Roman Gladiators

**Focus Questions: Why did the various segments of the Roman Empire support gladiator contests? How were gladiator contests similar and different from our own society’s attitude toward violence? Do you think gladiator contests contributed to the strength of the Roman Empire or its decline?**

Attending gladiatorial contests in the amphitheater was an essential part of being a Roman. Rome was a warrior state that had achieved its large empire by military violence. Thousands of Roman soldiers died in Italy and abroad in countless battles. In order to ensure military discipline, Roman soldiers could be very harsh on their own kind, as is evident in the practice of decimation, in which one soldier out of every ten guilty of cowardice or dereliction of duty was chosen by lot to be bludgeoned to death by his fellow soldiers.

In such a cultural climate it is not surprising that gladiatorial games were immensely popular and a characteristic symbol of Roman culture for almost seven centuries. A late Roman author says that emperors held gladiatorial games before military expeditions to prepare the Romans for war: “I accept as more truthful the tradition that Romans about to go to war ought to have seen battles and wounds and steel, and naked men contending against each other [i.e, gladiators], that they might not fear armed men or shrink from wounds and blood.”

It may be no accident that the most dramatic increase in the popularity of gladiatorial games occurred during the first two centuries CE, when the Augustan peace throughout the empire provided little opportunity for citizens to participate in real warfare. If there were not enough real warfare to satisfy Roman tastes, then counterfeit warfare would have to do. Hopkins calls the amphitheater "artificial battlefields" where the Romans "created battlefield conditions for public amusement...”

Gradually gladiatorial spectacle was staged by the wealthy as a means of displaying their power and influence within the local community. Advertisements for gladiatorial displays have survived at Pompeii, painted by professional sign-writers on house-fronts, or on the walls of tombs clustered outside the city-gates. The number of gladiators to be displayed was a key attraction: the larger the figure, the more generous the sponsor was perceived to be, and the more glamorous the spectacle. Under the empire, the emperor became the regular sponsor of gladiatorial games in Rome and normally attended the gladiatorial contests he sponsored.

Perhaps the orator Fronto has best expressed the political importance of spectacles in a letter discussing the rule of the emperor Trajan (*Letters* 2.18.9-17):

The following are derived from the most important principles of political science: that he [Trajan] as emperor has given his attention even to actors and the other artists of the theater, or circus [chariot-racing], or arena [gladiatorial combat] because he knew that the Roman people are concerned especially with two things, the grain supply and spectacles; [he also realizes] that his rule has won approval as much because of games as because of serious things and also that serious things are neglected with greater loss, but games, with greater resentment; that the human drives that lead men to demand the grain dole are less powerful than those which lead them to desire spectacles.by

Most gladiators were prisoners, slaves and criminals. They were subjected to a rigorous training, fed on a high-energy diet, and given expert medical attention. Hence they were an expensive investment, not to be dispatched lightly.

Remarkably, some gladiators were not slaves but free-born volunteers. The chief incentive was probably the down-payment that a volunteer received upon taking the gladiatorial oath, although other volunteers were motivated by the physical challenge and appeal of danger or the prospect of becoming popular items and sex symbols. This oath meant that the owner of his troupe had ultimate sanction over the gladiator's life, assimilating him to the status of a slave (i.e. chattel).

Gladiatorial displays were red-letter days in communities throughout the empire. The whole spectrum of local society was represented, seated strictly according to status. The combatants paraded beforehand, fully armed, in a procession similar to the opening ceremonies of the modern Olympic Games. They were usually accompanied by jugglers, acrobats, and other performers, and all kept time to marching music provided by musicians playing trumpets, flutes, drums, and sometimes a large hydraulic organ.

The fighting had several possible outcomes. If both warriors fought bravely and could not best each other, the sponsor declared the bout a draw and allowed them to leave the arena and fight another day. If it was thought that a fighter wasn’t giving it his all, he was punished by whipping or branding with hot irons.

A more common outcome was when one gladiator went down wounded. He was allowed to raise one finger, a sign of appeal for mercy, after which the emperor or sponsor decided his fate, usually in accordance with the crowd's wishes. If the spectators desired a fighter spared, they either waved their handkerchiefs or pointed their finger downward, the signal for the victor to drop his or her sword. At the same time they shouted "Mitte! ("Spare him!") On the other hand, if the choice was death, they pressed their thumbs toward their own chests (symbolizing a sword through the heart) and yelled "lugula!" ("Cut his throat!").

The Romans seemed ambivalent to the violent nature of the gladiatorial games and, though we may condemn them, the games are not unlike modern professional sports like hockey, rugby, and football. The gladiators were the heroes of their time. Without war heroes, Roman needed someone to idolized, and this role fell to the gladiators. Intellectuals who scorned gladiator contests had no real objections to the violence and bloodshed as such. Mostly one hears complaints about the popularity of these games among the lower classes.

Above all, gladiatorial combat was a display of nerve and skill. From the Roman point of view, the worth of gladiatorial contests lay in the achievement of fighting bravely and of dying nobly - one of the most precious ideals in the ancient world. The gladiator, worthless in terms of civic status, was paradoxically capable of heroism. Under the Roman Empire, his job was one of the threads that bound together the entire social and economic fabric of the Roman world.