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A Day at the Games

The *munus legitimum* or standardized show established by Augustus had three main parts. *Venationes*, the wild animal fights, took place in the morning. At mid-day were the executions. In the afternoon, viewers enjoyed the highlight of the spectacle, the gladiatorial combats. Much effort was expended to add variety to these events, to surprise, delight, or shock the audience, with much success by all accounts. Spectators would come for the entire day or just a portion, depending on their tastes and other responsibilities. But watching the performers (or victims) was just one part of the lure of the spectacle; the games offered a wide range of opportunities for those in the stands to meet new and attractive people, to engage in conversation, to enjoy free handouts of food or prizes, and to protest or approve recent actions of the emperor or the state. For some, the games themselves were a sideshow for the main attraction, which was the formal gathering of the Roman people. For others, the Roman crowd was something to be avoided at all costs.

Preparation and *Pompa*

How was a spectacle set up? The preparation began some time in advance. The *editor*, if he did not own his own *ludus* or gladiatorial school (and most did not), contacted a *lanista*, one of the professionals in charge of *ludi*; in Rome and a number of regions of the empire, he could tap into the extensive resources of an imperial *ludus*, under the control of the emperor. The *editor* would negotiate the number of gladiators, the skill level and the payment. This process might not be an amiable one: the text of Marcus Aurelius' law on the prices of gladiators (see chapter 1) suggests that *lanistae* engaged in price gouging.

Source: *CIL* 2.6278:¹ the *lanistae* should also be warned against a low desire to profiteer and be warned that they no longer have a free hand in supplying the half which the group of *gregarii* constitute . . . in order that the *lanistae* may be compelled to observe this rule as carefully as possible, competence must be assigned to provincial governors and their legates, or to quaestors, or to legates in command of legions.

The *editor* would then start the advertising process, through word of mouth and by hiring professional scribes to paint announcements of the upcoming shows, like those that survive from Pompeii (see chapter 1). The main information about the *munera* would be given on these announcements: the reason for the show, the name of the *editor*, the number of pairs of combatants and the additional features and amenities, such as *venationes*, music, executions, and accommodations for the audience. Day and location of the show were noted as well.² Shortly before the day of the *munera*, a program with the details of the show would be prepared for distribution to the spectators. Names of gladiators, their success records, and the order in which they were to appear would appear on the *libellus* or program. This kind of information would heighten the anticipation of the audience; it might also allow gamblers to calculate the odds on any given match. A painted version of such a program was found at Pompeii; after the show, the results of the matches were added to the record of the listed gladiators. The graffito survives in fragmentary form, but indicates the attention paid to career achievements of individual gladiators.

Source: *CIL* 4.2508: First gladiatorial show of Marcus Mesonius on the sixth day before the *nonas* of May [May 2]. Thraex vs. Murmillo: -nator of the Neronian *ludus*, twice victor, against Tigris of the Julian *ludus*, once victor; -ci-s of the Neronian *ludus*, three times victor and dismissed once standing, against Speculator, victor in 69 combats. . . .Hoplomachus vs. Murmillo: -eacius of the Julian *ludus*, dismissed standing, against M- of the Julian *ludus*, victor in 55 combats. . . .Gladiatorial show on the fifth, fourth, third and day before the *ides* and the *ides* of May [May 11–14]. Dimachaerus vs. Hoplomachus: I-ciens of the Neronian *ludus*, victor in twenty combats, granted *missio*, against Nobilior of the Julian *ludus*, victor in two combats, winner. Thraex vs. Murmillo: Lucius Sempronius, granted *missio*, against Platanus of the Julian *ludus*, winner. Thraex vs. Murmillo: Pugnax of the Neronian *ludus*, victor in three combats, winner. Murranus of the Neronian *ludus*, victor in three combats, died. Hoplomachus vs. Thraex: Cycnus of the Julian *ludus*, victor in nine combats, winner. Atticus of the Julian *ludus*, victor in 14 combats, granted *missio*. Thraex vs. Murmillo: Herma of the Julian *ludus*, victor in four combats, winner. Quintus Petillius, granted *missio*. Chariot Fighters: Publius Ostorius, victor in 51 combats, granted *missio*. Scylax of the Julian *ludus*, victor in 26 combats, winner. Thraex vs.

Murmillo: Nodu- of the Julian *ludus*, victor in seven combats, winner. Lucius Petronius, victor in 14 combats, granted *missio*. Thraex vs. Murmillo: Lucius Fabius, victor in nine combats, died. Astus of the Julian *ludus*, victor in 14 combats, winner.

The night before the *munera*, the performers were given a banquet, a feast that was apparently open to the public for observation. Mosaic representations of this banquet (see figure 3.1) much resemble depictions of the symposium,



Figure 3.1 Mosaic from El Djem, of gladiatorial banquet. Gilles Mermet/Art Resource, NY

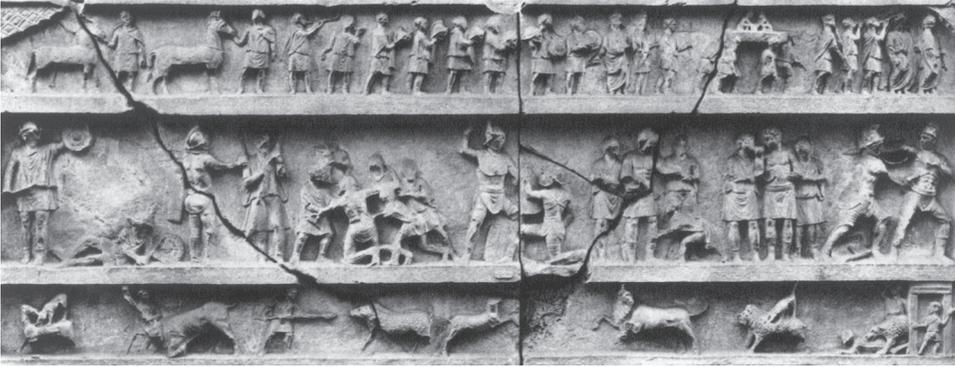


Figure 3.2 Grave relief of *munera* from Pompeii. Museo Archaeologico di Napoli

the idealized dinner party of elite Greek males in which discussion of philosophy and politics was interspersed with drinking games and entertainment. The gladiators' banquet was a site of moral value for Roman observers, as is indicated by Plutarch's approving commentary on how participants made prudent use of this time; no doubt it also allowed the oddsmakers another opportunity to assess potential outcomes.

Source: Plutarch, *Moral Essays* 1099B.³ Even among the gladiators I see those who are not entirely bestial but Greeks, who, when preparing to enter the arena, even though costly food items are set before them, find greater pleasure at that moment in recommending their wives to the care of their friends and in setting free their slaves, than in gratifying the appetite.

The spectacle itself began with the *pompa*, a procession that included political and religious elements as well as the performers at the games. A tomb relief uncovered at Pompeii is a rare representation of this particular part of the show, preliminary to the main event (see figure 3.2).

First to appear are the lictors, who announce the coming of the magistrate *editor* and carry the symbols of his office. On the Pompeiian relief they bear the *fascēs*, the bundle of rods and axes that symbolized *imperium*, the lethal capacity of Roman imperial authority. They are dressed in the toga, the traditional garment of active Roman citizenship. The lictors are followed by the *tubicines*, the trumpeters whose fanfare called the attention of the spectators, and then by men carrying a platform on their shoulders. This platform was typically a means of transporting the images of the gods and the deified emperors that were a standard part of the *pompa*. Tertullian's description of the procession emphasizes this religious aspect; his argument is that the spectacles are tainted by demonic idolatry, although the features of the *pompa* are based on usual practice for festival ritual. Bear in mind that all spectacle began as elaborate celebrations of the divine powers.

Source: Tertullian, *On the Spectacles* 7.2–3:⁴ The “*pompa*” procession – which comes first, proves in itself to whom it belongs, with the long line of idols, the unbroken train of images, the cars and chariots and conveyances for carrying them, the portable thrones and garlands and the attributes of the gods. Moreover, how many sacred rites are observed, how many sacrifices offered at the beginning, in the course, and at the end of the procession, how many religious corporations, furthermore, how many priesthoods, how many bodies of magistrates are called upon to march in it – each is known to the inhabitants of that city where all the demons have gathered and taken up their abode.

On the Pompeiian relief, the next figures carry a writing tablet and a palm branch, to record the victories and to honor the victors. After them is a person identified as the *editor*, surrounded by his entourage who carry the deluxe armor of the gladiators. More musicians follow, and then horses. In an actual procession, the horses would probably be followed by the human performers, the gladiators and *bestiarii*. Cinematic representations typically place the so-called “salute of the gladiators” here.

Little evidence for the use of the gladiators’ salute can be found; far more exists from nineteenth-century novelists and poets who were captivated by the cheerful fatalism they perceived in the formal greeting. The only source for the ritual dates to the reign of Claudius and the elaborate *naumachia* he presented prior to the draining of the Fucine Lake. The narrative context, however, implies that it was not part of the regular procedure, but rather something improvised for the occasion that did not achieve its desired effect, i.e. a pardon from the emperor for the convict performers.

Source: Dio Cassius 60.33:⁵ Those who were to take part in the sea-fight were condemned criminals . . . 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 worked to 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.

The events would begin with an announcement of what was to come, the same kind of information found on the *libellus*, with names and records of the performers. Under optimal conditions, the *praeco* or herald could make himself audible to most of the spectators. Large inscribed placards circulating in the audience would reiterate the information; placards could also be used for special announcements by the *editor*.

Venationes

The morning event for the *munus legitimum* would be the *venationes*, the animal shows. Here animals would fight other animals or *venatores* would combat them. In the earliest Republican spectacles, animals would sometimes simply be exhibited in the arena, without the excitement and blood of the hunt; this practice may have continued under the emperors as well. Calpurnius' poetic narrator, a naive visitor from the countryside, was most impressed by the beasts on display during a set of lavish spectacles hosted by the emperor Nero.

Source: Calpurnius, *Eclogues* 7.24:⁶ Beasts of every kind I saw; here I saw snow-white hares and horned boars, here I saw the elk, rare even in the forests which produce it. Bulls too I saw, either those of heightened nape, with an unsightly hump rising from the shoulder-blades, or those with shaggy mane tossed across the neck, with rugged beard covering the chin, and quivering bristles upon their stiff dewlaps. Nor was it my lot only to see monsters of the forest; sea calves also I beheld with bears pitted against them and the unshapely herd called by the name of horses, bred in that river whose waters, with spring-like renewal, irrigate the crops upon its banks.⁷

During the imperial period, *venatores* seem to have been very lightly armed, using lances or spears against the animals and protected only by *fasciae* or padded wraps on legs or torso. Some *venatores*, such as the *taurocentae* or bull-fighters, fought from horseback; those facing boars, bears and great cats did so on foot. *Missio* was possible for the *venator*; if he had performed well, he could be released for the day even if he had not killed the animal. This would also preserve a costly animal for future combats.

Meridiani

The *ludi meridiani*, the mid-day executions, followed the animal shows. The number and scale of executions, or indeed, whether they were presented at all, depended on the supply of condemned criminals. Rome and provincial capitals, as centers for Roman judicial activity, would have had more regular access to the *damnati*. Mosaics have fairly straightforward representations of the enactment of these executions. A mosaic from Zliten has several criminals, lashed upright to a kind of chariot or small wagon, being wheeled out to face their carnivorous doom; in one case, arena personnel wield a whip to urge the lion to his victim.



Figure 3.3 Sollertiana Domus mosaic of execution. Gilles Mermet/Art Resource, NY

Another mosaic from North Africa comes from the Sollertiana Domus, a villa in El Djem (figure 3.3). The mosaic, as preserved, features the arena during the *meridiani*, with leopards and bears wandering across the blood-stained sands. In the center is an empty stage, probably a special prop for a gladiatorial event; in the corners several condemned men, arms bound behind them, hair shaggy and disarrayed, are being killed by leopards. The mosaic shows the execution in progress in fairly graphic detail; in the southeast corner, the *damnatus* struggles back against the *bestiarius* pushing him from behind as the snarling leopard springs toward his bare chest. In the northeast vignette, the *damnatus* is being supported by the captor under the weight of the leopard, which clings to the condemned man's chest and thigh as it bites his face. Blood streaming from his wounds gives a narrative context for the other pools of blood marking the arena. This mosaic, in particular, also suggests the vulnerability of the *bestiarii* managing the execution, in very close proximity to animals being made to kill.

Not all *damnati* were killed by animals. Gladiators also served to fulfill Roman justice, as described by some Christian martyr acts; at other times, the condemned were forced to carry out executions on each other, as documented by Seneca for the mid-first century CE.

Source: Seneca, *Letters*, 7:⁸ I happened to go to one of these shows at the time of the lunch-hour interlude, expecting there to be some light and witty entertainment then, some respite for the purpose of affording people's eyes a rest from human blood. Far from it. All the earlier contests were charity in comparison. The nonsense is dispensed with now: what we have now is murder pure and simple. The combatants have nothing to protect them; their whole bodies are exposed to the blows; every thrust they launch gets home . . . There are no helmets and no shields repelling the weapons. What is the point of armor? Or of skill? All that sort of thing just makes the death slower in coming . . . The spectators insist that each on killing his man shall be thrown against another to be killed in his turn; and the eventual victor is reserved by them for some other form of butchery; the only exit for the contestants is death. Fire and steel keep the slaughter going. And all this happens while the arena is virtually empty.

Rome and the provincial capitals would have the resources to mount lavish demonstrations of Rome's coercive power, which by the end of the first century had become much less straightforward, staged, instead, as spectacle. Not infrequently, executions were crafted as mythic narratives or framed as a sort of dramatic retribution. In both cases, the punishment exacted was manipulated to hit one or more high points, in which the emotional impact of death and mutilation fulfilled a narrative function. These have been called "fatal charades" and are described with some relish in a number of ancient texts.

Here Strabo describes an execution he witnessed himself, in which the condemned, a Sicilian bandit, met his doom in a setting meant to recall the location of his criminal activity as well as his criminal nickname. The dramatic deconstruction of the scenery could also be read by the audience as a volcanic eruption, appropriate for Mt. Aetna.

Source: Strabo *Geography* 6.2:⁹ And recently, in my own time, a certain Selurus, called "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.

In another deadly vignette, the audience is transported from a sensational peak to the depth of shock and horror by the contrast between the rich fabrics of the dancers' costumes and the execution, punctuated by the unexpected explosion of those desirable fabrics. Plutarch, as a moralizing

biographer, does not find this kind of entertainment terribly sophisticated, probably because of the easy manipulation of the audience's emotional reaction.

Source: Plutarch, *Moral Essays* 554b:¹⁰ But there are some people, no different from little children, who see criminals in the arena, dressed often in tunics of golden fabric with purple mantles, wearing crowns and doing the Pyrrhic dance, and, struck with awe and astonishment, the spectators suppose that they are supremely happy, until the moment when, before their eyes, the criminals are stabbed and flogged, and that gaudy and sumptuous garb bursts into flames.

A number of these "mythic" executions were carried out at Titus' inauguration of the Flavian Amphitheater. As memorialized by the poet Martial, the mythic setting for each not only amazed the spectators, it reminded them of particular aspects of the power wielded by the emperor. Titus makes legends real, he punishes crimes of legendary scale, he recreates nature itself.

Source: Martial, *Spectacles* 9:¹¹ As Prometheus, bound on Scythian crag, fed the tireless bird with his too abundant breast, so did Laureolus, hanging on no sham cross, give his naked flesh to a Caledonian boar. His lacerated limbs lived on, dripping gore, and in all his body, body there was none. Finally he met with the punishment he deserved; the guilty wretch had plunged a sword into his father's throat or his master's, or in his madness had robbed a temple of its secret gold, or laid a cruel torch to Rome. The criminal had outdone the misdeeds of ancient story; in him, what had been a play became an execution.

Source: Martial, *Spectacles* 24:¹² Whatever Rhodope is said to have watched on Orpheus' stage, the arena, Caesar, displayed to you. Rocks crept and a wondrous forest ran, such as the grove of the Hesperides is believed to have been. Every kind of wild beast was present, mingling with the tame, and many a bird hovered above the bard. But himself lay torn by an ungrateful bear. This thing alone was done contrary to the legend.

The following selection from a short novel features a form of torture or execution for female criminals, i.e. rape by a quadruped. This kind of spectacle also appeared in the games of Titus, there given the mythic frame of the story of Dicte. Here the novel's perspective is that of a young man who, as a result of various misadventures, has been magically transformed into an ass and made to undergo a number of unfortunate experiences, only to end up part of a spectacle, the designated perpetrator of the punishment through

bestial sexuality. The sexually charged nature of Roman shows, particularly the mime and pantomime performances that monopolized Roman theaters, find a parallel in this kind of spectacle. As this is a comic novel, the execution is presented as a parody of romantic seduction, with luxurious bedding and food and drink to restore the energies of the “lovers.”

Source: Ps. Lucian, *The Ass* 52–53:¹³ Delighted with the spectacle, [the master of the ass] conceived the desire of exhibiting me doing this in public and told [the keeper] to keep it a secret, “so that,” he said, “on the day of the show we may introduce him in the amphitheater with a condemned woman, and he will mount her before the eyes of everyone.” Then they brought in to me a woman condemned to be killed by the animals and told her to make advances to me and fondle me. Then finally when the day came for my master to show his munificence, they decided to take me to the amphitheater. When I entered, I found a huge couch made of Indian tortoise-shell and inlaid with gold. On this they made me lie and the woman lie on it by my side. Then they put us on a trolley, wheeled us into the arena and deposited us in the middle. The people raised a loud shout and all clapped their hands to applaud me; a table was placed at one side with many of the dainties which gourmets have at dinner. Handsome wine boys stood beside us, serving us wine in golden goblets. My keeper stood behind me and told me to eat. But I was not only ashamed to be reclining in the amphitheater but also afraid that a bear or lion would leap on me.

One of the more famous stories attached to the corpus of Aesopic folktales is that of Androclus (or Androcles) and the Lion. Set in the early empire, the narrative tells of the surprising outcome of an execution. The surprise here, however, is not in the cleverly appropriate means of dealing death, but the unexpected reprieve for the condemned and the pleased acknowledgment by the crowd (and the emperor) that both animal and *damnatus* were agents in their release.

Source: Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 5.14: [quoting account of Apion] “In the Circus Maximus,” he said, “a lavish animal combat was being given for the people. I was a spectator at this event, since I happened to be in Rome. Many fierce wild animals were there, vast numbers of beasts, all rare of shape or ferocity. But beyond all the others the huge size of the lions caused wonder and one lion beyond all the rest. This one lion turned the thoughts and eyes of all on him because of the vigor and size of his body and because of his terrifying loud roar, and because of the muscles and mane rippling on his neck. A slave of a man of consular rank was brought on among many others, handed over to fight the animals. This slave’s name was Androclus. When that lion saw this man from afar, suddenly he stood as if astonished and then tentatively and

quietly, as if he was examining him closely, he approached the man. Then in the custom and manner of fawning dogs, he gently and courteously wagged his tail and rubbed against the man's body and softly licked with his tongue the legs and hands of the man, who was almost dead with fear by now. The man Androclus recovered his senses, which he had lost during those caresses of such a ferocious wild animal and gradually focused his eyes to look at the lion. Then, as though mutual recognition had been made, you would have seen man and lion happy and rejoicing." The greatest clamor of the people was raised by such an amazing thing, he said, and Androclus was summoned by Caesar and asked the cause, why so excessively fierce a lion would be merciful only to him. Then Androclus told the story of this wondrous and surprising matter. "When my master was imperial proconsul in the province of Africa, I was driven to run away by his harsh daily beatings . . . Then in the blazing heat of the mid-day sun, I happened upon a remote and secret cave into which I entered and hid myself. Not long after, this lion came to the same cave, with one foot lamed and bloody, emitting groans and pitiful moans because of the wound's pain." And he said at first he was terrified at the sight of the coming lion and his spirit frightened. "But after the lion came in," he said, ". . . he saw me hiding in the distance, and meek and mild he approached and seemed to show me his lifted paw and held it out as if seeking help. Then," Androclus said, "I pulled out a huge stalk stuck to the bottom of his foot and I squeezed out poison that had made its way into the deep wound and I carefully drained it and wiped away the gore, now without great fear. Relieved by my efforts, the lion lay down and fell asleep with its paw still in my hands and from that day for three whole years the lion and I lived in that same cave and in the same way . . . But when I became weary of that wild life, when the lion had gone hunting, I left the cave and traveled the road for about three days when I was sighted and taken by soldiers and removed from Africa to my owner in Rome. He immediately saw to it that I was condemned of a capital crime and handed over *ad bestias*. But I realize that this lion also, after I left, was then taken and now returns the thanks for my help and medical care." Apion recounts that Androclus said these things and after all these were written down on a tablet and circulated and announced to the people and then Androclus, at the request of all, was set free and his punishment suspended and the lion given to him by the vote of the people.

Munera

The high points of the spectacle were the *munera*, the gladiatorial combats. Gladiators were usually paired off to fight, with combatants determined by type of armature and by skill level, to keep the audience engaged in the spectacle by maximizing the suspense and drama of the duel. Gladiators themselves were thought to have internalized the needs of the audience, to such an extent that they wanted "equal" matches in which the outcome was uncertain.

Source: Seneca, *On Providence* 3.4: The gladiator judges it ignominious to be set against an inferior, as he knows it is without glory to defeat one who can be defeated without danger.

The armatures

The earliest gladiators were probably prisoners of war, who used weapons and fighting techniques learned as soldiers in a foreign army. As the gladiatorial institution developed, weapons and techniques were standardized in a number of categories or armatures. Some of these carried names of national groups, such as Samnite, *Thraex* or Thracian and *Gallus* or Gaul, which in origin may have been styles of weaponry and combat brought to Rome by war prisoners. Others are categorized by a particular weapon, such as the *retiarius* or “net-man,” or a peculiar feature of his armor: the *murmillo* was a heavy-armed gladiator with a decorative fish or *murmillo* on his substantial helmet. Some were named for their main technique or behavior: the *secutor* “follows” or chases his opponent.

The armatures fall into two main groups: the light-armed and the heavy-armed. Matches were set up between, not within, these two main groups, to give distinctive advantages (and disadvantages) to each combatant. While heavy armor offered better protection, it weighed down the gladiator, made him slower, made him tire more easily. Light armor allowed greater speed and agility, but the greater vulnerability of the armature was a real risk if the gladiator was cornered and his mobility cut off. The different tactics and skills required of the different armatures made the combats more exciting for the spectators. No doubt it was exciting enough for the combatants too.

Some items or equipment were standard for the majority of armatures. The gladiator typically wore a loincloth or *subligaculum*, attached around his waist with a *balteus* or belt. The *fasciae* were leather or cloth padded bands, wrapped around the legs for protection and support. Many types of armature included the *manica* or arm protector, made of padded leather or cloth, often covered with overlapping metal plates. Most gladiators wore helmets and carried shields, although these varied from armature to armature. Helmets also had the effect of depersonalizing the wearer, making it more difficult to empathize with the faceless combatant. This basic equipment gave the gladiator at least partial protection of certain crucial areas, i.e. the head, the arms, and the legs. The purpose here was to minimize the risk of a combatant being disabled quickly by an indirect hit. The torso was unprotected, however, and visibly vulnerable to the opponent and the audience.

The ancient authors that survive do not analyze the armatures in great detail; indeed, most references to the different kinds of gladiators are incidental, cursory at best. Scholars attempt to identify the various types

using the abundance of visual representations from antiquity. The overlap between different types, changes in names and in popularity over time, and the occasionally cryptic labels for different armatures make it difficult, however, to correlate representations and names with absolute certainty.

The Samnite armature, possibly derived from the weapons of the Samnites, Rome's enemy in three wars of the fourth and third centuries BCE, is frequently mentioned during the Republic but fades away in the Principate. The weaponry and technique continued in use, by other heavy-armed types such as the *secutor* and the *murmillo*.

The *murmillo* designation comes from the Greek word for a certain kind of salt-water fish.¹⁴ A fish crest may have usually decorated his visored helmet. The *murmillo's* right arm, the sword arm, was protected by the *manica*. Short greaves covered the lower parts of his legs. The rest of his body was protected by the oblong body-shield he carried, covering him from nose to shin when he crouched in the combat-ready position. The offensive weapon used by the *murmillo* was the *gladius*, the short thrusting sword common to the Roman infantry.

The *thraex* or *thrax* may have derived originally from the weapons of the Thracian people; Thracian POWs were taken by Sulla from the army of Mithridates, King of Pontus, in the 80s BCE. The *thraex* carried a small rectangular shield that protected at most the torso. Longer greaves covered his legs to mid-thigh to help compensate for the limited shield. The *thraex* used a *sica*, a type of short saber that was curved or even bent, as a thrusting weapon. A representation of a match involving a *thraex* was found at Bologna (figure 3.4); the long greaves and rectangular shield of the *thraex* at the right are clearly visible, as is a slight curve in the sword he holds over his head. The *thraex* is often represented fighting the *murmillo* or the *hoplomachus* (see figure 3.5). In the Bologna relief, however, he seems to await the outcome of a combat between two *essedarii* with oval shields, now no longer on their signature British-style chariots.

Hoplomachus in Greek means "shield-fighter"; the *hoplomachus* gladiator carried a short, round shield, a lance and a long dagger, all weapons that may have derived from those of the Greek infantry. The defensive equipment was similar to that of the *thraex*, with visored helmet, *manica* on the right, *fasciae* and long greaves to protect the length of the leg.

The most distinctive armature was that of the *retiarius*, who fought with a *rete* or weighted net as his main offensive weapon; this was backed by a trident with sharpened prongs and a long dagger, clutched, apparently, in the same hand that held the trident. With no helmet, no greaves and no shield, the *retiarius* was very lightly supplied with defensive equipment. His *manica* was on the left arm, often supplemented by a *galerus* or *spongia*, a raised metal guard that protected the shoulder and, to some extent, the head and neck.¹⁵ The technique here was to entangle one's opponent in the net, disarming or immobilizing him before moving in to wield the trident. Using both hands, the *retiarius* marshaled considerable force against a helmet or



Figure 3.4 Thraex relief from Bologna. Alinari/Art Resource, NY

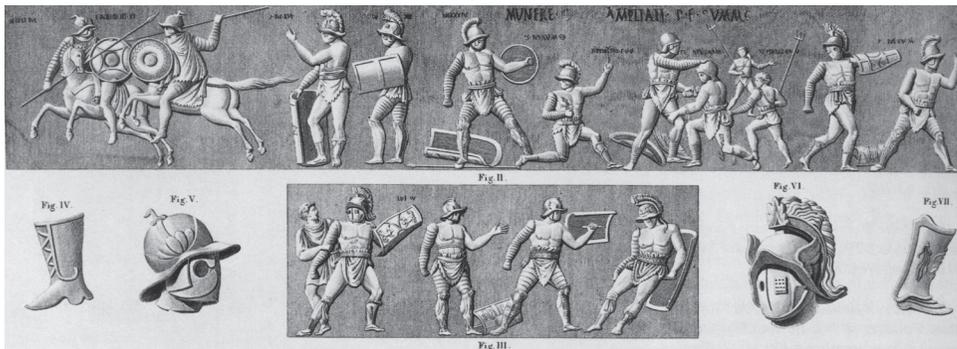


Figure 3.5 Relief from Scaurus' tomb at Pompeii



Figure 3.6 Mosaic of Astyanax vs. Kalendio combat from Madrid

greaves; in close contact, however, the trident could at best parry the blows of a sword. It was best for the *retiarius* to fight from a distance.

A mosaic now in the National Archaeological Museum in Madrid depicts different phases of the combat of a specific *retiarius*, Kalendio, in two registers (figure 3.6). The lower, earlier stage shows Astyanax, a *secutor*, fighting Kalendio, whose back is turned toward the viewer. Clearly visible, therefore, is Kalendio's *galerus* or neck-and-shoulder guard, which continues the limited protection offered by the *manica* on his left arm. Although Kalendio has thrown his net over Astyanax, the *secutor* seems unfazed by this and continues fighting. In the later stage of the combat, the viewer sees the crucial moment, where Kalendio is down, wounded (as evidenced by the puddles of blood on the sands) and raising his dagger in submission. Two arena personnel raise their hands and direct their attention toward the *editor*, outside the frame of the picture, whose decision would determine the fate of Kalendio. The inscription above this later scene has the null sign, symbolizing death, following the name of Kalendio, which suggests that the *editor* did not opt for *missio* in his case.

The *secutor* armature was a variation on the *murmillo* type. The main difference was in the *secutor's* helmet, which flowed smoothly down from the top of the head to the shoulders, instead of incorporating a visor to



Figure 3.7 Mosaic of combats from Verona. Cameraphoto Arte, Venice/Art Resource, NY

protect the face. Two round eyeholes allowed limited visibility. The peculiar shape of this helmet gave the *secutor* better protection against the *retiarius'* trident, as the prongs tended to be deflected by the smooth surface. It also made the *secutor's* head look a bit like that of a fish. The closed helmet would, however, limit the *secutor's* air supply, intensifying the long-term burden of the heavy armor. One of several gladiatorial mosaics from Verona, dating to the later second/early third century CE, depicts the moment of decision for a *retiarius*, forced to his knees by his *secutor* opponent (see figure 3.7, left). The distinctive helmet of the *secutor*, smoothly covering the head and face to the shoulders, with two round holes for visibility, is carefully picked out by the mosaicist.

Equites, as the name implies, fought on horseback (see figure 3.5, left), although visual representations of this type show them facing off on foot. Presumably the *equus* tried to unseat his opponent, so the crucial, deciding moments typically depicted visually would happen on the ground. *Equites* wore a visored helmet, often decorated with a pair of feathers on the sides, and carried a small, round shield. They may have started their fights with a lance, switching to the sword after they dismounted. They were usually depicted wearing tunics instead of the *subligacula*. They are also shown fighting each other, instead of being matched against an “opposite” armature; a mounted gladiator would have too much of an advantage over one on foot and the Romans wanted these matches to be genuine contests.

The combats

Gladiators were paired off to fight, with combatants determined by type of armature and by skill level, to keep the audience engaged in the spectacle by

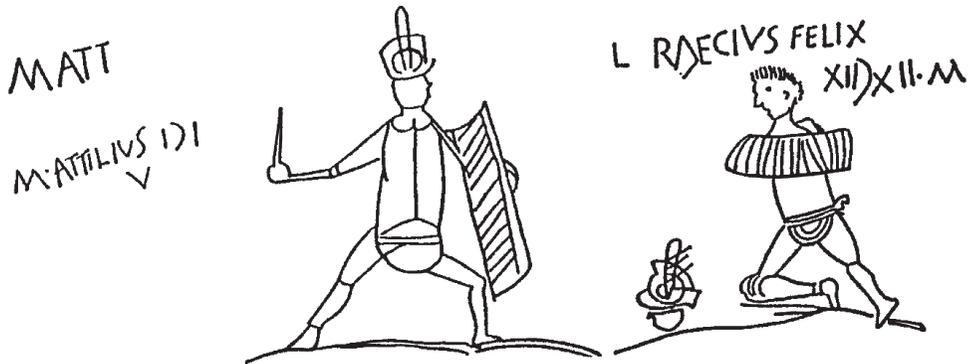


Figure 3.8 Graffito from Pompeii with Attilius and Felix

maximizing the suspense and drama of the duel. A prelude to the matches might be a battle with blunted weapons, like those used for training in the *ludus*. The *probatio armorum* would follow, the test to make sure the weapons were sharp. Then the combat started.

The tomb of Umbricius Scaurus near the Porta Herculanea of Pompeii (see figure 3.5) displayed originally a number of friezes depicting various events from a spectacle probably presented by N. Festius Ampliatus, whose name is painted above the relief; the names and records of the individual gladiators were also painted in. Bebryx and Nobilior, two *equites*, are in combat on the left of the upper register: note their distinctive cloaks and round shields. The next pair is a *murmillio*, with a long rectangular shield, and a *thraex*, with shorter shield and long greaves; note the artist's care in depicting the bands of the *fasciae* wrapped around the thighs of the *thraex*. Then the climactic moment of a combat between a *hoplomachus* (left) and a *murmillio*; the *murmillio* has been wounded by his opponent and, on one knee, lifts a finger to ask the *editor* for *missio*. The next pair is two *essedarii*, one of whose wounded thigh has caused him to collapse. The next pair, *retiarii* with tridents brandished in the air, were probably not set against each other. *Murmillio* and *thraex* finish off this register; the lower register is likewise two pairs of *murmillio/thraex* duels.

Impromptu sketches enliven the graffiti documenting the first combats of a gladiator in Pompeii: M. Attilius, who by his long shield was a *murmillio*, was matched against an established veteran in his first bout. As Fortuna (or Nemesis) would have it, he defeated his opponent, who left the arena alive. Attilius' next match is also depicted in sketch-and-graffiti form: another win for Attilius and another opponent, disarmed and unhelmeted, granted *missio* (see figure 3.8).

Source: *CIL* 4.10238: Marcus Attilius, *tiro*, won. Hilarus of the Neronian *ludus*, 14 matches, 13 victories, dismissed standing.

Source: *CIL* 4.10236: Marcus Attilius, one match, one victory, won. Lucius Raecius Felix, 12 matches, 12 victories, dismissed standing.

Rules of combat did exist for gladiatorial bouts, although little detail about what they were has survived. The *summa rudis* served as the chief referee, depicted at times with an assistant alongside him, both clad in tunics that distinguish them from the actual combatants. Failure of weaponry that resulted from manufacture or mischance, rather than, say, the outcome of damage during the fighting, may have warranted a pause in the combat to correct the problem. A very long bout could be paused by the referee, to give the combatants a break. Some have suggested that the middle range of the tomb relief from Pompeii (figure 3.2) shows such a pause in the action, when the gladiator is drinking liquid and getting a rub-down from arena personnel. The *summa rudis* would also enforce the pause when a downed gladiator asked for *missio*, as shown in the Verona mosaic (figure 3.7). Here, the *summa rudis* takes action in both scenes, for the kneeling *retiarius* on the left as well as the *murmillo* on the right; the latter has been severely wounded and lies prone on the sands, blood pooling under his body. The arena officiant raises hands and eyes to the editor outside the frame, suggesting that the loser is not yet dead and a decision is needed to authorize the final blow.

Tied matches were rare; gladiators were supposed to fight to a conclusion. Sometimes the vanquished opponent was killed in combat or received a mortal wound. Preferably, they fought until one was forced to submit by being disarmed or immobilized. The loser lowered any remaining weapons and raised one finger in submission. The *summa rudis* would intercede and direct the final decision toward the *editor*, the “real” controller of the *munera*. Meanwhile, the audience would be rendering their opinions: a call of “*Missum!*” or the waving of a cloth would be a recommendation for *missio* for the loser, while turned thumbs or the shriek of “*Iugula!*” advocated death on the sands. Advised by the spectators, the *editor* could demand a death blow for the defeated gladiator or could allow both fighters, in acknowledgment of their effort and skill, to leave standing. This kind of interaction is shown on the Symmachius mosaic (figure 3.9), complete with a replication of the chanting of the audience.

The mosaic is divided into two registers, the bottom scene preceding, chronologically, the one above. In the lower, earlier scene, two dismounted *equites*, recognizable by their tunics, round shields and plumed visored helmets, face off against each other, swords raised. They are flanked by two officials, the *summa rudis* on the right carrying a staff. The gaze of the viewer is directed inward by the gaze of the participants. The objects of the focus, the gladiators, are labeled above: *Habilis* is the combatant to the right and *Maternus* to the left. Next to *Maternus*’ name is the null symbol, \emptyset , indicating the death of *Maternus* and foreshadowing the action on the register above.



Figure 3.9 Symmachius mosaic from Madrid. Museo Arqueologico Nacional

An inscription crowns the bottom scene and summarizes the critical action of the combat: “While they were fighting, Symmachius thrust the sword.” The agent of death, Symmachius, is not one of the gladiators represented. Who, then, is responsible for the death? In the scene above, Habilis, left of center, leans over Maternus, now shown bleeding and prone on the sands of the arena. On the far left stands the *summa rudis*; his body turned away from the pair, toward the unseen *editor*, who is to decide whether Maternus is to be killed or to be granted *missio*. Written above the official is “I kill [him]”; the crowd responds with “We see this,” here articulating their primary function of “seeing” and receiving the message of the arena. The audience then addresses the *editor*: “Symmachius, you fortunate man!” As *editor*, he is the one who wielded the sword, he is the one who killed Maternus. He is the final arbitrator of life and death. He is acclaimed as “fortunate” in so doing;

his spectacle was a good one, he made the right decision as the agent of Roman authority and he earned the respect and gratitude of the community.

Good Spectacles vs. Bad Spectacles

Roman audiences apparently had developed tastes as to what constituted a good show, not just in terms of what kinds of armature, what kinds of events, what kinds of amenities would give them satisfaction and pleasure, but what kind of behavior they expected from a good *editor*. The prospective audience in Puteoli, in attendance at the banquet given by Trimalchio in the novel *Satyricon*, has definite opinions about an upcoming set of games offered by Titus Mammaea, a local politician seeking the votes of spectators. The passage contains useful tidbits for how shows worked, as well as how the quality of the competition affected the relationship between the *editor* and the recipients of his generosity.

Source: Petronius, *Satyricon* 45:¹⁶ And another thing, we'll be having a holiday with a three-day show that's the best ever – and not just a hack troupe of gladiators but freedmen for the most part. My old friend Titus has a big heart and a hot head. Maybe this, maybe that, but something at all events. I'm a close friend of his and he's no way wishy-washy. He'll give us cold steel, no quarter and the slaughterhouse right in the middle where all the stand can see it. And he's got the wherewithal – he was left thirty million sesterces when his poor father died. Even if he spent four hundred thousand, his pocket won't feel it and he'll go down in history. He's got some real desperadoes already, and a woman who fights in a chariot, and Glyco's steward who was caught having fun with his mistress. You'll see quite a quarrel in the crowd between jealous husbands and lover-boys. But that two-bit Glyco threw his steward to the beasts, which is just giving himself away. How is it the slave's fault when he's forced into it? It's that old pisspot who really deserved to be tossed by a bull. But if you can't beat the ass you beat the saddle.

But I can almost smell the dinner Mammaea is going to give us – two *denarii* apiece for me and the family.¹⁷ If he really does it, he'll make off with all Norbanus's votes, I tell you he'll win at a canter. After all, what good has Norbanus done us? He put on some two-for-the-price-of-one gladiators, so decrepit already that they'd have dropped if you blew at them. I've seen *bestiarii* give a better performance. As for the *equites* killed, he got them off a lamp – they ran round like cocks in a backyard. One was just a cart-horse, the other couldn't stand up, and the reserve was just one corpse instead of another – he was practically hamstrung. One boy did have a bit of spirit, a *Thraex*, and even he didn't show any initiative. In fact, they were all flogged afterwards, there were so many shouts of "Give it to them!" from the crowd. Pure cowards, that's all.

"Well, I've put on a show for you," he says. "And I'm clapping you," says I. "Reckon it up – I'm giving more than I got. So we're quits."

In Apuleius' novel, another set of games is anticipated very differently by part of the prospective audience, who reap unexpected dividends from the pre-production disaster that befell Demochares, the *editor*. As planned, the spectacle would have included gladiatorial combats and *venationes* with famous professionals as well as lavish preparations for executions of condemned criminals.

Source: Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* 4.13:¹⁸ [in Plataea] we found everyone chattering about a certain Demochares who was sponsoring a gladiatorial show. For, being a man with the highest connections and celebrated for his wealth and generosity, he furnished amusements for the populace as splendidly as his position warranted . . . There were gladiators (the very best names), *venatores* well-known for their agility, and criminals who had forfeited all claim on society and who were being fattened to feast the wild beasts. There were stages built up with stakes, towers of joisted beams like movable houses frescoed richly on the outside, luxurious receptacles for the animals destined to be slain. And as for the animals, they were all kinds imaginable; for [Demochares] had taken no end of trouble in importing from abroad the noble creatures whose bellies were the tombs for the condemned men. But apart from all the other hugely costly items he had concentrated the resources of his estate on collecting a bevy of enormous bears. Besides those snared by his own huntsmen and those bought at heavy expense, others had been donated by his enthusiastic friends; and the whole set were being reared with unstinted care and cost . . . the bears, pining away in their protracted captivity, weakened by the broiling summer heat, and deteriorating in their narrowed quarters, were afflicted by a sudden plague; and their numbers dwindled considerably. Everywhere in the streets you could see the hulks of dying bears strewn about like wrecked ships; and as a result of this the dirty mob, forced by rude poverty and pinched bellies to gulp down any offal that came their way as long as it cost nothing, stole out and served themselves with fresh bear steaks.

The Other Show: Audiences at the Games

Romans enjoyed rooting for their favorites: it generated heightened emotions and the rush of adrenaline, it was not terribly complex or involved, and it engaged the individual, vicariously but powerfully, in the danger and glory of the competition. Gambling on the outcome of matches invested the spectators in the results, increasing one's personal interest in the matches. Gladiator enthusiasts followed specific fighters and often identified themselves by preference for armature categories: light-armed or heavy-armed. *Scutarii* favored the heavily armed gladiators, whose heavy, body-protecting large shields were called *scuta* as a group. *Parmularii* rooted for the light-armed fighter, carrying the smaller, more maneuverable *parma* or small shield.

Emperors were fans too, able to dispute knowledgeably about different kinds of armature for gladiators. Titus shows himself to be positively involved in the games, sharing the spectators' enthusiasms but moderating his behavior appropriately.

Source: Suetonius, *Titus* 8:¹⁹ [Titus] openly acknowledged his partisanship of the Thracian-style gladiators and would gesture and argue vociferously with the crowd on this subject, though never losing either his dignity or his sense of justice.

The audience, of course, was not all-consumed by the spectacle in the arena. In the stands, spectators took the opportunity to interact with one another in interesting and inventive ways that registered greater or lesser engagement with the actual performance. The heightened emotions provided initiative for personal pursuits, be they romantic or intellectual.

Ovid provides a detailed (and tongue-in-cheek) manual on how to further a seduction as a spectator in the stands. Much attention is given to making use of the specifics of the venue for flirtation and "accidental" caresses: the crowding, the grime, the relative ease of contact in this mixed-sexes scenario. The emotional ambience is also an opportunity for Ovid's lothario: shared enthusiasms and cheering as much as moaning reactions to mortal wounds parallel the feelings of lovers' intimacies.

Source: Ovid, *The Art of Love* 1.135–170:²⁰ Furthermore, don't overlook the meetings when horses are running; in the crowds at the track opportunity waits. There is no need for a code of finger-signals or nodding. Sit as close as you like; no one will stop you at all. In fact, you will have to sit close – that's one of the rules, at a race track. Whether she likes it or not, contact is part of the game. Try to find something in common, to open the conversation; don't care too much what you say, just so that everyone hears. Ask her, "Whose colors are those?" – that's good for an opening gambit. Put your own bet down, fast, on whatever she plays. Then, when the gods come along in procession, ivory, golden, outcheer every young man, shouting for Venus, the queen. Often it happens that dust may fall on the blouse of the lady. If such dust should fall, carefully brush it away. Even if there's no dust, brush off whatever there isn't. Any excuse will do: why do you think you have hands? If her cloak hangs low, and the ground is getting it dirty, gather it up with care, lift it a little, so! Maybe, by the way of reward, and not without her indulgence, you'll be able to see ankle or possibly knee. Then look around and glare at the fellow who's sitting behind you, don't let him crowd his knees into her delicate spine. Girls, as everyone knows, adore these little attentions: getting the cushion just right, that's in itself quite an art; yes, and it takes a technique in making a fan of your program or in fixing a stool under the feet of a girl.

Such is the chance of approach the race track can offer a lover.

There is another good ground, the gladiatorial shows. On that sorrowful sand Cupid has often contested, and the watcher of wounds often has "had it" himself.²¹ While he is talking, or touching a hand, or studying entries, asking which one is ahead after his bet has been laid, wounded himself, he groans to feel the shaft of the arrow; he is a victim himself, no more spectator, but show.

A real-life example of such flirtation is given by Plutarch in his biography of the dictator Sulla, who met his last wife at the games. Plutarch's description acknowledges that the venue enables this kind of interaction in the audience, combining proximity of the sexes with the possibility for social circulation and intersecting eye lines.

Source: Plutarch, *Sulla* 35:²² A few months later there was a show of gladiators and since at this time men and women used to sit all together in the theater, with no separate seating accommodation for the sexes, there happened to be sitting near Sulla a very beautiful woman of a most distinguished family. Her name was Valeria . . . As she passed behind Sulla, she rested her hand on him, pulled off a little piece of wool from his toga and then went on to her seat. When Sulla looked round at her in surprise, she said: "There's no reason to be surprised, Dictator. I only want to have a little bit of your good luck for myself." Sulla was far from displeased . . . After this they kept glancing at each other, constantly turning their heads to look, and exchanging smiles. And in the end negotiations began for marriage.

The air of seduction in the stands was considered one of its dangers by the early Christian author Tertullian, who noted that fans "on the prowl" paid much attention to clothing and at least pretended interest in what was happening in the arena, as an opening to banter and flirtation.

Source: Tertullian, *On the Spectacles* 25.2:²³ No, indeed, in every kind of spectacle he will meet with no greater temptation than that over careful attire of women and men. That sharing of feelings and that agreement or disagreement over favorites fan the sparks of lust from their fellowship.

Clement, a second-century Christian author, went into minute detail on how best to lead a Christian life. His condemnation of the arena focuses on its sexualized ambience, concentrating on the audience's lack of control as the prime cause of the lascivious atmosphere.

Source: Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor* 3.11.77:²⁴ These assemblies, indeed, are full of confusion and iniquity; and these pretexts for assembling are the cause of disorder – men and women assembling promiscuously in the sight of one another. In this respect the assembly has already shown itself bad: for when the eye is lascivious, the desires grow warm; and the eyes that are accustomed to look impudently at one’s neighbors during the leisure granted to them, inflame the amatory desires. Let spectacles, therefore, and plays that are full of scurrility and of abundant gossip, be forbidden.

The passion stirred by such shows roused some to take extreme action; Petronius’ novel attributes some of the frenzied female sexual excitement to the allure of the forbidden, the marginal status of the performers. Note the reference to seating by social status in the woman’s avoidance of the elite section.

Source: Petronius, *Satyricon* 126:²⁵ Some women get heated up over the absolute dregs [of society] and can’t feel any passion unless they see slaves or bare-legged messengers. The arena drives some of them into heat, or a mule-driver covered with dust, or actors displayed on the stage. My mistress is one of this type. She jumps across the first fourteen seats from the orchestra and looks for something to love among the lowest crowd.

Dangerous games

Dangers to spectators were typically minimized by the construction of the spectacle venues; efficient movement through entrances would cut back on crowding, nets and barriers protected them from wild animals, even the risk of sunburn was diminished by the awnings. Rowdiness in the stands was, however, a recurrent problem, perhaps the ancient equivalent of modern soccer hooliganism. In the early empire, soldiers were regularly stationed at the spectacles to keep competitive passions from turning to blows. Nero’s adoption of a “popular” stance in his early years led him to ease up on this control; in fact, the rowdy behavior of a portion of the spectators in the stands was not only tolerated but encouraged by the relaxed and approving attitude of the emperor.

Source: Tacitus, *Annals* 13.25:²⁶ In the theater, there were brawls between gangs favoring rival performers. Nero converted these disorders into serious warfare. For he waived penalties and offered prizes – watching in person, secretly and on many occasions even openly. Finally, however, public animosities and fears of worse disturbances left no alternative but . . . to station troops in the theater again.

A reference in the corpus of Roman law suggests that a particular demographic, the *iuvenes* or “young men,” was seen as primarily responsible for creating a public nuisance at spectacles. The *iuvenes* was also the name for the young men’s clubs that were in part sponsored by the authorities, as a means of developing the proper attitudes toward tradition and responsibility among a network of the younger generation of future leaders. Some have seen in this law a reference to the breakdown of social order in the late Empire, beginning with the restless youth in the clubs.

Source: *Digest* 48.19.28.3:²⁷ From Callistratus, *Judicial Examinations*, book 6 . . . Certain persons, who commonly call themselves “the young men,” in certain towns where there is unrest play to the cheap seats for the applause of the mob. If they do no more than this and have not previously been admonished by the governor, they are beaten with rods and dismissed, or also forbidden to attend public spectacles. But if after such correction they are caught doing the same again, they should be punished with exile; or sometimes capital punishment may be imposed, for example, when they have too often been guilty of seditious and riotous behavior and after repeated arrests and too-lenient treatment persist in the same rash attitude.

Fights could break out in the stands at the spectacle, as happened in 59 CE in Pompeii’s amphitheater, with serious consequences. Tacitus’ description of the incident connects it to local partisanship, competition between boosters of Pompeii and the neighboring Nuceria, with a disenfranchised Roman senator possibly involved in the dispute. The Senate’s punishment banned not only spectacles in Pompeii but also private *collegia* or associations, which may be a recognition of the risky behavior of fan clubs.

Source: Tacitus, *Annals* 14.17:²⁸ About the same time a trifling beginning led to frightful bloodshed between the inhabitants of Nuceria and Pompeii, at a gladiatorial show exhibited by Livineius Regulus, who had been, as I have related, expelled from the Senate. With the unruly spirit of townsfolk, they began with abusive language of each other; then they took up stones and at last weapons, the advantage resting with the populace of Pompeii, where the show was being exhibited. And so there were brought to Rome a number of the people of Nuceria, with their bodies mutilated by wounds, and many lamented the deaths of children or of parents. The emperor entrusted the trial of the case to the Senate, and the Senate to the consuls, and then again the matter being referred back to the Senators, the inhabitants of Pompeii were forbidden to have any such public gathering for ten years, and all associations they had formed in defiance of the laws were dissolved. Livineius and the others who had excited the disturbance were punished with exile.



Figure 3.10 Fresco of riot at Pompeii. Scala/Art Resource, NY

A fresco found at Pompeii (see figure 3.10) depicts the riot of 59 in progress, as figures *not* in gladiatorial gear beat each other in the arena, in the stands and in the streets of the city near the amphitheater. The artist has tried to render something of a bird's-eye view of the setting, with some care given to the representation of the *vela* or awning in use as well as the distinctive exterior staircase of this early venue. More striking, however, are the clusters of out-of-scale figures committing mayhem upon each other.

The actual venue of the spectacle might not be safe. Tacitus spends some time on the enormous human costs of the tragedy at Fidenae in 27 CE, when a badly built temporary amphitheater collapsed (see chapter 2). Tacitus finds a moral value in the Romans' generous response to disaster – not unlike modern-day media coverage of tragedy.

Source: Tacitus, *Annals* 4.62–63:²⁹ Those who were crushed to death in the first moment of the accident had at least under such dreadful circumstances the advantage of escaping torture. More to be pitied were they who with limbs torn from them still retained life, while they recognised their wives and children by seeing them during the day and by hearing in the night their screams and groans. Soon all the neighbors in their excitement at the report were bewailing brothers, kinsmen or parents. Even those whose friends or relatives were away from home for quite a different reason, still trembled for them, and as it was not yet known who had been destroyed by the crash, suspense made the alarm more widespread.

As soon as they began to remove the debris, there was a rush to see the lifeless forms and much embracing and kissing. Often a dispute would arise, when some distorted face, bearing however a general resemblance of form and age, had baffled their efforts at recognition. Fifty thousand persons were maimed or destroyed in this disaster . . . At the moment of the calamity the nobles threw open their houses and supplied indiscriminately medicines and physicians, so that Rome then, notwithstanding her sorrowful aspect, wore a likeness to the manners of our forefathers who after a great battle always relieved the wounded with their bounty and attentions.

Special treats

Ancient authors and surviving announcements of games often herald the attention to detail demonstrated by the *editor* of the spectacle. A magnanimous sponsor not only provided exciting and colorful shows and fierce competition; he also took care of the human needs of his audience. This took the form of special comforts for the spectator: shade, snacks, sprinkles, and door prizes. A frequent source of pleasure for the Pompeiian audience was the provision of *vela* or awnings, to provide cooling shade; the phrase “*vela erunt*” (“there will be awnings”) is nearly a standard feature in the announcements of games painted on the walls of that town. The audience in Rome was also familiar with the *vela*; development of the concept in the capital improved on the material and the expanse of such awnings for spectators, as Pliny the Elder documents.

Source: Pliny, *Natural History* 19.23–25:³⁰ Linen cloths were used in the theaters as awnings, a plan first invented by Quintus Catulus³¹ when dedicating the Capitol. Next Lentulus Spinther is recorded to have been the first to stretch awnings of cambric in the theater, at the *Ludi Apollinares*.³² Soon afterwards Caesar when dictator stretched awnings over the whole of the Roman Forum, as well as the Sacred Way from his mansion, and the slope right up to the Capitol, a display recorded to have been thought more wonderful even than

the show of gladiators which he gave . . . recently awnings actually of sky blue and spangled with stars have been stretched with ropes even in the emperor Nero's amphitheaters.

Food, spectacular food

Distribution of food items as largesse had a long tradition in Roman politics; patrons in the early Republic, for example, fed their clients who came to wish them a good morning at the *salutatio*. Redistribution of wealth through public banquets was a regular feature of public religion as well as private events, such as funerals, and those that straddled the dividing line between public and private, including triumphs and *munera*. Grandiose handouts of food and beverages formed part of the spectacle during the great imperial games; at a set of games under Domitian, Statius was impressed by the lush and tasty treats falling from overhead.

Source: Statius, *Silvae* 1.6.9–50:³³ Scarce was the new dawn stirring, when already sweetmeats were raining from the line, such was the dew the rising East wind was scattering; the famous fruit of Pontic nut groves or of Idume's fertile slopes, all that devout Damascus grows upon its boughs or thirsty Caunus ripens falls in a generous profusion. Biscuits and melting pastries, American fruit³⁴ not over-ripe, must-cakes, and bursting dates from invisible palms were showering down. Not with such torrents do stormy Hyades overwhelm the earth or Pleiades dissolved in rain, as the hail that from a sunny sky lashed the people in the Latin spectacle seats . . . Behold another multitude, handsome and well-dressed, makes its way along all the rows. Some carry baskets of bread and white napkins and more luxurious fare; others serve languorous wine in abundant measure . . . you nourish alike the circle of the noble and austere and the folk that wear the toga and since, O generous lord, you feed so many multitudes, haughty Annona³⁵ knows nothing of this festival . . . One table serves each class alike: children, women, people, equestrians, and senators; freedom has loosed the bonds of awe. And even you as well – what god could have such leisure or promise as much – you came and shared our banquet. And now everyone, be he rich or poor, boasts himself the Emperor's guest.

Sparsiones

The Latin for sprinkles and door prizes uses the same fundamental word: *sparsio*. Alone, the word refers to a light cascade of water, most refreshing to a sweaty audience on a warm Mediterranean day. Sometimes the water could be mixed with balsam or saffron, to provide a pleasant scent. Pompey introduced these sprinkles into Rome for use in his theater, built during the

50s BCE. Seneca mentions a spraying contraption as an example of misdirected intelligence, human ingenuity used for frivolous purpose. His reference might be recognizable to a modern audience as “mistfers”: water under pressure was distributed from a perforated pipe and floated gently onto the heads of the audience.

Source: Seneca *Letters* 90.15:³⁶ And today just tell me which of the following you consider the wiser man: the one who discovers a means of spraying saffron perfumes to a tremendous height from hidden pipes, who fills or empties channels in one sudden rush of water, who constructs a set of interchangeable ceilings for a dining room in such a way as to produce a constant succession of different patterns.

Sparsio missilium, in contrast to *sparsiones*, refers to a light “rain” of small wooden balls, tossed at spectators. These balls acted as vouchers, inscribed with the prizes the holder could collect from the sponsor. These prizes ran the gamut from food items to cash to the title to an apartment; the voucher would become part of the holder’s estate, to be passed on to his heirs, even if not yet redeemed at the time of the owner’s death.

Source: Dio Cassius 66.25:³⁷ 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.

With such desirable items literally up for grabs, the scramble to catch these “missiles” could turn to frenzy. Seneca compares the door prizes at the games to advantages distributed by Fortune to human beings; these tangible assets of possessions and advancement are not unproblematic but carry unsuspected risks, as do the *sparsiones missilium*, bringing joy and danger to those who try to catch them.

Source: Seneca, *Letters* 74.7:³⁸ Imagine now to yourself that Fortuna is presenting games and is showering down honors, riches, and influence upon this crowd of mortals; some of these prizes have already been torn to pieces in the hands of those who try to snatch them, others have been divided among untrustworthy

partnerships, and still others have been snatched to the great detriment of those into whose possession they have come . . . others have been lost to their seekers because they were snatching too eagerly for them and, just because they are greedily seized upon, have been knocked from their hands . . . The most sensible man, therefore, runs from the theater as soon as he sees the little gifts being brought in; for he knows that one pays a high price for small favors. No one will grapple with him on the way out, or strike him as he departs; the quarrelling takes place where the prizes are.

Inaugural Games at the Flavian Amphitheater

The construction of the Colosseum was a key feature of the Flavian dynasty's imperial image. The family were "upstarts," their bloodlines lacking the patrician prestige that the Julio-Claudians had enjoyed. The change in imperial leadership was something of a test for the office of emperor as well. Much of the authority enjoyed by the first dynasty had been built up by the personal efforts of Augustus himself, with the best of his familial successors following established precedent very much in the name of their honored ancestor. Ignoring such traditions imperiled the emperor, as Nero had discovered to his detriment. After a period of civil war, the Flavians had to establish their legitimacy as rulers in the civil sphere, beyond the martial victory they'd already achieved. An important means of persuasion used by the Flavians was spectacle, to be housed in the enormous and lavish venue provided by Flavian generosity. The hundred days of games held by Titus to celebrate the opening of the Colosseum was an impressive way to demonstrate Flavian worthiness to their political constituencies. Descriptions of the events document repeated references to the cosmic or mythic level of Flavian power, power that was channeled positively toward leniency, accommodation, beneficence, but was nevertheless awe-inspiring.

Source: Dio Cassius 66.25:³⁹ Most that [Titus] did was not characterized by anything noteworthy, but in dedicating the hunting-theatre [amphitheater] and the baths that bear his name he produced many remarkable spectacles. 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, however) took part in despatching 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. 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 islet and assaulted and captured a wall that had been constructed around the monument. These were the spectacles that were offered, and they continued for a hundred days.

Martial's contemporary *Book of Spectacles* is a poetic celebration of the wonders displayed at the inaugural games sponsored by Titus. His "spin" on the games gives us an eyewitness' interpretation of what they meant and what sort of message the emperor was trying to convey to the spectators, who were the beneficiaries of this lavish gift. Repeatedly, Martial celebrates the universal authority of the emperor Titus. The fawning pachyderm in the following selection, possibly trained to curtsy for the procession, in this vignette reflects the peculiar status of the elephant in the Roman world, as an affiliate of power that could spontaneously recognize and submit to "natural" authority.

Source: Martial, *Spectacles* 20:⁴⁰ Devoted and suppliant the elephant adores you, Caesar, he who but lately was so formidable to the bull. He does it unbidden, no master teaches him. Believe me, he too feels our god.

Martial presents a comparison between Titus and Jupiter, referencing here the tale of Jupiter/Jove in eagle form abducting his favorite Ganymede. Titus' power is further demonstrated in this variation of the "lion and lamb" metaphor for the overturning of "natural" laws.

Source: Martial, *Epigrams* 1.6:⁴¹ As the eagle bore the boy through the airs of heaven, the timid talons did not harm their clinging freight. Now Caesar's lions are won over by their prey and the hare plays safely in the massive jaws. Which do you think the greater marvel? Behind both stands the Highest. The one is Caesar's, the other Jove's.

Here the poet documents the occasionally unavoidable difficulties in working with animals, here meant to defend the emperor's spectacle by suggesting the wait was worthwhile. The reluctance of the rhinoceros at Titus' games offers a context for the "miraculous" avoidance by the animals meant to destroy the Christian martyrs (see chapter 5).

Source: Martial, *Spectacles* 26:⁴² While the trembling trainers were goading the rhinoceros and the great beast's anger was long a-gathering, men were giving up hope of the combats of promised warfare; but at length the fury we earlier knew returned. For with his double horn he tossed a heavy bear as a bull tosses dummies from his head to the stars. [With how sure a stroke does the strong hand of Carpophorus, still a youth, aim Norcian spears!] He lifted two steers with his mobile neck, to him yielded the fierce buffalo and the bison. A lion fleeing before him ran headlong upon the spears. Go now, you crowd, complain of tedious delays!

This is an example of Titus' balanced stance toward gladiatorial enthusiasm, here connected to respect for traditional procedure and display of skill, followed by generosity without precedent.

Source: Martial, *Spectacles* 31:⁴³ As Priscus and Verus each drew out the contest and the struggle between the pair long stood equal, shouts loud and often sought discharge for the combatants. But Caesar obeyed his own law (the law was that the bout go on without shield until a finger be raised).⁴⁴ What he could do, he did, often giving dishes and presents. But an end to the even strife was found: equal they fought, equal they yielded. To both Caesar sent wooden swords and to both palms. Thus valor and skill had their reward. This has happened under no prince but you, Caesar: two fought and both won.

Commodus' Games

The emperor Commodus carried on in the tradition of extraordinary imperial games by sponsoring a lavish spectacle for 14 days in 192 CE. Commodus was the first emperor born to a reigning emperor; all his life he had known the license of unbridled power, with little experience of discipline beyond, apparently, that of the *ludus* and the circus. Like other emperors, he tried to create an image of authority through the use of spectacle. He is not unlike Titus in his repeated references to mythology, a means of inserting the emperor into the superhuman narratives of power. The way in which this emperor interacts with the symbolic repertory is different; the emperor himself becomes a *venator* and a gladiator, taking upon himself the taint of such

infames. He does not, however, please the crowd like a real performer; many of his actions in the arena are read by Dio Cassius, an eye-witness to these events, as a deliberate threat to the audience. The appropriate relationship of power is grotesquely twisted; the bears and ostriches are stand-ins for the victimized Roman people as the boundaries between the protected and the condemned are repeatedly violated.

Source: Dio Cassius 73.18–21:⁴⁵ On the first day [Commodus] killed a hundred bears all by himself, shooting down at them from the railing of the balustrade; for the whole amphitheater had been divided up by means of two intersecting cross-walls which supported the gallery that ran its entire length, the purpose being that the beasts, divided into four herds, might more easily be speared at short range from any point. In the midst of the struggle he became weary, and taking from a woman some chilled sweet wine in a cup shaped like a club,⁴⁶ he drank it at one gulp. At this both the populace 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 occurrences. 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, to the memory of those who shall live hereafter, just like any events of the greatest weight and importance . . . 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 luncheon, would fight as a gladiator. The form of contest that he practiced and the armor that he used were those of the *secutores* as they were called: he held the shield in his right hand and the wooden sword⁴⁷ in his left, and indeed took great pride in the fact that he was left-handed. His antagonist would be some athlete or perchance 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 other matters he put himself on equal footing with the other gladiators, except for the fact that they enter the lists 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*;⁴⁸ and when he had finished his sparring match, and of course won it, he would then, just as he was, kiss these companions through his helmet.⁴⁹ After this the regular contestants would fight. The first day he personally paired off 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. 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 slay the vanquished, he fastened the various contestants together and ordered them all to fight at once. Thereupon the men so 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 had brought them together.

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. Only Claudius Pompeianus the elder never appeared, but sent his sons, while remaining away himself; for he preferred even to be killed for this rather than to behold the emperor, the son of Marcus, conducting himself in such a fashion. . . . of the populace in general, many 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, inasmuch as a report spread abroad that he would want to shoot a few of the spectators in imitation of Hercules and the Stymphalian birds. And this story was believed, too, because he had once got together 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 likeness of serpents' bodies, and giving them sponges to throw instead of stones, had killed them with blows of a club, pretending that they were giants.⁵⁰

This fear was shared by all, by us [senators] as well as by the rest. And here is another thing that he did to us senators which gave us every reason to look for our death. Having killed an ostrich and cut off its head, he came up to where we were sitting, holding the head in his left hand and in his right hand raising aloft his bloody sword; and though he spoke not a word, yet he wagged his head with a grin, indicating that he would treat us in the same way. And many would indeed have perished by the sword on the spot, for laughing at him (for it was laughter rather than indignation that overcame us), if I had not chewed some laurel leaves, which I got from my garland, myself, and persuaded the others who were sitting near me to do the same, so that in the steady movement of our jaws we might conceal the fact that we were laughing.

Tainted by the Crowd

Criticism of spectacle was relatively rare among the Romans, either the populace or the intelligentsia. Those who did perceive a negative effect of the games tended to focus on issues that may seem strange to a modern reader. Perhaps the most prominent of these is the perception that spending time in a crowd had a damaging impact. This is the main focus of a famous letter of Seneca that discusses the spectacles at some length with the argument that the intensity of the emotions at the *munera* make one particularly susceptible to ethical degradation; indeed, Seneca suggests that one is more likely to learn selfishness there than the selflessness celebrated as a major benefit of watching blood games.

Source: Seneca *Letters from a Stoic*, 7:⁵¹ You ask me to say what you should consider it particularly important to avoid. My answer is this: a mass crowd. Associating with people in large numbers is actually harmful: there is not one of them that will not make some vice or other attractive to us, or leave us carrying the imprint of it or bedaubed all unawares with it. And inevitably enough, the larger the size of the crowd we mingle with, the greater the danger. But nothing is as ruinous to the character as sitting away one's time at a show – for it is then, through the medium of entertainment, that vices creep into one with more than usual ease. What do you take me to mean? That I go home more selfish, more self-seeking and more self-indulgent? Yes, and what is more, a person crueller and less humane through having been in contact with human beings . . . “But he was a highway robber, he killed a man.” And what of it? Granted that as a murderer he deserved this punishment, what have you done, you wretched fellow, to deserve to watch it? “Kill him! Flog him! Burn him! Why does he run at the other man's weapon in such a cowardly way? Why isn't the other one less half-hearted about killing? Why isn't this one a bit more enthusiastic about dying? Whip him forward to get his wounds! Make them each offer the other a bare breast and trade blow for blow on them.” And when there is an interval in the show: “Let's have some throats cut in the meantime, so that there's something happening!” Come now, I say, surely you people realize – if you realize nothing else – that bad examples have a way of recoiling on those who set them? Give thanks to the immortal gods that the men to whom you are giving a lesson in cruelty are not in a position to profit from it.

The relative rarity of amphitheaters in the Greek east long led scholars to assume that the cultured Hellenes scorned the crude spectacles of the Romans, that the horror provoked in the audience of Antiochus IV's *munera* reflected a general and lingering disgust at Roman-style blood events among the refined Greeks. Closer study of the evidence, especially material remains, offers a correction: Greek cities, like cities in the west, had an appetite for the Roman games and accommodated these spectacles within modified existing structures. Indeed, the criticism of the games offered by some Greek intellectuals points up their popularity among the general population of the eastern Mediterranean. Apollonius, a philosopher of the first century CE, condemns the contemporary use of Athens' Theater of Dionysus for gladiatorial events, noting with disapproval the enthusiasm of the crowd and the manipulation of the judicial system to acquire performers. The main thrust of his criticism seems to be the location itself: the theater, as a sacred space, was particularly vulnerable to the pollution of bloodshed, specifically, the ritual miasma created by the killing of human beings.

Source: Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 4.22:⁵² The Athenians ran in crowds to the theater beneath the Acropolis to witness human slaughter, and the passion for such sports was stronger there than it is in Corinth today; for they would buy for large sums adulterers and fornicators and burglars and cut-purses and kidnapers and suchlike rabble, and then they took them and armed them and set them to 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. And this he said in an epistle to them, that he was surprised “that the goddess had not already fled the Acropolis when you shed such blood under her eyes.”