abuse, then to stones, and finally to swords; the people of Pompeii, where the show was being exhibited, won. As a result, many of the Nucerians were carried maimed and wounded to the capital, while a very large number mourned the deaths of children or of parents. The inquiry into the affair was delegated by the emperor to the Senate and by the Senate to the consuls. When the case was presented once more to the Senate, the Pompeians as a community were banned from holding any similar assembly for ten years, and the associations which they had formed illegally were dissolved. Livineius and the others behind the outbreak were exiled.

[Tacitus](#), *Annales* 14.17

The theatre and chariot racing were much more prone to riots; in the Circus the stability of the factions and their small number encouraged factionalism; in the theatre the massive star power of the mime artists encouraged factionalism as well (for theatre riots see [the chapter on the Mime Riots](#)). In Constantinople the problem was particularly severe, and the Nika riot of 532 CE nearly unseated the Emperor Justinian.

At this same time an insurrection broke out unexpectedly in Byzantium among the people, and, contrary to expectation, it proved to be a very serious affair, and ended in great harm to the people and to the senate, as the following account will show. In every city the population has been divided for a long time



Fresco showing the riot at a gladiatorial show in Pompeii in 59 CE. From Pompeii; 1st century CE

they had been staying. So the whole population ran to them, and they declared Hypatius emperor and prepared to lead him to the market place to assume the power. But the wife of Hypatius, Mary, a discreet woman, who had the greatest reputation for prudence, laid hold of her husband and would not let go, but cried out with loud lamentation and with entreaties to all her kinsmen that the people were leading him on the road to death. But since the mob overpowered her, she unwillingly released her husband, and he by no will of his own came to the Forum of Constantine, where they summoned him to the throne;...

The emperor and his court were deliberating about whether it would be better for them if they remained or if they took to flight in the ships. And many opinions were expressed favouring either course. And the Empress Theodora also spoke to the following effect: "My opinion then is that the present time, above all others, is inopportune for flight, even though it bring safety.... For one who has been an emperor it is unendurable to be a fugitive. May I never be separated from this purple, and may I not live that day on which those who meet me shall not address me as mistress. If, now, it is your wish to save yourself, O Emperor, there is no difficulty. For we have much money, and there is the sea, here the boats. However consider whether it will not come about after you have been saved that you would gladly exchange that safety for death. For as for myself, I approve the ancient saying that royalty is a good burial-shroud." When the empress had spoken thus, all were filled with boldness, and, turning their thoughts towards resistance, they began to consider how they could defend themselves if any hostile force should come against them.... All the hopes of the emperor were centred upon Belisarius and Mundus, of whom the former, Belisarius, had recently returned from the Persian war bringing with him a following which was both powerful and imposing, and in particular had a great number of spearmen and guards who had received their training in battles and the perils of warfare....



Depiction of Theodora from a contemporary portrait mosaic in the Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna

When Hypatius reached the hippodrome, he went up immediately to where the emperor usually sits and seated himself on the royal throne from which the emperor was always accustomed to view the equestrian and athletic contests. And from the palace Mundus went out through the gate which, from the circling descent, has been given the name of the Snail.... Belisarius, with difficulty and not without danger and great exertion, made his way over ground covered by ruins and half-burned buildings, and ascended to the stadium.... Concluding that he must attack the people who had taken their stand in the hippodrome—a vast multitude crowding each other in great disorder—he drew his sword from its sheath and, commanding the others to do likewise, with a shout he advanced upon them at a run. But the people, who were standing in a mass and not in order, at the sight of armoured soldiers who had a great reputation for bravery and experience in war, and seeing that they struck out with their swords unsparingly, beat a hasty retreat.... [Mundus] straightway made a sally into the hippodrome through the entrance which they call the Gate of Death. Then indeed from both sides the partisans of Hypatius were assailed with might and main and destroyed.... There perished among the populace on that day more than thirty thousand.... The soldiers killed both [Hypatius and Pompeius] on the following day and threw bodies into the sea.... This was the end of the insurrection in Byzantium.

Procopius, *The Persian War*, 1.2

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Animals in the Arena



Retouched image of a Smirat Mosaic

This 3rd century mosaic from Smirat in Tunisia records a venatio given by Magerius. In the centre stands a steward with bags of money to pay the costs of the hunt (1,000 denarii or 4,000 sesterces); the inscription recalls the cheers of the audience.

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Exhibiting Animals

In this section you will learn

- the arrival of the first elephants to Rome and their exhibition
- the exhibition of other rare and unusual animals in Rome by various emperors

Although most exotic (and many non-exotic) animals brought to Rome ended up being slaughtered in the arena in beast hunts, some were brought to perform or simply to be exhibited (and then killed). The emphasis was on exhibiting the unusual, and the novel, animals the Roman either rarely saw or were seeing for the first time. Pliny the Elder's fascinating and wonderful encyclopaedia records many of the first appearances of various animals in Rome, beginning with elephants.



Triumphal procession with people riding elephants at far left, horse-drawn chariots at centre, passing through an arch at right.

The first elephants seen in harness at Rome were those in the triumph of Pompey the Great over Africa,¹ when they drew his chariot; this is said to have been done long ago at the triumph of Father Liber² at his conquest of India. Procilius says that the elephants used at the triumph of Pompey were unable to go in harness through the gate of the city.³ In the exhibition of gladiators which was given by Germanicus, the elephants performed a sort of dance with rough, irregular movements. It was a common thing to see them throw arrows with such strength that even the wind could not make them change their course, to imitate

1. We know it took place on March 12th, but are not sure if it occurred in 81, 80, or 79 BCE.

2. Bacchus, the god of wine, was said to have ridden in a chariot drawn by exotic animals as he spread his worship across the world when he made his first trip to Mount Olympus. He was often depicted on mosaics not just driving a chariot pulled by tigers and panthers, but surrounded by other exotic animals.

3. Presumably the triumphal gate, which was only opened for triumphs. (We are not sure of its location.)

among themselves gladiatorial fights, and dance the steps of the Pyrrhic dance.⁴ After this, too, they walked upon a tightrope and four of them carried a litter in which there was a fifth elephant, which represented a woman giving birth. Afterwards they took their place and so nicely did they manage their steps, that they did not so much as touch any of those who were drinking there.

It is a well-known fact that one of these elephants, who was slower than usual in learning his lessons and had thus been frequently beaten as a punishment, was found studying his lessons during the night. It is also very surprising thing that the elephant is able not only to walk up a tight-rope backwards but to come down it as well, with his head foremost. Mutianus, who was three times consul, informs us that one of these animals had been taught to trace the Greek alphabet and that he used to write in that language the following words: "I have myself written these words and have dedicated the Celtic spoils." Mutianus states also, that he himself was witness to the fact, that when some elephants were being landed at Puteoli and were forced to disembark, terrified at the length of the platform, which extended from the vessel to the shore, they walked backwards to deceive themselves by forming a false estimate of the distance.

[Pliny the Elder](#), *Natural History* 8.2-3



When he was curule aedile Quintus Scaevola (103 BCE), the son of Publius Scaevola, was the first to exhibit at Rome a combat of a number of lions; and Lucius Sulla, who became dictator later, gave a spectacle of a fight of one hundred lions with manes⁵ when he was praetor. After him, Pompey the Great exhibited six hundred lions in the Circus, three hundred and fifteen of which had manes; [Julius] Caesar, the dictator, exhibited four hundred. It was formerly a very difficult matter to catch lions, and it was mostly done by means of pit-falls. In the reign, however, of the Emperor Claudius, accident disclosed a method which appears almost disgraceful to the name of such an animal; a Gaetulian shepherd stopped a lion that was rushing furiously upon him, by merely throwing his cloak over the animal;⁶ an event that was then exhibited in the arena of the Circus, when the frantic fury of the animal was paralyzed in a manner almost incredible by a light covering being thrown over its head, so much so, that it was put into chains without the least resistance; we must conclude, therefore, that all its strength lies in its eyes.⁷ This fact makes Lysimachus'⁸ achievement in strangling a lion, which Alexander had ordered him to be caged with, less wonderful.

Mark Antony subjected lions to the yoke and was the first at Rome to harness them to his chariot; he did this during the civil war, after the battle on the plains of Pharsalia; not, indeed, without a kind of ominous foreshadowing, a prodigy that foretold at the time how that generous spirits were about to be subdued. But to have himself drawn along in this manner, in company with the actress Cytheris,⁹ was a thing that surpassed even the most monstrous spectacles that were to be seen at that calamitous period. It is said that

4. A type of war dance, performed both in Rome and Greece.

5. I.e. lions, rather than lionesses.

6. I admit that I am not an expert on the lion, but the success of such a tactic seems unlikely to me .

7. I said above that Pliny's encyclopedia was fascinating. I did not say it was right.

8. One of Alexander the Great's generals.

9. A famous actress in mime, she was also the mistress of Marcus Brutus, the assassin of Caesar.

Hanno, one of the most famous Carthaginians, was the first who dared to touch a lion with his hand and to exhibit it in a tame state. This was why he was banished: it was believed that a man so talented and so ingenious would have it in his power to persuade the people to anything, and it was looked upon as unsafe to trust the liberties of the country to one who had so eminently triumphed over even ferocity itself. There are some fortuitous occurrences cited also, which have given occasion to these animals to display their natural clemency. Mentor, a native of Syracuse, was met in Syria by a lion, who rolled before him in a begging manner; although terribly afraid and eager to escape, the wild beast on every side stopped him running away and licked his feet with a fawning air. Upon this, Mentor observed on the paw of the lion a swelling and a wound; from which, after extracting a splinter, he relieved the creature's pain. There is a picture at Syracuse which testifies to the truth of this transaction.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 8.20-21



Image of an elephant on a mosaic from Ostia, Rome's port. Many animals were probably brought to Rome via this port

All big cats were very popular, including panthers and tigers:

There was an ancient decree of the Senate, which prohibited animals being imported from Africa into Italy; but Gnaeus Aufidius, the tribune of the people, got a law repealing this passed and this allowed them to be brought over for the games of the Circus. Scaurus, in his aedileship, was the first who sent over parti-coloured panthers, one hundred and fifty in total; after which, Pompey the Great sent four hundred and ten, and the late Emperor Augustus four hundred and twenty. The same emperor was the first person who exhibited at Rome a tame tiger on the stage. This was in the consulship of Quintus Tubero and Fabius Maximus, at the dedication of the theatre of Marcellus, on the fourth day before the nones of May: the late Emperor Claudius exhibited four at one time.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 8.24-25

In the passage above Pliny refers to Augustus exhibiting a tame tiger; he also exhibited many other exotic animals.

Furthermore, if anything rare and worth seeing was ever brought to the city, it was his habit to make a

special exhibit of it in any convenient place on days when no shows were being held: a rhinoceros in the Saepa [Julia], a tiger on the stage and a snake of fifty cubits¹⁰ in front of the Comitium and so forth.

[Suetonius](#), *Augustus* 43.4

Romans had a taste for seeing far more exotic animals than tigers and rhinos, including some it is hard to identify.

There are two other animals, which have some resemblance to the camel. One of these is called, by the Ethiopians, the nabun. It has a neck like that of the horse, feet and legs like those an ox, a head like that a camel, and is covered with white spots upon a red background; because of these peculiarities it has been called the cameleopard.¹¹ It was first seen at Rome in the *Ludi Circenses* held by [Julius] Caesar, the Dictator. Since that time too, it has been occasionally seen. It is more remarkable for the singularity of its appearance than for its fierceness; for which reason it has obtained the name of the wild sheep. It was at the games of Pompey the Great that the chama,¹² an animal called rufus by the Gauls, was first exhibited; it has the shape of a wolf, with the spots of the leopard. There were also exhibited some animals from Ethiopia, which they called by the Greek name, chepoi, the back legs of which resembled the human feet and legs, while the fore-feet were like hands. These animals have not been seen at Rome since that time. At the same games the rhinoceros was also exhibited, an animal which has a single horn projecting from the nose; it has been frequently seen since then. This too is another natural-born enemy of the elephant. It prepares itself for combat by sharpening its horn against the rocks; and in fighting aims it mainly at the belly of its adversary, which it knows to be the softest part.¹³ The two animals are of equal length, but the legs of the rhinoceros are much the shorter: its skin is the colour of box-wood.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 8.27-29

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10. This was a very large snake: 50 cubits is roughly 23 metres in modern measurements.

11. This is a giraffe.

12. Most likely a lynx.

13. I would place this as a fact in the 'throwing things on lions stops them attacking' category of useful information.

Venationes

Most animals ended up as part of stage beast hunts where they were hunted by trained hunters, called *venatores* (Singular: *venator*). These hunts (called *venationes*, singular: *venatio*) were either held in amphitheatres (if available), or in the Circus Maximus in Rome, if particularly lavish. (For the form of execution which involved being thrown to wild animals see [Chapter 23: Damnatio ad Bestias](#).)

Pliny the Elder talks of the first elephants seen in Rome, who were killed in the Circus Maximus after being made to fight (presumably each other). Although this was not a proper *venatio*, it sounds a little like one, although the ‘hunters’ were not trained:

Elephants were first seen in Italy in 280 BCE during the war with King Pyrrhus;¹ they were called “Lucanian oxen,” because they were first seen in Lucania.² Seven years after this period, they appeared at Rome in a triumph. In the year 202 a great number of them which had been captured by Metellus in his victory in Sicily over the Carthaginians were brought to Rome; they were one hundred and forty-two in number, or, as some say, one hundred and forty, and were brought to our shores upon rafts, which were constructed on rows of hogsheads joined together. Verrius informs us that they fought in the Circus, and that they were killed with javelins, for want of some better method of disposing of them as the people neither wanted to keep them nor to give them to the kings. Lucius Piso tells us only that they were brought into the Circus Maximus and to increase the feeling of contempt towards them, they were driven all round the area of that place by workmen, who used only spears blunted at the point. The authors who think that they were not killed do not, however, tell us how they were afterwards disposed of.



Gladiator fighting an elephant.

[Pliny the Elder](#), *Natural History* 8.6

The first recorded *venatio* is often seen as that held in 186 BCE by Marcus Fulvius, victor of the Aetolian War, as part of his games celebrating his victory:

When this news came from Spain, the *Ludi Tauri* were celebrated as a special religious observance. These were followed by the *ludi* which M. Fulvius had vowed in the Aetolian war and were exhibited for ten days.² Many actors from Greece came to do him honour, and athletic contests were witnessed for the first time in Rome. The hunting of lions and panthers was a novel feature, and the whole spectacle presented almost as much splendour and variety as those of the present day.

[Livy](#), *From the Founding of the City* 39.22

Having wild animals in the arena or circus presented many challenges that chariot races and gladiator shows did not. For one, you had to ensure that the big cats did not jump the walls of the

1. Pyrrhus, King of Epirus, used war elephants in his campaigns in the South of Italy.

2. A region in the South of Italy.

amphitheatre and start killing the spectators. (It is worthwhile remembering that as senators sat at the front they'd have been the first to get mauled.) In the following extract from one of his *Eclogues* the poet Calpurnius Siculus (3rd century CE) describes the reactions of a peasant to a *venatio* in Rome, and includes a description of the device the Romans came up with to stop animals managing to get out of the arena, a barrel that turned when they landed on it, which meant that their claws could get no purchase.



Bronze medallion depicting the fight between a man and a wild animal.

See the *balteus* covered in gems and the gilded arcade compete over which is more brilliant, and just where the end of the arena presents the seats closest to the marble wall, wondrous ivory is inlaid on connected beams and unites into a cylinder which, gliding smoothly on its well-turned axle can by suddenly turning give no purchase to any claws which reach it and shake off beasts. The nets of gold wire which hang into the arena from solid and equally sized tusks and – Lycotas, if you ever trusted me at all, believe me now – each tusk was longer than our plough at home. No need to tell of everything as it happened: I saw animals of all sorts. There were snow-white hares, tusked boars, the elk, which is rare even in the forests it calls home; there were bulls, some with heightened nape, with an unsightly hump rising from the shoulder-blades, or others with shaggy mane tossed across the neck, with rugged beard covering the chin, and quivering bristles upon their stiff dewlaps. I did not just see beasts from the forest –

there were sea calves also there with bears pitted against them and the ugly herd by the name of horses, bred in that river whose waters with spring-like renewal, irrigate the crops upon its banks.³ Oh, how we shook, whenever we saw the arena part itself and its soil upturned and beasts plunging out from the chasm cleft in the earth; yet often from those same rifts the golden arbutes sprang amid a sudden fountain spray (of saffron).

Calpurnius Siculus, *Eclogues* 7

A part of his ceremonies for the opening of his theatre in Rome in 55 BCE Pompey also offered *venationes*; Cicero wrote to a friend who was in the country to comfort him for missing them. The repulsion of the Roman people at the killing of the elephants is unparalleled in accounts of the amphitheatre.

There remain the two wild-beast hunts, lasting five days, magnificent—nobody denies it—and yet, what pleasure can it be to a man of refinement, when a weak man is torn apart by an extremely powerful animal, or a splendid animal is transfixed by a hunting spear? Things which, after all, if worth seeing, you have often seen before; nor did I, who was present at the games, see anything at all new. The last day was that of the elephants, on which there was a great deal of astonishment on the part of the mob, but no pleasure at all. No – there was even a certain feeling of compassion aroused by it, and a kind of belief created that that animal has something in common with mankind.

[Cicero](#), *Letters to his Friends* 7.1

Animals were brought from all over the Roman Empire and beyond to die in the arena, as the 4th century poet describes:

3. Hippopotami; the river is the Nile.

Whatever inspires fear with its teeth, wonder with its mane, awe with its horns and bristling coat — all the beauty, all the terror of the forest is taken. They are not protected by their cunning; neither strength nor weight helps them; their speed does not save the fleet of foot. Some roar enmeshed in snares; some are thrust into wooden cages and carried off. There are not carpenters enough to fashion the wood; leafy prisons are constructed of rough beech and ash. Boats laden with some of the animals cross seas and rivers; the rower's hand pauses bloodless from terror, for the sailor fears the merchandise he carries. Others are transported over land in wagons that block the roads with the long procession, bearing the spoils of the mountains. The wild beast is carried a captive by those troubled cattle on whom in times past he satisfied his hunger, and each time that the oxen turned and looked at their burden they pulled away in terror from the pole.⁴

Claudian, *On Stilicho's Consulship III*



Exotic animal transportation, Villa del Casale, Piazza Armerina, Sicily, Italy. dated to middle of 4th century CE

The Emperor could order governors and the military to find animals for him; in the Republic, however, people relied on networks of friends. The following sequence of letters written in 51 BCE by Marcus Caelius Rufus to the politician and orator Cicero, who was then governor in Cilicia, show his increasingly frantic attempts to get Cicero to send him some panthers.

However, as soon as you learn of my having been elected,⁵ I beg you to be taking measures as to the panthers. I recommend Sittius' bond to your attention.

Letters to his Friends 8.1

I remind you often about Sittius' bond, for I am anxious that you should understand that it is of great importance to me: so also about the panthers, that you should send for some natives of Cibyra, and see that they are shipped to me

Letters to his Friends 8.4

In nearly every letter I have mentioned the subject of the panthers to you. It will be a disgrace to you that Patiscus has sent ten panthers to Curio and that you should not send many times more. And these very beasts, as well as ten more from Africa, Curio has presented to me, in case you think that he does not know how to make any presents except landed estates. If you will only not forget, and send for some men of Cibyra, and also transmit a letter to Pamphylia—for it is there that they are said to be mostly

4. The pole that ran between the two oxen pulling the cages.

5. He was running for curule aedile.

captured—you will achieve what you choose. I am all the more earnest about this now, because I think I shall have to supply the exhibition entirely apart from my colleague. Please lay this injunction upon yourself. It is your way to take much trouble willingly, as it is mine for the most part to take none. In this business you have nothing to do but speak—that is, to give an order and a commission. For as soon as the beasts have been captured, you have men to feed and transport them in those whom I have sent over on the affair of Sittius' bond. I think also that, if you give me any hope in your letters, I shall send some more men across.

Cicero, *Letters to his Friends* 8.9

This is Cicero's reply:

The panthers are being energetically attended to by the ordinary hunters in accordance with my orders: but there is a great scarcity of them, and such as there are, I am told, complain loudly that they are the only things for which traps are set in all my province, and they are said in consequence to have resolved to quit our province for Caria. However, the business is being pushed on zealously, and especially by Patiscus. All that turn up shall be at your service, but how many that is I don't in the least know. I assure you I am much interested in your aedileship: the day itself reminds me of it; for I am writing on the very day of the [Megalensia](#).⁶



Javelin thrower with panther.

Cicero, *Letters to his Friends* 2.11

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6. This was one of the festivals for which the aediles put on games.

Emperors and the Games

Imperial Sponsorship of the Games

In this section you will learn

- how emperors used the games to entertain and communicate with the people
- the different way various emperors staged games
- emperors like Caligula and Claudius who enjoyed the games a bit too much

Under the empire the role of games – particularly in Rome – was to promote the rule of the emperors. The emperor became the chief provider of games, an editor in chief, although some emperors revived the practice of various magistracies presiding over public games. Emperors vied with each other to provide more and more spectacular games; however, it wasn't until very late (80 CE) that the Colosseum was opened, built by the proceeds of the war against the Jews, and gave the emperors a permanent arena suitable for their spectacular munera. Despite his lack of a suitable arena, the first emperor, Augustus, set the standard for lavish imperial games.

Augustus out did all who came before him in the frequency, variety, and magnificence of his public shows. He says that he gave games four times in his own name and twenty-three times for other magistrates, who were either away from Rome or lacked resources. He gave them sometimes in all the neighbourhoods and on many stages with actors in all languages, and combats of gladiators not only



Augustus of Prima Porta

in the Forum or an amphitheatre, but in the Circus¹ and in the Saepta; sometimes, however, he gave nothing except a fight with wild beasts. He gave athletic contests too in the Campus Martius, erecting wooden seats; and a sea-fight,² constructing an artificial lake near the Tiber, where the grove of the Caesars now stands. On such occasions he placed guards in different locations in Rome, to prevent it from being a target for thieves because only a few people remained at home. In the Circus he exhibited charioteers, runners, and beast hunters, who were sometimes young men of the highest rank. He also gave frequent performances of the Game of Troy³ by older and younger boys, thinking it a time-honoured and worthy custom for the flower of the nobility to become known in this way. When Nonius Asprenas was lamed by a fall while taking part in this game, he presented him with a golden necklace and allowed him and his descendants to bear the surname Torquatus. But soon after he gave up that form of entertainment, because Asinius Pollio the orator complained bitterly and angrily in the Senate of an accident to his grandson Aeserninus, who also had broken his leg. He sometimes employed even Roman equestrians in scenic and gladiatorial performances, but only before it was forbidden by decree of the Senate. After that he exhibited no one of respectable parentage, with the exception of a young man named Lycius, whom he showed merely as a curiosity; for he was less than two feet tall, weighed only seventeen pounds, yet had a stentorian voice. He did however on the day of one of the shows make a display of the first Parthian hostages that had ever been sent to Rome, by leading them through the middle of the arena and placing them in the second row above his own seat.⁴

[Suetonius](#), *Augustus* 43

Augustus made sure to spend his time at the games actually watching them, as a way to please the people:

He himself usually watched the games in the Circus from the upper rooms of his friends and freedmen, but sometimes from the imperial box, and even in company with his wife and children. He was sometimes absent for several hours, and now and then for whole days, making his excuses and appointing presiding officers to take his place. But whenever he was present, he gave his entire attention to the performance, either to avoid the criticism to which he realized that his father Caesar⁵ had been generally exposed, because he spent his time at the games reading or answering letters and petitions; or from his interest and pleasure in the spectacle, which he never denied but often openly confessed. Because of this he used to offer special prizes and numerous valuable gifts from his own funds at games given by others, and he appeared at no contest in the Greek style without making a present to each of the participants according to their merits. He was especially fond of watching boxers, particularly those of Latin birth, not merely those who were recognized and classed as professionals, whom he was accustomed to match even with Greeks, but even the common untrained townspeople that fought rough and tumble and without skill in the narrow streets. In short, he followed with his interest all classes of performers who took part in the public shows; maintained the privileges of the athletes and even increased them; forbid the matching of gladiators without the right of appeal for *missio*; and deprived the magistrates of the power allowed them by an ancient law of punishing actors anywhere and everywhere, restricting it to the time of games and to the theatre. Nevertheless he exacted the severest discipline in the contests in the wrestling halls and the combats of the gladiators.

Suetonius, *Augustus* 45

As part of his generally thrifty (some would say cheap) nature Augustus' successor, the Emperor Tiberius, cut back on the costs for the games:

1. The Circus Maximus, usually used for chariot racing.

2. For more on this battle see [here](#).

3. The *lusus Troiae* was a complicated set of quasi military manoeuvres on horseback, which apparently could cause many injuries.

4. Sent by Parthia as part of a deal by which Augustus regained military standards lost by Marcus Licinius Crassus at Carrhae in 53 BCE.

5. Julius Caesar, who had adopted him in his will.



Tiberius reduced the cost of the games and shows by cutting down the pay of the actors and limiting the pairs of gladiators to a fixed number. Complaining bitterly that the prices of Corinthian bronzes had risen to an immense figure and that three mullets⁶ had been sold for thirty thousand sesterces, he proposed that a limit be set to household furniture and that the prices in the market should be regulated each year at the discretion of the senate; while the aediles were instructed to put such restrictions on cook-shops and eating-houses as not to allow even pastry to be exposed for sale. Furthermore, to encourage general frugality by his personal example, he often served at formal dinners meats left over from the day before and partly consumed, or the half of a boar, declaring that it had all the qualities of a whole one.

Suetonius, *Tiberius* 34.1

After Tiberius' reign, where games were scarce and reduced in magnificence, Caligula's fondness for spectacles must have been welcome

to the people of Rome. Though not to the gladiators he killed.

He gave several gladiatorial shows, some in the amphitheatre of Taurus⁷ and some in the Saepta Julia, in which he introduced pairs of African and Campanian boxers, the best from both regions. He did not always preside at the games in person, but sometimes assigned the honour to the magistrates or to friends. He exhibited different types of drama continually in many different places, sometimes even by night, lighting up the whole city.⁸ He also distributed gifts of various kinds, and gave each man a basket of food. During the feasting he sent his share to a Roman equestrian opposite him, who was eating with evident relish and appetite, while to a senator for the same reason he gave a commission naming him praetor out of the regular order. He also gave many games in the Circus, lasting from early morning until evening, introducing between the races now a baiting of panthers and now the manoeuvres of the game called Troy; some, too, of special splendour, in which the Circus race floor was strewn with red and green,⁹ while the charioteers were all senators. He also started some games at random, when a few people called for them from the neighbouring balconies,¹⁰ as he was inspecting the outfit of the Circus from the Gelotian house.

Besides this, he created a new and unheard of kind of spectacle; for he bridged the gap between Baiae and the mole at Puteoli,¹¹ a distance of about thirty-six hundred paces, by bringing together ships from all sides and anchoring them in a double line, and then heaping a mound of earth on them and fashioning it in the manner of the Appian Way.¹² He rode back and forth over this bridge for two successive days, the first day on a caparisoned horse, himself resplendent in a crown of oak leaves, a shield, a sword, and a cloak of cloth of gold; on the second, in the dress of a charioteer in a car drawn by a pair of famous horses, carrying before him a boy named Dareus, one of the hostages from Parthia, and attended by the entire praetorian guard and a company of his friends in Gallic chariots. I know that many have supposed that

6. Mullet was a fish the Romans prized very much; it was as a result very expensive.

7. The stone amphitheatre in the Campus Martius built in 29 BCE by Statilius Taurus.

8. As Rome had no public lighting system at night, it could get very dangerous when dark.

9. To match the colours of the Reds and Greens respectively.

10. Of the houses surrounding the Circus Maximus.

11. This was a location in the South of Italy.

12. One of main roads leading into Rome.

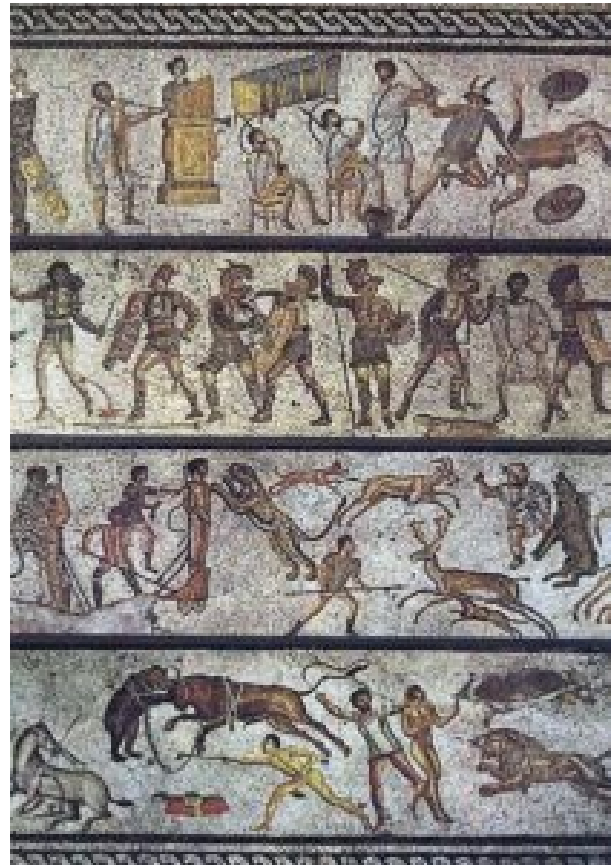
Gaius devised this kind of bridge in rivalry of Xerxes,¹³ who excited no little admiration by bridging the much narrower Hellespont; others, that it was to inspire fear in Germany and Britain, on which he had designs, by the fame of some stupendous work. But when I was a boy, I used to hear my grandfather say that the reason for the work, as revealed by the emperor's confidential courtiers, was that Thrasyllus the astrologer had declared to Tiberius, when he was worried about his successor and inclined towards his natural grandson, that Gaius had no more chance of becoming emperor than of riding about over the gulf of Baiae with horses.

He also gave shows in foreign lands, Athenian games at Syracuse in Sicily, and miscellaneous games at Lugdunum [Lyon] in Gaul; at the latter place also a contest in Greek and Latin oratory, in which, they say, the losers gave prizes to the victors and were forced to compose eulogies upon them, while those who came last were ordered to erase their writings with a sponge or with their tongue, unless they chose instead to be beaten with rods or thrown into the neighbouring river.

Suetonius, *Caligula* 18-20

However, Caligula's fondness for spectacles had a much darker side:

The following are special examples of his innate brutality. When cattle to feed the wild beasts which he had provided for a gladiatorial show were rather costly, he selected criminals to be devoured, and reviewing the line of prisoners without examining the charges, but merely taking his place in the middle of a colonnade, he ordered them be led away "from baldhead to baldhead." He forced a man who had made a vow to fight in the arena, if the emperor recovered, to keep his word, watched him as he fought sword in hand, and would not let him go until he was victorious, and then only after many entreaties. Another who had offered his life for the same reason, but delayed to kill himself, he turned over to his slaves, with orders to drive him through the streets decked with sacred boughs and fillets,¹⁴ calling for the fulfilment of his vow, and finally hurl him from the embankment. Many men of honourable rank were first disfigured with the marks of branding-irons and then condemned to the mines, to work at building roads, or to be thrown to the wild beasts; or else he shut them up in cages on all fours, like animals, or had them sawn asunder. Not all these punishments were for serious offences – they were for criticising one of his shows, or for never having sworn by his Genius.¹⁵ He forced parents to attend the executions of their sons, sending a litter for one man who said he was sick, and inviting another to dinner immediately after witnessing the death, and trying to make him smile and joke around by a great show of affability. He had the manager of his gladiatorial shows and *venationes* beaten with chains in his presence for several successive days, and would not kill him until he was disgusted at the stench of his putrefied brain. He burned a writer of Atellan farces alive in the middle of the arena of the amphitheatre, because of a



Mosaic showing a day of spectacles from Zliten (in modern Libya). Now in Tripoli, Libya.

13. King of Persia in the 5th century BCE, he invaded Greece; to move his troops to Greece he bridged the Hellespont in 482 BCE.

14. Fillets are wool headbands; these were worn by priests and sacrificial animals.

15. This is hard to explain, but roughly a genius in a Roman context was a man's guardian spirit (a woman's was called her Juno). Households worshipped the genius of the *paterfamilias* which was also thought to protect the entire household and ensure its continuity; Romans also worshipped the genius of the emperor.

humorous line with a double meaning. When a Roman equestrian loudly protested his innocence when he was thrown to the beasts, he took him out, cut off his tongue, and put him back again.

When a *murmillo* from the gladiatorial *ludus* fought with him with wooden swords and deliberately fell, he stabbed him with a real dagger and then ran about with a palm-branch, just like a proper victor.

He also devoted himself with much enthusiasm to arts of other kinds and of great variety, appearing as a Thracian gladiator, as a charioteer, and even as a singer and dancer, fighting with real weapons and driving in circuses built in various places; so carried away by his interest in singing and dancing that even at the public performances he could not refrain from singing with the tragic actor as he delivered his lines, or from openly imitating his gestures by way of praise or correction.

Suetonius, *Caligula selections*

Everyone criticised the following acts of Caligula. He made great numbers of men to fight as gladiators, forcing them to contend both in pairs and in groups drawn up in a kind of battle line. He had asked permission of the Senate to do this, so that he was able to do anything he wished even contrary to what the law stated, and thus put many people to death – this included twenty-six equestrians, some of whom had spent all of their money, while others had merely practised gladiatorial combat. It was not the large number of those who died that was so serious, though that was serious enough, but his excessive delight in their death and his insatiable desire for the sight of blood. The same trait of cruelty led him once, when there was a shortage of condemned criminals to be given to the wild beasts, to order that some of the mob standing near the benches should be seized and thrown to them; and to prevent the possibility of their making an outcry or uttering any reproaches, he first caused their tongues to be cut out. He compelled one of the prominent equestrians to fight in single combat on the charge of having insulted his mother Agrippina, and when the man proved victorious, handed him over to his accusers and caused him to be killed. And the man's father, though guilty of no crime, he confined in a cage, as, indeed, he had treated many others, and there put an end to him. He held these contests at first in the *Saepta Julia*, after excavating the whole site and filling it with water, to enable him to bring in a single ship, but later he transferred them to another place, where he had demolished a great many large buildings and erected wooden stands; for he despised the theatre of Taurus.

[Cassius Dio](#), *Epitome of Roman History* 59

Caligula's successor, his uncle Claudius, became emperor through the actions of the Praetorian Guard, who (apparently) found him cowering behind a curtain after the assassination of Caligula. He was an enthusiastic patron of the games as the following selections from Suetonius himself:



Bust of Emperor Claudius.

He very often distributed largess to the people. He also gave several splendid shows, not merely the usual ones in the customary places, but some of a new kind and some revived from ancient times, and in places where no one had ever given them before. He opened the games at the dedication of Pompey's theatre, which he had restored when it was damaged by a fire, from a raised seat in the orchestra, after first offering sacrifice at the temples in the upper part of the auditorium and coming down through the tiers of seats while all sat in silence. He also celebrated secular games, alleging that they had been given too early by Augustus and not reserved for the regular time; although he himself writes in his own History that when they had been discontinued for a long time, Augustus restored them to their proper place after a very careful calculation of the intervals. Therefore the herald's proclamation was greeted with laughter, when he invited the people in the usual formula to games "which no one had ever seen or would ever see again"; for some were still living who had seen them before, and some actors who had appeared at the former performance appeared at that time as well. He often gave games in the Vatican Circus also, at times with a beast-baiting between every

five races. But he adorned the Circus Maximus with barriers of marble and gilded goals, whereas before they had been of tufa and wood, and assigned special seats to the senators, who had been in the habit of viewing the games with the rest of the people. In addition to the chariot races he exhibited the game called Troy and also panthers, which were hunted down by a squadron of the praetorian cavalry under the lead of the tribunes and the prefect himself; likewise Thessalian horsemen who drive wild bulls all over the arena, leaping upon them when they are tired out and throwing them to the ground by the horns.

Claudius gave many gladiatorial shows and in many places: one in yearly celebration of his accession, in the Praetorian Camp without wild beasts and fine equipment, and one in the Saepta of the regular and usual kind; another in the same place not in the regular list, short and lasting but a few days, to which he was the first to apply the name of sportula, because before giving it for the first time he made proclamation that he invited the people "as it were to an impromptu meal, quickly prepared." There was no form of entertainment at which he was more familiar and free, even thrusting out his left hand, as the commons did, and counting aloud on his fingers the gold pieces which were paid to the victors; and he would constantly address the audience, and invite and urge them to enjoy themselves, calling them "masters" from time to time, and interspersing feeble and far-fetched jokes. For example, when they called for Palumbus he promised that they should have him, "if he could be caught."¹⁶ The following, however, was both exceedingly timely and salutary; when he had granted the wooden sword to an essedarius, whose four sons begged for his release, and the act was received with loud and general applause, he at once circulated a note, pointing out to the people how greatly they ought to desire children, since they saw that they brought favour and protection even to a gladiator. He gave representations in the Campus Martius of the storming and sacking of a town in the manner of real warfare, as well as of the surrender of the kings of the Britons, and presided dressed in a general's cloak. Even when he was on the point of letting out the water from Lake Fucinus he gave a sham sea-fight first. But when the combatants cried out: "Hail, emperor, they who are about to die salute thee," he replied, "Or not," and after that all of them refused to fight, maintaining that they had been pardoned. Upon this he hesitated for some time about destroying them all with fire and sword, but at last leaping from his throne and running along the edge of the lake with his ridiculous tottering gait, he induced them to fight, partly

16. Palumba is the Latin for dove; Claudius jokes that Palumbus might suddenly fly away given his name. It wasn't even a very good joke in the 1st century CE and time has not improved it.

by threats and partly by promises. At this performance a Sicilian and a Rhodian fleet engaged, each numbering twelve triremes, and the signal was sounded on a horn by a silver Triton, which was raised from the middle of the lake by a mechanical device.

Claudius, however, enjoyed the games and their bloodshed too much:

He always tortured witnesses and demanded the punishment of parricides at once and in his presence. When he was at Tibur and wished to see an execution in the ancient fashion,¹⁷ after the criminals were tied to the stake no executioner could be found. He sent for one from Rome right

Both great and small events showed he had a vicious and bloodthirsty nature.

away and continued to wait for him until night. At any gladiatorial show, either his own or another's, he gave orders that even those who fell accidentally should be killed, in particular the *retiarii*, so that he could watch their faces as they died. When a pair of gladiators had fallen by mutually inflicted wounds, he at once had some little knives made from both their swords for his use. He took such pleasure in the combats with wild beasts and of those who fought at noonday, that he would go down to the arena at daybreak and after dismissing the people for lunch at midday, he would keep his seat and in addition to the appointed combatants, he would for trivial and hasty reasons match others, even from the carpenters, the assistants, and men of that class, if any automatic device, or stage machinery,¹⁸ or anything else of the kind, had not worked well. He even forced one of his pages to enter the arena just as he was, in his toga.

Suetonius, *Claudius* 34.1.2

Claudius' successor Nero was enthusiastic about the games; for more on him see [Case Study I: Nero](#). After Nero's suicide the Flavian dynasty took power under Vespasian, who reigned from 69-79 CE. As Nero seems to have bankrupted the empire, Vespasian got a reputation for stinginess; that, however, did not stop him offering spectacles:

At the plays with which he dedicated the new stage of the theatre of Marcellus he revived the old musical entertainments. To Apelles, the tragic actor, he gave four hundred thousand sesterces; to Terpnus and Diodorus, the lyre-players, two hundred thousand each; of several a hundred thousand; while those who received least were paid forty thousand, and numerous golden crowns were also awarded.

Suetonius, *Vespasian* 19.1

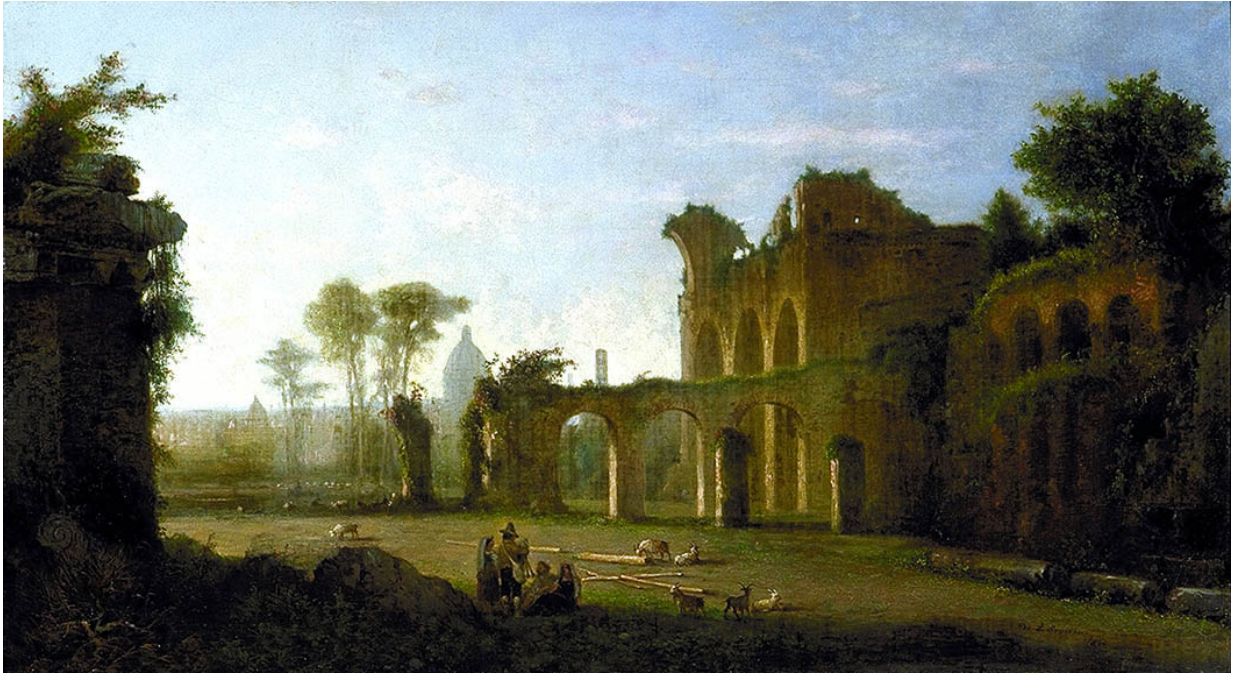
He did, importantly, begin the construction of the Colosseum, using funds from his victory in the Jewish War:

He also undertook new works, the temple of Peace hard by the Forum and one to the Deified Claudius on the Caelian mount, which was begun by Agrippina, but almost utterly destroyed by Nero; also an amphitheatre in the heart of the city, a plan which he learned that Augustus had cherished.

Suetonius, *Vespasian* 9.1

17. This, according to Suetonius' *Nero* (49.2) had the prisoner tied by the neck and hands to a v-shaped fork which sat on their neck before they were beaten to death with rods.

18. Here Suetonius refers to the *pegma*, tower-like piece of stage machinery from which gladiators fought or which might be set on fire or used otherwise in games.



View of the Temple of Peace in the Roman Forum by George Loring Brown

His son and successor, Titus gave a number of games including inaugural games for the Colosseum (later finished under Domitian).

He took away nothing from any citizen. He respected others' property, if anyone ever did; in fact, he would not accept even proper and customary presents. And yet he was second to none of his predecessors in munificence. At the dedication of his amphitheatre and of the baths which were hastily built near it he gave a most magnificent and costly gladiatorial show. He presented a fake sea-fight too in the old naumachia, and in the same place a combat of gladiators, exhibiting five thousand wild beasts of every kind in a single day.

Suetonius, *Titus* 7.3

Titus' behaviour at the games seems to have been exemplary in Roman terms:

The whole body of the people in particular he treated with such indulgence on all occasions, that once at a gladiatorial show he declared that he would give it, "not after his own inclinations, but those of the spectators"; and what is more, he kept his word. For he refused nothing which anyone asked, and even urged them to ask for what they wished. Furthermore, he openly displayed his partiality for Thracian gladiators and joked with the people about it with words and gestures, always however preserving his dignity, as well as observing justice. Not to omit any act of condescension, he sometimes bathed in the baths which he had built, in company with the common people.

Suetonius, *Titus* 9.2

Domitian, Titus' brother, came to the imperial throne in 81 CE. He was particularly noted for his lavish spectacles.

He constantly gave grand costly entertainments, both in the amphitheatre¹⁹ and in the Circus, where in addition to the usual races between two-horse and four-horse chariots, he also exhibited two battles, one between forces of infantry and the other by horsemen; and he even gave a naval battle in the amphitheatre. He also gave hunts of wild beasts, gladiatorial shows at night by the light of torches, and not only combats between men but between women as well. He was always present too at the games

19. The newly built Colosseum which was called the Flavian Amphitheatre.

given by the quaestors, which he revived after they had been abandoned for some time, and invariably granted the people the privilege of calling for two pairs of gladiators from his own school, and brought them in last in court outfits. During the whole of every gladiatorial show there always stood at his feet a small boy clad in scarlet, with an abnormally small head, with whom he used to talk a great deal, and sometimes seriously. At any rate, he was overheard to ask him if he knew why he had decided at the last appointment day to make Mettius Rufus prefect of Egypt. He often gave sea-fights almost with regular fleets, having dug a pool near the Tiber and surrounded it with seats; and he continued to witness the contests amid heavy rains.

He also celebrated Secular games, reckoning the time not according to the year when Claudius had last given them, but by the previous calculation of Augustus. In the course of these, to make it possible to finish a hundred races on the day of contests in the Circus, he diminished the number of laps from seven to five. He also established a quinquennial [contest](#) in honour of Jupiter Capitolinus of a threefold character, comprising music, riding, and gymnastics, and with considerably more prizes than are awarded nowadays.²⁰ For there were competitions in prose declamation both in Greek and in Latin; and in addition to those of the lyre-players, between choruses of such players and in the lyre alone, without singing; while in the stadium there were races even between maidens. He presided at the competitions in half-boots, dressed in a purple toga in the Greek fashion, and wearing upon his head a golden crown with figures of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, while by his side sat the priest of Jupiter and the college of the Flaviales,²¹ similarly dressed, except that their crowns bore his image as well. He celebrated the Quinquatria too every year in honour of Minerva at his Alban villa, and established for her a college of priests, from which men were chosen by lot to act as officers and give splendid shows of wild beasts and stage plays, besides holding contests in oratory and poetry. He made a present to the people of three hundred sesterces each on three occasions, and in the course of one of his shows in celebration of the feast of the Seven Hills gave a generous banquet, distributing large baskets of food to the senate and equestrians, and smaller one to the people; and he himself was the first to begin to eat. On the following day he scattered gifts of all sorts of things to be scrambled for, and since the greater part of these fell where the ordinary people sat, he had five hundred tickets thrown into each section occupied by the senatorial and equestrian orders.



Piazzale della Minerva, named after the winged statue of Minerva (Winged Victory). Minerva was the favourite goddess of Domitian.

Suetonius, *Domitian* 4

The following texts relate to a number of emperors, all of whom gave elaborate spectacles. The dates given are those of their reigns:

Trajan (98-117 CE):

[Trajan produced] nothing spineless or flabby, nothing that would soften or break the manly spirit of the

20. These games were modeled somewhat on the Olympic Games, but included artistic competitions, which the Olympics did not.

21. This was a college of priests dedicated to the worship of the deified Flavian emperors, Titus and Vespasian.

audience, but gave a spectacle that inspired the audience to noble wounds and to despise death, since even in the bodies of slaves and criminals the love of praise and desire for victory could be seen.

Pliny, *Panegyricus* 3.1

Upon Trajan's return to Rome a huge number of embassies came to him from various barbarians, including the Indi. And he gave spectacles on one hundred and twenty-three days, in the course of which some eleven thousand animals, both wild and tame, were slain, and ten thousand gladiators fought.

Cassius Dio, *Epitome of Roman History* 68.15.1

Hadrian (117-138 CE):

In almost every city he built buildings and gave public games. At Athens he exhibited in the stadium a hunt of a thousand wild beasts, but he never called away from Rome a single wild-beast-hunter or actor. In Rome, in addition to popular entertainments of unbounded extravagance, he gave spices to the people in honour of his mother-in-law, and in honour of Trajan he caused essences of balsam and saffron to be poured over the seats of the theatre. And in the theatre he presented plays of all kinds in the ancient manner and had the court-players appear before the public. In the Circus he had many wild beasts killed and often a whole hundred of lions. He often gave the people exhibitions of military Pyrrhic dances, and he frequently attended gladiatorial shows.

[Historia Augusta](#)²² 19.2-8

He also constructed theatres and held games as he travelled about from city to city, dispensing, however, with the imperial insignia; for he never used these outside Rome.²³ And yet he did not see his native land, though he showed it great honour and bestowed many splendid gifts upon it.

Cassius Dio, *Epitome of Roman History* 10.1

Other emperors gave games, of course. For Commodus, see [Case Study II: Commodus](#). The Severan dynasty, which took power in 193 CE, used games as a way to cement its power. The second emperor in that dynasty, Caracalla, was noted for his lavish games and fondness for chariot racing:

The emperor himself kept spending the money upon the soldiers, as we have said, and upon wild beasts and horses; for he was for ever killing vast numbers of animals, both wild and domesticated, forcing us to furnish most of them, though he did buy a few. One day he slew a hundred boars at one time with his own hands. He also used to drive chariots, wearing the Blue costume. In everything he was very hot-headed and very fickle, and he furthermore possessed the craftiness of his mother and the Syrians, to which race she belonged.²⁴ He would appoint some freedman or other wealthy person to be director of the games in order that the man might spend money in this way also; and he would salute the spectators with his whip from the arena below and beg for gold pieces like a performer of the lowest class. He claimed that he used the Sun-god's method in driving, and prided himself upon it. To such an extent was the entire world, so far as it owned his sway, devastated throughout his whole reign, that on one occasion the Romans at a horse-race shouted in unison this, among other things: "We shall do the living to death, that we may bury the dead." Indeed, he often used to say: "Nobody in the world should have money but me; and want it to bestow upon the soldiers." Once when Julia chided him for spending vast sums upon them and said,

22. This, it should be pointed out, is an incredibly unreliable source. It is, however, often very entertaining, which is some recompense.

23. Hadrian was born in Spain; he was notable for his extensive travelling throughout the empire, and especially in the east.

24. Cassius Dio, like many other ancient writers was prejudiced about certain groups – in his case easterners. Caracalla's father, Septimius Severus, came from Leptis Magna in North Africa; his mother Julia Domna was from a fabulously wealthy Syrian family, which had been incorporated into the Senate.

“There is no longer any source of revenue, just or unjust, left to us,” he replied, exhibiting his sword, “Be of good cheer, mother: for as long as we have this, we shall not run short of money.”

Cassius Dio, *Epitome of Roman History* 78

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Case Study I: Nero

Of all the emperors Nero was the most aware of the power of theatrics and performances of all kinds. When he died, his last words were *qualis artifex pereo* (Suetonius, *Nero* 49.1), often translated as ‘what an artist dies in me.’



He gave many entertainments of different kinds: the Juvenalia, chariot races in the Circus, stage-plays, and a gladiatorial show. At the first mentioned he had even old men of consular rank and aged matrons take part. For the games in the Circus he assigned a separate seating area to the equestrians, and even matched chariots drawn by four camels. At the games which he gave for the “Eternity of the Empire,” which by his order were called the Maximi, parts were taken by several men and women of both senatorial and equestrian rank; a well known Roman equestrian mounted an elephant and rode down a rope; a Roman play of Afranius, too, was staged, entitled “The Fire,” and the actors were allowed to carry off the furniture of the burning house and keep it. Every day all kinds of presents were thrown to the people; these included a thousand birds of every kind each day, various kinds of food, tickets for grain, clothing, gold, silver, precious stones, pearls, paintings, slaves, beasts of burden, and even trained wild animals; finally, ships, blocks of houses, and farms.

These plays he viewed from the top of the proscenium. At the gladiatorial show, which he gave in a wooden amphitheatre, erected in the district of the Campus Martius within the space of a single year, he had no one put to death, not even criminals. But he compelled four hundred senators and six hundred Roman equestrians, some of whom were well to do and of unblemished reputation, to fight in the arena. Even those who fought with the wild beasts and performed the various services in the arena were of the same orders. He also exhibited a naval battle in salt water with sea monsters swimming about in it; besides pyrrhic dances by some Greek youths, handing each of them certificates of Roman citizenship at the close of his performance. The pyrrhic dances represented various scenes. In one a bull mounted Pasiphae, who was concealed in a wooden image of a heifer; at least many of the spectators thought so. Icarus at his very first attempt fell close by the imperial couch and splattered the emperor with his blood; for Nero rarely presided at the games, but used to view them while reclining on a couch, at first watching through small openings and then with the entire balcony uncovered.

[Suetonius](#), *Nero* 11-12

A range of other texts and authors testify to Nero’s love for spectacle. And outrageous banquets.



Roman Republican silver denarius of the moneyer Tiberius Claudius Nero, Rome, 79 BC.

Draped bust of Diana right with bow and quiver over shoulder.

Victory in biga (two-horse chariot) right, holding reins and wreath; below horse.

It was an old desire of his to drive a chariot and team of four, and an equally repulsive ambition to sing to the lyre in the stage manner. "Racing with horses," he used to observe, "was a royal accomplishment, and had been practised by the commanders of antiquity: the sport had been celebrated in the praises of poets and devoted to the worship of Heaven. As for song, it was sacred to Apollo; and it was in the dress appropriate to it that, both in Greek cities and in Roman temples, that great and prophetic deity was seen standing." He could no longer be checked, when Seneca and Burrus¹ decided to concede one of his points rather than allow him to carry both; and an enclosure was made in the Vatican valley, where he could manoeuvre his horses without the spectacle being public. Before long, the Roman people received an invitation in form, and began to hymn his praises, as is the way of the crowd, hungry for amusements, and delighted if the sovereign leans in the same direction. However, the publication of his shame brought not the satisfaction he expected, but a stimulus; and, in the belief that he was reducing his own disgrace by polluting others, he brought on the stage those children of the great houses whom poverty had made sell themselves. They died and I regard it as a debt due to their ancestors not to record them by name. For the disgrace, in part, is his who gave money for the reward of infamy and not for its prevention. He even led well-known Roman equestrians to promise their services in the arena by what might be called enormous rewards, were it not that gifts from him who is able to command carry with them the compelling quality of necessity.

[Tacitus](#), *Annales* 14.24

Of the entertainments [of Nero] the most famous for their infamous extravagance were those given by Tigellinus,² which I will describe as an illustration so I will not have again and again to narrate similar extravagance. He had a raft constructed on Agrippa's lake, put the guests on board and had some smaller boats tow it to set it in motion. These boats glittered with gold and ivory; the crews were arranged according to age and experience in vice. He had obtained birds and beasts from remote countries and sea monsters from the ocean. Brothels were set up on the margin of the lake; these were crowded with noble ladies and on the opposite bank you could see naked prostitutes making obscene gestures and movements. As darkness approached all the grove around and surrounding buildings echoed with singing and shone brilliantly with lights.

Tacitus, *Annales* 15.2

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1. The philosopher Seneca the Elder was Nero's tutor and advisor; Burrus was the prefect of the Praetorian Guard and another advisor.

2. The chief officer of the praetorian guard, he was also one of Nero's most influential (and loyal) advisors.

Case Study II: Commodus (161-92 CE)

Commodus is perhaps best remembered now as the Emperor in *Gladiator* (2000); the real life Commodus was certainly fond of fighting as a gladiator, though he was also co-emperor with his father, Marcus Aurelius, and ruled for several years after he died, which is something the film ignores. The ever reliably over the top *Historia Augusta* gives a scurrilous story to explain Commodus' mania for gladiators; it claims that Commodus' real father was a gladiator.

Some say, and it seems plausible, that Commodus Antoninus, his son and successor, was not his child, but the product of an affair; they embroider this assertion, moreover, with a story current among the people. On a certain occasion, it was said, Faustina, the daughter of Pius¹ and wife of Marcus, saw some gladiators pass by and burned with love for one of them. Later, when she had been sick for a long time, she confessed the passion to her husband. And when Marcus reported this to the Chaldeans, it was their advice that Faustina should bathe in his blood and thus couch with her husband. When this was done, the passion was ended, but their son Commodus was born a gladiator, not really a prince; for afterwards as emperor he fought almost a thousand gladiatorial bouts before the people, as shall be related in his life. This story is considered plausible, as a matter of fact, because the son of so virtuous an emperor had habits worse than any *lanista*, any actor, any arena roadie,² anything brought into existence from the dregs of all dishonour and crime. Many writers, however, state that Commodus was really the child of adultery, since it is generally known that Faustina, while at Caieta, used to choose out lovers from among the sailors and gladiators. When Marcus Antoninus was told about this so he might divorce, if not kill her, he is reported to have said "If we send our wife away, we must also return her dowry". And what was her dowry? The Empire, which, after he had been adopted at the wish of Hadrian, he had inherited from his father-in-law Pius.

[*Historia Augusta*, *Life of Marcus Aurelius* 19.1-9](#)



The Emperor Commodus Leaving the Arena at the Head of the Gladiators

The *Historia Augusta's* *Life of Commodus* gives some more sensational details:

1. Antoninus Pius, the previous emperor, who adopted Marcus Aurelius, and who was also Faustina's father.
2. The word used in Latin is *arenarius*, which usually means someone who worked at the arena as an attendant or orderly.

Certain months were renamed in his honour by his flatterers; for August they substituted Commodus, for September Hercules, for October Invictus, for November Exsuperatorius, and for December Amazonius, after his own surname. He had been called Amazonius, moreover, because of his passion for his concubine Marcia, whom he loved to have portrayed as an Amazon, and for whose sake he even wished to enter the arena of Rome dressed as an Amazon. Besides these facts, it is related in records that he fought 365 gladiatorial combats in his father's reign. Afterwards, by vanquishing or slaying retiarii, he won enough gladiatorial crowns to bring the number up to a thousand. He also killed with his own hand thousands of wild beasts of all kinds, even elephants. And he frequently did these things before the eyes of the Roman people.

11.8-12

At gladiatorial shows he would come to watch and stay to fight, covering his bare shoulders with a purple cloth. And it was his custom, moreover, to order the insertion in the city-gazette of everything he did that was base or foul or cruel, or typical of a gladiator or a pimp — at least, the writings of Marius Maximus so testify. He entitled the Roman people the “People of Commodus,” since he had very often fought as a gladiator in their presence. And although the people regularly applauded him in his frequent combats as though he were a god, he became convinced that he was being laughed at, and gave orders that the Roman people should be slain in the Amphitheatre by the marines who spread the awnings. He gave an order, also, for the burning of the city, as though it were his private colony, and this order would have been executed had not Laetus, the prefect of the guard, deterred him. Among other triumphal titles, he was also given the name “Captain of the Secutores” six hundred and twenty times.

The prodigies that occurred in his reign, both those which concerned the state and those which affected Commodus personally, were as follows. A comet appeared. Footprints of the gods were seen in the Forum departing from it. Before the war of the deserters the heavens were ablaze. On January 1st a swift coming mist and darkness arose in the Circus; and before dawn there had already been fire-birds and ill-boding portents. Commodus himself moved his residence from the Palace to the Aedes Vectiliana on the Caelian hill, saying that he could not sleep in the Palace. The twin gates of the temple of Janus opened of their own accord, and a marble image of Anubis was seen to move. In the Minucian Portico a bronze statue of Hercules sweated for several days. An owl, moreover, was caught above his bed-chamber both at Lanuvium and at Rome. He was himself responsible for no inconsiderable omen relating to himself; for after he had plunged his hand into the wound of a slain gladiator he wiped it on his own head, and again, contrary to custom, he ordered the spectators to attend his gladiatorial shows dressed not in togas but in cloaks, a practice usual at funerals, while he himself presided in the dress of a mourner. Twice, moreover, his helmet was borne through the Gate of Libitina.³ He gave money to the people, 725 denarii for each man. Toward all others he was close-fisted to a degree, since the expense of his luxurious living had drained the treasury.⁹ He held many races in the Circus, but rather as the result of a whim than as an act of religion,⁴ and also in order to enrich the leaders of the factions.

Life of Commodus 15-16

Cassius Dio, who lived and served in the Senate under Commodus, gives more information on the details of Commodus' mania for the games:

3. Libitina was a Roman goddess of death; this gate *may* have been located on the east side. It is often said that the bodies of dead gladiators were taken through this gate, but we really know very little about this.

4. The races were only supposed to take place as part of religious festivals; there were certainly enough of those that one didn't really have to start coming up with that many other excuses.

He did not drive chariots in public except sometimes on a moonless night, for, though he was eager to play the charioteer in public, too, he was ashamed to be seen doing so; but in private he was constantly doing it, taking on the Green uniform. As for wild beasts, however, he killed many both in private and in public. In addition, he fought as a gladiator; in doing this at home he managed to kill a man now and then, and in making close passes with others, as if trying to clip off a bit of their hair, he sliced off the noses of some, the ears of others, and sundry features of still others; but in public he refrained from using steel and shedding human blood. Before entering the amphitheatre he would put on a long-sleeved tunic of silk, white interwoven with gold, and thus arrayed he would receive our greetings; but when he was about to go inside, he put on a robe of pure purple with gold stars, wearing a chlamys⁵ in the Greek style in the same colour, and a crown made of gems from India and of gold, and he carried a herald's staff like Mercury's. As for the lion-skin and club, in the street they were carried before him⁶ and in the amphitheatres they were placed on a gilded chair, whether he was present or not. He himself would enter the arena dressed like Mercury, and taking off his other garments, would begin his exhibition barefoot and wearing only a tunic.



Commodus as Hercules

On the first day he killed a hundred bears all by himself, shooting down at them from the railing of the balustrade – the whole amphitheatre had been divided up by means of two intersecting cross-walls which supported the gallery that ran its entire length so the beasts, divided into four herds, might more easily be speared at short range from any point. In the middle of the struggle he became weary, and taking from a woman some chilled sweet wine in a cup shaped like a club, he drank it at one gulp. At this both the people and we senators all immediately shouted out the words so familiar at drinking-bouts, “Long life to you!” And let no one feel that I am sullyng the dignity of history by recording such events. On most accounts, to be sure, I should not have mentioned this exhibition; but since it was given by the emperor himself, and since I was present myself and took part in everything seen, heard and spoken, I have thought proper to suppress none of the details, but to hand them down, trivial as they are, just like any event of the greatest weight and importance. And, indeed, all the other events that took place in my lifetime I shall describe with more exactness and detail than earlier occurrences, for the reason that I was present when they happened and know no one else, among those who have any ability at writing a worthy record of events, who has so accurate a knowledge of them as I.

On the first day, then, the events that I have described took place. On the other days he descended to the arena from his place above and cut down all the domestic animals that approached him and some also that were led up to him or were brought before him in nets. He also killed a tiger, a hippopotamus, and an elephant. Having performed these exploits, he would retire, but later, after lunch, would fight as a gladiator. He fought as and dressed in the armour of the *secutores*, as they were called: he held the shield in his right hand and the wooden sword in his left, and indeed took great pride in the fact that he was left-handed. His antagonist would be some athlete or perhaps a gladiator armed with a wand; sometimes it was a man that he himself had challenged, sometimes one chosen by the people, for in this as well as in

5. A type of Greek cloak.

6. Commodus liked to dress up like Hercules, which meant carrying a club and wearing a lion skin.

other matters he put himself on an equal footing with the other gladiators, except for the fact that they enter the games for a very small sum, whereas Commodus received a million sesterces from the gladiatorial fund each day. Standing beside him as he fought were Aemilius Laetus, the prefect, and Eclectus, his cubicularius;⁷ and when he had finished his sparring match (and, naturally, won it) he would then, just as he was, kiss these companions through his helmet. After this the regular contestants would fight. The first day he personally paired all the combatants down in the arena, where he appeared with all the trappings of Mercury, including a gilded wand, and took his place on a gilded platform; and we regarded his doing this as an omen.⁸ Later he would ascend to his customary place and from there view the remainder of the spectacle with us. After that the contests no longer resembled child's play, but were so serious that great numbers of men were killed. Indeed, on one occasion, when some of the victors hesitated to kill the defeated, he fastened the various contestants together and ordered them all to fight at once. Then the men who were bound fought man against man, and some killed even those who did not belong to their group at all, since the numbers and the limited space forced them together.



At the base of the Bust of Commodus as Hercules is an Amazon figure.

That spectacle, of the general character I have described, lasted fourteen days. When the emperor was fighting, we senators together with the equestrians always attended. The only person never to show up was Claudius Pompeianus – he sent his sons, while remaining away himself; for he preferred to die for this rather than to behold the emperor, the son of Marcus, behaving like this. For among other things that we did, we would shout out whatever we were ordered, and we especially shouted out these words: “You are lord and you are first, the most fortunate of men. Victor you are, and victor you shall be; from everlasting, Amazonian, you are victor.” But many of the people did not enter the amphitheatre at all, and others departed after merely glancing inside, partly from shame at what was going on, partly also from fear, for a report spread abroad that he would want to shoot a

few of the spectators in imitation of Hercules and the Stymphalian birds.⁹ And this story was believed, too, because he had once gathered all the men in the city who had lost their feet as the result of disease or some accident, and then, after fastening about their knees some likenesses of serpents' bodies, and giving them sponges to throw instead of stones, killed them with blows of a club, pretending that they were giants.

We all shared this fear – us senators as well as the rest of the people. Another thing he did to us senators which gave us every reason to expect our death was to kill an ostrich and cut off his head and then approach where we were sitting, holding the head in his left hand and silently raising up his bloody sword with his right hand, he wagged his head with a grin, indicating that he would treat us in the same way. Many would indeed have died by the sword on the spot, for laughing at him (for we were overcome with laughter rather than indignation), if I had not chewed some laurel leaves, which I got from my garland and persuaded the others who were sitting near me to do the same, so that in the steady movement of our arms we could hide the fact that we were laughing. After the events described he raised our spirits. For when he was intending to fight once more as a gladiator, he ordered us enter the amphitheatre dressed formally as equestrians and in our woollen cloaks, a thing that we never do when going to the amphitheatre except when one of the emperors has passed away; and on the last day his helmet was carried out by the gates through which the dead are taken out. These events caused absolutely every one of us to believe that we were surely about to be rid of him.

7. A private servant and especially someone who guards access to a public person.

8. Mercury was, among other duties, the god who escorted the souls of the dead to the underworld.

9. This was one of Hercules' 12 labours.

And he actually did die, or rather was killed, before long. For Laetus and Eclectus, displeased about what he was doing, and inspired by fear because of the threats he made against them because they tried to prevent him from acting in this way, formed a plot against him. It seems that Commodus wished to kill both the consuls, Erucius Clarus and Sosius Falco, and on New Year's Day to issue forth both as consul and secutor from the quarters of the gladiators; in fact, he had the first cell there, as if he were one of them. Let no one doubt this statement. Indeed, he actually cut off the head of the Colossus, and substituted for it a likeness of his own head; then, having given it a club and placed a bronze lion at



Athlete Narcissus strangling Commodus.

its feet, so as to cause it to look like Hercules, he inscribed on it, in addition to the list of his titles which I have already indicated, these words: "Champion of secutores; only left-handed fighter to conquer twelve times (as I recall the number) one thousand men. For these reasons Laetus and Eclectus attacked him, after making Marcia their confidant. At any rate, on the last day of the year, at night, when people were busy with the holiday, they caused Marcia to administer poison to him in some beef. But the immoderate use of wine and baths, which was habitual with him, kept him from succumbing at once, and instead he vomited up some of it; and thus suspecting the truth, he indulged in some threats. Then they sent Narcissus, an athlete, against him, and caused this man to strangle him while he was taking a bath. Such was the end of Commodus, after he had ruled twelve years, nine months, and fourteen days. He had lived thirty-one years and four months; and with him the line of the genuine Aurelii ceased to rule.

[Cassius Dio](#), *Roman History*

The last word on Commodus goes to Herodian, a second century CE historian:

Now the emperor, casting aside all restraint, took part in the public shows, promising to kill with his own hands wild animals of all kinds and to fight in gladiatorial combat against the bravest of the youths. When this news became known, people hastened to Rome from all over Italy and from the neighboring provinces to see what they had neither seen nor even heard of before. Special mention was made of the skill of his hands and the fact that he never missed when hurling javelins or shooting arrows.

His instructors were the most skillful of the Parthian bowmen and the most accurate of the Moroccan javelin men, but he surpassed them all in marksmanship. When the days for the show arrived, the amphitheatre was completely filled. A terrace encircling the arena had been constructed for Commodus, enabling him to avoid risking his life by fighting the animals at close quarters; rather, by hurling his javelins down from a safe place, he offered a display of skill rather than of courage. Deer, roebuck, and horned animals of all kinds, except bulls, he struck down, running with them in pursuit, anticipating their dashes, and killing them with deadly blows. Lions, leopards, and other animals of the nobler sort he killed from above, running around on his terrace. And on no occasion did anyone see a second javelin used, nor any wound except the death wound. For at the very moment the animal started up, it received the blow on its forehead or in its heart, and it bore no other wound, nor did the javelin pierce any other part of its body: the beast was wounded and killed in the same instant. Animals were collected for him from all over the world. Then we saw in the flesh animals that we had previously marveled at in paintings.



Emperor Commodus kills a leopard with an arrow

From India and Ethiopia, from lands to the north and to the south, he displayed animals unknown before to the Romans and then killed them. On one occasion he shot arrows with crescent-shaped heads at Moroccan ostriches, birds that move with great speed, both because of their swift nature aloft and the sail-like nature of their wings. He cut off their heads at the very top of the neck; so, after their heads had been severed by the edge of the arrow, they continued to run around as if they had not been injured. Once when a leopard, with a lightning dash, seized a condemned criminal, he thwarted the leopard with his javelin as it was about to close its jaws; he killed the beast and rescued the man, the point of the javelin anticipating the points of the leopard's teeth.

Again, when a hundred lions appeared in one group as if from beneath the earth, he killed the entire hundred with exactly one hundred javelins, and all the bodies lay stretched out in a straight line for some distance; they could thus be counted with no difficulty, and no one saw a single extra javelin.

As far as these activities are concerned, however, even if his conduct was hardly becoming for an emperor, he did win the approval of the mob for his courage and his marksmanship. But when he came into the amphitheater naked, took up arms, and fought as a gladiator, the people saw a disgraceful spectacle, a nobly born emperor of the Romans, whose fathers and forebears had won many victories, not taking the field against barbarians or opponents worthy of the Romans, but disgracing his high position by degrading and disgusting exhibitions.

In his gladiatorial combats, he defeated his opponents easily, and he did no more than wound them, since they all submitted to him, but only because they knew he was the emperor, not because he was truly a gladiator. At last he became so demented that he was unwilling to live in the imperial palace, but wished to change his residence to the gladiatorial barracks. He gave orders that he was no longer to be called Hercules, but by the name of a famous gladiator then dead. He removed the head of a huge Colossus which the Romans worship and which bears the likeness of the Sun, replacing it with his own head, and inscribed on the base not the usual imperial and family titles; instead of "Germanicus" he wrote: "Conqueror of a Thousand Gladiators." On this day, too, they dine merrily together on the delicacies of land and sea. This is also the day on which the consuls who give their names to the year first don the purple robes of office for their one-year term. When all were occupied in the celebration, Commodus had it in mind to appear not from the imperial palace, in the customary fashion, but from the gladiatorial barracks, clad in armor instead of in the splendid imperial purple, and accompanied by the rest of the gladiators.

But the time had finally come for Commodus to cease his mad antics and for the Roman empire to be rid of this tyrant. This occurred on the first day of the new year, when the Romans celebrate the festival which they trace back to the most ancient of the Italic native gods. They believe that Saturn, ousted from his realm by Jupiter, came down to earth and was the guest of Janus. Fearful of his son's power, he escaped when Janus hid him. This episode gave the region of Latium its name, which is derived from the Greek word *lathein*, "to escape notice." For this reason the Italians continue to celebrate the Saturnalia down to the present time, to commemorate the sheltering of the god, and they observe at the beginning of the year the festival of the Italic god Janus. The statues of Janus have two faces because the year begins and ends with him. On the day of this festival the Romans go out of their way to greet each other and exchange gifts. He announced his intentions to Marcia, whom, of all his mistresses, he held in highest esteem; he kept nothing from this woman, as if she were his legal wife, even allowing her the imperial honors except for the sacred fire. When she learned of his plan, so unreasonable and unbecoming an emperor, she threw herself at his feet, entreating him, with tears, not to bring disgrace upon the Roman Empire and not to endanger his life by entrusting it to gladiators and desperate men. After much pleading, unable to persuade the emperor to abandon his plan, she left him, still weeping. Commodus then

summoned Laetus, the praetorian prefect, and Eclectus, his *cubicularius*, and ordered them to make arrangements for him to spend the night in the gladiatorial barracks, telling them that he would leave for the festival sacrifices from there, and show himself to the Romans under arms. And these men, too, pleaded with the emperor not to do anything unworthy of his imperial position.

Commodus, enraged, dismissed them and retired to his bedroom for a nap (for this was his custom in the middle of the day). First he took a wax tablet made from a thin strip of basswood, which grows under the bark of the linden tree – and wrote down the names of those who were to be put to death that night. Marcia’s name was at the top of the list, followed by Laetus and Eclectus and a large number of the foremost senators. Commodus wanted all the elder statesmen and the advisers appointed for him by his father, those who still survived, to be put to death, for he was ashamed to have these revered men witness his disgraceful actions. He planned to confiscate the property of the wealthy and distribute it to the soldiers, so that they would protect him, and to the gladiators, so that they would entertain him. After composing his list, Commodus placed the tablet on his couch, thinking that no one would come into his bedroom. But there was in the palace a very young little boy, one of those who went about bare of clothes but adorned with gold and costly gems. The Roman voluptuaries always took delight in these lads. Commodus was very fond of this child and often slept with him; his name, Philocommodus clearly indicates the emperor’s affection for him.

Philocommodus was playing idly about the palace. After Commodus had gone out to his usual baths and drinking bouts, the lad wandered into the emperor’s bedroom, as he usually did; picking up the tablet for a plaything, he left the bedroom. By a stroke of fate, he met Marcia. After hugging and kissing him (for she too was fond of the child), she took the tablet from him, afraid that in his heedless play he might accidentally erase something important. When she recognized the emperor’s handwriting, she was eager to read the tablet. Discovering that it was a death list and that she was scheduled to die first, followed by Laetus and Eclectus and many others marked for murder, she cried out in grief and then said to herself: “So, Commodus, this is my reward for my love and devotion, after I have put up with your arrogance and your madness for so many years. But, you drunken sot, you shall not outwit a woman deadly sober!”

She then summoned Eclectus; he was in the habit of visiting her anyway, since he was the bedroom steward, and it was rumored that she was sleeping with him. She handed him the tablet, saying: “See what a party we are to enjoy tonight!” Eclectus read it and was dumbfounded (but he was an Egyptian, bold by nature and quick-tempered, a man of action). Sealing the tablet, he sent it off to Laetus by one of his trusted slaves. After reading the tablet, Laetus hurried to Marcia as if to discuss the emperor’s orders with her, especially about his proposed stay with the gladiators. And while they pretended to be arguing about this matter, they concluded that they must act first or suffer the consequences, agreeing that it was no time for indecision or delay. They decided to poison Commodus, and Marcia assured them that she could administer a potion with the greatest ease. For it was her custom to mix the wine and give the emperor his first cup, so that he might have a pleasant drink from the hand of his beloved. When Commodus returned from his bath, she poured the poison into the cup, mixed it with a pungent wine, and gave it to him to drink. Since it was his practice to take a cup of friendship after his many baths and jousts with animals, he drained it without noticing anything unusual. Immediately he became drowsy and stupefied and fell asleep, believing that it was the natural result of his exertions. Eclectus and Marcia ordered all the rest to return to their homes, and made everything quiet for him. Commodus had acted like this on other occasions when overcome by wine. Since he bathed often and drank often, he had no set time for sleeping; in addition, he indulged in all kinds of pleasures, to which he was a willing slave at any hour.

Herodian, *Roman History* 1.15-17

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Executions



Criminals being thrown to the beasts (left) and venatores (right) on the Zliten Mosaic.

One form of spectacles in the arena was the execution of criminals; this is also generally the most appalling of the events to read about. These took place at noon, and were the lunchtime show. They were not, however, all that popular, unless the criminal was particularly notorious: there was no skill on show and those about to be executed were not about to be given a means to protect themselves and the Romans, contrary to their popular image, were not always that eager to see people murdered by animals or other people nonstop. As a result some criminals were killed in elaborately stage-managed re-enactments of mythical spectacles as a way to attract attention. Most, however, were just thrown to the animals.

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Damnatio ad Bestias

The readings in this section deal with those condemned to be killed by being thrown to a range of wild animals. In 146 BCE Scipio Africanus the Younger had deserters killed by this means; Lucius Aemilius Paulus had some deserters trampled by elephants in 167 BCE; but these were foreigners – Roman soldiers were not normally executed publicly in this fashion, as it was a particularly humiliating form of punishment. The executions were not actually all that popular, not necessarily because people were compassionate and hated people being executed this way (although some surely did), but because they were boring and not edifying. Notice in the passage, below the Stoic philosopher Seneca the Younger is not disturbed by public executions per se, but by the evil effect he felt they had on those watching.



I visited the games once at midday, hoping to find some touch of wit and humor there – I was bitterly disappointed. It was really nothing but butchery and what occurred in the morning section was merciful compared to it – at this stage they put aside all trifling and what goes on is nothing but murder. They have no armour to defend them and are open everywhere to blows and no blow occurs without a wound. Many people prefer this part of the games to the normal pairs [of gladiators] and the bouts at request. No wonder! For they have no helmets or shields to deflect weapons – for what is the point of armour or weapons? They do nothing but delay death. In the morning men were thrown to lions and to bears, at midday to the spectators. There was no escape for them: the audience demands that some who kills is kept fighting until he can be killed. Every bout ends in death by the sword or fire. And all of this goes on while the stands are empty! You may reply, “But he was a bandit! He killed someone!” So what? Fine: he killed someone and deserved to die; but you, poor man, what have you done that you deserve to watch this?

“Kill him! Whip him! Burn him alive,” is the cry: “Why does he rush on the blade so timidly? Why is he so reluctant to kill? Why won’t he die willingly? Drive him with whips to take wounds! Let them both get blow for blow, with their bare chests exposed for the wounds!” There is an interval: “While we’re waiting let’s have some throatcutting so that nothing is left undone.”

Seneca the Younger, *Letters to Lucilius* 7

Tertullian similarly criticises these executions, not because he thought it was wrong to kill people

but because he could not be sure that those killed in this way were guilty and because of the effect it had on the viewers:

We shall now see how the Scriptures condemn the amphitheatre. If we can maintain that it is right to indulge in the cruel, and the impious, and the fierce, let us go there. If we are what we are said to be, let us glut ourselves there with human blood. It is good, no doubt, to have the guilty punished. Who but the criminal himself will deny that? And yet the innocent can find no pleasure in another's sufferings: he rather mourns that a brother has sinned so heinously as to need a punishment so dreadful. But who is my guarantee that it is always the guilty who are condemned to the wild beasts, or to some other destiny, and that the guiltless never suffer from the revenge of the judge, or the weakness of the defence, or the pressure of the rack? How much better, then, is it for me to remain ignorant of the punishment inflicted on the wicked, in case, I am obliged to know also of the good coming to untimely ends—if I may speak of goodness in the case at all! At any rate, gladiators not chargeable with crime are offered in sale for the games, that they may become the victims of the public pleasure. Even in the case of those who are judicially condemned to the amphitheatre, what a monstrous thing it is, that, in undergoing their punishment, they, from some less serious delinquency, advance to the criminality of mankillers!

But I mean these remarks for the pagans. As to Christians, I shall not insult them by adding another word as to the aversion with which they should regard this sort of exhibition; though no one is more able than myself to set forth fully the whole subject, unless it be one who is still in the habit of going to the shows. I would rather this be incomplete than set people's memory working again.

[Tertullian](#) *On Spectacles* 19

Although public executions were felt by nearly everyone to serve an important social function and few pitied those in the arena, as far as we can tell, it was thought disturbing to take too much pleasure in the executions, as the Emperor Claudius did.



A plate from North Africa shows damnatio ad bestias, with a woman tied to a stake as a bear prepares to attack.

Claudius was constantly giving gladiatorial *munera*, for he took great pleasure in them, and he even aroused criticism because of this. Very few wild beasts perished, but a great many human beings did, some of them fighting with each other and others being devoured by the animals. For the emperor cordially detested the slaves and freedmen who in the reigns of Tiberius and Gaius [Caligula] had conspired against their masters, as well as those who had laid information against others without cause or had borne false witness against them, and he accordingly got rid of most of them in the manner related, though he punished some in another way, and handed many over to their masters themselves for punishment. So great, indeed, was the number becoming of those who were publicly executed, that the statue of Augustus

which stood on the spot was taken elsewhere, so that it should not either seem to be witnessing the bloodshed or else be always covered up. By this action Claudius brought ridicule upon himself, as he was gorging himself upon the very sights that he did not think it fitting for even the inanimate bronze to seem to behold. He used to delight especially in watching those who were cut down during the intermission in the spectacle at lunch time; and yet he had put to death a lion that had been trained to eat men and therefore greatly pleased the crowd, claiming that it was not fitting for Romans to gaze on such a sight. But for certain acts he was loudly praised — for mingling freely with the people at the spectacles, for providing them with all they wanted, and also because he made very little use of heralds but instead announced most events by means of notices written on boards.

[Cassius Dio](#) *Roman History* 60

There were few happy endings for those thrown to the animals: those who entered the arena died. One exception is the (almost certainly false) story of the slave Androclus and the lion he had once rescued.

Apion Plistonices was a man who knew a great deal about literature and had an extensive and varied knowledge of things Greek. In his works, which are recognized as of great repute, is contained an account of almost all the remarkable things which are to be seen and heard in Egypt. Now, in his account of what he professes either to have heard or read he is perhaps too verbose through a reprehensible love of display—for he is a great self-advertiser in parading his learning; but this incident, which he describes in the fifth book of his *Wonders of Egypt*, he declares that he neither heard nor read, but saw himself with his own eyes in the city of Rome.

“In the Circus Maximus,” he says, “a battle with wild beasts on a grand scale was being exhibited to the people. Of that spectacle, since I chanced to be in Rome, I was,” he says, “an eye-witness. There were there many savage wild beasts, brutes remarkable for their huge size, and all of uncommon appearance or unusual ferocity. But beyond all others,” says he, “did the vast size of the lions excite wonder, and one of these in particular surpassed all the rest. This one lion had drawn to himself the attention and eyes of all because of the activity and huge size of his body, his terrific and deep roar, the development of his muscles, and the mane streaming over his shoulders. There was brought in, among many others who had been condemned to fight with the wild beasts, the slave of an ex-consul; the slave’s name was Androclus. When that lion saw him from a distance,” says Apion, “he stopped short as if in amazement, and then approached the man slowly and quietly, as if he recognized him. Then, wagging his tail in a mild and caressing way, after the manner and fashion of fawning dogs, he came close to the man, who was now half dead from fright, and gently licked his feet and hands. The man Androclus, while submitting to the caresses of so fierce a beast, regained his lost courage and gradually turned his eyes to look at the lion. Then,” says Apion, “you might have seen man and lion exchange joyful greetings, as if they had recognized each other.”



He says that at this sight, so truly astonishing, the people broke out into great shouts; and Gaius Caesar¹ called Androclus to him and inquired why that fiercest of lions had spared him alone. Then Androclus told a strange and marvellous story. “My master,” he said, “was governor of Africa. While there, I was forced by his undeserved, daily whippings to run away, and that my hiding-places might be safer from my master, who ruled that region, I took refuge in lonely plains and deserts, intending, if food should fail me, to seek death in some form. Then,” said he,

1. Caligula

“when the midday sun was fierce and scorching, finding a remote and secluded cavern, I entered it, and hid myself. Not long afterwards this lion came to the same cave with one paw lame and bleeding, making known by groans and moans the torturing pain of his wound.” And then, at the first sight of the approaching lion, Androclus said that his mind was overwhelmed with fear and dread. “But when the lion,” said he, “had entered what was evidently his own lair, and saw me cowering at a distance, he approached me mildly and gently, and lifting up his foot, was evidently showing it to me and holding it out as if to ask for help. Then,” said he, “I drew out a huge splinter that was embedded in the sole of the foot, squeezed out the pus that had formed in the interior of the wound, wiped away the blood, and dried it thoroughly, being now free from any great feeling of fear. Then, relieved by that attention and treatment of mine, the lion, putting his paw in my hand, lay down and went to sleep, and for three whole years from that day the lion and I lived in the same cave, and on the same food as well. For he used to bring for me to the cave the choicest parts of the game which he took in hunting, which I, having no means of making a fire, dried in the noonday sun and ate. But,” said he, “after I had finally grown tired of that wild life, I left the cave when the lion had gone off to hunt, and after travelling nearly three days, I was seen and caught by some soldiers and taken from Africa to Rome to my master. He at once had me condemned to death by being thrown to the wild beasts. But,” said he, “I see that this lion was also captured, after I left him, and that he is now paying me back for my kindness and my cure of him.”

Apion records that Androclus told this story, and that when it had been made known to the people by being written out in full on a tablet and carried about the Circus, at the request of all Androclus was freed, acquitted and presented with the lion by vote of the people. “Afterwards,” said he, “we used to see Androclus with the lion, attached to a slender leash, making the rounds of the shops throughout the city; Androclus was given money, the lion was sprinkled with flowers, and everyone who met them anywhere exclaimed: ‘This is the lion that was a man’s friend, this is the man who was physician to a lion.’”

Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 5.14

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Executions as Mythical Re-enactments

Warning: This chapter contains graphic descriptions of violence.

A particularly gruesome form of execution involved making the condemned criminal play a role in a mythic re-enactment. A form of this was inflicted on the bandit Selurus, who was brought to Rome and executed on a wooden platform made to look like Mount Aetna:

And recently, in my own time,¹ a certain Selurus, called the “son of Aetna,” was sent up to Rome because he had put himself at the head of an army and for a long time had overrun the regions round about Aetna with frequent raids; I saw him torn to pieces by wild beasts at an appointed combat of gladiators in the Forum; for he was placed on a lofty scaffold, as though on Aetna, and the scaffold was made suddenly to break up and collapse, and he himself was carried down with it into cages of wild-beasts — fragile cages that had been prepared beneath the scaffold for that purpose.

Strabo, *Geography* 7.2

The poet Martial records several far more elaborate executions in his *Book of Spectacles* (originally written for Titus’ games for the opening of the Colosseum, he revised it and it was presented to Domitian in 81 CE).

V Believe that Pasiphae was mated to the Cretan bull: we have seen it, the old-time myth is now believed!² And let not long ago time, Caesar, marvel at itself: the arena makes real for you whatever Fame sings of.

VII Just as Prometheus³ chained on a Scythian crag fed the untiring vulture with his too prolific heart, so Laureolus,⁴ hanging on a real cross, defenceless gave up his guts to a Caledonian bear. His mangled limbs lived on, though the parts dripped gore, and in all his body there was nowhere a body’s shape. He finally won a deserved punishment: the guilty man had cut a parent’s or a master’s throat with his sword, or, in his insanity, had robbed a temple of its piled up gold, or had secretly set a savage torch to you, Rome.⁵ Accursed, he had outdone the crimes ancient legends tell told; in him that which had been a show before was punishment.

VIII Daedalus, now you are being mangled by a Lucanian boar,⁶ how you wish you now had your wings!

XVIB A bull carried Europa along fraternal seas; but now a bull has carried Alcides⁷ to the stars. Compare now, Fame, the bulls of Caesar and of Jupiter: the burden was the same, yet Caesar’s bull threw his higher.

XXI The arena has shown to you, Caesar, whatever Rhodope saw, it is said, on the Orphic stage.⁸ Cliffs crept close and a marvellous wood moved swiftly on, one such as men think the grove of the Hesperides

1. c. 35 BCE.

2. Pasiphae was the wife of Minos, king of Crete. As a punishment to Minos she was forced to fall in love with a bull by the god Neptune. She mated with him after the craftsman Daedalus built a hollow wooden cow for her to hide in. The child of this union was the Minotaur.

3. As a punishment for stealing fire and giving it to mankind, Jupiter chained the god Prometheus to a rock; every day a vulture ate his liver, which grew back in the night.

4. He was a legendary Roman bandit; there was a mime named after him

5. Arson was considered a particularly heinous crime in Rome because of the great amount of damage it could cause.

6. Lucania is a region in the South of Italy; densely wooded, it was known for its wild boars.

7. Alcides = Hercules. Europa was a princess who was abducted by Jupiter in the form of a white bull; he carried her from Asia to Crete.

8. The mountain of Rhodope in Thrace was associated with the mythical poet Orpheus, who was said to be able to charm wild animals with his song. In this re-enactment it seems as if a condemned prisoner was made to play the role of Orpheus, eventually being mauled by a bear.

was. Every kind of wild beast was there, mixed in the herd and above the Orpheus many birds hovered – but he fell, mauled by an ungrateful bear. This was the only thing which did not correspond to the legend.

XXIB When the earth yawned suddenly and sent out a she-bear to attack Orpheus, the bear came from Eurydice.⁹

XXV Stop wondering that the night-time wave spared you, Leander¹⁰ – it was Caesar’s wave.

XXV B While bold Leander was swimming to his sweet love and his weary head was now being engulfed by the swelling waters, in misery (or it is said) he spoke to the surging waves: ” Spare me while I go to her, overwhelm me when I return.”

XXVI A trained bevy of Nereids played along the sea and danced on the yielding waters with their varied arrangements. A trident threatened with straight spikes, an anchor with a curved one: we thought we saw an oar, and we thought we saw a boat, and that the Spartan¹¹ star glittered in welcome to the seamen, and sails filled wide for all to see. Who imagined such marvellous art in liquid waves? These pastimes either Thetis taught or learned herself.

[Martial](#), *On Spectacles*

Not all re-enactments involved Greek myth: some also involved people playing the role of figures from Roman legend as in the following poem about a criminal being forced to play the role of Gaius Mucius Scaevola, a legendary Roman who thrust his hand into a sacrificial fire after being captured by Rome’s enemies when on a mission to assassinate the enemy leader: he did this as a way to show them how little Romans valued their lives or cared about pain:

9. It is likely that XXI and XXIB were originally parts of the same poem. Eurydice was Orpheus’ wife, whom he tried unsuccessfully to rescue from the underworld.

10. This and the following were part of a naumachia, rather than an event in the Colosseum. Part of the show was presumably someone representing Leander re-enacting his mythic swim across the Hellespont to his beloved Hero.

11. The stars of Castor and Pollux, gods worshipped by sailors.

The spectacle which is now presented to us in Caesar's arena, was the great glory of the days of Brutus. See how bravely the hand bears the flames. It even enjoys the punishment, and reigns in the astonished fire! Scaevola himself appears as a spectator of his own act, and applauds the noble destruction of his right hand, which seems to luxuriate in the sacrificial fire; and unless the means of suffering had been taken away from it against its will, the left hand was still more boldly preparing to meet the vanquished flames. I am unwilling, after so glorious an action, to inquire what he had done before; it is sufficient for me to have witnessed the fate of his hand.

Martial Epigrams 8.30

If that Mucius, whom we recently saw in the arena in the morning, and who shoved his hand into the blaring fire, appears to you to be a man of patience, fortitude, and endurance, you have no more sense than the people of Abdera; for when a man is commanded, with the alternative of the pitched shirt before his eyes, to burn his hand, it would be more courageous to say, "I will not burn it!"

Martial, *Epigrams* 10.25

Tertullian raged¹² against these mythic re-enactments (along with other things, such as farces)



Mucius Scaevola

Others of your writers in their depravity even amuse you by vilifying the gods. Look at those elegant writings of your Lentuli and Hostilii, whether in the jokes and tricks it is the mimes or your gods which make you laugh, [writing likes] *Anubis the Adulterer*, and *Mr. Luna*,¹³ *Diana Whipped*, and *Reading of the Will of Jupiter Deceased*, and *Three Mocked and Hungry Herculeses*. Your dramatic literature, too, depicts all the sins of your gods. The Sun mourns his offspring cast down from heaven to your pleasure; Cybele sighs after the scornful shepherd without a blush from you;¹⁴ you tolerate Jupiter's misdeeds appearing on stage, and the shepherd judging Juno, Venus, and Minerva.¹⁵ Then, again, when the face of one your gods sits on a disreputable and infamous head, when an impure body of someone and up for the art in all effeminacy represents a Minerva or a Hercules, is not the majesty of your gods insulted and their deity dishonoured? Yet you not merely look on, but applaud. You are, I suppose, more devout in the arena, where after the same fashion your deities dance on human blood, on the pollutions caused by inflicted punishments, as they act their themes and stories, doing their turn for the wretched criminals, except that these, too, often put on divinity and actually play the very gods. We have seen in our day a representation of the mutilation of Attis, that famous god of Pessinus, and a man burnt alive as Hercules. We have made merry amid the ludicrous cruelties of the noonday exhibition, at Mercury examining the bodies of the

12. I suspect that at least 50% of Tertullian's waking hours were spent raging about something.

13. The moon goddess, Luna, was not usually a man. As might be guessed by the fact that she was a goddess

14. Attis; he was a shepherd who was driven mad as a punishment by the goddess Cybele. In his madness he castrated himself, the mutilation that Tertullian is referring to.

15. A reference to the Judgment of Paris, where the shepherd Paris gave the Golden Apple as prize to Venus after she'd promised him Helen of Troy.

dead with his hot iron; we have witnessed Jupiter's brother, mallet in hand, dragging out the corpses of the gladiators.¹⁶ But who can go into everything of this sort?

[Tertullian](#), *Apology* 15.4-6

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16. In the arena there was a person dressed up as Pluto, god of the underworld and Jupiter's brother, who hit the corpses with his mallet to make sure they were dead and dragged the corpses out with a tool.

Executions of Christians

If there has been one element of the arena that has captured imaginations and condemnation for centuries, it's the execution of Christians in the arena. Although films about saintly early Christians being fed to the lions are not made at the same rate as they once were,¹ the image is still iconic, even though Christians were never executed in the Colosseum. *For more on this topic see: [The Spectacle of Martyrdom](#).*

We first hear of Christians being punished after the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE. Nero, facing accusations that he had deliberately set the fire used the Christians as scapegoats:

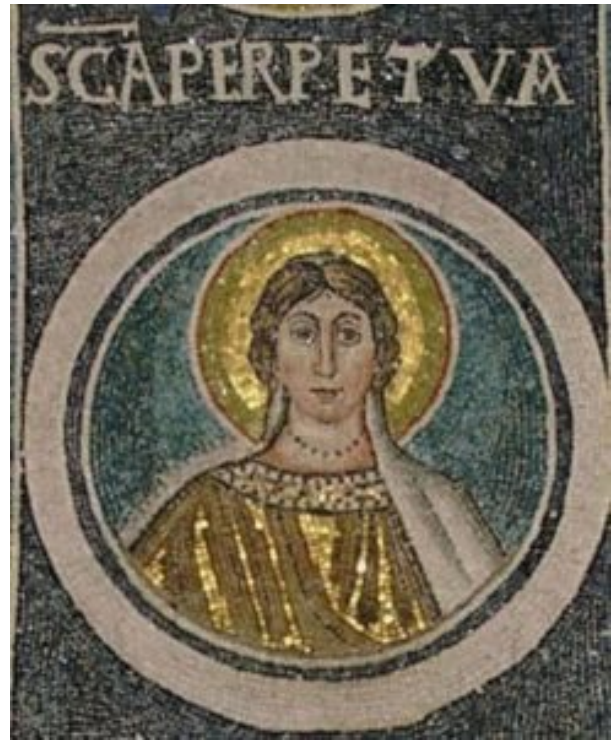
Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.

[Tacitus](#), *Annals* 47

Perpetua was arrested and executed in Carthage in 203 CE; the account of her trial and execution is unusual in that much of it is a first person account, taken from her diary.

1. Classic films on this topic include: *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), *The Robe* (1953), *Quo Vadis* (1951), and *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954).

A few days after, the report that we were to be tried. My father returned from the city weary and exhausted and he begged me to disavow my faith saying: "Have pity, daughter, on my grey hairs; have pity on your father, if I am worthy to be called father by you; if with these hands I have brought you up to this blossoming youth and I have preferred you to all your brothers; give me not over to the reproach of men. Look upon your brothers; look upon your mother and aunt; look upon your son, who will not survive you. Give up your resolution; do not destroy us all together; for none of us will speak openly against men again if you suffer anything." This he said because of his father's love, kissing my hands and grovelling at my feet; and with tears called me lady instead of daughter. And I was grieved for my father because he alone would not rejoice at my passion out of all my family; and I comforted him, saying: "Whatever God wishes shall be done at this tribunal; for know that we are not established in our own power, but in God's." And he left in deep sorrow.



Mosaic of Saint Perpetua in the Euphrasian Basilica in Porec in Croatia.

Another day as we were eating we were suddenly dragged away to be tried; and we came to the forum. At that point a report spread abroad through the parts near to the forum and a very great number gathered together. We went up to the tribunal. The others confessed when asked. So they came to me. And my father appeared there with my son, and tried to draw me from the step, saying: "Perform the Sacrifice; have mercy on the child." And Hilarian the procurator – he that after the death of Minucius Timinian the proconsul had received in his room the right and power of the sword – said: "Spare your father's grey hair; spare your infant boy. Make a sacrifice for the Emperors' prosperity." And I answered: "I am a Christian." And when my father stood by me yet to cast down my faith, Hilarian ordered him to be thrown down and he was hit with a rod. And I sorrowed for my father's harm as though I had been hit myself; so sorrowed I for his unhappy old age. Then Hilarian passed sentence upon us all and condemned us to the beasts and we went cheerfully down to the cells.

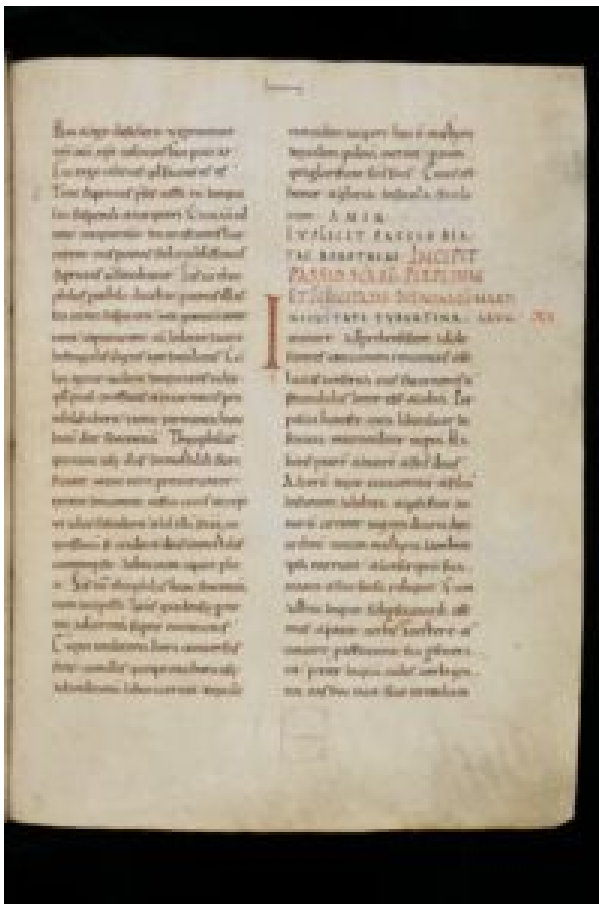
The section I have cut tells how the Christians are kept in prison awaiting execution for several days; we pick up the narrative where Perpetua is describing a vision:

The day before we fought, I saw in a vision that Pomponius the deacon had come here to the door of the prison and knocked hard on it. And I went out to him and opened it; he was dressed in an unbelted, white robe and wearing very curiously made shoes. And he said to me: "Perpetua, we await you; come." And he took my hand, and we began to go through rugged and winding places. At last, breathing hard, we came to the amphitheatre, and he led me into the middle of the arena. And he said to me: "Be not afraid; I am here with you and suffer together with you." And he went away. And I saw many people watching closely. And because I knew that I was condemned to the beasts I marvelled that beasts were not sent out against me. And there came out against me an ugly Egyptian with his helpers to fight with me. Also there came to me attractive young men, my helpers and aiders. And I was stripped naked and I became a man. And my helpers began to rub me with oil as their custom is for a contest; and facing was that Egyptian wallowing in the dust. And there came out a very tall man, so tall that he towered over the very top of the amphitheatre, wearing an unbelted robe, and beneath it between the two stripes over the breast a robe of purple; having also shoes strangely made in gold and silver; bearing a rod like a master of gladiators, and a green branch with golden apples. And he asked for silence and said: "Egyptian, if he shall conquer this woman, shall kill her with the sword; and if she shall conquer him, she shall receive this branch." And he went away. And we came close to each other, and began to strike one another. He tried to trip up my feet, but I with my heels kicked his face. And I rose up into the air and began so to hit him as though as I did

not stand on earth. But when I saw that there was yet delay, I joined my hands, setting finger against finger. And I caught his head, and he fell upon his face; and I trod upon his head. And the people began to shout, and my helpers began to sing. And I went up to the master of gladiators and received the branch. And he kissed me and said to me: "Daughter, peace be with you." And I began to go with glory to the gate called the Gate of Life.

And I awoke; and I understood that I should fight, not with beasts but against the devil; but I knew that mine was the victory. Thus far I have written this, till the day before the games; but the events of the games themselves let him write who will.

The next section is written by another Christian, who relates what eventually happened to Perpetua and the rest of the Christians:



Opening page of *The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*

These were the glorious visions of those martyrs themselves, the most blessed Saturus and Perpetua, which they themselves wrote down. But God called Secundulus earlier from this world while he was yet in prison; not without grace, but so he would escape the beasts. Yet if not his soul, his flesh at least knew the sword. As for Felicity, she too received this gift from the Lord. For because she was eight months pregnant (being already with child when she was arrested) she was very sad as the day of the games came closer, fearing that she should be kept back for this reason (for it is not lawful for pregnant women to be exhibited for torment) and she would shed her holy and innocent blood after us among strangers and criminals. Also her fellow martyrs were very sad to leave behind them so good a friend and as it were their fellow-traveller on the road of the same hope. Wherefore with joint and united groaning they poured out their prayer to the Lord, three days before the games. Her birth pains came to her early after their prayer. And when by reason of the natural difficulty of the eighth month she was oppressed with labour and made cried out, there said to her one of the servants of the keepers of the door: You that cry out now, what will you do when you are thrown to the beasts, which you despised when you would not sacrifice? And she answered, I myself now suffer that which I suffer, but there another shall be in me who shall suffer for me,

because I am to suffer for him. So she gave birth to a daughter, whom a sister reared up to be her own daughter.

Since therefore the Holy Spirit has suffered, and suffering has willed, that the order of the games also should be written; though we are unworthy to finish the recounting of so great glory, yet we accomplish the will of the most holy Perpetua, nay rather her sacred trust, adding one testimony more of her own steadfastness and height of spirit. When they were being more cruelly handled by the tribune because through advice of certain most despicable men he feared that they might be taken from the prison secretly by magic charms, Perpetua answered him to his face: Why do you not allow us to take some comfort, seeing we are victims most noble, namely Caesar's, and on his feast day we are to fight? Or is it not your glory that we should be taken out thither fatter of flesh? The tribune trembled and blushed, and gave order that they should be more gently handled, granting that her brothers and the rest should come in and rest with them. Also the adjutant of the prison now believed.

Likewise on the day before the games, when at the last feast which they call Free they made (as far as they might) not a Free Feast but a Love Feast,² with like hardihood they cast these words at the people; threatening the judgment of the Lord, witnessing to the felicity of their passion, setting at nought the curiosity of those that ran together. And Saturus said: Is not tomorrow sufficient for you? Why do you favourably behold that which you hate? You are friends today, foes tomorrow. Yet mark our faces diligently, that you may know us again on that day. So they began all to go away thence astonished and many now believed. Now dawned the day of their victory, and they went forth from the prison into the amphitheatre as it were into heaven, cheerful and bright of countenance; if they trembled at all, it was for joy, not for fear. Perpetua followed behind, glorious of presence, as a true spouse of Christ and darling of God; at whose piercing look all cast down their eyes. Felicity likewise, rejoicing that she had given birth to a child in safety, that she might fight with the beasts, came now from blood to blood, from the midwife to the gladiator, to wash after her travail in a second baptism. And when they had been brought to the gate and were being compelled to put on, the men the dress of the priests of Saturn, the women the dress of the priestesses of Ceres, the noble Perpetua remained firm to the end, and would not. For she said: For this cause came we willingly unto this, that our liberty might not be obscured. For this cause have we devoted our lives, that we might do no such thing as this; this we agreed with you. Injustice acknowledged justice; the tribune suffered that they should be brought out as they were, without more fuss. Perpetua began to sing, as already treading on the Egyptian's head. Revocatus and Saturninus and Saturus threatened the people as they gazed. Then when they came into Hilarian's sight, they began to say to Hilarian, stretching out their hands and nodding their heads: You judge us, they said, and God you. At this the people being enraged begged that they should be beaten with scourges before the line of gladiators (those who fought with beasts). Then truly they gave thanks because they had received somewhat of the sufferings of the Lord.

But He who had said *Ask and you shall receive* [John 16:24] gave to them asking that end which each had desired. For whenever they spoke together of their desire in their martyrdom, Saturninus for his part would declare that he wished to be thrown to every kind of beast, that so indeed he might wear the more glorious crown. At the beginning of the spectacle therefore himself with Revocatus first had ado with a leopard and was afterwards torn by a bear on a raised bridge. Now Saturus detested nothing more than a bear, but was confident already he should die by one bite of a leopard. Therefore when he was being given to a boar, the gladiator instead who had bound him to the boar was torn asunder by the same beast and died after the days of the games; nor was Saturus more than dragged. Moreover when he had been tied on the bridge to be assaulted by a bear, the bear would not come out of his den. So Saturus was called back unharmed a second time.

But for the women the devil had made ready a most savage cow, prepared for this purpose against all custom; for even in this beast he would mock their sex. They were stripped therefore and made to put on nets; and so they were brought out. The people shuddered, seeing one a tender girl, the other her breasts yet dropping from her late childbearing. So they were called back and clothed in loose robes. Perpetua was first thrown, and fell upon her loins. And when she had sat upright, her robe being rent at the side, she drew it over to cover her thigh, mindful rather of modesty than of pain. Next, looking for a pin, she likewise pinned up her dishevelled hair; for it was not fit that a martyr should suffer with hair dishevelled, in case she should seem to grieve in her glory. So she stood up; and when she saw Felicity struck down, she went up and gave her her hand and lifted her up. And both of them stood up together and as the hardness of the people was now subdued were called back to the Gate of Life. There Perpetua being received by one named Rusticus, then a catechumen, who stood close at her side, and as now awakening from sleep (so much was she in the Spirit and in ecstasy) began first to look about her; and then (which amazed everyone there), When, she asked, are we to be thrown to the cow? And when she heard that this had been done already, she would not believe till she perceived some marks of mauling on her body and on her dress. Thereupon she called her brother to her, and that catechumen, and spoke to them, saying: "Stand fast in the faith, and love you all one another; and be not offended because of our passion."

Saturus also at another gate exhorted Pudens the soldier, saying: "So then indeed, as I trusted and foretold, I have felt no assault of beasts until now. And now believe with all your heart. Behold, I go out thither and shall perish by one bite of the leopard. "And immediately at the end of the spectacle, the leopard being

2. The *cena libera* was public meal given to gladiators and the condemned the night before they were to appear in the arena.

released, with one bite of his he was covered with so much blood that the people (in witness to his second baptism) cried out to him returning: "Well washed, well washed." Truly it was well with him who had washed in this way. Then said he to Pudens the soldier: "Farewell; remember the faith and me; and let not these things trouble you, but strengthen you." And then he took from Pudens' finger a little ring, and dipping it in his wound gave it back again for an heirloom, leaving him a pledge and memorial of his blood. Then as the breath left him he was cast down with the rest in the accustomed place for his throat to be cut. And when the people begged that they should be brought forward, that when the sword pierced through their bodies their eyes might be witnesses to the slaughter, they rose of themselves and moved, whither the people willed them, first kissing one another, that they might accomplish their martyrdom with the rites of peace. The rest not moving and in silence received the sword; Saturus much earlier gave up the ghost; for he had gone up earlier also, and now he waited for Perpetua likewise. But Perpetua, that she might have some taste of pain, was pierced between the bones and shrieked out; and when the swordsman's hand wandered still (for he was a novice), herself set it upon her own neck. Perhaps so great a woman could not else have been killed (being afraid by the unclean spirit) had she not herself so willed it.

The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity



Perpetua, Felicitas, Revocatus, Saturninus and Secundulus.

Polycarp was a Bishop of Smyrna in the second century CE; he was executed in 155 CE, and the following relates the events of his death.

Brothers, we write to you the story of the martyrs and of the blessed Polycarp, who put an end to the persecution by his martyrdom as though adding a seal to it. For one might almost say that all that had gone before happened in order that the Lord might show to us from above a martyrdom in accordance with the Gospel. For he waited to be betrayed as Jesus had done, that we too might become his imitators, "not thinking of ourselves alone, but also of our neighbours." For it is the mark of true and steadfast love, not to wish that oneself may be saved alone, but all your brothers also...

...But thanks be to God, for the devil had no power over any. For the most noble Germanicus encouraged

them by his endurance and he fought gloriously with the wild beasts. For when the governor wished to persuade him and ordered him have pity on his youth, he violently dragged the beast towards himself, wishing to be released more quickly from their unrighteous and lawless life. So after this all the crowd, wondering at the nobility of the God-loving and God-fearing people of the Christians, cried out: "Away with the Atheists; let Polycarp be searched for." But one, named Quintus, a Phrygian lately come from Phrygia, when he saw the wild beasts turned coward. Now it was he who had forced himself and some others to come forward of their own accord. The governor persuaded him with many entreaties to take the oath and offer sacrifice. For this reason, therefore, brothers, we do not praise those who give themselves up, since the Gospel does not teach this. But the most wonderful Polycarp, when he first heard it, was not disturbed, but wished to remain in the city; but the majority persuaded him to go away quietly, and he went out quietly to a farm, not far distant from the city, and stayed with a few friends, doing nothing but pray night and day for all and for the Churches throughout the world, as was his custom. And while he was praying he fell into a trance three days before he was arrested, and saw the pillow under his head burning with fire, and he turned and said to those who were with him: "I must be burnt alive."

Polycarp is captured and brought to the Governor. After some backwards and forwards the governor condemns him to the wild beasts.

And the governor said: "I have wild beasts. I will send you to them, unless you repent." And he said: "Call for them, for repentance from better to worse is not allowed us; but it is good to change from evil to righteousness." And the governor said again to him: "I will cause you to be consumed by fire, if you not scared by the beasts, unless you repent." But Polycarp said: "You threaten with the fire that burns for a time and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. But why are you waiting? Come, do what you will." And with these and many other words he was filled with courage and joy, and his face was full of grace so that it not only did not fall with trouble at the things said to him, but that the governor, on the other hand, was astounded and sent his herald into the midst of the arena to announce three times: "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian." When this had been said by the herald, all the multitude of pagans and Jews living in Smyrna cried out with uncontrollable anger and a loud shout: "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many neither to offer sacrifice nor to worship." And

when they said this, they cried out and asked Philip the Asiarch to let loose a lion on Polycarp. But he said he could not legally do this, since he had closed the games. Then they thought it right to cry out with one mind that he should burn Polycarp alive, for the vision which had appeared to him on his pillow must be fulfilled, when he saw it burning, while he was praying, and he turned and said prophetically to those of the faithful who were with him, "I must be burnt alive."

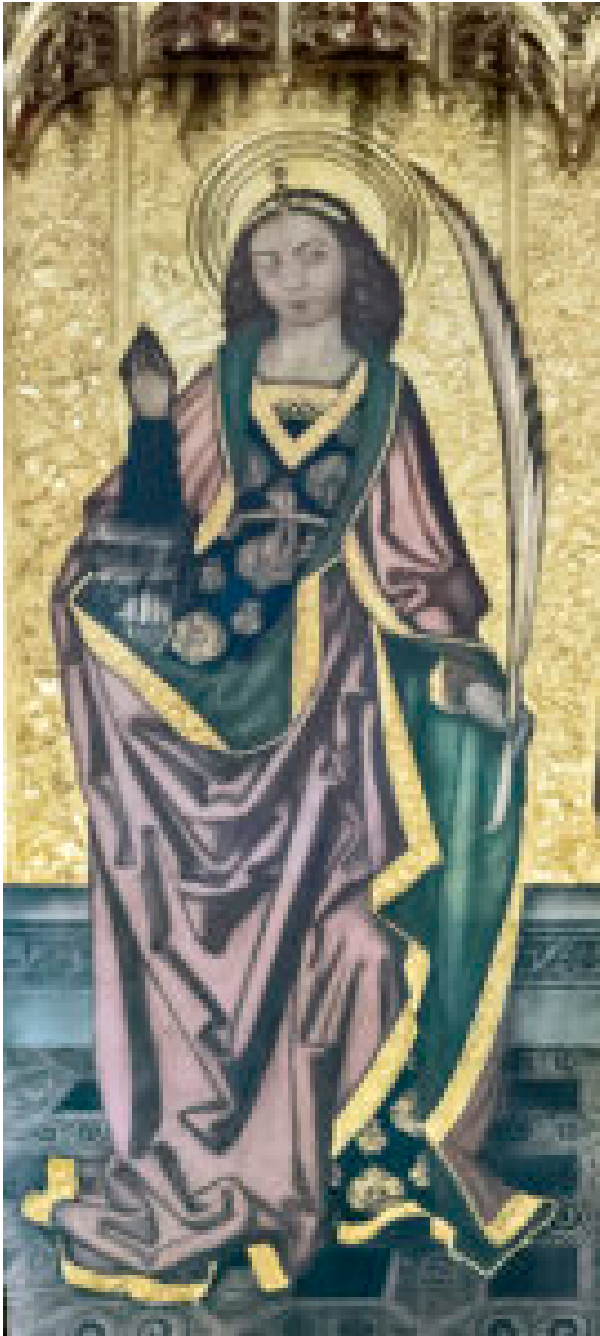
These things then happened with great speed, quicker than it takes to tell, and the crowd came together immediately, and prepared wood and kindling from the work-shops and baths and the Jews were extremely zealous, as is their custom, in assisting at this. Now when the fire was ready Polycarp took off all his clothes, and untied his belt and tried also to take off his shoes, though he did not do this before, because each of the faithful was always zealous, which of them might the more quickly touch his flesh. For he had been treated with all respect because of his noble life, even before his martyrdom. Immediately therefore, he was fastened to the instruments which had been prepared for the fire, but when they were going to nail him as well he said: "Leave me thus, for He who gives me power to endure the fire, will grant me to remain in the flames unmoved even without the security you will give by the nails." So they did not nail him, but tied him, and he put his hands behind him and was bound, as a noble ram out of a great flock, as a sacrifice, a whole burnt offering made ready and acceptable to God; and he looked up to heaven and said...



Saint Polycarp

... Now when he had uttered his Amen and finished his prayer, the men in charge of the fire lit it, and a great flame blazed up and we, to whom it was given to see, saw a marvel. And we have been preserved to report to others what happened. For the fire made the likeness of a room, like the sail of a vessel filled with wind, and surrounded the body of the martyr as with a wall, and he was within it not as burning flesh, but as bread that is being baked, or as gold and silver being refined in a furnace. And we perceived such a fragrant smell as the scent of incense or other costly spices. At length the lawless men, seeing that his body could not be consumed by the fire, ordered an executioner to go up and stab him with a dagger, and when he did this, there came out a dove, and much blood, so that the fire was quenched and all the crowd marvelled that there was such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect. And of the elect was he indeed one, the wonderful martyr, Polycarp, who in our days was an apostolic and prophetic teacher, bishop of the Catholic Church in Smyrna. For every word which he uttered from his mouth both was fulfilled and will be fulfilled.

Thecla was an aristocratic virgin, engaged to a man called Thamyris. She became a follower of Paul after hearing his teachings on virginity; despite being thrown to animals in the arena several times, she kept surviving and bouncing back to Pauline pursuit. This account was probably written in the 2nd century CE and follows both Paul and Thecla on their travels around the Roman East; its authenticity is much debated.



Saint Thecla

At length her family missed Thecla and they and Thamyris searched for her in every street, as though she had been lost, but one of the porter's fellow-slaves told them that she had gone out in the night. Then they questioned the porter, and he told them that she was gone to the prison to the strange man [Paul]. So they followed his directions, and found her there and when they came out they got a mob together, and went and told the governor all that had happened. So he ordered Paul to be brought before his tribunal. In the mean time Thecla lay wallowing on the ground in the prison, in that same place where Paul had sat to teach her; because of this the governor also ordered her to be brought before his tribunal – a summons she received with joy, and went. When Paul was brought there the mob cried out more eagerly, "He is a magician, let him die!" Nevertheless, the governor listened with pleasure to Paul's speech in the holy works of Christ; and, after he called a council, he summoned Thecla, and said to her, "Why do you not, according to the law of the Iconians, marry Thamyris?" She stood still, with her eyes fixed upon Paul; and finding she made no reply, Theoclia, her mother, cried out, saying, "Let the unjust creature be burnt; let her be burnt in the middle of the theatre, for refusing Thamyris, so all women may learn from her to avoid such practices." Then the governor was very concerned and ordered Paul to be whipped out of the city and Thecla to be burnt. So the governor arose and at once went into the theatre and all the people went to see the terrible sight.

But Thecla, just as a lamb in the wilderness looks every way to see its shepherd, looked around for Paul; and as she was looking upon the mob, she saw the Lord Jesus in the likeness of Paul, and said to herself, Paul is come to see me in my distressed circumstances. And she fixed her eyes upon him; but he instantly rose up to heaven while she stared at him. Then the young men and women brought

wood and straw to burn her and she wrung tears from the governor after she was brought naked to the stake, as he was surprised when he saw how beautiful she was. And when they had placed the wood down the people commanded her to climb on it, which she did, first making the sign of the cross. Then the people set fire to the pile; but though the flame was very large, it did not touch her, for God took compassion on her, and caused a great eruption from the earth beneath her, and a cloud from above to pour down great quantities of rain and hail. Thus by the rupture of the earth very many were in great danger and some were killed and the fire was extinguished, and Thecla was preserved.

Thecla runs into further trouble in Antioch, where a magistrate called Alexander falls in love with her and tries to abduct her – failing in this he has Thecla tossed into the arena for a second time, despite the crowd's displeasure.

When the people saw this they said, "The verdicts passed in this city are unjust." But Thecla begged the governor to protect her chastity until she was thrown to the beasts. The governor then asked if anyone

would look after her;³ upon which a certain very rich widow, named Trifina, whose daughter had recently died, desired that she might look after her and she began to treat her in her house as her own daughter. 3 At length a day came, when the beasts were brought out to be viewed and Thecla was brought to the amphitheatre and, in front of a large number of spectators, put into a den in which was a very fierce lioness. Trifina, without any surprise, accompanied Thecla, and the lioness licked the feet of Thecla. The title written which gave her crime was: Sacrilege. Then the woman cried out, "God, the verdicts passed in this city are unjust." After the beasts had been shown, Trifina took Thecla home with her, and they went to bed; and behold, the daughter of Trifina, who was dead, appeared to her mother and said, "Mother, take the young woman, Thecla, your daughter in my place; and ask her to pray for me, that I may be translated to a state of happiness." Upon which Trifina, with a mournful air, said, "My daughter Falconilla has appeared to me, and ordered me to receive you in her room; so I ask, Thecla, that you will pray for my daughter, that she may be translated into a state of happiness, and to life eternal." When Thecla heard this, she immediately prayed to the Lord, and said: "O Lord God of heaven and earth, Jesus Christ, thou Son of the Most High, grant that her daughter Falconilla may live forever." Trifina hearing this groaned again, and said: "O unjust verdicts! O unreasonable wickedness! That such a creature should (again!) be thrown to the beasts!" On the next day, at dawn Alexander came to Trifina's house, and said: "The governor and the people are waiting; bring the criminal out." But Trifina attacked him so violently that he was scared and ran away. (Trifina was born into the imperial family), and she thus expressed her sorrow, and said; "Alas! I have trouble in my house on two accounts, and there is no one who will relieve me, either under the loss of my daughter, or my being able to save Thecla. But now, O Lord God, help Thecla your servant." While she was thus engaged, the governor sent one of his own officers to bring Thecla. Trifina took her by the hand, and, going with her, said: "I went with Falconilla to her grave, and now must go with Thecla to the beasts." When Thecla heard this, she weeping prayed, and said: "O Lord God, whom I have made my confidence and refuge, reward Trifina for her compassion to me and preserving my chastity." Upon this there was a great noise in the amphitheatre; the beasts roared, and the people cried out, "Bring in the criminal." But the woman cried out, and said: "Let the whole city suffer for such crimes; and order all of us, O governor, to the same punishment. O unjust sentence! O cruel sight!" Others said, "Let the whole city be destroyed for this vile action. Kill us all, O governor. O cruel sight! O unjust sentence."

Then Thecla was taken out of the hand of Trifina, stripped naked, had a girdle put on, and thrown into the place appointed for fighting with the beasts: and the lions and the bears were let loose upon her. But a lioness, the fiercest of the animals, ran to Thecla, and fell down at her feet. Upon which the multitude of women shouted aloud. Then a she-bear ran fiercely towards her; but the lioness met the bear, and tore it to pieces. Again, a lion, who frequently devoured men and which belonged to Alexander ran towards her; but the lioness fought the lion, and they killed each other. Then the women worried more, because the lioness, which had helped Thecla, was dead. Afterwards they brought out many other wild beasts; but Thecla stood with her hands stretched towards heaven, and prayed; and when she had done praying, she turned about, and saw a pit of water, and said, "Now it is a proper time for me to be baptized". Accordingly she threw herself into the water, and said, "In your name, O my Lord Jesus Christ, I am baptized on this final day." The women and the people seeing this, cried out, and said, "Do not throw yourself into the water." And the governor himself cried out, to think that the seals were like to devour so much beauty. Despite this, Thecla threw herself into the water, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. But the seals were killed when they saw the lighting and fire and swam dead upon the surface of the water, and a cloud of fire surrounded Thecla, so that as the beasts could not come near her and the people could not see her nudity. Yet they turned other wild beasts upon her; upon which they made a very mournful outcry; and some of them scattered nard, others cassia,



"Thecla among the beasts", altar of the cathedral of Tarragona, Spain

3. Under house arrest.

other amomus, others ointment; so that the quantity of ointment was large, in proportion to the number of people. At this all the beasts lay as though they were asleep and did not touch Thecla. Whereupon Alexander said to the Governor, "I have some very terrible bulls; let us bind her to them." To which the governor, with concern, replied, you may do what you think fit. Then they put a cord round Thecla's waist, which bound also her feet, and with it tied her to the bulls, to whose testicles they applied red-hot irons, that so they being the more tormented, might more violently drag Thecla about, till they had killed her. The bulls accordingly tore about, making a most hideous noise, but the flame which was about Thecla burnt off the cords which were fastened to the members of the bulls and she stood in the middle of the stage, as unconcerned as if she had not been bound. But in the mean time Trifina, who sat upon one of the benches, fainted away and died; upon which the whole city was greatly worried. And Alexander himself was afraid, and called out to the governor, saying: "I entreat you, take compassion on me and the city, and release this woman, who has fought with the beasts; in case, both you and I, and the whole city be destroyed: For if Caesar should have any account of what has passed now he will certainly immediately destroy the city, because Trifina, a person of imperial birth and a relation of his, is dead where she sits" Upon this the governor called Thecla from among the beasts to him, and said to her, "Who are you? And what are your circumstances, that none the beasts will touch you?" Thecla replied to him; I am a servant of the living God; and as to my state, I am a believer on Jesus Christ his Son, in whom God is well pleased; and for that reason none of the beasts could touch me. He alone is the way to eternal salvation, and the foundation of eternal life. He is a refuge to those who are in distress; a support to the afflicted, hope and defence to those who are hopeless; and, in a word, all those who do not believe on him, shall not live, but suffer eternal death. When the governor heard these things, he ordered her clothes to be brought, and said to her put on your clothes. Thecla replied: "May that God who dressed me when I was naked among the beasts, in the day of judgment clothe your soul with the robe of salvation." Then she took her clothes, and put them on; and the governor immediately published an order in these words; "I release to you Thecla the servant of God. Upon which the women cried out together with a loud voice, and with one accord gave praise unto God, and said: There is but one God, who is the God of Thecla; the one God who has delivered Thecla." So loud were their voices that the whole city seemed to be shaken; and Trifina herself heard the glad tidings, and arose again, and ran with the multitude to meet Thecla; and embracing her, said: "Now I believe there shall be a resurrection of the dead; now I am convinced that my daughter still lives. So, come home with me, my daughter Thecla, and I will give that I have to you." So Thecla went with Trifina and was looked after for a few days at her home, teaching her the word of the Lord, whereby many young women were converted and there was great joy in the family of Trifina. But Thecla longed to see Paul, and inquired and sent everywhere to find him; and when at length she was informed that he was at Myra, in Lycia, she took with her many young men and women; and putting on a girdle, and dressing herself like a man, she went to him in Myra in Lycia, and there found Paul preaching the word of God; and she stood by him among the crowd.

Acts of Thecla and Paul, Adapted from the translation by Jeremiah Jones

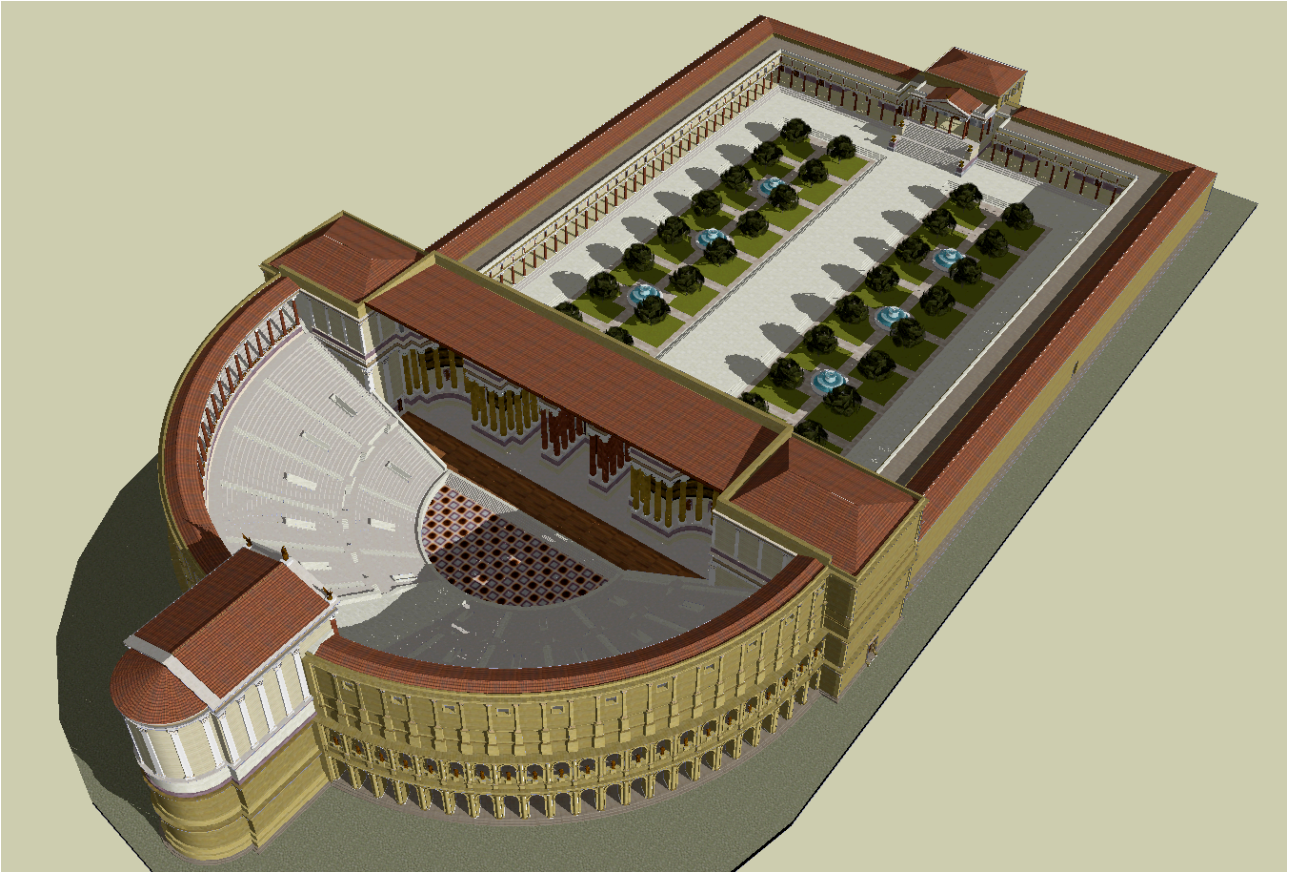
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Theatre and Dance



Artist's reconstruction of the Theatre of Pompey, the first stone theatre built in Rome.

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Development of Roman Theatre and Mime

In addition to slaughter, death, and men racing really, really fast, the Romans also liked the theatre, and *ludi scaenici* ('stage games') were offered alongside other spectacles as part of the annual *ludi*. In his monumental history of Rome Livy describes the foundation of the *ludi scaenici* in 364 and its development in the years after that:

In this year and the next, in the consulship of Gaius Sulpicius Peticus and Gaius Licinius Stolo, there was a plague. In that year, nothing worthy of mention happened except that to appease the gods they held a *lectisternium*,¹ the third one since the city had been founded. We are told that since neither human strategies nor divine relief blunted the force of the disease, they established the *ludi scaenici*, along with some other measures to appease divine wrath; this was something new for a warlike people, who had only seen circuses before then. As with nearly all first steps, it started off small; it was also foreign. Some players brought in from Etruria gave a suitable performance in the Tuscan way, dancing to the rhythm played by a flute without a song and without imitating the action in songs. Then young men imitated them and at the same time hurled jokes in rough verse at each other. . . .

After some time passed, it was Livius who first dared leave *satira* and weave a story with a plot. Like everyone else then, he acted out his own songs, but it is said that because he was often called back to the stage his voice became weak; he then asked the favor of having a boy stand before the flute player and sing while he acted with even more energy because he was not slowed down by having to use his voice. After that, singing was done with gestures accompanying it and the actors only spoke the dialogue portions. When such rules diverted plays from [simple] laughter and haphazard joking and translated them little by little into an art, the young men left acting in plays to these actors and began to exchange jokes woven in the old way among themselves. This is the source of what were afterwards called *exodia*, something especially connected with Atellan farces. This sort of play came from the Oscans and the young men held on to it and didn't allow actors to pollute it. From then it has been the rule that performers (*actores*) in Atellans are not barred from voting and serving in the army, unlike other stage professionals. I thought it good to set out the small beginnings of plays, while doing the same for other beginnings, so that it will be clear how they have moved from such a sane start to a form of insanity which even wealthy kingdoms could barely endure.

[Livy](#), *From the Founding of the City* 7.2

1. A feast for the gods.



A YouTube element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/spectaclesintheromanworldsourcebook/?p=197>

Roman theatre was often spectacular; in his games for the opening of his theatre (which could seat 40,000 – for more on the building see the [next section](#)) in 55 BCE Pompey the Great put on magnificently outfitted games as well as other entertainments. He used the spoils he had obtained in victories in the east as props.

You know all about the rest of the games, which hadn't even that amount of charm which less lavish games usually have: for the spectacle was so elaborate as to leave no room for cheerful enjoyment, and I think you need feel no regret at having missed it. For what is the pleasure of a procession of six hundred mules in the *Clytemnestra*, three thousand bowls in the *Trojan Horse*, or brightly coloured armour of infantry and cavalry in some battle? These things roused the admiration of the mob; to you they would have brought no delight. But if during those days you listened to your reader Protogenes, so long at least as he read anything rather than my speeches, surely you had far greater pleasure than any one of us. For I don't suppose you wanted to see Greek or Oscan plays, especially as you can see Oscan farces in your Senate-house over there, while you are so far from liking Greeks, that you generally won't even go along the Greek road to your villa. Why, again, should I think you care about missing the athletes, since you disdained the gladiators – in which even Pompey himself confesses that he wasted his trouble and his pains. There remain the two wild-beast hunts, lasting five days, magnificent—nobody denies it—and yet, what pleasure can it be to a man of refinement, when either a weak man is torn by an extremely powerful animal, or a splendid animal is transfixed by a hunting spear? Things which, after all, if worth seeing, you have often seen before; nor did I, who was present at the games, see anything the least new. The last day was that of the elephants, on which there was a great deal of astonishment on the part of the vulgar crowd, but no pleasure whatever. No, there was even a certain feeling of compassion aroused by it, and a kind of belief created that that animal has something in common with mankind.

[Cicero](#), *Letters to his Friends* 7.1

Here is another, later account:

During these same days Pompey dedicated the theatre in which we still take pride. In it he provided an entertainment consisting of music and gymnastic contests, and in the Circus a horse-race and the slaughter of many wild beasts of all kinds. Indeed, five hundred lions were used up in five days, and eighteen elephants fought against men in heavy armour. Some of these beasts were killed at the time and others a little later. For some of them, contrary to Pompey's wish, were pitied by the people when, after being wounded and ceasing to fight, they walked about with their trunks raised toward heaven, lamenting so bitterly as to give rise to the report that they did so not by mere chance, but were crying out against the oaths in which they had trusted when they crossed over from Africa, and were calling upon Heaven to avenge them. For it is said that they would not set foot upon the ships before they received a pledge under oath from their drivers that they should suffer no harm. Whether this is really so or not I do not know; for some in time past have further declared that in addition to understanding the language of their native country they also comprehend what is going on in the sky, so that at the time of the new moon, before that luminary comes within the gaze of men, they reach running water and there perform a kind of purification of themselves. These things I have heard; I have heard also that this theatre was not erected by Pompey, but by one Demetrius, a freedman of his, with the money he had gained while making campaigns with the general. Most justly, therefore, did he give his master's name to the structure, so that Pompey might not incur needless reproach because of the fact that his freedman had collected money enough for so huge an expenditure.

[Cassius Dio](#), *Roman History* 39.38

There were a number of theatrical genres in Rome, ranging from Latin translations of Greek tragedies and comedies, to plays dealing with Roman history (*fabula praetexta*), to Atellan farce and mime. Mime was the sole form of theatre that involved female actors; one of whom Cytheris was especially famous and a close associate of both Mark Antony and Brutus, Caesar's assassin. Mark Antony was especially friendly with mime actors:

We are told, at any rate, that Antony once feasted at the wedding of Hippias the mime, drank all night, and then, early in the morning, when the people summoned him to the forum, came before them still stuffed with food and vomited into his toga, which one of his friends held out to help. Sergius the mime also was one of those who had the greatest influence with him, and Cytheris, a woman from the same school of acting, was also a great favourite – he took her with him in a litter on his visits to the cities and her litter was followed by as many attendants as that of his mother.

[Plutarch](#), *Antony* 9.4

Mime was subdivided into several forms, of which pantomime became the single dominant theatrical form in Rome after its introduction by Augustus' freedman Pylades in 22 BCE.



Fragment of an ancient Roman marble map of the early 3rd century CE showing the Theatre of Pompey.



Choregos and actors

Augustus allowed the praetors who wanted to do so to spend three times as much on the public festivals as the amount granted them from the treasury. Thus, even if some people were vexed at the strictness of his other regulations, this action and his restoration of one Pylades, a mime, who had been exiled on account of sedition, ensured they remembered them no longer. This is why Pylades is said to have replied very cleverly, when the emperor rebuked him for having quarrelled with Bathyllus, a fellow-artist, and a favourite of Maecenas: “It is to your advantage, Caesar, that the people should devote their spare time to us.”

Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 54.17

Pylades’ form of mime was the most spectacular and was not generally considered that appropriate for private performances, as one of the characters in a dialogue written by Plutarch

points out:

I reject the sort of dancing which is called Pyladean from Pylades, because it is full of pomp, very pathetic, and requires a great many people; but if we would admit any of those sort that deserve the praise Socrates mentions in his discourse about dancing, I like that sort called Bathyllean,² which requires not so high a motion, but has something of the character of the Cordax, and resembles the motion of an Echo, a Pan, or a Satyr frolicking with love.

Plutarch, *Table Conversations* 7.8.2

The following account of the omens before the death of Caligula give some idea of the sort of special effects that might be used in Roman theatre:

The day before Caligula was killed he dreamt that he stood in heaven beside the throne of Jupiter and that the god struck him with the toe of his right foot and hurled him to earth. Some things which had happened on that very day shortly before he was killed were also regarded as omens. 4 As he was sacrificing, he was sprinkled with the blood of a flamingo,³ and the pantomimic actor Mnester danced a tragedy which the tragedian Neoptolemus had acted years before during the games at which Philip, King of the Macedonians,⁴ was assassinated. In a farce called *Laureolus*, in which the chief actor falls as he is making his escape and vomits blood, several understudies so vied with one another in giving evidence of their proficiency that the stage swam in blood. A nocturnal performance besides was rehearsing, in which scenes from the lower world were represented by Egyptians and Ethiopians.

[Suetonius](#), *Caligula* 57.3

Like gladiators and charioteers – and all those who were perceived as selling their bodies – actors were *infamis* (except for those who acted in Atellan farce) and while they might acquire great fame and wealth, had a very low status in the Roman hierarchy. The Emperor Augustus took action against some actors who it was felt were getting above their status.

Augustus was so especially strict about curbing the lawlessness of actors, that when he learned that Stephanio, an actor of Roman plays, was waited on by a matron with hair cut short to look like a boy, he

2. After Bathyllus, its most famous performer.

3. These were not normally used as sacrificial animals, but Caligula had exotic animals sacrificed as part of the cult of his own divinity.

4. Philip II, the father of Alexander. The tragedy was *Cinyras*.

had him whipped with rods through the three theatres and then banished him. Hylas, a pantomimic actor, was publicly lashed in the atrium of his own house, on complaint of a praetor, and Pylades⁵ was expelled from the city and from Italy as well, because by pointing at a spectator who was hissing at him with his finger he turned all eyes upon him.

Suetonius, *Augustus* 14

There was also the chance that some lines might suddenly be turned against the emperor:

How grossly Tiberius was in the habit of abusing women even of high birth is very clearly shown by the death of a certain Mallonia. When she was brought to his bed and refused most vigorously to submit to his lust, he turned her over to the informers, and even when she was on trial he did not cease to call out and ask her “whether she was sorry”; so that finally she left the court and went home, where she stabbed herself, openly upbraiding the ugly old man for his obscenity. Hence a stigma put upon him at the next plays in an Atellan farce was received with great applause and became a saying, that “the old goat⁶ was licking the does.”

Suetonius, *Tiberius* 45.4

Others, like the satirist Juvenal, rabidly attacked what they saw as the moral dangers of mime:

Can you find any woman that’s worthy of you under our porticoes? Does any seat at the theatre hold one you could take from there and love with confidence? When sinuous Bathyllus⁷ dances his pantomime Leda, Tucia wets herself and Apula cries out as if she were making love with sharp tedious cries. Thymele watches carefully: naive Thymele learns something.

Juvenal *Satire* 6⁸ (Translated by A. S. Kline)

However, all this criticism was ignored by most. Some wealthy Romans kept troops of actors in their house for private entertainment – and also rented them out for various *ludi*. One such was Numidia Quadratilla, a very wealthy lady of the late 1st century CE:

Numidia Quadratilla has died, having almost reached the age of eighty. Up until her last illness she enjoyed uninterrupted good health, and was unusually strong and robust for a woman. She has left a very prudent will, having disposed of two-thirds of her estate to her grandson, and the rest to her grand-daughter. The young lady I know very slightly, but the grandson is one of my closest friends. He is a remarkable young man, and his merit entitles him to the affection of a relation, even where his blood does not. Notwithstanding his remarkable attractiveness he escaped all malicious gossip both as a boy and a youth: he was a husband at twenty-four, and would have been a father if fate had not disappointed his hopes. He lived in close quarters with his luxury-loving grandmother, but was very scrupulous about his own behaviour, although he respected her. She kept a company of pantomimes and was an encourager of this class of people to a degree not appropriate for one of her gender and social status. But Quadratus was never at these entertainments whether she gave them in the theatre or in her own house; nor, indeed, did she require him to be present. I once heard her say, when she was recommending to me the supervision of



Bust of Tiberius

5. He was a freedman of Augustus and one of those who introduced pantomime to the Romans; he focused on tragic pantomime. He attacked the audience on other occasions: one when he was acting out the madness of Hercules the audience hissed at him for not dancing properly; he threw off his mask and screamed “idiots! I am acting the role of a madman!” His exile was in 18 BCE – he was back within a year.
6. Tiberius had retired to the island of Capri; the Latin for goat is *caper*, hence the double meaning.
7. One of Augustan artists who introduced pantomime to Rome; he appears to have focused on comic pantomime and rather sexy version of myths.
8. This is a satire against women in which Juvenal basically accuses them of all the evils that a Roman could imagine. And that was quite a few.

her grandson's studies, that it was her custom, in order to pass away some of those unemployed hours with which female life abounds to amuse herself with playing at draughts or watching her pantomimes, but that whenever she engaged in either of those amusements she always sent away her grandson to his studies: she appeared to me to act in this way as much out of reverence for the youth as from affection. I was a good deal surprised, as I am sure you will be too, at what he told me the last time the priestly games were on.⁹ As we were coming out of the theatre together, where we had been entertained with a show of these pantomimes, "Do you know," said he, "to-day is the first time I ever saw my grandmother's freedman dance?" Such was the grandson's speech! While a set of men of a far different stamp, in order to do honour to *Quadratilla* (I am ashamed to call it *honour*), were running up and down the theatre, pretending to be struck with the utmost admiration and rapture at the performances of those pantomimes and then imitating in musical chant the expression and manner of their lady patroness. But now all the reward they have got, in return for their theatrical performances, is just a few small legacies, which they have the mortification to receive from an heir who was never so much as present at these shows.

[Pliny the Younger](#), *Letters* 7.24

The following is an extract from a 2nd century CE novel about a young man who is turned into a donkey and gets into all sorts of trouble along the way. In the course of his adventures he is condemned to the arena (in his donkey form), but gets to witness a mime show which precedes the other events:



Portrait of ancient writer Apuleius

The day appointed for the show came at last. I was led to the amphitheatre's outer wall, by an enthusiastic crowd, in procession. The entertainment began with actor's comic mimes, while I enjoyed myself by the gate browsing the rich and juicy grass growing at the entrance, and now and then refreshing my eyes with a glance at the show through the open portal. There were boys and girls in the bloom of youth, outstanding in their fresh beauty, splendid costumes, and graceful movements, ready to perform the Pyrrhic dance. They moved in decorous unwavering order, now weaving in and out in a whirling circle, now linking hands in a slanting chain, now in wedges forming a hollow square, now separating into distinct troops. When the trumpet's final note un-wove the knotted complexities of their intricate motion, the curtain was raised, the screens folded back, and the stage was set.

There stood a mountain of wood, built with noble skill to resemble that illustrious Mount Ida that Homer sang. It was planted out with living trees and bushes, and from its summit a stream of water flowed from a fountain made by the designer's own hand. A handful of goats were cropping the grass and a youth, beautifully dressed in the manner of Paris, as Phrygian shepherd, an Asiatic robe flowing over his shoulders, a gold tiara on his

brow, pretended to be tending the flock. Then a shining lad appeared, naked except for a cloak worn on his left shoulder, attracting all gazes with his blond hair, with little gold wings on either side projecting from his curls and a wand, proclaiming him as Mercury. He danced forward bearing in his right hand an apple covered in gold leaf, and offered it to the actor playing Paris. Then, relaying Jupiter's instructions

9. Games run and put on by members of the priestly colleges, rather than the magistrates.

for the action to follow, he nodded, swiftly and gracefully retraced his steps, and vanished. Next arrived a respectable looking girl dressed as the goddess Juno, a pure white diadem on her brow and a sceptre in her hand. Then on came another you'd have recognised as Minerva, a shining helm crowned with an olive wreath on her head, holding a shield and brandishing a spear as if off to battle. Then another girl made her entrance, a real beauty with an ambrosial complexion, playing Venus, as Venus looked before marriage. Her exquisite naked form was bare except for a piece of silken gauze with which she veiled her sweet charms. An inquisitive little breeze kept blowing this veil aside in wanton playfulness so that it lifted now to show her ripening bud, or now pressed madly against her, clinging tightly, smoothly delineating her voluptuous limbs. The goddess' very colouring offered interest to the eye, her body the white of heaven from which she came, her veil the cerulean blue of the sea from which she rose.

Each of the girls who played a goddess was accompanied by attendants; Juno by two lads from the acting troop, depicting Castor and Pollux, heads capped with helmets shaped like halves of the egg they came from, topped by stars to signify the Twins, their constellation. To the sound of an Ionian flute piping melodies, the goddess advanced with calm unpretentious steps, and with graceful gestures promised Paris rule over all Asia if he granted her the prize for beauty. The girl whose weapons denoted Minerva was guarded by two boys, depicting Terror and Fear, armour-bearers to the war-goddess, leaping forward with drawn swords. Behind them a piper played a battle tune in the Dorian mode, a deep droning intermingled with shrill screeches, stirring them to energetic dance. Minerva tossed her head, glared threateningly, and informed Paris in swift and abrupt gestures that should he grant her victory in the beauty contest then with her assistance he would be renowned for his bravery and his triumphs in war.

Then came Venus, to the audience's loud applause, taking her place gracefully at centre-stage, sweetly smiling and ringed by a host of happy little boys, so chubby and milky-white you'd have thought them real cupids flown down from heaven or in from the sea. With little wings and archery sets and all the rest they truly fitted the part, lighting their mistress' way with glowing torches as if they were off to a wedding feast. Next a crowd of beautiful girls streamed in, the most graceful of Graces, the loveliest of Hours, scattering garlands and loose flowers in tribute to their goddess, paying honour to the queen of all pleasure with the blossoms of spring.

Now flutes of many notes played Lydian airs in sweet harmony, and as their soft melodies charmed the hearts of the audience, Venus began a gentle dance, with slow hesitant steps and sinuously swaying body and head, advancing with delicate movements to the sweet sound of the flutes. Letting fly passionate or sharp and menacing glances, she often seemed to be dancing by means of her eyelids alone. As soon as she reached the judge, Paris, she promised with transparent gestures, that if he preferred her above the other two goddesses she would grant him a bride of marvellous beauty, the very image of herself. At this the Phrygian youth, gladly handed her the golden apple, in token of yielding her the victory.

Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* Book 10, (Translation A.S. Kline)

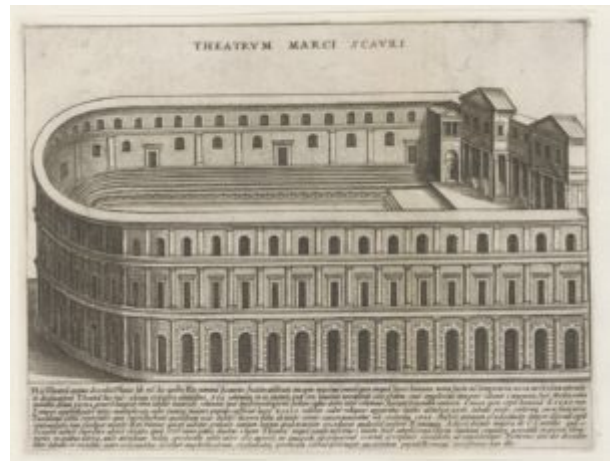
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Theatres

The Romans were very reluctant to build any permanent structure for holding either gladiatorial games or theatrical shows. Temporary structures, sometimes of great magnificence, were either put up or other public spaces, such as the Forum, were repurposed for the holding of games. Marcus Aemilius Scaurus celebrated games as an aedile in 58 BCE; they were legendary for their extravagance and for the elaborate temporary theatre he built. The gamble paid off as he was elected praetor in 56 BCE.

Constructed during his term as aedile (and only for a few days' use), the grandest building ever built by man – and that is counting permanent structures. I refer to his theatre: it had three stories, supported by 360 columns...The lowest level was marble; the next glass – a luxury never heard of since – and the top was fashioned from gilded boards. The lowest columns were 38 feet high and between them were placed three thousand bronze statues...The rest of the equipment, including cloth of gold, painted panels, and various theatrical props, was so lavish that when they took what was suitable for everyday use to Scaurus' villa at Tusculum and angry slaves burned down the villa, the loss was calculated at thirty million sesterces.



Wooden Theater of Marcus Scaurus in Rome

[Pliny the Elder](#), *Natural History* 31.114-115

In 55 BCE Pompey's stone theatre became the first permanent stone theatre in Rome. This complex not only included a theatre, but a temple to Venus Victrix, a meeting place for the Senate (where Caesar was later assassinated) and gardens with porticos). To get a full sense of its magnificence go to [Theatre of Pompey Visualization Project](#)

Let us consider the true nature of theatrical entertainment, beginning with the vice inherent in its setting. If we view it correctly the theatre is a shrine to Venus. Indeed, this type of building came into the world in the name of Venus. For originally, even the pagan censors destroyed theaters as quickly as they were built because they could see the horrific moral fallout from the immorality of the theatre. This was why when Pompey the Great (only his theater was greater than he!) had built his citadel [his theatre] of every vice and was afraid that because of this people might criticize him later, he added on to his theater a temple to Venus, and when he summoned the people to the dedication, he did not call the structure a theater, but a temple "to which we have added," he said, "some seating for shows."

[Tertullian](#), *On Spectacles* 1.10

Other texts on the theatre fill out our knowledge of it and its opening games. (Also see the letter of Cicero in the [previous section](#).)

In 55 BCE Pompey dedicated the theatre of which we are still proud; at the dedication he put on shows of music and athletics.

[Cassius Dio](#), *History* 39.38.1

When designing a theater, you should include porticoes behind the stage to house the audience when a sudden downpour disrupts the performances, and to provide some open space for the preparation of stage sets. The Pompeian Portico is an example of this.

Vitruvius, *Architecture* 5.9.1

Polygnotus also did the painting (now in the Portico of Pompey but formerly in his Curia) in which you cannot be sure whether the man with the shield is climbing or descending.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 35.59

Among the decorations of his theater Pompey the Great placed images of celebrated marvels, made with special elaboration for the purpose by the talent of eminent artists; among them we read of Eutycheis who at Tralles was carried to her funeral pyre by 20 children and who had given birth more than 30 times, and Alcippe who gave birth to an elephant, although it is true that the latter case ranks among the portents, for one of the first occurrences of the Marsian War was that a maidservant gave birth to a snake, and also monstrous births of various kinds are recorded among the ominous things that happened. (H. Rackham, trans.)

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 7.3.34-5

Varro writes that Coponius also created the statues of the 14 nations which are placed around Pompey's complex.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 36.41

Crassus went out to his province at the end of his year of office as consul. Pompey, however, stayed behind to open his theater, at the dedication of which he held athletic sports and musical contests and provided wild animals in which 500 lions were killed. The most remarkable show of all—indeed a most horrifying spectacle—was an elephant fight.

[Plutarch](#), *Pompey* 52

The theatre also contained a meeting place for the Senate. It was here Caesar was killed on the Ides of March in 44 BCE. He fell at the foot of the statue of Pompey there, in a moment of supreme historic irony. Of course, this later created problems for Mark Antony and Octavian, who eventually turned the room into a toilet.

The scene itself of Caesar's death-struggle and assassination later made it clear to all that some supernatural being had taken the event in hand to bring it about. For the meeting-site of the Senate that day contained a statue of Caesar's late rival Pompey, which Pompey himself had dedicated as one more ornament to his theater...



Because Mark Antony was not only loyal to Caesar but physically powerful as well, the conspirators had arranged for Brutus Albinus to detain him outside in a lengthy conversation. Caesar himself, however, entered, and the Senate rose in his honor. Some of the conspirators then moved into position behind Caesar's chair, while others, approaching him from the front as if in support of a petition being pleaded by Tillius Cimber on behalf of his exiled brother, gathered closely around Caesar's chair to argue the case. Sitting down, Caesar tried to brush them off, but they continued to harass him with their request until Caesar was driven to show some violence of temper. It was then that Tillius gave the signal to begin the attack, jerking Caesar's toga down from both his shoulders. Casca was the first to strike, stabbing Caesar in the neck with his dagger, but because he was understandably nervous about initiating a deed of such daring, the wound was neither deep nor deadly, and Caesar was able to turn around, grab the knife, and hold it away... So the attack began. Those who were ignorant of the plot stood there in shock, neither fleeing nor coming to Caesar's defense with so much as a shout. Those in the know and intent on murder, however, all drew their knives in a ring around Caesar, so that whichever way he turned he was exposed to blades aimed at his face and eyes, trapped like an animal and struck by every hand. Since all of the conspirators had to take a part in the sacrifice, as it were, and to taste of Caesar's murder, Brutus also stabbed him once, in the groin. Some say that up until then Caesar was shouting and attempting to deflect and dodge the blows of the others but when he saw that Brutus too had drawn his sword, he pulled his toga over his head and sank down (whether by chance, or pushed there by his killers) at the base of Pompey's statue, spattering it with blood so that it seemed his former enemy in war stood over him in vengeance, with Caesar laid out at his feet quivering from his multitude of wounds. It is said he had been stabbed twenty-three times in all. Many of his assassins also received stab wounds, having struck one another by accident in their attempt to land so many blows on one body.

Plutarch, *Caesar* 66.1, 3-7

Consider the case of Caesar. Imagine him knowing by using divination that among the very Senate whose members were largely of his own choosing, in the *curia* of Pompey's theater, in front of the statue of Pompey himself, with so many of his own centurions looking on, he should be murdered by Rome's finest citizens, some of whom owed their success entirely to Caesar, and knowing that when he lay there dead not even one of his slaves, let alone one of his friends, would approach his corpse. Would he not have been tortured all his life, knowing this to be his fate?

[Cicero](#), *On Divination* 2.23

Augustus moved the statue of Pompey out of the Senate Hall where Caesar was murdered and placed it on a marble arch opposite the main door of the stage.

[Suetonius](#), *Augustus* 31.5

The triumvirs [Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus, in 42 BCE] first closed the building where Caesar was murdered. Later they had it rebuilt as a toilet.

Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 47.19

It wasn't all murder and theatre, though. The poet Propertius writes to his girlfriend, Cynthia, who has left Rome, about the wonders of its gardens.

I suppose you think the Portico of Pompey, with its shady columns and tapestries woven with gold, is squalid – the Portico with its solid rows of plane trees all shaped to an even height, the streams of flowing water that slide off the Slumbering Satyr, and the liquid sounds of splashing around the entire basin when Triton suddenly blows the water from his mouth.

Propertius, *Elegies* 2.32.11-16

Of course, this being ancient Rome, the theatre burned down every once in a while. Claudius restored it and held a number of lavish shows there to mark that.

Claudius put on a number of extravagant shows....For the dedication of the Theatre of Pompey, which he had restored after a fire, he presided over the entertainment from a raised platform erected in the orchestra, after first praying at the temples above and descending through the middle of the auditorium while everyone sat in silence.

Suetonius, *Claudius* 21

Magnificent as it was, the theatre could always be made more luxurious for special occasions:

Claudius' immediate successor Nero covered the theater of Pompey with gold for one day's purpose, when he was to display it to Tiridates, King of Armenia. Yet how small was the theater in comparison with Nero's Golden Palace which covers Rome!

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 33.16.54

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Case Study: the Great (Panto)mime Riots of Rome

There were a number of forms of mime; the mime that inspired rioting in 14/15 and 23 CE was pantomime, a spectacular form of mime that was a form of solo ballet often retelling classical myths, with a star mime who danced and did spectacular acrobatics, a chorus, and an orchestra – you need to think about something akin to Cirque du Soleil, rather than Marcel Marceau.¹ Mime in this form inspired fanatical devotion on a level that equals anything modern fandom can produce, and perhaps on an even greater level – we do not hear of capital cities laid waste by hordes of Beliebers, for example. In 14 CE Augustus – who enjoyed the theatre and sponsored mime – died, and Tiberius came to the throne. Tiberius did not enjoy spectacles, especially after he was forced by the crowd to give freedom to Actius, a comic actor or mime.

That year [14 CE] saw a new form of religious ritual with the addition of a new college of Priests of Augustus, which was patterned on the ancient Titian brotherhood founded by Titus Tatius² to safeguard the Sabine rites. Twenty-one members were drawn by lot from the leading Roman houses and Tiberius, Drusus, Claudius, and Germanicus were added.³ The *Ludi Augustales*, celebrated for the first time, were marred by a disturbance caused by the rivalry of the mime actors. Augustus had allowed these theatrical shows to please Maecenas, who was deeply in love with Bathyllus. He himself also had no personal dislike for amusements of this type, and considered it a graceful act to take part in the pleasures of the crowd. Tiberius had other tendencies, but as yet he lacked the courage to force into the ways of austerity a nation which had been indulged for so many years.

[Tacitus](#), *Annales* 1.54

Cassius Dio adds a little more information, which suggests that the riots started when one of the stars refused to enter the theatre until he was paid more:

Meanwhile the people rioted, because at the *Ludi Augustales* one of the actors would not enter the theatre for the regular pay and they did not stop rioting until the tribunes of the plebs convened the senate that very day and begged it to permit them to spend more than the legal amount.

[Cassius Dio](#), *Roman History* 56.47.2

15 CE saw more riots on a larger scale; it appears Tiberius cut the fee for mimes (*Suetonius*, *Tiberius* 34.1), while his son Drusus (then around 30) was extremely friendly with them:



Bust of Tiberius

1. If you don't know who Marcel Marceau is you should look him up on YouTube.
2. A legendary king of the Sabines, who eventually co-ruled that people and the Romans along with Romulus.
3. All were members of the imperial family.



Portrait of Julius Caesar Drusus

While Tiberius was carrying out these measures, Drusus performed the duties pertaining to the consulship equally with his colleague [Tiberius], just as any ordinary citizen might have done; and when he was left heir to someone's estate, he assisted in carrying out the body. Yet he was so given to violent anger that he struck upon a distinguished equestrian and for this exploit received the nickname of Castor. And he was becoming so heavy a drinker, that one night, when he was forced to lend aid with the Praetorians to some people whose property was on fire and they called for water, he gave the order: "Serve it to them hot." He was so friendly with the actors, that this class created a riot and could not be brought to order even by the laws that Tiberius had introduced for regulating them.

Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 57.14.9-10

Some of the measures that were taken are listed below:

The disorderliness of the stage, which had become apparent the year before, now broke out on a more serious scale. In addition to casualties among the people, several soldiers and a centurion were killed, and an officer of the Praetorian Guards wounded, in the attempt to repress the insults levelled at the magistracy and the dissension of the crowd. The riot was discussed in the Senate and it was suggested that the praetors should be given the authority to punish actors. Haterius Agrippa, a tribune of the people, vetoed this proposal and was attacked in a speech by Asinius Gallus. Tiberius said nothing, allowing the Senate to have this simulacrum of liberty. Still the veto held good, for the deified Augustus had once answered a question by saying that actors were immune from the whip, and it would be blasphemy for Tiberius to now do the opposite of what he had said. They passed a great number of laws to limit the expenditure on entertainments and to curb the extravagance of the fans. The most striking were: that no senator was to enter the houses of pantomime actors; that, if they came out into public, Roman equestrians were not to gather around them, nor were their performances to be followed except in the theatre; while the praetors were to be authorized to punish any disorder among the spectators with exile.

Tacitus, *Annales* 1.77

Clearly this did not work, as in 23 CE (the same year Drusus died) the riots broke out once more:

Next, after various and generally ineffective complaints from the praetors, Tiberius at last brought up the question of the effrontery of the *histriones*:⁴ "They were frequently the instigators of sedition against the state and of depravity in private houses; the old Oscan farce, the trivial delight of the crowd, had come to such a pitch of indecency and power that it needed the authority of the Senate to check it." The *histriones* were then expelled from Italy.

Tacitus, *Annales* 4.14

It was not just the actors who were expelled, but the leaders of their factions:

He took great pains to prevent disturbances by the people and punished those that occurred very, very severely. When a quarrel in the theatre ended in bloodshed, he banished the leaders of the factions, as well

4. This can refer to a wide range of actors, though probably mime actors are intended here.

as the actors who were the cause of the trouble – and no entreaties of the people could ever induce him to recall them.

[Suetonius](#), *Tiberius* 37.2

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Staging War

Naumachiae and Land Battles

As the resources of Rome grew, so too did its leaders' ability to stage large scale combats on land and sea for the people of Rome. Although these featured Roman soldiers in the beginning, these were replaced with prisoners-of-war and condemned criminals. The naval recreations are called *naumachiae* (singular *naumachia*).



The naumaquia (Naval battle between Romans).

For his quadruple triumph in 46 BCE, Julius Caesar put on a variety of shows, including the first known *naumachia*:

Combats with wild beasts were presented on five successive days, and last of all there was a battle between two opposing armies, in which five hundred infantry, twenty elephants, and thirty cavalry fought on each side. To make room for this in the Circus Maximus, the goals were taken down and in their place two camps were pitched over against each other. The athletic competitions lasted for three days in a temporary stadium built for the purpose in the region of the Campus Martius. 4 For the naval battle a pool was dug in the lesser Codeta¹ and there was a contest of ships of two, three, and four banks of oars, belonging to the Tyrian and Egyptian fleets, manned by a large force of marines. Such a crowd flocked to all these shows from every quarter, that many strangers had to lodge in tents pitched in streets or along the roads, and the crush was often such that many were crushed to death, including two senators.

[Suetonius](#), *Julius Caesar* 39

1. This was located in the Campus Martius; it was later filled up by Augustus as the water became stagnant and a site for mosquitos to breed.

It is said that money to the amount of 60,500 silver talents was carried in the procession and 2822 crowns of gold weighing 20,414 pounds, from which wealth Caesar made allocations immediately after the triumph, paying the army all that he had promised and more. Each soldier received 5000 Attic drachmas, each centurion double, and each tribune of infantry and prefect of cavalry four times that sum. To each plebeian citizen also was given an Attic mina. He gave also various spectacles with horses and music, an infantry combat, 1000 on each side, and a cavalry fight of 200 on each side. There was also another combat involving both cavalry and infantry. There was an elephant fight, twenty against twenty, and a naval engagement of 4000 rowers, where 1000 fighting men fought on each side.

Appian, *Civil Wars* 2.102

In his *Res Gestae*, his public autobiography, Augustus gave an account of the various shows he had put on for the people, including his *naumachia*, which was held in a new, specially excavated location, which continued to be used by later emperors:

I gave the people a spectacle of a naval battle, in the place across the Tiber where the grove of the Caesars is now, with the ground excavated in length 1,800 feet, in width 1,200, in which thirty beaked ships, biremes or triremes, but many smaller, fought among themselves; in these ships about 3,000 men fought in addition to the rowers.

[Augustus](#), *Res Gestae* 23

Cassius Dio gives a fuller description of Augustus' games.

These matters settled, Augustus dedicated this temple of Mars [Ultor], although he had granted to Gaius and Lucius once for all the right to consecrate all such buildings by virtue of a kind of consular authority that they exercised in the traditional manner. And they did, in fact, have the management of the Ludi Circenses games on this occasion, while their brother Agrippa took part along with the boys of the first families in the equestrian exercise called "Troy." Two hundred and sixty lions were slaughtered in the Circus. There was a gladiatorial combat in the Saepta Julia, and a naval battle between the "Persians" and the "Athenians" was given on the spot where even to-day some relics of it are still pointed out. These, it will be understood, were the names given to the contestants; and the "Athenians" prevailed on this occasion. Afterwards water was let into the Circus Flaminius and thirty-six crocodiles were slaughtered there.

[Cassius Dio](#), *Roman History*

The largest *naumachia* was that of Claudius held in 52 CE to celebrate his draining of the Fucine Lake (neither the *naumachia* nor the draining went that well): it involved 19,000 men.

Claudius conceived the desire to exhibit a naval battle on a certain lake; so, after building a wooden wall around it and erecting stands, he assembled an enormous multitude. Claudius and Nero were arrayed in military clothing, while Agrippina wore a beautiful *chlamys*² woven with threads of gold, and the rest of the spectators whatever pleased their fancy. Those who were to take part in the sea-fight were condemned criminals, and each side had fifty ships, one part being styled "Rhodians" and the other "Sicilians." First they assembled in a single body and all together addressed Claudius in this fashion: "Hail, Emperor! We who are about to die salute you." And when this in no way helped save them and they were ordered to fight just the same, they simply sailed through their opponents' lines, injuring each other as little as possible. This continued until they were forced to destroy one another.

Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 60

2. A type of cloak. Agrippina was Claudius' wife and Nero's mother.

Nero also gave *naumachiae*:

In the course of producing a spectacle at one of the theatres Nero suddenly filled the place with sea water so that fishes and sea monsters swam about in it, and he exhibited a naval battle between men representing Persians and Athenians. After this he immediately drained the water, dried the ground, and once more exhibited contests between land forces, who fought not only in single combat but also in large groups equally matched.

Cassius Dio, *Epitome of Roman History* 61

He also turned the site of Augustus' *naumachia* to some interesting uses:

Reluctant, however, as yet to expose his dishonour on a public stage, he founded the so-called Juvenalia for which a crowd of volunteers enrolled themselves. Neither rank, nor age, nor an official career prevented a man from practising the art of a Greek or a Latin actor, down to attitudes and melodies never meant for the male sex. Even women of distinction studied indecent parts; and in the grove with which Augustus fringed his pool for *naumachia*, little trysting-places and drinking-dens sprang up, and every incentive to voluptuousness was exposed for sale. Distributions of coin, too, were made, for the respectable man to expend under compulsion and the prodigal from vainglory. Hence debauchery and scandal thrived; nor to our morals, corrupted long before, has anything contributed more of uncleanness than that herd of reprobates. Even in the decent walks of life, purity is hard to keep: far less could chastity or modesty or any vestige of integrity survive in that competition of the vices. — Last of all to tread the stage was the sovereign himself, scrupulously testing his lyre and striking a few preliminary notes to the trainers at his side. A cohort of the guards had been added to the audience — centurions and tribunes; Burrus, also, with his sigh and his word of praise. Now, too, for the first time was enrolled the company of Roman equestrians known as the Augustiani; conspicuously youthful and robust; wanton in some cases by nature; in others, through dreams of power. Days and nights they thundered applause, bestowed the epithets reserved for deity upon the imperial form and voice, and lived respected and honoured — as if earned by virtue.

[Tacitus](#), *Annals* 14.15

Two of the three Flavian emperors, Titus and Domitian, also gave *naumachia*.



The Numachia of Emperor Nero

Most that Titus did was not characterized by anything noteworthy, but in dedicating the hunting-theatre and the baths that bear his name he produced many remarkable spectacles.³ There was a battle between cranes and also between four elephants; animals both tame and wild were slain to the number of nine thousand; and women (not those of any prominence,

3. These celebrated the opening of the Colosseum in 80 CE.

however) took part in dispatching them. As for the men, several fought in single combat and several groups contended together both in infantry and naval battles. For Titus suddenly filled this same theatre with water and brought in horses and bulls and some other domesticated animals that had been taught to behave in the liquid element just as on land. He also brought in people on ships, who engaged in a sea-fight there, impersonating the Corcyreans and Corinthians; and others gave a similar exhibition outside the city in the grove of Gaius and Lucius, a place which Augustus had once excavated for this very purpose.⁴ There, too, on the first day there was a gladiatorial exhibition and wild-beast hunt, the lake in front of the images having first been covered over with a platform of planks and wooden stands erected around it. On the second day there was a horse-race, and on the third day a naval battle between three thousand men, followed by an infantry battle. The “Athenians” conquered the “Syracusans” (these were the names the combatants used), made a landing on the island and assaulted and captured a wall that had been constructed around the monument.⁵ These were the spectacles that were offered, and they continued for a hundred days; but Titus also furnished some things that were of practical use to the people. He would throw down into the theatre from aloft little wooden balls variously inscribed, one designating some article of food, another clothing, another a silver vessel or perhaps a gold one, or again horses, pack-animals, cattle or slaves. Those who seized them were to carry them to the dispensers of the bounty, from whom they would receive the article named.

Cassius Dio, *Epitome of Roman History* 66⁶

So many honours were voted to Domitian that almost the whole world (or all of it he ruled) was filled with his images and statues made of both silver and gold. He also gave a very costly spectacle, about which we have noted nothing that was worthy of historic record except that girls competed in the foot-race. After this, in the course of holding what purported to be triumphal celebrations, he arranged numerous contests. In the Circus [in 89 CE], for example, he exhibited battles of infantry against infantry and again battles between cavalry, and in a new place he produced a naval battle. At this last event practically all the combatants and many of the spectators as well perished. For, though a heavy rain and violent storm came up suddenly, he nevertheless permitted no one to leave the spectacle; and though he himself changed his clothing to thick woollen cloaks, he would not allow the others to change their attire, so that not a few fell sick and died. By way, no doubt, of consoling the people for this, he provided for them at public expense a dinner lasting all night. Often he would conduct the games also at night, and sometimes he would pit dwarfs and women against each other.

Cassius Dio, *Epitome of Roman History* 67

The last recorded naumachia was that given by Philip the Arab in 247 CE to celebrate Rome’s 1000th birthday.

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4. This is the one he mentions in the *Res Gestae*.

5. The Athenians lost the battle for Syracuse in 414 BCE (rather badly, in fact), so this contradicts history.

6. Cassius Dio lived from 164-229 CE. His 80 book history is only partially extant; he is also clearly writing considerably later than the reign of Domitian and Titus.

The Roman Triumph

The Roman triumph was a type of military parade. Generals with imperium could be voted one by the Senate provided a number of conditions were met. Under the Republic victorious members of the Senate (and sometimes non-senators) lobbied hard to be voted a triumph, sometimes waiting for years in the Campus Martius until they achieved this (legally generals could not cross into the city of Rome proper without giving up your imperium). Under the empire the right to hold a triumph was confined to emperor and close members of his family. The route of the triumph is a subject of debate; those seeking a map of various suggestions of the route should go to <http://andreimihailiuk.wix.com/romantriumph>. As the reading below shows, Romulus, the legendary founder of Rome was said to have held the first triumph the following report of his triumph is certainly more myth than history given that this work dates to c. 7 BCE and there were no historical or literary sources from Romulus' period for the author to consult.

After he captured the town Romulus ordered the prisoners to hand over their weapons and taking those of their children for hostages as he thought fit, he marched against the Antemnates. After he had conquered their army as he had the previous one by attacking them unexpectedly while they were still scattered and foraging, he gave the same treatment to the prisoners and led his army home, carrying with him the spoils of those who had been killed in battle and the best part of the plunder as an offering to the gods; (he offered many sacrifices as well). Romulus himself came last in the procession, dressed in a purple robe and wearing a crown of laurel upon his head, and, so he might maintain his royal dignity, riding in a chariot drawn by four horses. The rest of the army, infantry and cavalry, followed organized by divisions, praising the gods in Roman songs and praising their general in improvised verses. Citizens with their wives and children came out to meet them and stood on each side of the road, congratulating them upon their victory and expressed their welcome every way they could. When the army entered Rome they found mixing bowls¹ filled to the brim with wine and tables loaded down with all sorts of food; these were placed before the most distinguished houses so that anyone who wanted could take their fill. Such was the victorious procession, marked by the carrying of trophies and concluding with a sacrifice, which the Romans call a triumph, as it was first instituted by Romulus. But in our day the triumph had become a very costly and ostentatious pageant, and was accompanied by a theatrical pomp designed rather to display wealth than to mark bravery, and it has completely changed from its ancient simplicity. After the procession and the sacrifice Romulus built a small temple on the summit of the Capitoline hill to Jupiter whom the Romans call Feretrius; indeed, the



Panel from a representation of a triumph of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius

1. The Romans, like the Greeks, mixed their wine with water and believed that only barbarians drank it neat.

ancient traces of it still remain, of which the longest sides are less than fifteen feet. In this temple he consecrated the spoils of the king of the Caeninenses, whom he had killed with his own hand.²

[Dionysius of Halicarnassus](#), *Roman Antiquities* 34

Pompey the Great held three triumphs. The first was after he was victorious in North Africa and was held in 81,80, or 79 BCE on March 12th; this triumph is described below:

After [his victory in Africa], Pompey asked for a triumph, but Sulla opposed his request. The law, he said, permitted only a consul or a praetor to celebrate a triumph, but no one else.³ Therefore Scipio Africanus the Elder, after he had defeated the Carthaginians in Spain in far greater conflicts, did not ask for a triumph for he was not consul nor even a praetor. And if Pompey, who had scarcely yet grown a beard and who was too young to even be a senator, should ride into the city in a triumph, it would not only bring Sulla's government into complete disrepute but also increase Pompey's reputation. This was what Sulla said to Pompey, declaring that he would not allow his request, but would oppose him and thwart his ambition if Pompey refused to listen to him. However, Pompey, was not cowed but told Sulla to reflect that more worshipped the rising than the setting sun, hinting that his own power was on the increase, while that of Sulla was on withering and fading away. Sulla did not hear the words distinctly, but seeing, from their expressions that those who did hear them were amazed, he asked what it was that had been said. When he learned what it was, he was astounded at Pompey's impudence and cried out twice in succession: "Let him triumph!" And when many people were clearly unhappy and indignant at his plan, Pompey, we are told, was even more eager to annoy them and tried to ride into the city on a chariot drawn by four elephants (he had brought many from Africa which he had captured from its kings). But the gate⁴ of Rome was too narrow so he gave up the attempt and changed over to horses. In addition, when his soldiers, who had not got as much as they expected,⁵ were inclined to make a disturbance and impede the triumph, he said he did not care at all but would rather give up his triumph than give in to them. Then Servilius, a man of distinction, and someone who had been most opposed to Pompey's triumph, said he now saw that Pompey was really great and worthy of the honour.

[Plutarch](#), *Life of Pompey the Great* 14

Pompey's second triumph took place in 71 BCE for victory in Spain. His third triumph in 61 BCE was for victory over King Mithridates IV of Pontus in the Third Mithridatic War (74-63 BCE). Tigranes, King of Armenia, had been part of the anti-Roman alliance as had a number of other rulers in that area worried about Roman imperial expansion. Into this triumph Pompey rolled a celebration for his victory over the pirates.

His triumph was so magnificent that although it was distributed over two days, still there wasn't enough time and much of what had been prepared could not find a place in the spectacle – enough to dignify and adorn another triumphal procession. Inscriptions carried in advance of the procession indicated the nations over which he triumphed. These were: Pontus; Armenia; Cappadocia; Paphlagonia; Media; Colchis; Iberia, Albania; Syria; Cilicia; Mesopotamia; Phoenicia and Palestine; Judaea; Arabia; and all the power of the pirates by sea and land which he had destroyed. Among these peoples according to the inscriptions no less than a thousand strongholds had been captured, and almost nine hundred cities, eight hundred piratical ships; he had also founded while thirty-nine cities. In addition to all this the inscriptions said that whereas the public revenues from taxes had been fifty million drachmas, they were receiving from the additions which Pompey had made to the city's power eighty-five million, and that he was bringing into the public treasury in coined money and vessels of gold and silver twenty thousand talents – and this was separate from the money which he had given to his soldiers, of whom the one whose share was the

2. The *spolia opima*, armour stripped from the body of the dead general of the opposing side who had been killed in battle by the Roman general. Besides this only 2 other generals dedicated such armour.

3. Pompey wasn't even in the Senate at this point, let alone a consul or praetor; he was also only 26 – not even old enough to enter the Senate under Roman law.

4. The triumphal gate through which triumphing generals entered the city. No one knows where it was.

5. Roman generals usually distributed a portion of their war booty to their soldiers. Some were generous, some, like Pompey on this occasion, were a little too reluctant to part with the wealth.

smallest had received fifteen hundred drachmas. Besides the chief pirates he also led as captives the son of Tigranes the Armenian with his wife and daughter, Zosime, a wife of King Tigranes himself, Aristobulus, king of the Jews, a sister and five children of Mithridates, Scythian women, and hostages given by the Iberians, by the Albanians, and by the king of Commagene. There were also very many trophies, equal in number to all the battles in which Pompey had been victorious either in person or in the persons of his lieutenants. 5 But that which most enhanced his glory and had never been the lot of any Roman before, was that he celebrated his third triumph over the third continent. For others before him had celebrated three triumphs; but he celebrated his first over Africa, his second over Europe, and this, his last, over Asia, so that he seemed in a way to have included the whole world in his three triumphs.

Plutarch, *Life of Pompey the Great* 45



The Triumph of Pompey

In 46 BCE Julius Caesar celebrated a quadruple triumph, celebrating his victories over Gaul, Pontus, Africa, and Egypt.

Having ended the wars, he celebrated five triumphs, four in a single month, but at intervals of a few days, after defeating Scipio;⁶ and another on defeating Pompey's sons. The first and most splendid was the Gallic triumph, the next the Alexandrian, then the Pontic, after that the African, and finally the Spanish, each differing from the rest in its equipment and display of spoils. As he rode through the Velabrum on the day of his Gallic triumph, the axle of his chariot broke, and he was all but thrown out; and he mounted the Capitol by torchlight, with forty elephants bearing lamps on his right and his left. In his Pontic triumph he displayed among the show-pieces of the procession an inscription of but three words, "I came, I saw, I conquered," not indicating the events of the war, as the others did, but the speed with which it was finished.

[Suetonius](#), *Life of Julius Caesar* 37.1-2

Caesar's soldiers sang rude songs about him in his triumphs, something which was a traditional feature of the triumph:

Finally, in his Gallic triumph his soldiers, among the mocking songs which are usually sung by those who followed the chariot, sang these lines, which became a by-word: "All the Gauls did Caesar defeated all the

6. Scipio Nasica was leading the senatorial forces in Africa.

Gauls, but Nicomedes defeated him. But Caesar rides in triumph, victor over all the Gauls, Nicomedes does not triumph, who defeated the conqueror.”

Life of Julius Caesar 49.4

That he did not refrain from affairs in the provinces is shown in particular by this couplet, which was also shouted by the soldiers in his Gallic triumph: “Men of Rome, keep close to your wives, here’s a bald adulterer. Gold in Gaul you spent in dalliance, which you borrowed here in Rome.

Life of Julius Caesar 51.1

Plutarch gives a similar account of the triumph, minus the songs:

Having ended the wars, he celebrated five triumphs, four in a single month, but at intervals of a few days, after defeating Scipio; he held another when he defeated Pompey’s sons. The first and most splendid was the Gallic triumph, the next the Alexandrian, then the Pontic, after that the African, and finally the Spanish, each differing from the rest in its equipment and display of spoils. As he rode through the Velabrum on the day of his Gallic triumph, the axle of his chariot broke, and he was all but thrown out; and he mounted the Capitol by torchlight, with forty elephants bearing lamps on his right and his left. In his Pontic triumph he displayed among the show-pieces of the procession an inscription of but three words, “I came, I saw, I conquered,” not indicating the events of the war, as the others did, but the speed with which it was finished.

Plutarch, *Life of Julius Caesar 37*



The Triumph of Caesar

Augustus and Tiberius had triumphs, but we don’t have full details of them. We hear rather more of Caligula’s ‘triumph’ for his ‘victory’ over the ocean (he was supposed to be invading Britain):

Finally, as if he intended to bring the war to an end, he drew up a line of battle on the shore of the Ocean, arranging his ballistas and other artillery; and when no one knew or could imagine what he was going to do, he suddenly bade them gather shells and fill their helmets and the folds of their gowns, calling them “spoils from the Ocean, due to the Capitol and Palatine.” As a monument of his victory he erected a lofty

tower, from which lights were to shine at night to guide the course of ships, as from the Pharos. Then promising the soldiers a gratuity of a hundred denarii each, as if he had shown unprecedented liberality, he said, “Go your way happy; go your way rich.” Then turning his attention to his triumph, in addition to a few captives and deserters from the barbarians he chose all the tallest of the Gauls, and as he expressed it, those who were “worthy of a triumph,” as well as some of the chiefs. These he reserved for his parade, compelling them not only to dye their hair red and to let it grow long, but also to learn the language of the Germans and assume barbarian names. He also had the triremes in which he had entered the Ocean carried overland to Rome for the greater part of the way. He wrote besides to his financial agents to prepare for a triumph at the smallest possible cost, but on a grander scale than had ever before been known, since the goods of all were at their disposal.

Suetonius, *Caligula* 46-4

The Emperor Claudius did invade Britain and celebrated a triumph for his victory in 44 CE:

He made but one campaign and it was not very important. When the Senate voted him the triumphal regalia, as he thought the honour beneath the imperial dignity and desired the glory of a true triumph, he chose Britain as the best place to get one, as it was a land that had no one had tried to attack since the Deified Julius [Caesar] and was just then in a state of rebellion because of the refusal to return certain deserters. On the voyage from Ostia⁷ he was nearly wrecked twice in furious northwesterners, off Liguria and near the Stoechades islands. Therefore he made the journey from Massilia⁸ all the way to Gesoriacum⁹ by land, crossed from there, and without any battle or bloodshed received the submission of a part of the island, returned to Rome within six months after leaving the city, and celebrated a triumph of great splendour. He allowed not only the governors of the provinces to come to Rome to see the triumph, but even some of the exiles; and among the tokens of his victory he set a naval crown on the gable of the Palace beside the civic crown, as a sign that he had crossed and, as it were, subdued the Ocean. His wife Messalina followed his chariot in a carriage, as did also those who had won the triumphal regalia in the same war; the rest marched on foot in purple-bordered togas, except Marcus Crassus Frugi, who rode a caparisoned horse and wore a tunic embroidered with palms, because he was receiving the honour for the second time.

Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* 17

The triumph of Vespasian and Titus celebrated their victory over the Jews in the Jewish Revolt (66-73 CE). After Nero committed suicide and civil war ensued, Vespasian had returned to Rome to take the imperial throne in 69, leaving Titus in charge of the campaign and the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. The triumph took place in 71 (the revolt was pretty much over by then, but dragged on because of hold outs like Masada, Herodium, Machaerus, and Hyrcannia). The following account is by Josephus, a Jewish general who went over to the Roman side, and is the most detailed description of a triumph that we have:

7. Rome's port.

8. Modern Marseilles. The Stoechades islands are about 70 KM off the shore of Marseilles.

9. A town near modern Calais, just across the English Channel.

He ordered that the leaders of the captives, Simon and John, with the other seven hundred men, whom Titus had selected out of the rest because they were very tall and handsome, should be brought quickly to Italy because he wished to show them in his triumph.¹⁰ So when he had had a good voyage the city of Rome came out to meet him at a distance as it had done before for his father. But what Titus thought was the most wonderful element was that his father [Vespasian] met and received him. But still the mass of the citizens was filled with the greatest joy when they saw them all three¹¹ together, as they did at this time. Nor had many days passed when they decided to have but one triumph that they would share because of the glorious exploits they had performed, although the Senate had decreed each of them a separate triumph. So, when notice had been given of the day appointed for this solemn triumphal parade not one of the immense multitude was left in the city, but everybody went out to see it although there was only standing room – the spectators left only a passage wide enough for those that were in the triumph to go along it.



Detail from the Arch of Titus showing his triumph held in 71 for his successful Sack of Jerusalem.

Now all the army marched out beforehand by companies and sorted by ranks, under their different commanders, in the night-time; they were around the gates, not of the Upper Palaces, but those near the Temple of Isis. For there it was that the Emperors had rested the previous night. And as soon as it was day Vespasian and Titus came out, crowned with laurel dressed in those ancient purple habits which were proper to their family and then went as far as Octavian's Walks. For there it was that the Senate, senior magistrates, and those of the equestrian class waited for them. A platform had been erected before the colonnades of the temple and ivory chairs were placed on it. When they came and sat down upon them the army immediately made an acclamation of joy to them and all cried out about their courage while they sat without their weapons, in their silk garments, crowned with laurel. Then Vespasian accepted these cries; but although everyone was still inclined to continue making them, he gave them a signal for silence. When everyone was entirely silent he stood up and, covering most of his head with his cloak, he gave the customary solemn prayers. Titus also gave the same prayers. After these prayers Vespasian made a short speech to all the people and then sent away the soldiers to the breakfast put on for them, as was the custom, by the victorious generals. Then he retired to the gate which is called the Gate of the Triumph because triumphs always go through it. There they ate a little. When they had put on their triumphal garments and offered sacrifices to the gods that were placed at the gate, they sent the triumph forward, and marched through the theatres so they could be more easily seen by the masses.

It is impossible to describe the multitude of the displays as they deserve and the magnificence of them all: they were such indeed as a man could not easily imagine whether he was thinking about works of art, varieties of wealth, or rare items from nature. For almost all the marvellous things that the happiest men ever get by piece by piece were here one heaped on another and they were all marvellous and costly and demonstrated the vastness of the dominions of the Romans by being brought together on that day. Spectators could see a mighty quantity of silver, gold, and ivory, formed into all sorts of shapes and it did not appear as if they were only carried along in a triumphal parade, but, the saying is, they flowed along like a river. Some parts were composed of the rarest purple hangings, and so carried along; and others had lifelike images embroidered by the art of the Babylonians. There were also precious stones that were transparent, some set in crowns of gold, and some in other devices, as the workmen pleased. And of these such a vast number were brought, that we learned from this how vainly we imagined any of them to be rarities. The images of the gods were also carried, being as well wonderful for their largeness and made with great skill; and all of these images were from very costly materials. And many species of animals were brought, every one adorned with trappings. The men also who brought every one of these displays were in great multitudes and adorned with purple garments, all over interwoven with gold. Those that were chosen for carrying these displays also had such magnificent ornaments, which were were both

10. Some 97,000 prisoners were taken in the course of the war.

11. Titus, Vespasian, and Domitian.

extraordinary and surprising. Besides these we saw that even the great number of the captives was adorned; the variety that was in their garments, and their fine texture, concealed from the sight the deformity of their bodies. But what afforded the greatest surprise of all was the structure of the pageants that were borne along; whoever saw them could not but be afraid that the bearers would not be able to support them, such was their magnitude. For many of them were constructed three or even four stories high. The magnificence also of their structure gave you both pleasure and surprise. For upon many of them were laid carpets of gold. There was also wrought gold and ivory, fastened about them all, along with many different images of the war in a variety of ways, giving a most lively visual representation of that war. For there was to be seen a happy country laid waste, entire squadrons of enemies slain, while some of them ran away and some were carried into captivity, there [you could see] walls of great height and size overthrown and ruined by machines, there were [images of] the strongest fortifications taken and the walls of most populous cities upon the tops of hills seized on, and an army pouring into the walls. [They also showed] also every place full of slaughter and enemies pleading for their lives when they were no longer able to lift up their hands to fight. Fire also sent upon temples was here represented, and houses overthrown, and falling upon their owners: rivers also, after they came out of a large and melancholy desert, ran down, not into a land cultivated, nor as drink for men, or for cattle, but through a land still on fire upon every side. For the Jews related that such a thing they had undergone during this war. Now the workmanship of these representations was so magnificent and lively in how it was constructed that it exhibited what had been done to such as did not see it, as if they had been really present. On the top of every one of these pageants was placed the commander of the city that was taken and how he had been captured. Moreover there followed those pageants a great number of ships. And for the other spoils they were carried in great plenty, but for those that were taken in the Temple of Jerusalem, they made the greatest show of all the spoils. These were: the golden table, of the weight of many talents; the Menorah, that was made of gold (though its construction was now changed from that which we made use of. For its middle shaft was fixed upon a basis, and the small branches were produced out of it to a great length; their position looks like a trident, and every branch had a brass socket for a lamp at the tops of them. These lamps were seven in number and represented the dignity of the number seven among the Jews). And the law of the Jews was the last of all the spoils. After these spoils a great many men passed by, carrying the images of victory which were made entirely either of ivory or of gold. After these Vespasian marched in the first place and Titus followed him. Domitian also rode along with them, making made a glorious appearance riding on a beautiful horse.

Now the last part of this triumph was at the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus; and when they got there, they stopped. For it was the Roman's ancient custom to wait there until somebody brought the news that the general of the enemy was dead. This general was Simon, the son of Gioras, who had been led in this triumph among the captives. A rope had also been put upon his head; and he had been drawn into an appropriate place in the Forum – he had also been tormented by those that drew him along – the law of the Romans required, that criminals condemned to die, should be killed there. Accordingly when it was related that there was an end of him, and all the people had set up a shout for joy, they then began to offer those sacrifices which they had consecrated in the prayers used in such solemn occasions. When they had finished these they went away to the palace; the victorious generals entertained some of the spectators at their own feast; for all the rest there were lavish preparations made for feasting at home. For this was a festival day to the city of Rome, one celebrated for the victory obtained by their army over their enemies; the end that was now put to their civil miseries,¹² and for the commencement of their hopes of future prosperity and happiness.

After these triumphs were over and he had settled the affairs of the Romans on the best foundations, Vespasian resolved to build a temple to Peace. This was finished in so short a time and so glorious a manner as was beyond everything people expected and though possible. For providence had given him a vast quantity of wealth besides what he had formerly gained in his other exploits; he had this temple adorned with pictures and statues; for in this temple were collected and deposited all such rarities as men before used to wander all over the known world to see when they had a desire to see one of them after another; he also placed there those golden vessels and instruments which were taken out of the Jewish temple as records of his glory. But still he ordered that they should lay up their law and the purple veils of the holy place in the royal palace itself and keep them there.

12. The civil wars that broke out after the death of Nero.

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Strange Bodies: The Display of People

This is a very disturbing form of spectacle: the Romans were not enlightened about disability and difference: deformed children were frequently exposed; some might be killed as *monstra*, signs of the gods' displeasure. Even minor physical disabilities or ugliness could be laughed at and mocked – see, for example, the Cicero passage below. (*For more on this topic see [here](#).*)

Caricatures also provoke loud laughter: as a rule they are levelled against ugliness or some physical defect, and involve comparison with something a little unseemly. One example was when I said to Helvius Mancina, 'I will now show what manner of man you are,' to which he answered, 'So show me,' whereupon I pointed out with my finger a Gaul depicted on the Cimbrian shield of Marius,¹ which hung below the New Shops, with the body twisted, the tongue protruding, and the cheeks baggy: this raised laughter, for nothing so like Mancina was ever seen. Another example was when I told Titus Pinarius, who kept twisting his chin when he was speaking, that the time for his observations, if he wished to say anything, would come when he had finished cracking his nut.

[Cicero](#), *On the Orator* 2.266 (the speaker is not Cicero but Julius Caesar Strabo)

A body that was not normally considered grotesque or risible might become so when being punished: the execution of Vitellius, one of the short-lived emperors of 68 CE, is one such example.

1. A shield captured by Marius in the Gallic War, 101 BCR.

The foremost of the army had now forced their way in, and since no one opposed them, were ransacking everything in the usual way. They dragged Vitellius from his hiding-place and when they asked him his name (for they did not know him) and if he knew where Vitellius was, he attempted to escape them by a lie. Being soon recognized, he did not cease to beg that he be confined for a time, even in the prison, alleging that he had something to say of importance about the safety of Vespasian. But they bound his arms behind his back, put a noose about his neck, and dragged him with torn clothes and half-naked to the Forum. All along the Sacred Way he was greeted with mockery and abuse, his head held back by the hair, as is common with criminals, and even the point of a sword placed under his chin, so that he could not look down but must let his face be seen. Some pelted him with dung and shit, others called him an arsonist and glutton, and some of the mob even taunted him with his bodily defects. He was in fact abnormally tall, with a face usually flushed from hard drinking, a huge belly, and one thigh crippled from being struck once upon a time by a four-horse chariot, when he was in attendance on Gaius [Caligula] as he was driving. At last on the Stairs of Wailing he was tortured for a long time and then killed and dragged off with a hook to the Tiber

[Suetonius](#), *Life of Vitellius* 17



Vitellius dragged through the streets of Rome by the populace

Anything out of the ordinary was disturbing to the Romans as it was considered a sign of the gods' anger. I include a selection of texts below some of which relate to what the Romans thought of as *monstra* being displayed, others of which relate to strange occurrences in nature, such as a woman giving birth to an elephant.

In Peloponnesus also there is found a woman, who gave birth over four births to twenty children, the greater part of which lived. Trogius tells us that in Egypt a woman gave birth to seven babies at one time. It also occurs, moreover, that there come into the world children of both sexes in one, whom we call hermaphrodites. In old days they were known by the name of androgyni, and reputed for prodigies;² but now men take pleasure in them. Pompey the Great, in the Theatre which he adorned with remarkable ornaments, as well for the subject as the most exquisite hand of the great artists, among other images represented Eutichtt, a Woman of Tralles, who after she had borne thirty births, was carried by twenty of her children to the funeral pyre to be burnt. Alcippe gave birth an elephant, and that certainly was a monstrous token. Also in the beginning of the Marsian War a slave gave birth to a serpent. It is no lie that females may be turned to males; for we have found it recorded in the Annals, that in the year when Publius Licinius Crassus and C. Cassius Longinus were consuls, there was at Cassinum a woman who, under her parents, became a boy: and by the order of the Aruspices he was taken to a desert island. Lucinius Mutianus reports that himself saw at Argos a Person named Arescon, who had been called Arescusa, and even had been married, but afterwards came to have a beard, and the genitalia of a man, and thereupon married a wife. He also saw at Smyrna a boy changed. I myself was an eye-witness that in Africa L. Cossicius, a citizen of Thysdris, who had been changed into a man the very day on which he

2. In other words, they were frequently thrown into the ocean if discovered. Only Pliny could look back on that and think the Romans had fallen from true, decent values by stopping it.

was married to a husband....By law, 'it should be lawful to parents to put to death children that were born monstrous,' but Dionysius Halicarnassus adds, that it was necessary they should call witnesses to prove that they were monstrous, although the latter stipulation can scarcely be reconciled with another law, which gave to parents the right of life and death over their children.

[Pliny the Elder](#), *Natural History* 7.3-4

Those who were unusually short or tall might be exhibited as spectacles, whatever their status – and that exhibition might continue after their deaths:

Our annals do not tell us what Naevius Pollio's height was; but we learn from them that he nearly lost his life from the rush of the people to see him, and that he was looked upon as a prodigy. The tallest man that has been seen in our times was called Gabbaras, who was brought from Arabia by the Emperor Claudius; his height was nine feet and nine inches. In the reign of Augustus, there were two persons, Posio and Secundilla, who were half a foot taller than him; their bodies have been preserved as objects of curiosity in the museum of the Sallustian family.

In the reign of the same emperor, there was a man also remarkable for his extremely diminutive stature, being only two feet and a palm in height; his name was Conopas, and he was a great pet with Julia, the granddaughter of Augustus. There was a woman also of the same size, Andromeda, a freed-woman of Julia Augusta. We learn from Varro that Manius Maximus and M. Tullius, members of our equestrian order, were only two cubits in height; I have myself seen them, preserved in their coffins. It is far from an unknown fact that children are occasionally born a foot and a half in height, and sometimes a little more; such children, however, die by the time they are three years old. We find it stated by the historians that the son of Euthymenes of Salamis had grown to be three cubits in height, at the age of three years; that he was slow of gait and dull of comprehension; that at that age he had even attained puberty and his voice had become strong, like that of a man. We hear, also, that he died suddenly of convulsions of the limbs, at the completion of his third year. I, myself, not very long ago, was witness to exactly similar appearances, with the exception of the state of puberty, in a son of Cornelius Tacitus, a member of the equestrian order, and procurator of Belgic Gaul. The Greeks call such children as these, *extrapeloï*; we have no name for them in Latin.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 7.16

Varro, speaking of persons remarkable for their strength, gives us an account of Tributanus, a celebrated gladiator, and skilled in the use of the Samnite arms; he was a man of meagre person, but possessed of extraordinary strength. Varro makes mention of his son also, who served in the army of Pompey the Great. He says, that in all parts of his body, even in the arms and hands, there was a network of sinews, extending across and across. The latter of these men, having been challenged by an enemy, with a single finger of the right hand, and that unarmed, vanquished him, and then seized and dragged him to the camp. Vinnius Valens, who served as a centurion in the praetorian guard of Augustus, was in the habit of holding up wagons laden with casks, until they were emptied; and of stopping a carriage with one hand, and holding it back, against all the efforts of the horses to drag it forward. He performed other wonderful feats also, an account of which may still be seen inscribed on his monument. Varro, also, gives the following statement: "Fusius, who used to be called the 'bumpkin Hercules,' was in the habit of carrying his own mule; while Salvius was able to mount a ladder, with a weight of two hundred pounds attached to his feet, the same to his hands, and two hundred pounds on each shoulder." I myself once saw—a most marvellous display of strength—a man of the name of Athanatus walk across the stage, wearing a leaden breast-plate of five hundred pounds weight, while shod with shoes of the same weight.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 7.19

The Emperor Domitian had a deformed boy as a favourite; he also had dwarfs fight in the arena:

Throughout every gladiatorial show there always stood at his feet a small boy clad in scarlet, with an

abnormally small head, with whom he used to talk a great deal, and sometimes seriously. At any rate, he was overheard to ask him if he knew why he had decided at the last appointment day to make Mettius Rufus prefect of Egypt.

Suetonius, *Domitian* 4.2

He would also frequently stage the games also at night, and sometimes he would pit dwarfs and women against each other.

[Cassius Dio](#), *Epitome* Book 67

In the middle of this noise and the new luxuries there appear women trained to wield the sword wildly daring to fight like men. You would believe that the Amazons of Thermodon were fighting wildly by Tanais or savage Phasis. Now a bold unit of dwarfs appears, whose growth nature suddenly cut short, binding them in one movement into a knotted lump. They give and receive wounds and threaten death with tiny hands. Mars, our father, and bloody *Virtus* laugh and cranes hover over the scattered loot marvel at the tiny fighters.

[Statius](#), *Silvae* 1.6.52-64

Elagabalus was a member of the Severan Dynasty and ruled from 218-222. He was only fourteen when he came to the throne and he ruled about as well as one would expect a fourteen year old to do; in other words, he rather resembled Joffrey from *Game of Thrones*. He surrounded himself with a range of people the average Roman would not have thought fit company for an emperor, most of whom his successor, Alexander Severus, got rid of:



Bust of Elagabalus

All the dwarfs belonging to Elagabalus, both male and female, fools, catamites who had good voices, all kinds of entertainers at table, and actors of pantomimes he made public property; those, however, who were not of any use were assigned, each to a different town, for support, in order that no one town might be burdened by a new kind of beggar. The eunuchs, whom Elagabalus had had in his base councils and had promoted, he presented to his friends, adding a statement to the effect that if they did not return to honest ways, it should be lawful to put them to death without authority from the courts. Women of ill repute, of whom he arrested an enormous number, he ordered to become public prostitutes, and he deported all catamites, those with whom that scourge had carried on a most pernicious intimacy, being drowned by shipwreck.

[Historia Augusta](#), *Alexander Severus* 34.2

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Appendix I: Glossary

Aedile

The first rank on the *cursus honorum*, the course of public offices, these magistrates were in charge of maintaining public buildings and space and supervised and organized the public festivals. There were two types of aedile, *curule*, and *plebeian*.

Ammianus Marcellinus (c. 330-390s CE)

A Greek speaking Roman soldier and historian from (possibly) Syria. He wrote a history called the *Res Gestae* which started in 96 CE and ended in 378 (only the portion covering the final years is still extant).

Andabata

A rare type of gladiator who fought blindfolded. On horseback. No one really knows how that worked, but one hopes the horses were well-trained.

Canopus

An town in Egypt on the Nile Delta.

Capua

An originally Greek town in the south of Italy, it was both a resort town and also a location for training gladiators.

Censor

A very senior magistracy in Rome. The position could only be held by *ex-consuls*, and two were elected for a five year term (every other magistracy was only for a one year term). Their job was to keep the census of the Roman people and oversee public morality – the main part of which was expelling people from the Senate for various moral reasons, or from their tribe or status for the same. They also oversaw some of the finances of the state.

Comitium

An open air space located in a corner of the Roman Forum, near where the *Curia Julia* still stands. It was an assembly place for the people and the heart of political activity in Rome. For more see [here](#).

Commodus

This is a stub and will be updated soon.

Consul

The chief military and civilian commander of Rome. Two were elected each year and competition to become consul was incredibly intense as it represented the apex of a political career. After their term in office consuls could go on to be governors of provinces, where, under the Republic, they were wont to rob the provincials blind in order to recoup the costs of their political campaigns.

Damnatio ad Bestias

Dictator

An emergency position, appointed by the Senate in times of crisis, a dictator could only serve for six months, but during that period he had absolute authority. Caesar had himself voted dictator for life which a) was certainly illegal and b) turned out to be a very short time thanks to the c. 70 members of the Senate (some of whom were his close friends) who stabbed him to death in 44.

Duovir or Duumvir (plural: duumviri/duoviri)

‘One of the two men’ (in plural ‘the two men’) is a term used for any dual magistracy. When used in reference to Italian towns and Roman colonies it refers to the chief magistrates (the local equivalent of the Roman consuls).

Editor

A sponsor of a ludus (i.e. whoever was paying for and hosting it).

Essedarius (plural essedarii)

A gladiator who fought from a British style war chariot. This type may have been introduced by Julius Caesar after his ‘conquest’ of the island.

Hercules

A mythical Greek hero who performed many labours. One of those was killing a great lion.

Hoplomachus

A “shield-fighter”; the word is originally Greek. This gladiator carried a short round shield, a spear, and a dagger, which was adapted from Greek infantry equipment. He had a helmet and greaves as well.

Imperium

The power to command legions and the army. It was only held by certain magistracies, such as the consulship and praetorship. Holders had the right to be attended by lictors, the number of which varied according to the seniority of the magistracy.

Infamis (plural infames)

An infamis person was someone who had lost their legal and/or social standing as a Roman

citizen. All entertainers were infamis: that included charioteers and actors as well as gladiators. So too were all prostitutes, pimps, and gladiatorial trainers.

Lanista (plural lanistae)

A gladiatorial trainer/manager. Thought to be a word of Etruscan origin.

Laquearius

A type of gladiator who tried to snare his opponent with a lasso.

lictor

These were men assigned to protect and act as at the direction of certain high officials in Rome, such as consuls.

Ludi Circenses

Circus games. This covers any chariot racing; the Ludi circenses were held in conjunction with other annual, religious festivals.

Ludi Megalenses

Also known as the Megalesia. Held in April (almost at the same time as the Ludi Cereales, first celebrated in 204 BCE with the coming of the Magna Mater, the Great Mother from Pessinus in modern Turkey (Livy 29.14.14), it became an annual festival in 194 BCE. It involved ludi scaenici for one of its six days.

Ludi Romani

In honor of Juppiter Optimus Maximus. The ludi scaenici were added to this festival in 364 BCE, and by 214 they covered four days (Livy 24.43.7); it was here that Livius Andronicus presented the first recorded play at Rome.

Ludi Scaenici

Stage games. This covers any theatrical performance; the Ludi Scaenici were held in conjunction with other annual, religious festivals.

Ludus (plural ludi)

A ludus may refer to any type of school, including a gladiatorial one. Ludi also refers to games, the public games held as part of religious rituals.

Magna Graecia

The name given to the parts of the South of Italy and Sicily colonized by the Greeks; it contained many important cities which were originally founded by Greek settlers, including Neapolis (Naples), Tarentum (Tarento), and Syracuse.

Missio

Literally “a sending away”, it refers to the release of a gladiator at the end of a combat. Gladiators could be sent away *stantes missi*, that is, they were released from that particular *munus* after fighting to a standstill with no one clearly gaining the upper hand. There were rare games that were *sine missione*, where (possibly) every combat ended with one gladiator dying: under the empire you had to get imperial permission to have a *munus* of this type. (Some people argue that in these losing gladiators did not necessarily die, but that there had to be clear victors and losers.)

Munus (plural munera)

Literally “gift”, “duty”, or “favour”, particularly one owed to the dead. As gladiatorial shows were given to honour the dead and in accordance with vows they were called *munera*. A *munus* in this sense was a private obligation and thus the cost was paid by whoever vowed it, not the state. Later the *munera* were integrated into the other games and incorporated into imperial spectacles.

Murmillio (plural murmilliones)

A heavily armed gladiator whose helmet had a decorative *murmillio*, a type of salt-water fish, on it. He had a large oblong shield behind which he crouched and used a *gladius*, a short thrusting sword.

Naumachia (plural naumachiae)

A staged naval battle. These were held in a variety of places, some of which were purpose built pools of great size. Julius Caesar dug a pool for his, but the water was stagnant and the pool had to be filled in to prevent disease. Augustus built another; Claudius held his – the biggest on record – on the Fucine Lake.

Olympic Games

These were celebrated every four years from 776 BCE on at Olympia in central Greece. They were only open to those with Greek ancestry, though that was stretched for Roman emperors.

Ostia

A term used sometimes for the starting gates in chariot races and the Circus Maximus. It also refers to Ostia, Rome’s port.

physiognomist

Someone who tells someone's character and (sometimes) future from their physical features.

Praetor

The second most senior position in the *cursus honorum*, there was originally only one, but the number expanded to 8 and then 16 as the needs of the administration demanded more and more magistrates.

Retiarius

A net fighter, perhaps the most iconic gladiator type of all. His weapon was a trident and he tried to trap opponents in his net. He had very little protective equipment and wore no helmet.

Saepta Julia

The Saepta Julia was a building in the Campus Martius, which was completed by Agrippa, one of Augustus' closest friends, who was also married to Julia, Augustus' daughter. Augustus then decorated it. It was used for a variety of purposes (including voting) and hosted gladiatorial games a number of times – and even a naumachia by Caligula, though it was a very odd naumachia, as it only featured one ship.

Sagittarius

A rare type of gladiator who fought with a bow and arrows. If you think this is not a terrifying type, then you've never heard of Katniss Everdeen.

Samnite

One of the original types of gladiators, named after an Italian tribe that was once an enemy of the Romans; when the Romans became friendly with them, this type vanished, to be replaced by the Thracian.

Scissor (“Carver”)

A very rare type of gladiator about which we know little.

Secutor (plural secutores)

Literally “follower”, a type of gladiator usually matched against a retiarius. He was armed very much like a murmillo, but had a different helmet with very little visibility from two small eyeholes, which was designed so the retiarius net could not catch easily and the trident was better deflected.

theatre of Taurus

The first stone amphitheatre in Rome, built by Statilius Taurus under Augustus. It was never very satisfactory and appears to have been infrequently used. It no longer survives.

Thracian (Thraex/Thrax)

A type of gladiator who fought with a small shield (called a parmula) and a curved, short sword.

Tribune of the Plebs

A magistracy without imperium, it was founded in 494 BCE to protect the interests of the plebs. It was a sacrosanct office – meaning that harming one in office was a capital offence – and from 449 BCE onwards any tribune could veto any legislation that he felt was not in the interest of the people. Originally there were only two, but that number expanded to ten; their

powers were circumscribed by the Dictator Sulla, but quickly restored by Pompey the Great in 54 BCE.

Venatio (plural venationes)

Beast hunts, sometimes in staged settings. A wide range of domestic and exotic animals were hunted. Although dangerous, a venatio was not necessarily fatal for the hunters, who were given weapons and had some protection.

Venator (plural venatores)

A trained beast hunter. Not to be confused with criminals who were thrown to the beasts as a form of execution; although fighting wild animals is never going to be a safe endeavour, these were trained professionals, who were armed. There was a ludus in Rome dedicated to training them, the Ludus Matutinus. Venatores were usually part of the morning show.

Vitellius (15-69 CE)

Aulus Vitellius Germanicus Augustus was emperor for 8 months in 69 - the third of that year. He was defeated by Vespasian and killed by his soldiers.

Appendix II: Biographies of the Ancient Authors



An interactive or media element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/spectaclesintheromanworldsourcebook/?p=214>

Author	Years	Bio
Augustine	354 – 430 CE	Born to a Christian mother and a pagan father in North Africa he was Roman in status and of good rank. He was baptized as an adult in 387; he wrote an account of the conversion called <i>Confessions</i> . He became a leading theologian and Bishop of Hippo, his hometown, where he died when the Vandals were besieging the city.
Augustus	63 BCE – 17 CE	The first emperor of Rome, he left behind a written record of his achievements, the <i>Res Gestae Divi Augusti</i> , which was inscribed in bronze on his mausoleum and also in at least one province (possibly more). The rest of his writings have vanished.
Cassiodorus	c. 485 – 585 CE	A 5th century monk and politician, he eventually became consul. After assisting his father, who was governor of Italy, he went to the Gothic court in Ravenna and later, after the Byzantine reconquest of the Western Empire, to Constantinople.
Cassius Dio	c. 150 – 235 CE	A consul and a historian (he wrote in Greek). He wrote a 60 book history of Rome from the landing of Aeneas in Italy until 229 CE. Some of the history is extant in its original form, some of it only exists in epitomes or summaries by a range of later authors. His name is sometimes written Dio Cassius.
Cicero	106 – 43 BCE	A leading politician and orator of the Late Republic who was also Rome's greatest lawyer and speaker. He also wrote a large number of letters to family and friends, many of which we still have, which provide a unique picture of social, political, and family life in the Late Republic. He was murdered at the orders of Mark Antony and his head and hands were displayed in the Forum.
Dionysius of Halicarnassus	c. 60 – after 7 BCE	A Greek historian, who wrote during the reign of Augustus; his writing was very pro-Roman and he argued that the Romans were originally Greeks. His major work, <i>Roman Antiquities</i> , drew on a variety of Greek and Roman sources, including Livy.
Florus	c. 74 – 130 CE	He wrote an epitome of Roman history, mainly drawing on Livy, covering the period from the founding of the city to 25 BCE.
Historia Augusta	117 – 284 CE	A collection of biographies of emperors and their challengers covering the period 117-284 CE. It is incredibly unreliable, sometimes outright lies and claims to be the work of several authors, which it surely is not, but we often have no other source for some of the period so are forced to rely on it from time to time. It is, however, a good record of the sorts of things that Romans could believe about emperors and their families.
Livy	59 BCE – c. 17 CE	Titus Livius Patavinus, came from Patavium (modern Padua), a city in the north of Italy. He moved to Rome in the 30s BCE but never seems to have played a role in public life. He wrote a massive history of Rome from its founding up until Livy's own times. Much of it is lost and only exists in summaries or quotations; of the original 142 books we have 35, covering the early history of Rome and the Second Punic War.

Martial	c. 40 – c. 103 CE	A Roman citizen from Spain, he moved to Rome in the mid 60s CE. His earliest work the <i>Liber spectaculorum</i> , the <i>Book of Spectacles</i> , was published for the opening of the Colosseum by Titus, but the version we have now is one published under Domitian, Titus' successor. After that he published a sequence of books of epigrams, some of which talk of the arena.
Ovid	43 BCE – 17/18 CE	Publius Ovidius Naso. A author of love poetry, including a 'how to' guide, the <i>Art of Love</i> , he was exiled in 8 CE to Tomis on the Black Sea by Augustus for some offense that was never specifically explained by Ovid. (Ovid hated Tomis, which must have been a horrible place to be stuck in for someone as urbane as Ovid. And, yes, that's true even if they had a gymnasium and spoke Greek.)
Pliny the Elder	23 – 79 CE	A senator, consul, advisor to the emperor, general, who was also a prolific author on a wide variety of subjects. His sole extant work, the <i>Natural History</i> (sometimes called the <i>Natural History</i>), is a compendium of wonders and facts of varying dubiousity. He died during the eruption of Vesuvius, while attempting to discover more about the eruption (and incidentally saving lives in his role as the person in charge of the Roman fleet at Misenum).
Pliny the Younger	61 – c. 112 CE	The nephew and adopted son of Pliny the Elder, he published several books of letters of his to various individuals around Rome, including many members of the elite and the emperor.
Plutarch	c. 46 – 126 CE	A Greek biographer and historian, who was also a philosopher and priest (at Delphi). His parallel lives paralleled the life of one famous Roman with a famous Greek (he also wrote largely non-extant biographies of some emperors). His concern is not so much with history as with character and men's destinies.
Polybius	c. 200 – 118 BCE	A Greek historian, he was originally from Arcadia and came to Rome as a hostage because of his father's involvement in the Achaean league which went to war with Rome. He was a friend of Scipio Africa the Younger and was the first Greek to write at such length at what he recognized was a rising power in the Mediterranean. He wrote a work called the <i>Histories</i> , covering Roman history from 264-146, that is the period of Rome's conflict with Carthage.
Statius	c. 46 – 96 CE	A poet from the south of Italy who published a finished epic (the <i>Thebaid</i>), an unfinished one (the <i>Achilleid</i>), and a sequence of occasional poems, the <i>Silvae</i> .
Suetonius	c. 69 – after 122 CE	A biographer from the equestrian class; he was the emperor Hadrian's personal secretary and a close friend of Pliny the Younger. He wrote a number of texts, not all of which survive. Of that which survives <i>Lives of the Twelve Caesars</i> is the most famous, and which starts with Julius Caesar and ends with Domitian; he had access to the imperial archives for the early lives – not so for the later ones.

Tacitus	c. 56 – 117 CE	One of the greatest Roman historians, whose histories, unfortunately do not survive intact. He wrote the <i>Annals</i> and <i>Histories</i> which survive in part; and a biography of his father-in-law Agricola (the <i>Agricola</i>), an ethnographic work on Germany (the <i>Germania</i>), and one on oratory (the <i>Dialogue on Oratory</i>): these last three are extant.
Tertullian	c. 160 – c. 225 CE	A Christian, he came from New Carthage in the Roman province of Africa. He wrote both in Latin and Greek (though mainly in Latin) on various religious and doctrinal matters and was a fierce opponent of paganism.

Appendix III: Annual Roman Festivals

These are some of the public festivals that reoccurred on an annual or regularly recurring basis

Compitalia: Held during the winter, this was a crossroads festival originally in honour of the lares compitales (gods of the crossroads). This festival was suppressed during the Late Republic due to continuing disturbances, but revived under Augustus, where the lares of the imperial house were worshipped.

Consualia: One of the oldest of *ludi publici*, public games, it was in honour of Consus, the god of grain storage, and held on August 18th. His altar was buried in the Circus Maximus and was uncovered for sacrifices. There were also horse and chariot races; additionally mules and donkeys were given wreaths and allowed to rest on that day.

Ludi Apollinares: Festival in honour of the god Apollo, it was first celebrated in 212 as votive games; they became annual games in 208 to protect against a plague. They were held in July and included *venationes*, *ludi circenses*, and *ludi scaenici*.

Ludi Capitolini: The Capitoline Games were held in honour of Jupiter of the Capitoline and were founded in 387 BCE after the Gauls sacked Rome, but did not take the Capitol. They took place in October; after they fell into disuse the Emperor Domitian reintroduced them and modelled them (somewhat) on the Olympic Games, planning for them to be held every four years.

Ludi Ceriales: Also known as the Cerealia. In honour of the grain goddess Ceres (Greek Demeter). Held at some point in the middle of April, it lasted seven days; initially only a festival on special occasions, it became an annual festival, except at times of public mourning. One part of the celebration involved tying torches to live foxes and releasing them in the Circus Maximus. After 175 BCE it involved *ludi scaenici*.

Ludi Florales: Held from April 28-May 3 and also known as the Floralia, it was a festival in honour of the goddess Flora. This became a regular festival in 173; mimes were performed here (naked actresses) and goats and hares were hunted in the Circus Maximus. It was notorious for its indecency.

Ludi Megalenses: Also known as the Megalesia. Held in April (almost at the same time as the *Ludi*

Cereales, first celebrated in 204 BCE with the coming of the *Magna Mater*, the Great Mother from Pessinus in modern Turkey (Livy 29.14.14), it became an annual festival in 194 BCE. It involved *ludi scaenici* for one of its six days.

Ludi Plebeii: The Plebeian Games; held in November and instituted in 220; Livy 26.30 mentions these games as a regular festival, in his discussion of the year 216 BCE. Plautus' *Stichus* was performed at these games in 200.

Ludi Romani: In honor of Juppiter Optimus Maximus. The *ludi scaenici* were added to this festival in 364 BCE, and by 214 they covered four days (Livy 24.43.7); it was here that Livius Andronicus presented the first recorded play at Rome.

Ludi Taurii: A festival (probably) held every 5 years, it involved horse racing, but we know little about it otherwise.

Appendix IV: Roman Prices

All figures are given in sesterces. Please remember that calculating costs and figures for ancient Rome is very difficult and it is very hard to be precise – it is pretty much impossible to express these in terms of any modern currency.

Incomes in Rome

Julio-Claudian

Imperial income: 400 million sesterces per annum?

Day laborer's income: 3-4 sesterces a day (city of Rome)¹

Roman soldier's income: 900 sesterces a year

Equestrian estate (minimum):² 400,000

Senatorial estate (minimum): 1,000,000 (from land in Italy)

Augustus' estate at death (14 CE): over 1,000 million sesterces

Tiberius' estate at death (37 CE): 2,700 million sesterces

GDP: Estimates vary from 10,000-20,000³

Flavian

Domitian's (81-96 CE) imperial income: 1-1.2 billion sesterces per annum?

Roman soldier: 1,200 sesterces a year

Patrons' payments to clients for daily visit (reign of Domitian): 6 ¼ sesterces

Elite estates

Titus Antistius (quaestor 50 BCE): 18 million

Marcus Crassus the Triumvir (c. 114-53 BCE): c. 200 million

Lucius Lucullus (118-56 BCE): c. 100 million

Pompey the Great (106-46 BCE): over 200 million

1. Wages were lower elsewhere: in rural Egypt, for example, labourers earned c. 1 sesterce a day. However, costs of living were also lower outside Rome.
2. This is the annual income required to belong to the equestrian or senatorial class; many members of this class had incomes much higher than this. Senators had to have at least 1 million sesterces from land; there was no such restriction on equestrians.
3. 10,000 (Peter Temin), 12,500 (Keith Hopkins); 20,000 (Raymond Goldsmith),

Cicero (106-43 BCE): c. 13 million

Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus (50s BCE-25 CE): 400,000 million

Pliny the Younger (61-112s CE): c. 16 million estate; lifetime gifts to his home town of Comum: 1.6 million sesterces

Seneca the Younger (d. 65 CE): 300,000 million

Gaius Caecilius Isidorus, freedman of Gaius Caecilius (d. 8 BCE): estate of 60 million sesterces + over ¼ million cattle and oxen

Narcissus, freedman of the Emperor Claudius (d.54 BCE): estate of 400,000 million

Explaining citations of ancient authors

There is a remarkable lack of consistency in how ancient authors are cited and the names that are used for them. In this volume we use the name that we think is most familiar to our readers and the most commonly in use, and our approach in the same for the titles of their works.

One more thing: an ancient book is what could be fit on a single scroll. So when we refer to a book of a work, that is what we are referring to. Chapters are subsections of books, and the same thing is true of line numbers in poetry.

Here are the ancient titles along side the titles we use for different authors works (this is not a complete list, mind you.)

Cicero

- In Defence of Caelius

Polybius, Histories

Tacitus

- Annals
- Histories

Sources for the Translations

Many of the translations are adapted from out of copyright translations provided by a range of sources, given below. I am immensely grateful to those who have made this material available.

- [Poetry in Translation](#) (Apuleius, Juvenal)
- [Internet Classics Archive](#)
- [Internet History Sourcebook](#) (Ancient History)
- [LacusCurtius: Into the Roman World](#)
- [Perseus](#) – This can be a bit hard to work with if you don't know what you are looking for and are unfamiliar with the way that classical texts are cited,

Versioning History

This page lists changes to this guide marked with a 0.1 increase in the version number.

Major content additions and changes will be marked with a 1.0 increase in the version number.

Version	Date	Change
1.0	March 18, 2020	Conversion of original manuscript [Word doc] into Pressbooks.