



## Gladiators: Heroes of the Roman Amphitheatre

By Professor Kathleen Coleman

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The ancient Romans are often seen as bringing civilisation to the western world, but they regarded the slaying of gladiators as a normal form of entertainment. Kathleen Coleman describes what went on, and examines the society that accepted such barbarity without question.

### Conscripts and volunteers

Today, the idea of gladiators fighting to the death, and of an amphitheatre where this could take place watched by an enthusiastic audience, epitomises the depths to which the Roman Empire was capable of sinking. Yet, to the Romans themselves, the institution of the arena was one of the defining features of their civilisation.

#### **Gladiators ... were an expensive investment, not to be despatched lightly.**

Hardly any contemporary voices questioned the morality of staging gladiatorial combat. And the gladiators' own epitaphs mention their profession without shame, apology, or resentment. So who were these gladiators, and what was their role in Roman society?

The Romans believed that the first gladiators were slaves who were made to fight to the death at the funeral of a distinguished aristocrat, Junius Brutus Pera, in 264 BC. This spectacle was arranged by the heirs of the deceased to honour his memory.

Gradually gladiatorial spectacle became separated from the funerary context, and was staged by the wealthy as a means of displaying their power and influence within the local community. Advertisements for gladiatorial displays have survived at Pompeii, painted by professional sign-writers on house-fronts, or on the walls of tombs clustered outside the city-gates. The number of gladiators to be displayed was a key attraction: the larger the figure, the more generous the sponsor was perceived to be, and the more glamorous the spectacle.

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

For a gladiator who died in combat the trainer (*lanista*) might charge the sponsor of the fatal spectacle up to a hundred times the cost of a gladiator who survived. Hence it was very much more costly for sponsors to supply the bloodshed that audiences often demanded, although if they did allow a gladiator to be slain it was seen as an indication of their generosity.

Remarkably, some gladiators were not slaves but free-born volunteers. The chief incentive was probably the down-payment that a volunteer received upon taking the gladiatorial oath. This oath meant that the owner of his troupe had ultimate sanction over the gladiator's life, assimilating him to the status of a slave (ie a chattel).

Some maverick emperors with a perverted sense of humour made upper-class Romans (of both sexes) fight in the arena. But, as long as they did not receive a fee for their participation, such persons would be exempt from the stain of *infamia*, the legal disability that attached to the practitioners of disreputable professions such as those of gladiators, actors and prostitutes.

## Rules and regulations

Regardless of their status, gladiators might command an extensive following, as shown by graffiti in Pompeii, where walls are marked with comments such as *Celadus, suspirium puellarum* ('Celadus makes the girls swoon').



Mosaic of fighting gladiators ©

Indeed, apart from the tombstones of the gladiators, the informal cartoons with accompanying headings, scratched on plastered walls and giving a tally of individual gladiators' records, are the most detailed sources that modern historians have for the careers of these ancient fighters.

### The minutiae of the rules governing gladiatorial combat are lost to modern historians ...

Sometimes these graffiti even form a sequence. One instance records the spectacular start to the career of a certain Marcus Attilius (evidently, from his name, a free-born volunteer). As a mere rookie (*tiro*) he defeated an old hand, Hilarus, from the troupe owned by the emperor Nero, even though Hilarus had won the special distinction of a wreath no fewer than 13 times.

Attilius then capped this stunning initial engagement (for which he himself won a wreath) by going on to defeat a fellow-volunteer, Lucius Raecius Felix, who had 12 wreaths to his name. Both Hilarus and Raecius must have fought admirably against Attilius, since each of them was granted a reprieve (*missio*).

It was the prerogative of the sponsor, acting upon the wishes of the spectators, to decide whether to reprieve the defeated gladiator or consign him to the victor to be polished off. Mosaics from around the Roman empire depict the critical moment when the victor is standing over his floored opponent, poised to inflict the fatal blow, his hand stayed (at least temporarily) by the umpire.

The figure of the umpire is frequently depicted in the background of an engagement, sometimes accompanied by an assistant. The minutiae of the rules governing gladiatorial combat are lost to modern historians, but the presence of these arbiters suggests that the regulations were complex, and their enforcement potentially contentious.

## Fighting-styles

The rules were probably specific to different styles of combat. Gladiators were individually armed in various combinations, each combination imposing its own fighting-style. Gladiators who were paired against an opponent in the same style were relatively uncommon.



A Murmillone helmet ©

One such type was that of the *equites*, literally 'horsemen', so called because they entered the arena on horseback, although for the crucial stage of the combat they dismounted to fight on foot.

### **The most vulnerable of all gladiators was the net-fighter**

Some of the most popular pairings pitted contrasting advantages and disadvantages against one another. Combat between the *murmillo* ('fish-fighter', so called from the logo on his helmet) and the *thraex* or *hoplomachus* was a standard favourite.

The *murmillo* had a large, oblong shield that covered his body from shoulder to calf; it afforded stout protection, but was very unwieldy. The *thraex*, on the other hand, carried a small square shield that covered only his torso, and the *hoplomachus* carried an even smaller round one.

Instead of calf-length greaves, both these types wore leg-protectors that came well above the knee. So the *murmillo* and his opponent were comparably protected, but the size and weight of their shields would have called for different fighting techniques, contributing to the interest and suspense of the engagement.

The most vulnerable of all gladiators was the net-fighter (*retiarius*), who had only a shoulder-guard (*galerus*) on his left arm to protect him. Being relatively unencumbered, however, he could move nimbly to inflict a blow from his trident at relatively long range, cast his net over his opponent, and then close in with his short dagger for the face-off.

He customarily fought the heavily-armed *secutor* who, although virtually impregnable, lumbered under the weight of his armour. As the *retiarius* advanced, leading with his left shoulder and wielding the trident in his right hand, his shoulder-guard prevented his opponent from striking the vulnerable area of his neck and face.

Not that all gladiators were right-handed. A disconcerting advantage accrued to the left-handed; they were trained to fight right-handers, but their opponents, unaccustomed to being approached from this angle, could be thrown off-balance by a left-handed attack. Left-handedness is hence a quality advertised in graffiti and epitaphs alike.

Originally the different fighting-styles must have evolved from types of combat that the Romans met among the peoples whom they fought and conquered - *thraex* literally means an inhabitant of Thrace, the inhospitable land bordered on the north by the Danube and on the east by the notorious Black Sea.

Subsequently, as the fighting-styles became stereotyped and formalised, a gladiator might be trained in an 'ethnic' style quite different from his actual place of origin.

It also became politically incorrect to persist in naming styles after peoples who had by now been comfortably assimilated into the empire, and granted privileged relationships with Rome. Hence by the Augustan period the term *murmillo* replaced the old term *samnis*, designating a people south of Rome who had long since been subjugated by the Romans and absorbed into their culture.

### **Barrack life**

The gladiatorial barracks were marked by heterogeneity. Membership was constantly fluctuating, as troupes toured the local circuit. Some members survived to reach retirement; new recruits were enlisted, many of them probably unable to understand Latin.

In the larger barracks, members of the same fighting-style had their own dedicated trainer, and they often bonded together in formal associations. Frequently it was a gladiator's fellows who furnished his tombstone, perhaps through membership of a burial society.

**... gladiators must frequently have met their intimate fellows in mortal combat.**

Yet gladiators must frequently have met their intimate fellows in mortal combat. Professionalism and the survival instinct would have demanded a merciless display of expertise, inculcated by the gladiator's training. Within a training-school there was a competitive hierarchy of grades (*palo*) through which individuals were promoted.

The larger barracks, at least, had their own training arena, with accommodation for spectators, so that combatants became accustomed to practising before an audience of their fellows. The system meant that combat and heroic prowess were brought right into the urban centres of the Roman empire, whereas real warfare was going on unimaginably far away, on the borders of barbarism.

## Criticism and popularity

There were some dissenting voices: the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius found gladiatorial combat 'boring', but he nevertheless sponsored legislation to keep costs at a realistic level so that individuals could still afford to mount the displays that were an obligatory requirement of certain public offices.



A Roman mosaic showing amphitheater scenes ©

Both pagan philosophers and Christian fathers scorned the arena. But they objected most vociferously not to the brutality of the displays, but to the loss of self-control that the hype generated among the spectators.

### Gladiatorial displays were red-letter days ...

Gladiatorial displays were red-letter days in communities throughout the empire. The whole spectrum of local society was represented, seated strictly according to status. The combatants paraded beforehand, fully armed. Exotic animals might be displayed and hunted in the early part of the programme, and prisoners might be executed, by exposure to the beasts.

As the combat between each pair of gladiators reached its climax, the band played to a frenzied crescendo. The combatants (as we know from mosaics, and from surviving skeletons) aimed at the major arteries under the arm and behind the knee, and tried to batter their opponent's skull. The thirst for thrills even resulted in a particular rarity, female gladiators.

Above all, gladiatorial combat was a display of nerve and skill. The gladiator, worthless in terms of civic status, was paradoxically capable of heroism. Under the Roman empire, his job was one of the threads that bound together the entire social and economic fabric of the Roman world.

Not even Spartacus, most famous of all gladiators, has left his own account of himself. But shreds of evidence, in words and pictures, remain - to be pieced together as testimony of an institution that characterised an entire civilisation for nearly 700 years.

## Find out more

### Books

*Emperors and Gladiators* by Thomas Wiedemann (Routledge, 1992)

*Gladiators and Caesars* edited by Eckart Köhne and Cornelia Ewigleben (British Museum Press, 2000)

## About the author

Kathleen Coleman is Harvard College Professor, and professor of Latin, at Harvard University. She is the author of an edition, with translation and commentary, of Book 4 of the *Silvae*, a volume of 'occasional' poems published in AD 95 by the Neapolitan poet Statius. Professor Coleman has also written a number of articles about Roman spectacle, and was a historical consultant on Ridley Scott's film of 2000, 'Gladiator'.