

The Art of the Sword and Sand:

*Roman Gladiators and Man's Fascination with Martial
Entertainment*

By Ethan Pierce

Introduction

- The Portrayal of Gladiators
 - Popular culture has portrayed Gladiation as a brutal act of near suicide or sacrifice.
 - Only for condemned men and prisoners of war.
- A Discordance
 - This portrayal does not align with Evidence or human nature.
 - This portrayal falsely represents the Roman taste and citizen.



Figure 1
This 19th century painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme portrays a victorious gladiator awaiting the decision for the fate of his foe.

Guiding Research Questions

- Where does this representation come from?
- What is at stake?
- What does the evidence tell us? What can we infer from what we observe? (in both the past and the present).
- Is the modern fascination with Combat sport any different from Roman tastes?

Origins

- Gladiation began with Etruscan Funeral rituals.
 - Funeral of Decimus Junius Brutus in 264 BC is the first known Roman example (Boatwright et al. 2004).
- Hybridize with military *triumphs*.
 - An aspect of Roman Military culture. Displays prowess (Kyle, 2014).
- These became an increasingly popular, and incorporate more aspects.
 - Evolve into spectacles, or the *ludi* (games).
- Hellenization of culture, particularly the Greek love of sport greatly changed Roman outlook on the games (Kyle, 2014).

Formalization

- Categories and disciplines are eventually formulated.
 - Depictions in mosaics and sources give us examples of Gladiator types coming about.
 - *Venators*
 - *Beastarius*
 - Some are specifically condemned men
 - Gladiator classes too become formalized.
 - *Threax*
 - *Hoplomachus*
 - *Retiarius*
 - *Murmillo*
 - These Gladiator classes are only depicted as combatting specific other classes of gladiators.



Figure 2
Depicts a *Retiarius* fighting a *Murmillo* overseen by a *Summa Rudis*. This Mosaic is located at a Villa in the village of Nennig, dating to the 3rd Century AD.

Condemned Men?

“I attended a mid-day exhibition, expecting some fun, wit, and relaxation, – an exhibition at which men's eyes have respite from the slaughter of their fellow-men. But it was quite the reverse. The previous combats were the essence of compassion; but now all the trifling is put aside and it is pure murder. The men have no defensive armour. They are exposed to blows at all points, and no one ever strikes in vain . . . In the morning they throw men to the lions and the bears; at noon, they throw them to the spectators. The spectators demand that the slayer shall face the man who is to slay him in his turn; and they always reserve the latest conqueror for another butchering. The outcome of every fight is death, and the means are fire and sword. This sort of thing goes on while the arena is empty.”

- An excerpt from Seneca's epistle "On Crowds"

Seneca, Lucius Annaeus. *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales: With an English Translation by Richard M. Gummere*. Translated by Richard M. Gummere. Vol. 1. 3 vols. London, UK: William Heinemann, 1953.

Organization

- Gladiators were slaves and property of gladiator schools and their owners.
 - These gladiators could be war captives, criminals, debtors, or simply volunteers.
 - How they came to the gladiator school largely dictated the class of gladiator they would be.
- These schools housed, fed, and trained these gladiators for the games.
 - Regimented diets.
 - Day to day life managed.
- *Lanista*: were the managers of Gladiators and gladiator schools.
- *Editors*: Game organizers who essentially rented gladiators from the schools.

Some Comparisons to the Modern Combat Athlete

- Formalized rulesets
 - Style, weight class, parameters, referees.
- Voluntary
- Potentially dangerous, but not often fatal
- Potential rewards
 - Fame
 - Prestige
 - Wealth
- Displays of competitive martial prowess.



Figure 3

Photo depicts MMA fighters engaged in a contest overseen by a referee. Photo by user Nestor22ns.

Misconceptions and Realities

- Gladiators were not expected to die. In fact, evidence suggests that that it was an undesired outcome.
 - Expectations and an unspoken code of conduct.
 - *Ad digitum* and the *Summa Rudis*.
 - From the Epitaph of a fallen gladiator's tombstone: "Here I lie victorious, Diodorus the wretched. After breaking my opponent Demetrius, I did not kill him immediately. But murderous Fate and the cunning treachery of the *Summa Rudis* killed me, and leaving the light I have gone to Hades." (Carter, 2011).
- Many historians and accounts suggest that the life of a gladiator was one that could be desirable. It is suggested that many who became gladiators did so voluntarily.
 - Many emperors and elites were drawn to the arena, with Commodus being a famous example.
 - Freeborn Roman names on graffiti (Fagan, 2011).
 - Successful gladiators could earn wealth, fame, and glory. This could be a tempting opportunity for someone born in a lower class.

Impact on the Roman Image

- The mischaracterization of the games results in a warped view of Roman society and sensibilities.
- Rome was a primarily martial culture, and martial prowess was deemed noble and admirable.
- Displays involving beasts and animals could be a spectacle unto themselves, making them appealing examples of exotic fauna from throughout the empire.
- Gladiators who were particularly successful could become quasi celebrities, increasing their appeal and allure.
- The formalization of the games and contests made it a competitive sport, which appealed greatly to a hybridized society as obsessed with sport and military prowess as the Romans.

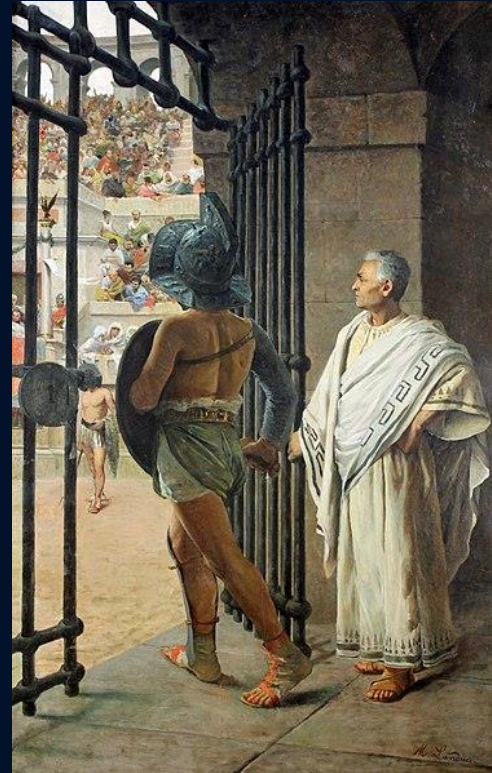


Figure 4
19th Century
painting by
Nicolao
Landucci
entitled, *The
Gladiator*.

Conclusion

Incorrect portrayal of Gladiators has left us with a warped view of Roman sensibilities and a skewed view of the past.

Their fascination with “Blood Sport” is no different from the modern fascination with Combat Sports. Attributing barbarity to the Romans is a byproduct of an incorrect portrayal of Gladiation and does a disservice to historical understanding.

Bibliography

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(Figure 2) Nicolao, Amantio. "Nennig Roman Villa and Mosaics Gladiators." Photo. TimeTravelRome, October 15, 2021.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nennig_Roman_Villa_and_Mosaics_Gladiators.jpg.

(Figure 3) Nestor22ns. "Rachid Combate." Photo. WikimediaCommons, February 24, 2022.
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(Figure 4) Landucci, Nicolao. *The Gladiator*. Ca. 1850. Oil on canvas, height: 63.5 in (161.2 cm); width: 40 in (101.6 cm). Unknown location.
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