

much better chance of defeating the other *secutor*.²⁴⁴ This form of fighting must have been popular with spectators because, in an inscription from Pompeii in which the components of two *munera* are listed, the *pontarii* are the only specific category of gladiator mentioned.²⁴⁵ Like the *pontarius*, the *dimachaerus* may not be a separate category of gladiator, but, as Robert points out, could be a *retiarius* or even a heavy-armed gladiator of various categories who wielded a dagger or short sword in each hand: a 'specialization', as Junkelmann calls this form of fighting.²⁴⁶

A provincial gladiator: cruppellarius

The various provinces into which Gaul was divided took up gladiatorial combat with enthusiasm as part of their romanization. We know that the *gallus* became a popular gladiator type at Rome early in the history of gladiatorial combat, but it is doubtful that the *gallus* would have ever been accepted in Gaul, since he was created as a reminder of Gallic defeat. There seems, however, to have been at least one native gladiatorial type that was created in Gaul and did not appear in arenas outside that area: the *cruppellarius*. We hear of this Gallic gladiator type only once, when a group of *cruppellarius* were recruited by a Gallic rebel named Sacrovir in the early first century AD to fight against the Romans. On the evidence that we have, these gladiators were virtually useless in war and perhaps boring in the arena. They were covered from head to toe in virtually impenetrable metal plating of some kind (mail?), but were so hindered by the heavy armour that they could not inflict significant damage on their opponents. In battle against the Romans, their protective covering was an effective defence against spears and swords, but the Roman soldiers eventually got the best of them by chopping at their armour with axes, pickaxes, pikes and forked poles to expose their bodies to attack.²⁴⁷

Female gladiators

The Romans were fond of novelty in their entertainment, and there was no greater novelty than the spectacle of women appearing as gladiators in the arena, particularly aristocratic women. Female gladiators represented the contradiction of one of Rome's most cherished traditional values, the association of women with the household and various domestic tasks. When a woman fought in the arena, she was abandoning her female role and

invading an exclusively masculine area of martial virtue and, when she fought as a professional gladiator, she, like a freeborn man, incurred the dishonour of *infamia* by taking up a disgraced profession. The scandal created by this act was probably even greater in the case of a woman. But as is the case even today, scandal fascinated the Romans despite societal disapproval, leading them to flock to see such performances and fuelling the desire of performers to attain notoriety by fulfilling this demand.

We hear of no female gladiators during the Republic, when women were less free to pursue their own desires. The legal and moral control that the *paterfamilias* wielded over his family, especially female members, was not to be questioned. The power of the family patriarch seems to have been a sufficient deterrent to female members of the family from putting themselves on display in the theatre or in the amphitheatre. Women, however, began to acquire greater freedom in the late Republic and early empire, so it is not surprising that we first hear of women wanting to perform as gladiators. The threat of *infamia* was apparently no longer enough to discourage individual women from volunteering themselves. By the early first century AD, the number of women fighting in the arena was sufficient to spur the Senate into action. In AD 11, a *Senatus Consultum* ('Decree of the Senate') was issued imposing an age restriction on both freeborn men (25 years old) and women (20 years old) before they could sign themselves up as gladiators or act on the stage.²⁴⁸ This decree appears to be designed to stem the tide of impressionable young aristocrats, swept away by the romance of the arena and the stage, from volunteering their services in these venues. Eight years later, a second decree was issued to deal specifically with the problem of women from senatorial and equestrian families serving as gladiators. It would seem that, during this eight-year period, women from these two upper classes had begun to appear on the stage and to fight as gladiators in the arena in even greater numbers. The *Senatus Consultum* of AD 19 took a stricter approach. It forbade women of these classes to appear on the stage or become gladiators and prohibited *lanistae* from hiring them. The reason for these prohibitions given in this decree was that the *infamia* that these aristocrats incurred diminished the dignity of their respective classes.²⁴⁹ Another penalty was added: those who disobeyed this decree were to be deprived of a proper burial with a funeral.²⁵⁰ The existence of both these decrees indicates the active interest of women of all classes in fighting as a gladiator and the desire of Roman spectators to watch them perform.

Apparently, the decree of AD 19 was either forgotten or ignored during the reign of Nero, because more and more freeborn women were becoming performers in the theatre and the arena. Tacitus calls attention to the large numbers of upper-class women and senators who suffered disgrace because of their appearances in the arena.²⁵¹ Another historian who expressed chagrin at such behaviour was Cassius Dio, who was himself a member of the senatorial class. He points out that their service as gladiators and as arena hunters was in some cases voluntary and, in others, forced by the emperor. These aristocratic men and women, encouraged by Nero's appearances on-stage, engaged in other activities in public equally productive of *infamia* such as singing and dancing, playing musical instruments, acting in plays, and driving horses in the Circus Maximus.²⁵² Nero presented an ethnic variation on the female gladiator when he gave a *munus* in Puteoli honouring Tiridates, the king of Armenia, in which Ethiopian women (along with Ethiopian men and children) fought as gladiators.²⁵³ A character in Petronius' *Satyricon* mentions an *essedaria*, a female gladiator who rode in a British war chariot, as a featured attraction in a *munus* in southern Italy.²⁵⁴ Female gladiators continued to appear in the arena throughout the rest of the first century AD and during the second. Aristocratic women who performed in the arena, both in gladiatorial combat and in the *venatio*, were a special target of Juvenal's satire. He complains of a certain Mevia who participated in the *venatio* as a *venator*, dressed up like an Amazon with one breast exposed and carrying hunting spears.²⁵⁵ He also rails against women who disgrace their famous ancestors by training as gladiators in the *ludus*, wearing the typical gladiatorial armour from helmet to greaves.²⁵⁶ The ultimate disgrace would be if this training were for real gladiatorial combat. Cassius Dio seeks to put the best face possible on a *venatio* given during the dedication of the Colosseum, when he expresses relief that the women who participated in this event were not of the two upper classes.²⁵⁷

Suetonius credits Domitian with being the first emperor to incorporate female gladiators and arena hunters into a nocturnal *munus* in the amphitheatre by torchlight.²⁵⁸ The female gladiators do not seem to have been taken seriously in Domitian's shows. The poet Statius speaks of these feminine fighters as 'untrained and ignorant of weaponry'. Moreover, they were presented in conjunction with dwarf gladiators, who appeared immediately after them. Since the Romans were less than sympathetic to physical deformity,



Figure 22 Two female gladiators. British Museum, London, © The Trustees of The British Museum

combat involving dwarfs was for laughs. Statius depicts Mars and the personification 'Bloody Courage' (*Cruenta virtus*) laughing at the dwarfs in close combat, wounding and threatening death to each other in a comic parody of real gladiatorial combat.²⁵⁹ The same comic effect would have been achieved when, on occasion, female fighters were matched against dwarfs, truly a bizarre combination, but probably much enjoyed by the spectators.²⁶⁰

In a bas-relief found in the Greek east at Halicarnassus two female gladiators are depicted in combat (Figure 22). There is no way of telling their social rank; they could be aristocrats or ordinary women, but they appear to be real gladiators. They are heavy-armed fighters, but it is not clear to what specific category of gladiator they belong. They are not wearing their helmets, which are on the ground on either side of what seems to be a platform on which they are standing. Otherwise they sport the usual equipment of the heavy-armed gladiator: shield, *manica*, *balticus*, *subligaculum* and greaves. The reason for the helmets on the ground will be dealt with later in

this chapter in 'Gladiatorial combat'. The medium size of their concave rectangular shields offers the possibility that both are *thraeces*, but there are some problems with that interpretation. The *thraex* did not usually fight another *thraex*, and their weapon appears to be a straight short sword or dagger rather than the Thracian's curved weapon (*sica*).²⁶¹ It has been suggested that they are *provocatores*, who did fight each other, but there is no evidence of the breast plate protecting the upper torso, characteristic of that type of gladiator. If the helmets on the ground were represented more clearly, we might be able to be more exact about their gladiator type. Both gladiators have one naked breast exposed that is not covered by the shield, which may mean that they fought with naked torsos just like most male gladiators. Completely naked torsos would suggest that these female gladiators sought equality with male gladiators, who (except for the *provocator*) wore no protective armour on their upper body as a badge of courage.

The inscription below them gives their names: Amazonia and Achillia, appropriate pseudonyms for female gladiators. The name Amazonia refers to the mythical female warriors who fought with one breast exposed. Achillia is the feminine form of Achilles, the greatest of all Greek legendary fighters. In fact, ancient spectators would have recognized in these names a reference to the legend according to which Achilles killed the Amazon Queen Penthesilea, ally of the Trojans at Troy, without realizing that she was woman until he stripped her armour.²⁶² The Greek word *apeluthēsan* ('they were released') indicates that they both fought well enough to impress the *editor* and the spectators, so that the former called it a draw and allowed both to retire from the arena to fight another day. This suggests that these female gladiators were not aristocratic women on a lark, but lower-class women who were fighting for their lives.²⁶³ The fact that this match was thought deserving of durable commemoration in sculpted marble indicates how seriously these gladiators were taken. This slab may have been commissioned and put on public display in Halicarnassus by the *editor* to remind his fellow citizens of the great show he had put on, but this is not how *editores* usually memorialized their shows. An *editor* typically celebrated his *munus* with paintings displayed in locations frequented by the public, and privately with mosaic floors depicting various events in his *munus* in a reception area for all his guests to see.²⁶⁴ Thus it has been argued that this relief could have been set up in the *ludus* in which these women were trained as an example of their achievement.²⁶⁵

In the late second century or early third century AD, Septimius Severus proclaimed a ban on upper-class female gladiators, citing essentially the same reason as the senatorial decree of AD 19.

*The women in this contest fought so energetically and savagely, that they were the cause of other elite women becoming the object of jokes and as a result, it was decreed that no woman should ever again fight in a gladiatorial duel.*²⁶⁶

We only hear of female gladiators once more, in an inscription from the Roman port of Ostia in which a local magistrate named Hostilianus credits himself with being the first to present female gladiators in that city.²⁶⁷ M. Cebeillac-Gervasoni and F. Zevi date the inscription to the second half of the second century AD, most likely before the ban.²⁶⁸ In the inscription, Hostilianus is called 'the administrator of the young people's games' (*curator lusus iuvenalis*) in Ostia. The participants in these youth games were members of a paramilitary youth organization called a *collegium iuvenum* ('an association of young people'), consisting of aristocratic youth.²⁶⁹ These organizations existed in towns and cities throughout the empire. They trained young men and, on occasion, young women, in martial arts, including swordsmanship. An inscription from Carsulae (north of Rome, near modern San Gemini) mentions a gladiator who was a trainer of youths (*pinnrapus iuvenum*).²⁷⁰ Cebeillac-Gervasoni and Zevi have suggested that the female gladiators in Hostilianus' show could have been trained in the *collegium iuvenum* at Ostia (Rome's seaport), perhaps under his supervision. They also have proposed that Hostilianus' female gladiators may have been presented in the context of the games (*iuvenalia*) that were required of the young men and women as demonstration of their acquired skills rather than at the normal *munus*.²⁷¹ These women no doubt fought with wooden weapons or, at worst, with dulled swords. Coleman, however, interprets this evidence differently. She dates this inscription to a period after Septimius Severus' ban on aristocratic female gladiators and argues that the use of the word *mulieres* ('women') rather than *feminae* ('ladies') means that no aristocratic women were involved in this show, and thus would not have violated Severus' ban. She also points out that it is likely that other shows involving female gladiators had been presented in various towns, of which no record has survived.²⁷²

Gladiator names

The names of gladiators were an important aspect of their mystique. Most gladiators chose stage names that projected an attractive gladiatorial image of themselves to the spectators. On the other hand, many gladiators used their real names. Most of those who did so were undoubtedly *auctorati* and used the three names, typical of Roman citizens, as an attempt to differentiate themselves from the slave gladiators, their social inferiors. An example of one of these three-part names is one that a graffiti artist painted on the side of a tomb in Pompeii above his depiction of a gladiator, L. Raecius Felix.²⁷³ Sometimes *auctorati*, following usage in everyday Roman life, used only their *praenomen* ('first name') and their *nomen* (surname) like M. Atilius, who defeated Raecius. Another possibility for a freeborn *auctoratus* was to be known just by his *nomen* or by his *cognomen* (third name).²⁷⁴ Nonetheless, despite the dignity and status that these three names brought to numerous gladiators, they lacked the imaginative aura of stage names.²⁷⁵ In adopting pseudonyms, gladiators drew heavily on Greco-Roman myth and legend, which was familiar to most spectators. Obviously, the sobriquet 'Achilles' excited the imagination much more than L. Raecius Felix. Greek and Roman epic provided a rich resource for appropriate gladiatorial names, especially since the heroes in these works fought duels with swords. The pseudonyms that follow are a selection from the numerous surviving pseudonyms: Patroclus (best friend of Achilles), Diomedes (one of the leading Greek warriors), Aias/Ajax (second greatest Greek warrior), Hector (leading Trojan warrior) and Turnus (Aeneas' chief opponent in the *Aeneid*). Other heroic legends such as the story of the Argonauts and the Seven against Thebes were also favoured sources, for example: Polydeuces (Latin Pollux), the famous boxer and immortal brother of the mortal Castor (also a gladiatorial name), and Bebryx (Argonauts); Eteocles, Polyneices, Tydeus, Hippomedon, Amphiarus and Parthenopaeus (from Theban legend). The names Eteocles and Polyneices are particularly fitting because of the fratricidal sword duel they fought for the kingship of Thebes. We know that two brothers in Smyrna (modern Izmir on the western coast of Turkey) took the names of the quarrelling Theban brothers, but in real life their feelings for each other were quite different as Polyneices' epitaph reveals: 'Eteocles [set up this monument] in memory of his brother Polyneices, an *essedarius*'.²⁷⁶ Two names, Bebryx and Tydeus, add a frisson of

ruthless savagery to a gladiator's image. Bebryx ('the Bebrycian') undoubtedly refers to a character in the *Argonautica*, Amycus, the arrogant king of the barbarian Bebrycians, who ignored the laws of hospitality by immediately challenging any stranger arriving on his shore to a boxing match and then killing him. His last opponent was the Argonaut Polydeuces, whose training in the techniques of boxing enabled him to defeat and kill Amycus, a victory of civilized skills over brute force.²⁷⁷ Tydeus alienated his patron divinity, Athena, by eating the brains of his Theban opponent, Melanippus.²⁷⁸ The adjectival names Ferox ('arrogantly savage') and Pugnax ('combative') carry the same meaning, but without the specific savagery in the stories of Amycus and Tydeus. There were other legendary heroes whose names gladiators favoured, such as Perseus, who beheaded the Medusa, Bellerophon, who rode the flying horse Pegasus, and Meleager, who killed the monstrous Calydonian boar (also a good name for a *venator*). Another category of adjectives and nouns (both Latin and Greek) stress victory and superiority in general: Victor ('winner') and in its passive form, Invictus ('invincible'), the Greek equivalent of which was Anicetus, Neikophoros ('victorious'), Exochus ('mightiest'), Amaranthus ('unperishable'), Triumphus ('triumph') and Tyrannus ('tyrant'). Stephanos ('crown') is a very popular gladiatorial name because it signifies the pursuit of excellence. A crown was awarded not just to any winner of a gladiatorial contest, but to one who has performed outstandingly.

Not all gladiator names were suggestive of martial virtue and force. There are some names that suggest trickery and/or skill. Hermes and Autolykos, for example, were both mythical tricksters. The pseudonyms Argutus ('keen-minded') and Pardos ('leopard', a wily predator) have the same connotation, while Capreolus ('wild goat') suggests light-footedness. Another group of gladiator names from Greco-Roman myth emphasize beauty and sexual attractiveness and no doubt were a further stimulus to women who were vulnerable to the sexual appeal of gladiators: Hippolytus (a handsome youth who rejected all women and died for this offence against Aphrodite), Hyacinthus (a beautiful young man loved by Apollo) and Eros/Cupid, the god of love himself.²⁷⁹ Sometimes adjectives were used as names with the same intent: Kallimorphos, ('of beautiful form'), Euprepes ('good looking'), Euchrous ('having a good complexion') and Decoratus ('handsome').

Gladiators were also fond of using stage names to associate themselves with precious jewels and with gold. Perhaps gladiators named Amethystus

('amethyst'), Beryllus ('beryl') and Smaragdus ('emerald') had these gems set into their armour and weapons as decorations. Aureolus ('golden') was a favourite name of leading gladiators.²⁸⁰ The Greek stem '*chryso-*', meaning 'golden', appears frequently in gladiatorial names: Chrysanthus ('golden flower'), Chrysopetanus ('golden hat', probably a reference to Hermes' broad-brimmed hat) and Chrysomallos ('golden fleece'), a reference to the story of Argonauts. Two other golden names suggest an association with Eros: Chrysopteros ('of golden wing', an epithet of Eros) and Chryseros ('golden love'). Finally, the popular sobriquets Columbus and Palumbus ('dove' and 'ring dove') seem odd for gladiators, emphasizing gentleness over violence. These names may be intended to be ironic as seems to be the case with the names Trupheros ('dainty') and Hilarus ('cheerful').²⁸¹

Great performers in the arena

We know that certain gladiators attained great fame and popularity, but it might seem surprising, given the honours heaped on athletes today, that there seems to be so little praise of star gladiators in Roman literary sources. There is also no record of statues of gladiators in comparison with the hundreds of statues of great Greek athletes we read about in Greek sources such as Pausanias. The reason for this neglect is the disgrace associated with the profession of gladiator. There was one writer, however, whose enthusiasm for gladiators led him to dedicate a poem of praise to a contemporary star of the arena. The name of the gladiator was Hermes, whom the poet Martial lavishly praises for his skills, competitive character, and his overwhelming superiority among gladiators. Each line of the poem begins with the name Hermes:

- 1 *Hermes, the martial pleasure of the age;*
Hermes, trained in the use of all weapons;
Hermes, both gladiator and teacher;
Hermes, the stormy terror of his gladiator school;
- 5 *Hermes, whom alone Helius fears;*
Hermes, before whom alone Advolans falls;
Hermes, trained to win without killing;
Hermes, the only gladiator who can substitute for himself;
Hermes, the enricher of ticket scalpers;
- 10 *Hermes, the care and despair of gladiator groupies;*

Hermes, proud user of the warlike spear;
Hermes, threatening with his marine trident;
Hermes, the object of fear in his soft cap;
Hermes, the glory of universal Mars;

15 *Hermes, singular in all ways and three times unique.*²⁸²

Martial's emphasis is on Hermes' unusual versatility, to which he refers in lines 2 and 11–15. Apparently, Hermes, although familiar with all styles of fighting (2), had mastered the fighting styles of three different types of gladiators; usually, a gladiator specialized in only one. The three types here are the *hoplomachus* ('spear', 11), *retiarius* ('trident', 12) and *velox* ('soft cap', 13). Hermes' choice of these three gladiatorial types suggests that he was not much of a sword fighter, since none of these three types used that weapon. The *hoplomachus* used a lance and dagger, the *retiarius*, a trident and a dagger, and the *velox*, a throwing spear. Hermes seems not to have been the strongest of gladiators because both the *retiarius* and the *velox* were light-armed gladiators and the *hoplomachus*, while not exactly light-armed, was somewhere in between in this regard, carrying a small, round shield weighing only about 4 pounds. It is not surprising that Hermes was already a teacher in the gladiator school, while he was still an active gladiator (3). His versatility made him particularly valuable as an instructor. Helius ('sun god') and Advolans ('the flying gladiator', a reference to his speed) are apparently outstanding gladiators who have been defeated by Hermes. Especially notable is Hermes' ability to win without killing (7), which suggests that not all gladiators were out to kill their opponents unless it was necessary. His mastery of weapons was such that he could employ them with just enough force to inflict non-lethal wounds that would cause his opponent to submit. Hermes also possessed the *sine qua non* of a great gladiator: women found him sexually attractive (10).

Martial also praises an animal fighter named Carpophorus in two poems. The praise, however, although effusive, is much less specific and somewhat formulaic. In both poems from his *Book of Spectacles*, Martial associates Carpophorus with the achievements of mythical heroes such as Hercules, Jason, Theseus and Meleager, who killed or subdued monstrous animals.²⁸³ Martial's three poems (one for Hermes and two for Carpophorus) represent the only extant panegyrics to specific fighters in the arena. Other gladiators had to settle for the ephemeral applause of the crowd and whatever monetary

awards the *editor* deemed appropriate as recognition of their victories in the arena. The gladiator and the animal fighter were men of the moment (sometimes a very brief moment) and not for the ages.

It should be noted, however, that human performers were not the only ones to achieve fame in the arena. There were large predators whose success in killing hunters or performing tricks in the arena brought them such fame that they were given names and their images were artistically represented. For example, a North African mosaic from Rades celebrates famous trained bears with impressive names: Braciatius, Gloriosus, Simplicius, Alecsandria, Fedra (the tragic heroine Phaedra) and Nilus ('the Nile'), while a mosaic from Curubis (modern Kourba in Tunisia) honours two bears who were obviously effective killers named Crudelis ('cruel') and Omicida ('man-killer').²⁸⁴ The Magerius mosaic from Smirat in Tunisia honours four courageous leopards which were killed by equally famous hunters. The leopards were named Victor ('winner'), Crispinus ('Curly', a common Roman cognomen), Luxurius ('pleasure-loving') and Romanus ('Roman'). While the average person had to be satisfied with watching these beloved animals in the arena, an emperor could indulge his enthusiasm more immediately. Valentinian I (AD 364–375) kept two female bears, *Mica* ('Gold Flake') and *Innocentia* ('Innocence'), renowned as 'devourers of men' in cages just outside his bedroom. Innocence, because of her great success in killing human opponents in the arena, won the equivalent of a gladiator's *rudis*, when Valentinian released her into the woods. Ammianus Marcellinus, who tells this story, carries the parallel with a gladiator even further when he calls Innocence 'well deserving' (*bene meritam*), a phrase commonly used in the epitaphs of gladiators to sum up their careers.²⁸⁵

The main event: gladiators in the afternoon

The mood

The atmosphere of the combat was serious and even sombre. The menace of violence and death pervaded the arena. A passage in a rhetorical exercise presents a fictional recruit's reaction to his first appearance in the arena. His words vividly present the terrors of the arena for participants and even for the crowd. After all, the excitement of vicarious fear that was aroused in spectators by identifying themselves with the gladiators was part of the

fun.²⁸⁶ Romans, who were not jaded by the overload of violent entertainment that we moderns are regularly subject to in films and on television, would have been especially vulnerable to the brutal sights and sounds they experienced in the arena.

Now the day was here and the people had now gathered for the spectacle of our [i.e., the recruit and his fellow gladiators] suffering and now those about to perish, having been put on display in the arena, had led a procession of their own death. The munerarius took his seat, about to gain public favour at the cost of our blood . . . one thing . . . made me miserable, that I seemed inadequately prepared; to be sure I was destined to become a victim of the arena; no gladiator had cost the munerarius less. The whole arena resounded with the apparatus of death. One man was sharpening a sword, another one was heating plates with fire, some gladiators were being struck by rods, others, by whips [all these devices were used to force reluctant gladiators to fight].²⁸⁷ You would have thought these men were pirates.²⁸⁸ Trumpets blared with their funereal sound [trumpet music was associated with funerals]; after the couches of Libitina [= 'stretchers'] were brought in, there was a funeral procession before those carried out [of the arena] were even dead. Everywhere there were wounds, moans, gore; every possible danger was evident.²⁸⁹

Gladiatorial combat

At a large-scale *munus*, the spectators could expect to see twelve or thirteen matches in an afternoon, which would take at least three hours to complete.²⁹⁰ This estimate is based on the presumed average length of a gladiatorial contest being between ten and fifteen minutes. One would also have to allow some extra time for those matches that required the *editor* to make a life or death decision and for normal breaks between matches. This time would have been used by arena attendants called *harenarii* ('sand men') who cleaned up the bloody sand with rakes and sprinkled it with water.²⁹¹

What was a gladiatorial match like? Surviving ancient art such as paintings and mosaics give us still-life depictions, but modern re-creations in films often provide a better representation of these fights. There is one literary description of gladiatorial combat in Lucian's *Toxaris*, although the account is very brief. It is fictional, but no doubt Lucian had seen real matches. The fight takes place in the Greek city of Amastris on the

southern shore of the Black Sea. Two friends, Toxaris and Sisennes, both Scythians, who have lost all their possessions to thieves, find out about a *munus* to be held in three days' time. Apparently, the show was organized in a rather impromptu way, without the careful preparation typical of most *munera*.²⁹² The editor of this show was recruiting gladiators with an offer of 10,000 drachmas to anyone willing to take part in the gladiatorial show. Sisennes enthusiastically decides to take up the offer and, on the day of the *munus*, leaves his seat in the theatre and enters the fighting area. With characteristic bravado, he decides to fight without a helmet. The match then begins:

*Taking his position [Sisennes] fought helmetless and right away he himself is wounded, having been cut behind the knee by a curved sword [His opponent was a thrax.] with the result that much blood flowed. I [Toxaris] was already dying with fear, but [Sisennes] alertly pierced with his sword the chest of his opponent as he was boldly rushing in for the kill. As a result, his opponent fell before his feet and he, in bad shape himself, sat on the corpse and came close to dying himself, but I ran to him, helped him up and comforted him. And when he was dismissed as the winner, I picked him up and carried him back to our quarters.*²⁹³

This fight is really quite a simple one with a quick decisive result. One must remember that the gladiators described here are amateurs, attracted by the offer of cash for their participation. It is not surprising that these two young men seem to be ignorant of defensive techniques, leading to a short, bloody fight. Moreover, the quick death of Sisennes' opponent eliminates the need for a dramatic life or death decision by the editor. The crowd does not have the opportunity to recommend discharge or death for the losing gladiator. If Sisennes had not been able to continue after initially being seriously wounded by his opponent, he would have had two choices: to fight on in his weakened condition until he was killed by his opponent (or by some miracle won the match), or to ask the editor for release (*missio*), which, if granted, would have allowed him to walk (or be helped) out of the arena.²⁹⁴ If he chose the first option and was killed, his result would have been reported as *stans perit* (literally, 'he died standing'), an honourable death. If he chose the latter option, he would have given a clear signal to the *summarudis* and to the editor by lifting his left arm and raising the index finger of his left hand (Figure 23). Often this gesture would be accompanied



Figure 23 Zliten mosaic: a *hoplomachus* waits while his opponent, a *murmillio*, having discarded his shield as a sign of submission, asks for *missio* (*stans missus*) with an upraised index finger of his left hand. Villa at Dar Buc Amméra, Tripolitania. Archaeological Museum, Tripoli. Roger Wood/Corbis

by the discarding of an important piece of equipment such as a helmet, shield or sword. Sometimes the gladiator conceding defeat would merely lower his weapon.²⁹⁵ In a Pompeian graffito, the gladiator L. Raccius Felix has thrown his helmet to the ground, while the gladiator seeking *missio* in Figure 23 has thrown off his shield from his left forearm and hand so that he can signal submission with his finger. These are signs of an admission of defeat, but it still mattered whether the gladiator made them while standing or from various lower positions (sitting, leaning, squatting or kneeling) on the ground. An epitaph of a gladiator named *Flamma* ('Flame') shows that this was an important difference.²⁹⁶ The inscription records that *Flamma* died at age 30, having had thirty-four matches, of which he won twenty-one and then mentions two kinds of *missio*: *stans* [*missus*] ('released while standing') and *mis[sus]* ('released not standing').²⁹⁷ These releases account for twelve of his losses (*stans* eight times and *missus* four). The missing loss was of course his final bout in which he was killed. *Flamma* was undoubtedly

proud that the number of releases standing is twice those requested from the ground. In only four of his losses had he been beaten so badly that he could not get up to request *missio* from a standing position. The fact he requested and had been granted *missio* from a standing position mitigated the shame of his losses on eight occasions.

There is one other category of release, *stantes missi*, which is the plural of *stans missus*, but has a different meaning: a draw rather than a defeat. The opportunity for the release of both gladiators was infrequent, since both opponents had to request *missio* simultaneously. The poet Martial recorded a celebrated instance of this result during the inauguration of the Colosseum (mentioned earlier).²⁹⁸ The gladiators in this match, Priscus and Verus, had been fighting intensely for an extended period of time with no decisive outcome. Titus stopped the match and imposed a new condition (*lex*, 'rule'): that both gladiators lay down their shields (*parma . . . posita*, with their shields laid aside) and fight until one raised a finger in surrender (*ad digitum*).²⁹⁹ Titus' *lex* was designed to bring the match to an end more quickly. Both gladiators would have lost their main defence against serious wounds to the torso. When this solution did not achieve its intended result, the crowd, impressed by the efforts of these evenly matched gladiators, began to demand *missio* for both of them. Things came to head when both gladiators eventually asked for *missio* at the same time.³⁰⁰ The obvious intent of his *lex* had been to determine a winner, but the simultaneity of their requests for *missio* now allowed him to make a decision fair to both gladiators in recognition of their epic match. Titus pronounced the match a tie, declaring both gladiators winners with the presentation of palms, symbolic of victory. In addition, Titus granted *missio* in its ultimate form, a complete discharge from their service as gladiators, symbolized by the presentation of the *rudis*.³⁰¹ Another example of *stantes missi* can be seen on the bas-relief from Halicarnassus discussed earlier, in which two female gladiators appear in full armour except for their helmets (Figure 22). The legend in Greek, *apeluthēsan* ('they were released'), appears above the two fighters. Coleman has compellingly argued that their heads are bare because they have performed a gesture of surrender, placing their helmets on the ground on either side of the platform on which they are standing. Thus, *apeluthēsan* is a Greek translation of the Latin *stantes missi*. Just as the match of Priscus and Verus received a poetic monument to commemorate its rare outcome, the

discharge of Achillia and Amazon was memorialized with a stone monument for the same reason.³⁰²

If, however, *missio* were not granted to the losing gladiator, it would mean that the petitioner would be killed by the victorious gladiator in a ritual that would bring a dramatically powerful end to the contest. First the referee (*summarudis*), stepped in with his rod to keep the two fighters separate (Figure 23), or just restrained the sword hand of the victorious gladiator while the *editor* made his decision (Figure 11). The task of preventing the winning gladiator from attacking a gladiator who had requested *missio* was the primary responsibility of the *summarudis*.³⁰³

The *editor* had the final word on the matter of life or death of a gladiator, no matter how vociferous the crowd was in support of or against, a gladiator.³⁰⁴ The failure to comply with his decision was not tolerated. During the reign of Commodus, a number of victorious gladiators apparently showed reluctance to kill their defeated opponents when the emperor denied *missio*. Commodus' punishment was swift and severe. He had the disobedient gladiators chained together and forced them to fight each other in a group. They were bound so close to each other that some gladiators accidentally killed those who were not their immediate opponents.³⁰⁵

It should be noted, however, that some *editores* seem to have been willing on occasion to leave the decision to grant release or not up to the winning gladiator. The emperor Caracalla told a defeated gladiator to direct his request for *missio* to his opponent. This pronouncement could put the winning gladiator in a difficult situation. The losing gladiator could have been a comrade or even a cellmate in their *ludus*. If, however, he followed his first inclination and spared his opponent, he might offend the emperor in appearing to be more merciful than his ruler. Thus, he regretfully chose the safer option for himself and refused *missio*.³⁰⁶ An epitaph of a gladiator named Urbicus seems to presume that an *editor* had granted him the power to decide whether his opponent would live or die. In the epitaph, he speaks to those gladiators who read this inscription on his tomb: 'My advice is that you condemn to death a gladiator whom you have defeated.' Apparently, Urbicus had granted *missio* to his opponent, who on a later occasion had killed him.³⁰⁷ (Note that it is the custom in epitaphs for the deceased to speak to passers-by.) In their own epitaphs, some gladiators speak of their own compassion towards their rivals in the arena, who were probably fellow

members of the *familia*. For example, Olympus says that he spared the lives of many opponents.³⁰⁸

The *editor's* life-and-death decision was not made in a vacuum. There were a number of factors that could come into play. First, the *editor* invited the spectators to give their opinions. Spectators who had been won over by a display of courage and skill by the petitioner would shout *missum* ('[I want him] released') or *missos* ('[I want] both gladiators released'). An inscription records what was probably the chant of two competing factions among the spectators in reaction to both opponents' request for *missio*: *missos missos, iugula iugula* ('Release them, release them; cut their throats, cut their throats!').³⁰⁹ The shouts in favour of *missio* were often accompanied by gestures such as shaking the flaps of the toga or waving handkerchiefs.³¹⁰ If the *editor* decided to spare the losing gladiator, he used a hand signal, which consisted of turning the thumb, pressed to the fist, down towards the ground, a sign of approval among the Romans.³¹¹ Those spectators who disagreed or merely wanted to see a man put to death shouted *iugula* ('cut his throat') and turned their thumb upwards pressed against the closed fist in a gesture called 'the hostile thumb' (*pollice infesto*).³¹² A poem in the *Anthologia Latina* confirms the tie between the 'the hostile thumb' and the fate of a defeated gladiator: 'even the defeated gladiator is hopeful in the cruel arena although the crowd threatens him with the hostile thumb'.³¹³ The 'thumbs down' gesture given by the Vestal Virgins in Jean-Léon Gérôme's famous painting *Pollice Verso* (1872) (Figure 24) is a commonly understood gesture of disapproval in modern times, but had just the opposite meaning in the ancient world. Anthony Corbeill argues that, in the Roman mind, the thumb was symbolic of the penis and thus this gesture would be the ancient equivalent of giving the losing gladiator 'the finger'. He also argues that the modern 'thumbs up' sign did not have a positive meaning until the twentieth century. (Clearly, however, the modern thumbs-down sign had already acquired a negative meaning by the time of *Pollice Verso*.) Corbeill describes the development of this gesture: 'In parallel to the representation of the phallus in Roman antiquity, the originally apotropaic significations of the thumb came to be perceived as hostile and threatening'.³¹⁴ Thus, Juvenal's famously ambiguous phrase 'turned thumb' (*pollice verso*) as a sign of condemnation from the spectators means specifically 'with upturned thumb'.³¹⁵ Of course, Juvenal did not need to explain that to his readers, who were quite familiar with the gesture.

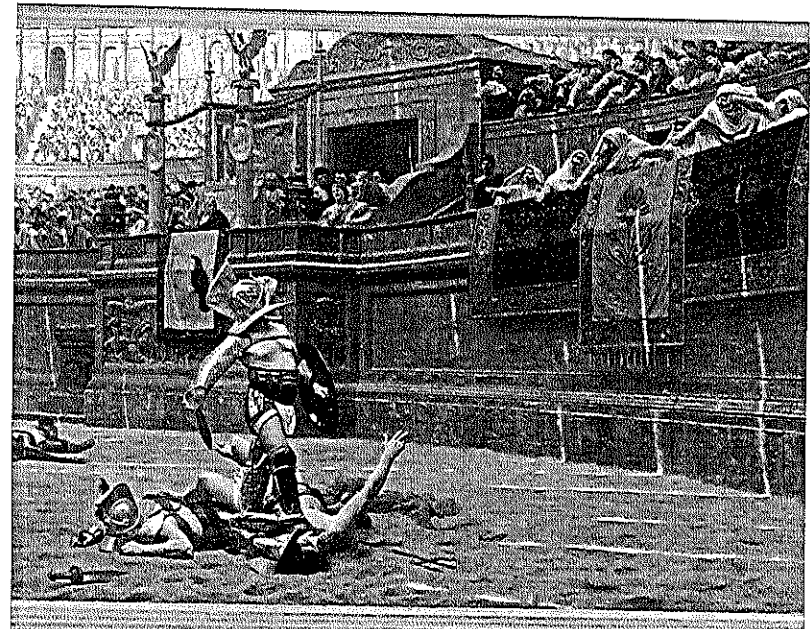


Figure 24 *Pollice Verso* (Jean-Léon Gérôme). Note the Vestal Virgins in the upper right-hand corner giving the anachronistic 'thumbs down' signal. Phoenix Art Museum, Arizona, USA/The Bridgeman Art Library Ltd

If there were a clear consensus among the crowd for either discharge or death, there would be pressure on the *editor* to please them. We know that spectators usually liked to see the request for *missio* answered negatively by the *editor* so that they could see what amounts to an execution of the losing gladiator by his victorious opponent. *Editores* seeking public favour would often grant their wish. Juvenal, in his rant against men who had been lowly musicians and arena attendants but were now wealthy enough to give *munera*, notes that they, in their desire to ingratiate themselves with the spectators, went along with crowd's desire to deny *missio*: 'they kill to please the spectators'.³¹⁶ Another important consideration was economic. When an *editor* decided not to grant *missio*, he was obliged to compensate the *lanista* from whom he had rented the gladiator, and the more valuable the gladiator was, the more the *editor* had to consider whether he wanted to add a considerable payment to the significant amount of money he had already spent on his *munus*. Thus, it is unlikely that a valuable commodity like a

'star' gladiator would be denied *missio*. Moreover, because he was freeborn, an *auctoratus* would be given more consideration with regard to *missio* than a slave gladiator. Veteran gladiators were also more likely to be spared when they lost. An inscription records a *munus*, given by a certain M. Mesonius, in which the veterans lost and were released: a *dimachaerus* in his twenty-first fight lost to a *hoplomachus* in just his third and was released; an *essedarius* in his fifty-second match lost to another *essedarius* in his twenty-seventh and was spared.³¹⁷ Sometimes, personal motives came into play, affecting the *editor's* decision, as when Claudius wanted to order the death of the gladiator Sabinus, the prefect of the German bodyguard under Caligula, but was persuaded by his wife Messalina, who had been Sabinus' lover, to spare him.³¹⁸ Of course, the desire to avoid outlandish expenditure was not always the primary motivation of an *editor* who wanted to please and impress the crowd. If he adopted a policy of no release in his *munus*, he was likely to produce a permanent record of his generosity (to the spectators), as did the *editor* in a third century AD inscription from Minturnae, which credited him with presenting eleven matches over a four-day period and denying *missio* to eleven gladiators.³¹⁹

If the *editor* was not the emperor and the ruler was present at the *munus*, the *editor* could be intimidated by the imperial presence when he was deciding the issue of *missio* and thus would follow what he knew to be the emperor's usual policy in this matter. Ovid points out that when Augustus entered the amphitheatre as a spectator at someone else's *munus*, a defeated gladiator was sure to be granted *missio*, although the preference of the *editor* and the crowd might have been just the opposite.³²⁰ By the middle of the first century AD, however, spectators increasingly preferred a more lethal result. A character in Petronius' *Satyricon* talks enthusiastically about an upcoming *munus* in which the gladiators will fight to the death.³²¹ It is during the reign of Augustus that we first hear of a new condition or *lex* laid down for combat by some *editores: sine missione* ('without release'). This meant that surrender with a request for *missio* would not be allowed. The fight will be to the death. Augustus reacted negatively to this new policy and established a ban on fights *sine missione*.³²² Augustus' preference for *missio* seems to have been a desire to preserve what had been the custom in gladiatorial fights up to his day: virtually automatic release for the petitioning gladiator. His ban may have been occasioned by a *munus* given by Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, the grandfather of the emperor Nero. Suetonius gives only a

very general reason for Ahenobarbus' offence: 'he [Domitius] gave a *munus* that was of such savagery that Augustus was forced to restrain him with an edict after a private reprimand had failed'.³²³ One possibility is that the practice which Suetonius characterizes as 'savagery' (*sacvitia*) was Domitius' *lex* of *sine missione* for all the matches in his *munus*. Another possibility is that Domitius, without officially proclaiming a policy of *sine missione*, merely refused *missio* to all gladiators requesting it, thus producing the same results as a declaration of *sine missione*, as probably was the case with the *editor* at Minturnae mentioned above. A fictional *munus* in southern Italy in Petronius' *Satyricon* was apparently advertised as requiring fights to the death. The phrase used is 'without escape' (*sine fuga*), most likely synonymous with *sine missione*.³²⁴ This perhaps suggests that Augustus' ban was occasionally ignored outside of Rome. Drusus, a son of the emperor Tiberius, was the *editor* of a *munus* along with his brother Germanicus (AD 15), in which he was censured both by shocked spectators and his father for 'rejoicing excessively in blood however cheap'.³²⁵ Although the Romans normally saw nothing wrong with gladiators being killed, there was too much 'cheap' blood shed in this *munus*, even for jaded Roman spectators. Now, the question is what specifically made this *munus* so bloody? It is unlikely that Augustus' ban on *sine missione* matches would have been flouted openly during the reign of his adopted son, Tiberius. In all probability, it was the extra-sharp swords that Drusus supplied to his gladiators, which became known as 'Drusian' swords and no doubt produced significantly worse wounds in comparison with ordinary swords.³²⁶ The policy of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, who was averse to the bloodshed of gladiatorial combat, was never to give sharp swords to his gladiators when he was *editor*, but to supply them with blunted weapons.³²⁷ David Potter argues that gladiators rarely fought in matches in which the death of one opponent was a condition. He also points out that while the emperor was free to impose a *sine missione* condition on his *munus*, *munerarii* in the provinces had to get his permission.³²⁸

The emperor Claudius followed in the footsteps of his two ancestors Domitius Ahenobarbus and Drusus (both members of the Claudian clan) in the matter of gladiators. Suetonius characterizes his behavior as an *editor* as 'cruel and bloodthirsty' because of his policy that even an accidental fall of a gladiator would result in his death. Apparently, Claudius justified this principle by counting the position of the fallen gladiator on the ground as

an admission of defeat and an appeal for *missio*. Once a gladiator fell, Claudius automatically denied *missio*. He imposed this policy not only when he was *editor*, but also on other *editores*.³²⁹ On the other hand, Claudius sometimes could act generously as an *editor*. On one occasion, he released an *essedarius* when he was supplicated by the gladiator's four sons, an incident discussed earlier in a different context. Claudius was then moved to send an attendant around the amphitheatre carrying a placard advising the people to beget children in light of how valuable his four sons had been to the *essedarius*.³³⁰

Once the editor had made his decision, a fanfare from the arena orchestra signalled his readiness and all attention would be turned towards him as he gave either a positive or negative hand signal. This moment can be seen in Figure 11. A *summarudis* restrains the right arm of a victorious *equus* as a horn player, accompanied by the other musicians, signals the moment of decision.³³¹

There were specific expectations of how a defeated gladiator should behave after he was refused *missio*. Just like soldiers, gladiators were trained to give unquestioning obedience to their superiors. The most important aspect of this obedience was their complete submission to the decision of the *munerarius* and an unflinching reception of the deathblow (Figure 25).³³² Of course, the ideal was not always attained in practice. Some gladiators, facing imminent death, did not behave so courageously, a behaviour that annoyed the crowd which had come to expect higher standards.³³³ Nonetheless, Cicero believed that gladiators generally provided an example of what behavioural miracles 'practice, preparation [and] habit' could create. What amazed Roman intellectuals about gladiators, who were in large part slaves, was the admirable courage they commonly exhibited, a moral quality which was thought to be characteristic only of freeborn men. Seneca gives the example of a gladiator who had not shown any courage throughout the whole match, but when denied *missio*, 'offered his throat to his opponent and guided the wavering sword to its destination'.³³⁴ He also notes that losing gladiators would rather display their courage to the crowd by being dispatched by their opponent in the arena than having their throat ignobly cut in the *spoliarium*.³³⁵

There is one other possible outcome of a gladiatorial duel: both gladiators kill each other. This was not a common occurrence in the arena, and because of its rarity, was considered a significant event. When two gladiators

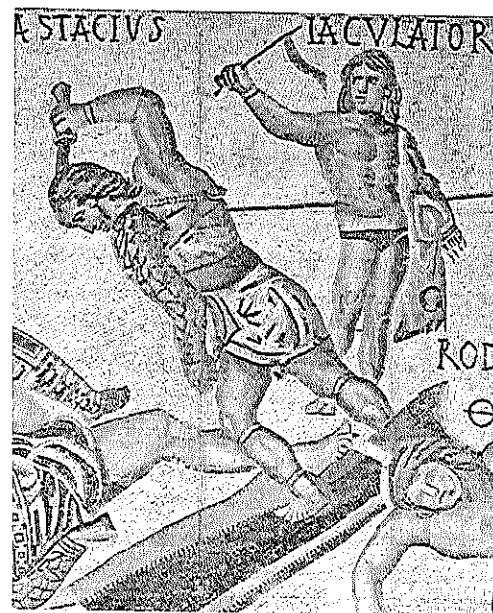


Figure 25 Borghese mosaic: Astacius, ordered by the *munerarius*, delivers deathblow to his opponent. Note 'theta' symbol over dead gladiator in lower right-hand corner. Torrenova, Borghese Gallery. Alinari Archives/Corbis

killed each other, Claudius had a set of small knives made out of their swords as a memento of the occasion.³³⁶ The scholiast Porphyron, in an explanatory note on one of Horace's *Satires*, mentions that an epic match between Bythus and Bacchius, two of the most famous gladiators of the late first century BC, resulted in the death of both fighters.³³⁷

Even *damnati* could be released, although it happened rarely. Such a release occurred in Claudius' famous *naumachia* ('staged naval battle') on the Fucine Lake, when all the *damnati* who survived the fighting were released because of their bravery. The most unusual case of a released *damnatus* is that of Androclus (to be discussed in Chapter 5), who won the hearts of the crowd and the emperor when he told the story about his earlier kindness to a lion that did not attack him in the arena. A good part of this story is fictional, but the details of its conclusion in the amphitheatre are almost certainly authentic. At Rome, the release of a *damnatus* was an *ad hoc* decision of the *editor* (usually the emperor), but in the provinces, this kind of release was eventually incorporated into the law with specified conditions. A statute

in Justinian's *Digest* orders that the presiding official at a *venatio* in the provinces should not release someone condemned *ad bestias* just 'because of the favour of the crowd', but only if the *damnatus* has the kind of 'strength and skill' appropriate to a performer in the arena at Rome. Even in this case, the provincial *editor* should first consult the emperor.³³⁸ An animal in a *venatio* might even win *missio* if, like a gladiator, it won the favour of the crowd and the *editor*. Martial tells a story of the emperor's release of a doe, which, having outwitted pursuing hounds with her twists and turns, stopped in front of the emperor's box and seemed to adopt a suppliant stance. The emperor granted the request and the dogs did not harm the doe. According to Martial, this was the result of the emperor's divine power: one of the poet's servile flatteries of the emperor.³³⁹

Survival odds and life expectancy

The life and death decisions of the *munerarius* bring to mind certain questions. What were the chances of survival for a gladiator in a given match? How long were their careers, on average? In order to calculate the survival odds of gladiators, Ville has used inscriptions that record deaths and survivals in matches and give the age of gladiators at death. The statistics that Ville, or any scholar, presents cannot pretend to scientific precision because of the haphazard survival of inscriptions.³⁴⁰ The inscriptions involving gladiators obviously represent only an infinitesimal percentage of all the gladiators who fought in ancient times. Epitaphs of gladiators, which are an important source of our knowledge of gladiatorial careers, exist only for those gladiators whose surviving friends and/or family had the resolve and the financial resources to commemorate his professional life with a tomb and an inscription. Given this limitation, however, statistical averages based on minimal evidence are still valuable for the approximations that they provide us. Ville says that the odds of a gladiator surviving a match in the first century AD were nine to one in his favour.³⁴¹ Hopkins and Beard, using a different set of inscriptions as evidence (which they honestly call 'a ridiculously small sample'), do not differ substantially from Ville. They calculate the survival rate of the first century AD as slightly over eight in ten.³⁴² During this period, *missio* seems to have been the norm. Only the incompetent or the cowardly were refused release. In the second and third centuries AD, however, Ville states that survival rate decreased by half, so that a gladiator

had only slightly less than five chances out of ten to leave the arena alive.³⁴³ An extreme example is a *munus* that was given in AD 249 in Minturnae discussed earlier. The editor denied *missio* to the losers of all 11 matches.³⁴⁴ Ville sees the reason for this as the increasing competition among *editores* to win favour among the spectators, who wanted to witness a death in every match. By the second century, the denial of *missio* had become the rule rather than the exception.³⁴⁵ *Missio* was awarded only when the loser had impressed the *editor* and the crowd with his bravery.

In reality, the odds of survival were different for each gladiator in accordance with his level of skill and experience. Not surprisingly, a majority of inexperienced gladiators were killed in their first or second fights. Highly skilled fighters naturally had a much better chance of survival, but there were other factors involved in their greater probability of survival. First, gladiators of the highest level, such as imperial gladiators, were only matched with gladiators of similar proficiency on special occasions (to lessen the risk of serious injury or death of very expensive gladiators); for the most part, they fought inferior combatants. Thus, these proficient gladiators piled up very impressive records of victories during their long careers. Ville cites gladiators who won from 30 to 150 career victories.³⁴⁶ As we have seen earlier, star gladiators were too valuable to be denied *missio*. This was also true to a lesser degree of merely good gladiators. Ville also ventures an average age of gladiators who died in combat based on sixteen epitaphs that give age of the deceased. His calculation is 27 years of age, but he rightly does not propose this average with any great confidence.³⁴⁷ Hopkins and Beard suggest a significantly lower number for the average: 22.5 years.³⁴⁸ While there is no doubt that becoming a gladiator increased the risk of an early death, one should not exaggerate the statistical significance of the early deaths of gladiators. Wiedemann notes that one has to judge the lifespan of gladiators in the context of life expectancy among their non-gladiatorial contemporaries.³⁴⁹ In ancient Rome, there was a considerable risk of an early death even for non-gladiators. Three out of five persons died before the age of 20.³⁵⁰ On the other hand, there were some gladiators whose careers were relatively long. For example, the gladiator Flamma died at age 30 having fought thirty-three times.³⁵¹ We cannot be sure how many years it took him to compile thirty-three fights, but approximately a decade might be a reasonable guess. M. Antonius Niger, a *thraex*, died at age 38, but he had fought only eighteen times.³⁵² Since his three names indicate

that he was a freeman, he was no doubt an *auctoratus*, who probably signed up later in life for a limited period and perhaps died a natural death.

There were also the lucky few who were successful enough to survive until they were granted a complete release from their service as gladiators (*rudiarum*). It seems that there were different periods of service as a gladiator before a criminal condemned to a gladiator school (*damnatus ad ludum gladiatorium*) became eligible for the *rudis* according to the nature of the crime. An edict of Hadrian states that a man convicted for cattle rustling had to fight in the arena for at least three years before he could receive the *rudis*. A *munerarius* could make a special grant of freedom along with the *rudis*, but normally the receipt of the *rudis* did not mean that the convict was automatically a freeman.³⁵³ Although the convicted cattle rustler had escaped the dangers of the arena, he still could not become a freeman until after the fifth year.³⁵⁴ One presumes that during the two-year period he was still confined to the *ludus*, assisting in the training of other gladiators or even doing odd jobs. We have no evidence of how long the waiting period was for those guilty of other crimes. One thing, however, is certain; this release did not come quickly.³⁵⁵ The sources speak of 'old' and 'decrepit' gladiators, probably in their mid to late thirties.³⁵⁶ Ville mentions four *rudiarum* who had participated in various numbers of matches over the course of their careers: one in perhaps as many as eighteen, two others, eleven each, and one as few as seven.³⁵⁷ How long a career does each of these numbers represent? It is impossible to tell since we have no idea how often, on average, they fought in a given year. Hopkins and Beard suggest that gladiators fought an average of just under two times a year, whereas Coleman proposes an average of two or three fights a year. Both estimates represent a low frequency of fighting, which probably was true only of the best gladiators.³⁵⁸ It would seem logical that star gladiators, worth more alive than dead to their *lanista* or *procurator*, fought a smaller number of duels annually than did their lesser colleagues. Ville gives an example of an imperial gladiator who he calculates had fought in less than six *munera* annually, and of another who had only five combats in four years.³⁵⁹ On the opposite end of the spectrum, we hear of gladiators fighting more than once in a *munus*. A *thraex* named M. Antonius Exochus (Figure 14) fought twice in a *munus* celebrating a posthumous triumph of Trajan.³⁶⁰ In the first match on the second day of the *munus*, Exochus, a *tiro* ('apprentice gladiator'), fought another *tiro* named Araxes to a draw. (It was normal

practice for a *tiro* to fight another *tiro* .³⁶¹) In the second match on the ninth day, Exochus defeated a more experienced gladiator named Fimbria in his ninth fight.³⁶² Perhaps Exochus had impressed the crowd so much in his first fight that the *editor* brought him back for an encore, but at least allowed him six days to recover from his first match.³⁶³ The participation of *suppositicii* or *tertiarii* in a *munus* required that their opponents had to fight twice in the same day. There are recorded examples of one gladiator fighting two opponents, and of another who faced three opponents, in the same day.³⁶⁴

Rewards of the gladiator

After the match, the *editor* presented the winning gladiator with various rewards for his victory. The winner received a palm branch, symbolic of victory, which he carried as he circled the amphitheatre to the enthusiastic applause of the crowd.³⁶⁵ There was another symbolic prize, a laurel crown, which was at first given to gladiators for an extraordinary victory. In time, however, *editores* began to behave like college professors who contribute to grade inflation. They awarded the laurel crown automatically so that it was devalued and was no more prestigious than the palm branch. Thus, when career records were compiled and memorialized in inscriptions, the absence of the laurel crown became more meaningful than its presence. If the number of crowns did not match the number of victories, then the number of victories left over was obviously not terribly impressive.³⁶⁶

Victory in a gladiatorial contest, however, brought more than just symbolic compensation. After the match was over, the *editor* handed a cash prize directly to the winning gladiator. Suetonius provides us with a description of an award ceremony in which a good-natured Claudius counted aloud in unison with the crowd and on the fingers of his left hand as he doled out gold coins to the winner with his right.³⁶⁷ The valuable metal plate on which these coins were piled was also part of the prize.³⁶⁸ The gladiator, however, could not keep all his prize money. It had always been the custom for the lion's share of a gladiator's cash reward to go to his *lanista*. Legislation of Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus (AD 177-180) set the division of prize money at 1:3 for a free gladiator and 1:4 for a slave.³⁶⁹ Although gladiators were no doubt overjoyed to be rewarded with money, this kind of prize was not a matter of great pride. When the

accomplishments of gladiators were recorded on their epitaphs, there is only mention of the symbolic prizes they have won (palms and crowns). As Valerie Hope points out: 'No gladiator is described in terms of his monetary worth or the extent of his winnings'.³⁷⁰

Various pleasures of the *munus*

The violence of the *venatio* and gladiatorial combat naturally provided the primary pleasures of a *munus*, but the spectacle had other features that gave great pleasure to the crowd. Spectators would certainly be disappointed if the *editor* omitted too many of these extra features. An inscription from the Greek city of Mylasa (modern Milas in south-western Turkey) consists of a decree honouring a high priest of the imperial cult (his name is not found in the surviving part of this inscription) for a *munus* he gave.³⁷¹ The decree lists specifically what the crowd enjoyed about the *munus*.

The inscription stresses the incredulous wonder, amazement and shouts of the crowd at the sight of the gladiators' beauty and strength in the *pompa*.³⁷² The spectators' positive reaction is also evoked by the generosity of the *editor*, who spent a great amount of money on the gladiators' armament with its gold ornamentation.³⁷³ Although only gold is mentioned in the surviving portion of this inscription, Robert believes that silver was probably also used in this *munus*.³⁷⁴ Silver was a common enhancement of gladiator armour. Pliny the Elder writes that, when Julius Caesar gave funeral games in honour of his father in 65 BC, 'the whole apparatus of the arena was silver', including the silver ornamentation of the gladiators' armament. Even *damnati* who were condemned to fight wild animals in the *venatio* of this *munus* were given weapons adorned with silver. Pliny adds that this practice was much imitated in the towns of Italy.³⁷⁵

The Mylasian *editor* generously added a scattering of roses and gifts among the spectators.³⁷⁶ Roses may also have been strewn on the arena floor as can be seen from amphitheatre scenes on two North African mosaics.³⁷⁷ As for the main show, the high priest supplied gladiators of every type.³⁷⁸ The variety provided by these different styles of fighting was important to the success of a *munus*. The interest of the crowd, however, was not completely technical. There is mention early in the inscription of the gladiators competing for their lives.³⁷⁹ This could merely be a reference to the general risk of death that was present in every gladiatorial duel, but

more likely it meant that the bouts were fights to the death. (The *munerarius* may have received permission from the emperor.) All these features of this *munus* illustrate the *editor's* willingness to go the extra mile in pleasing the people, thereby creating mutual goodwill between the *editor* and the spectators.³⁸⁰ At the end of the inscription, the high priest is praised for surpassing all expectation with his generosity.³⁸¹ This, no doubt, is a reference to the end of the *munus* when the high priest, like a modern stage performer at the end of the show, received shouts of approval and thanks from the crowd (*acclamatio*). This inscription from which we have obtained so much evidence about the *munus* at Mylasa, was publicly displayed in the city and was itself a commemoration of the great event and a tangible expression of the people's gratitude.³⁸²

The public banquet (*epulum*) was another popular 'extra' of the *munus*. Probably the most famous *epulum* was given by Domitian in the Colosseum. The poet Statius saw this banquet as especially notable because of the 'liberty' it exemplified: 'every order ate at one table: children, women, men of the lower orders, equestrians and senators'. Moreover, Domitian dined with his subjects, no doubt a poetic hyperbole merely referring to Domitian's presence in the amphitheatre when the *epulum* took place.³⁸³ Statius describes this huge banquet.

*Behold, there a group of good-looking people elegantly dressed enter the seating area, not smaller in number than those seated. Some carry bread-baskets and snow white napkins and splendid foods; others distribute mellowing wine.*³⁸⁴

The public banquet mentioned in Petronius in a southern Italian town would have been on a very modest scale in comparison with Domitian's grand feast.³⁸⁵

Another popular feature of the *munus* was a *sparsio* (literally 'a sprinkling'), a word which had two different meanings in association with the *munus*. One kind of *sparsio* involved gifts or tokens for gifts that were thrown to the crowd (*missilia*, literally, 'things thrown'), like the gifts scattered at the *munus* in Mylasa above. At a show sponsored by Nero the following were thrown to the crowd, creating a mad scramble among the spectators: 'various kinds of birds, a variety of foods, tokens [to be exchanged] for wheat, clothes, gold, silver, gems, pearls, paintings, slaves, beasts of burden, tamed wild beasts and finally, boats, apartment buildings

and farms'.³⁸⁶ At the inauguration of the Colosseum in AD 80, the emperor Titus threw round wooden tokens into the crowd from the upper part of the auditorium, which could be redeemed for food, clothing, silver and gold vessels, horses, beasts of burden, cattle and slaves (no boats, apartment buildings and farms this time!). Those who were lucky enough to catch one of these tokens with the gift inscribed on it could exchange it for the prize at a distribution centre.³⁸⁷ The *sparsio*, however, could cause disturbances among the crowd. Seneca notes the chaos and the ill will that arose among the greedy crowd in the rush to grab the gifts or the tokens.³⁸⁸ Another kind of *sparsio* involved spraying the crowd with perfume, usually the essence of saffron mixed with water. Seneca mentions an impressive spray that reached from the bottom of the amphitheatre to its highest point accomplished by water pressure.³⁸⁹ With the heat in the spring and summer and the unpleasant smells generated by the *venatio* and the carnage of gladiatorial combat, this spray came as welcome refreshment that cooled and deodorized.³⁹⁰

In imperial times, there were occasionally unscheduled events which, although they no doubt made the crowd nervous, added an unexpected thrill to the *munus*, at least for those spectators who were lucky enough not to be directly involved. Normally the anonymity of a large crowd protected individual spectators, but sometimes a spectator caught the attention of the emperor at the wrong time and gave offence. Roman spectators were not beyond hurling verbal abuse at the emperor.³⁹¹ The crowd had to be prepared for almost anything, especially when the *editor* was an unstable and tyrannical emperor like Caligula or Domitian. An offending spectator might suddenly find himself part of the show. For example, a certain Esius Proculus, who was nicknamed *Colosseros* ('colossal love-god') because of his beauty and large, muscular body, was suddenly ordered into the arena by Caligula to fight first against a *thraex* and then a second time against a *hoplomachus*, both of whom Esius defeated. Apparently, Caligula, who was envious of his handsome face and popularity with women, was determined to punish him. He then ordered Esius to be dressed in rags and to be led in chains throughout the city. After displaying him to a group of women, he had his throat cut.³⁹² Then there was the man, mentioned earlier in this chapter, who taunted Domitian about his partiality to gladiators with large shields. The crowd was immediately treated to his execution when he was thrown to hunting dogs in the arena.³⁹³

Crowd behaviour

Crowd participation, whether with shouts or with gestures, was constant throughout the *munus*. They unabashedly volunteered their comments on the action, gave advice to the gladiators, or even expressed their opinions on matters external to the show such as politics. As one would expect, significant moments in combat elicited the most powerful crowd reactions. When a gladiator was felled by his opponent, the crowd exploded. Shouts of '*hoc habet!*' ('He's had it!') or '*peractum est!*' ('It's all over!') could be heard all over the amphitheatre.³⁹⁴ If something happened to upset them, the spectators could act, as Seneca suggests, like a child throwing a tantrum, especially if a gladiator did not live up to their expectations:

*Why does the crowd become angry with gladiators and unjustly think that they have been done an injustice because [the gladiators] are unwilling to accept their fate [after missio has been refused]? They believe that they have been treated with contempt and transform themselves in expression, gesture and passion from a spectator into an enemy.*³⁹⁵

One reaction when spectators were upset, was to throw objects. In the late Republic, the crowd threw stones at Vatinius, an unpopular politician, when he entered the amphitheatre. Later, when Vatinius was about to give a *munus*, he got the aediles to issue an edict that spectators could throw only fruit into the arena. A waggish jurisconsult named Cascellius, when asked whether a pine cone was a fruit answered: 'If you are going to throw it at Vatinius, it's a fruit!'³⁹⁶

The passions stirred up in the crowd were powerful. Seneca reports that whenever he was a part of a large throng at a spectacle, he returned 'more greedy, more ambitious, and more pleasure-seeking. No, I should say rather crueler and more inhumane, because I was among human beings.'³⁹⁷ The philosopher is talking about the noonday spectacle in which convicts were executed, but it is also relevant to the reaction of Augustine's young friend, Alypius, to his first experience of gladiatorial combat. Previously, Alypius had expressed only hostility and contempt for this spectacle, but was dragged into the amphitheatre by his friends. Here is Augustine's complete account of Alypius' first experience of the amphitheatre, which gives a vivid impression of the noise and sights of the arena. Augustine locates the amphitheatre at Rome, no doubt the Colosseum with as many as 50,000 spectators at full

capacity. It is no wonder that the attention of the young provincial Alypius was usurped by the overwhelming noise of the crowd.³⁹⁸

*When they arrived there and occupied whatever seats they could, the whole amphitheatre was seething with monstrous delights. Alypius closed his eyes so that the awful goings-on might not enter his consciousness, but if only he had stopped up his ears! For when one of the gladiators fell in combat, and a huge shout of all the spectators had powerfully resounded in his ears, he was overcome by curiosity, and as it were prepared to see whatever had happened and once it had been seen to disdain it. He opened his eyes and was struck with a greater wound in his soul than the gladiator whom he desired to see had received in his body. He fell more wretchedly than that gladiator whose fall had provoked the shout that entered through his ears and opened up his eyes with the result that his mind, still bold rather than brave and much weaker due to its greater reliance on itself than on you [i.e., Christ], was struck and thrown down. As soon as he saw blood, he drank in the savagery; and not turning away, kept his gaze fixed and absorbed the madness and delighted in the criminal combat, and was made drunk with bloody delight. Now he was not the same person that he was when he had first arrived, but one of the crowd which he had joined and a true companion of his friends who brought him there. Need I say more? He watched, shouted, became excited, and took away from the amphitheatre a madness, which would bring him back not only with those friends who dragged him there in the first place, but also without them as he dragged others to the spectacle.*³⁹⁹

Tertullian also warns his Christian readers of the powerful emotional influence that the crowd in the amphitheatre can wield over the individual: 'What will you do once you are caught in that floodtide of wicked applause?' Tertullian's recommendation is that Christians stay away from the amphitheatre.⁴⁰⁰ Many Christians, however, did not heed Tertullian's advice. Some even attended the executions of their fellow-believers.⁴⁰¹ The allure of gladiator shows for Christians is evident in Jerome's *Life of St Hilarion*.⁴⁰² The saint was tormented by regularly recurring temptations that appeared to him in visions: a naked woman, a sumptuous feast, and a gladiator show, including a recently killed gladiator, who begged Hilarion for burial.

Like modern young men who are attracted to violence in films and on the television, ancient youths like Alypius were particularly vulnerable to the violent attractions of the gladiator games. A young man in a declamation

describes his own behaviour as he watches his friend fighting in his stead in the arena. As he watches, he 'fights' the match along with his friend, mimicking the movements of his friend by ducking the attacks of an imaginary opponent and standing up straight when his friend went on the offensive.⁴⁰³ This kind of behaviour also took place at the chariot races. Silius Italicus in his *Punica*, no doubt inspired by his first-hand observation of crowd behaviour in the Circus Maximus, presents his spectators imitating the prone position of the charioteers leaning over the reins as they drive their horses, and shouting the same commands to the horses as the drivers.⁴⁰⁴ It should be also noted that women could be similarly affected by action in the arena. The Christian poet Prudentius writes of a rather overenthusiastic Vestal Virgin who jumps out of her seat when a blow is delivered by one of the gladiators, and votes with her '[up]turned thumb' for the death of the loser. In addition to this passion for bloody violence, she proclaims her lust for the victorious gladiator, whom she calls her 'darling' every time he stabs his opponent in the throat.⁴⁰⁵ Not all female spectators, however, were as fiercely involved in the matches as this Vestal Virgin. Consider the woman named Martha who sat at the feet of the wife of the famous general Marius and correctly predicted the winner of each match.⁴⁰⁶ Spectators were capable of gentler emotions. They sometimes formed an emotional bond with certain arena performers, which was evident when they mourned their deaths, as in the case of a favourite gladiator or even a wild animal.⁴⁰⁷ This emotional engagement could also consist of fierce hatred, as is demonstrated by curse tablets (*tabellae defixionum*), on which they inscribed prayers to various deities to take action against a performer they disliked. The prayers on these tablets were most commonly directed at chariot drivers, but were also used to wish harm to gladiators and animal fighters. Here follows a *defixio* wishing injury and failure to a *venator* named Gallicus inscribed on a lead tablet and found in the amphitheatre at Carthage.⁴⁰⁸ The repetitions in the Gallicus curse are indications of the intense hatred that the writer feels for the *venator* and, moreover, are an attempt to persuade the divinity addressed to grant the wishes expressed in the *defixio*. Depicted on the tablet is an image of a god with the head of a serpent, holding a spear in his right hand and a lightning bolt in his left.⁴⁰⁹

Kill, destroy, wound Gallicus, the son of Prima, at this hour in the ring of the amphitheatre . . . bind [with a spell] his feet, his limbs, his mind, the

*very marrow of his bones. Bind Gallicus, the son of Prima, so that he cannot kill a bear or a bull with one or two blows, or kill a bull [and] a bear with three blows. In the name of the living omnipotent [god] bring this about now; now, quickly, quickly; let a bear crush and wound him.*⁴¹⁰

Despite the emotional involvement of the crowd in the violent action of gladiatorial combat and the *venationes*, crowd control was never a major problem in the amphitheatre at Rome. Although we do hear of factionalism among fans of gladiator games (*parmularii* versus *scutarii*), this partisanship lacked the emotional power of the circus factions designated by colours (Reds, Blues, Greens and Whites) and never resulted in more than verbal abuse among fans. At least, at Rome, rioting did not occur in the amphitheatre, as it did in the theatre and the circus. We do not hear of any disturbance comparable to the catastrophic Nika riot (AD 532) involving fans of the Blue and the Green chariot racing factions at Constantinople, which began in the hippodrome and spread to the streets, resulting in the destruction of a large part of the city and 30,000 deaths (probably somewhat exaggerated by the sources).⁴¹¹ A cohort of soldiers (*militēs stationarii*) was stationed in the amphitheatre, circus and theatre, but there is no record of their having to deal with serious disorder at gladiator games.⁴¹² As Alex Scobie explains:

*It seems, then, that spectator violence at the three main forms of public entertainment in the Roman world [gladiator shows, circus games, and dramatic presentations] . . . was inversely proportionate to the degree of violence inherent in each of the three types of spectacle.*⁴¹³

It is not clear in the sources who these *militēs stationarii* were: members of the Praetorian Guard or soldiers from the urban cohorts led by the city prefect.⁴¹⁴ Sandra Bingham argues persuasively that, at least through the Julio-Claudians, the soldiers providing security at spectacles were members of the Praetorian Guard. She traces the development from a personal bodyguard of the emperor at the games to 'a regularized security detail of guard members . . . as an extension of this bodyguard'. The urban cohorts, having half as many men as the Praetorian Guard, would have had enough to do to perform their primary task: keeping order in the streets.⁴¹⁵ In AD 56, Nero briefly removed this military guard from the various entertainment sites on the pretext that watching over spectators was not a proper military duty.

Cassius Dio tells us that Nero, who loved the violent disturbances that took place occasionally at theatres and racetracks, hoped that the absence of soldiers would encourage more riots, but even the lack of guards does not seem to have promoted rioting in the amphitheatre.⁴¹⁶

Outside of Rome, the story was rather different. At a *munus* in Pompeii (AD 59). Pompeians clashed with spectators from the neighbouring town of Nuceria. Tacitus, our only source for this riot, does not say how many people were killed and wounded in this *melée*, but the number must have been significant, with the Nucerians getting the worst of it. In all likelihood, there was no military guard stationed in the Pompeian amphitheatre, but even soldiers might not have been able to quell this disturbance.⁴¹⁷ Tacitus never explains clearly the specific reason for the riot, but it obviously was rooted in a pre-existing animosity between the citizens of the two towns. For hostility among the spectators to percolate to this degree, the two groups cannot have been sitting intermingled with each other, as they would have been at Rome where seating was assigned according to class. Solidarity of cause could only have developed if each side in the conflict was sitting with their own partisans. The violence was prefaced with verbal abuse between citizens of both towns and quickly escalated to the throwing of stones and the wielding of weapons and even spread outside the amphitheatre. This incident was serious enough to require the attention of the Roman Senate. Its decision was, first, to ban *munera* at Pompeii for a ten-year period; second, to dissolve illegal social clubs called *collegia*; and, third, to exile the *munerarius* Livienus Regulus, for his role in inciting the riot.⁴¹⁸

As in modern sports, ancient arena sports had fan clubs, which proclaimed their enthusiasm for gladiator games and the *venatio* and rooted for specific arena performers. These fan clubs were no doubt offshoots of youth organizations (*collegia iuvenum*) mentioned earlier, which were dedicated to sports. We hear of these fan clubs both in the Greek east and in the west. In Termessus, Miletus and Ephesus, the clubs have the name *Philoploi* ('Lovers of Arms'). There were also fan clubs devoted to the *venatio*, for example, *Philokunēgoi* ('Lovers of the Hunt'). In Verona, the fan club of a *retiarius* named Glaucus, in conjunction with his wife Aurelia, paid for a funerary inscription honouring him. The name of the club was *Amatores* ('Lovers', i.e., 'fans' [of Glaucus]). An honourable burial was a real concern of gladiators, many of whom did not have a family or fans (like Glaucus) financially able to pay. The fate of many gladiators was an anonymous mass

grave. We hear of a *collegium* ('club') devoted to the god Silvanus, consisting of a gladiatorial troupe belonging to the emperor Commodus and various arena functionaries, one purpose of which was no doubt to provide proper burial for its members. The *collegium* consisted of twenty-three gladiators, one *manica* maker, one masseur and seven men designated as *pagani* (meaning uncertain). The administrators of the club were a freedman of the emperor and a *cryptiarius*, a custodian of the crypt, where, according to Hermann Dessau, gladiators often practised.⁴¹⁹

Fan enthusiasm for gladiatorial combat was also evident outside the amphitheatre. When there was no live action to enjoy in person, Romans liked being reminded of the action of the arena by pictorial representations in various artistic media, both public and private. Gladiators in action were a favourite subject for paintings, which were displayed by *munerarii* in public places in commemoration of *munera* they had sponsored. These paintings attracted the attention of the public, reminding them of the *munerarius*' generosity to them. This practice had been begun in 132 BC by a certain C. Terentius Lucanus, who commissioned paintings of gladiators in action in commemoration of a funeral *munus* he had given in the Roman Forum in honour of his grandfather. He exhibited these paintings in the Grove of Diana, an important centre of the worship of that goddess in central Italy.⁴²⁰ A freedman of Nero who had given a gladiator show in the town of Antium (modern Anzio) had paintings of gladiators displayed in public porticos there.⁴²¹ Petronius' Trimalchio expresses the desire to have his tomb decorated with paintings of the great gladiator Petraites. Domestic art, such as decorated cups, lamps and mosaics, commonly featured gladiators. Trimalchio had silver cups adorned with a combat scene involving Hermeros and Petraites.⁴²² Although Horace in one of his *Satires* has a slave confess his addiction to paintings of gladiators, it is likely that many a master felt the same thrill in viewing them.

... I gaze at the fights of [the famous gladiators] Fulvius, Rutuba and Pacideianus with their straining leg muscles. Painted with red chalk or with charcoal, they appear to be really fighting: brandishing their weapons, they attack and parry...⁴²³

Modern fans are clearly not alone in indulging their fascination with their favourite sport through the medium of pictorial representations.

A Brief History of Gladiator Games



The Republic

After the first *munus* in honour of Junius Pera in 264 BC, the next *munus* mentioned in the historical record took place in 215 BC. This *munus* was given in connection with the funeral of M. Aemilius Lepidus, who had twice been elected consul and held the prestigious office of augur.¹ Could forty-nine years actually have passed between the first and second *munus* at Rome? Perhaps the custom of giving a gladiator show at a funeral did not catch on immediately after its first occurrence in 264 BC and Lepidus' family revived it. Indeed, one could argue that there might have been initial resistance to the bloody violence of gladiatorial combat, but it is doubtful that a martial people like the Romans would have had such tender sensibilities. After all, gladiator shows found acceptance rather quickly even among the Greeks, who were more culturally refined than the Romans. In 175 BC, when the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes imported gladiator games from Rome and presented them at Antioch, his subjects were shocked at first but it did not take them long to change their minds. Soon gladiator games were all the rage.² Another possible explanation for this