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Gladiators



Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome

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Chapter 2

Recruitment and Training of Gladiators



Who were gladiators? How did they become gladiators? Cicero identifies them as 'either men of no moral worth or barbarians.'¹ What Cicero means is that they are either criminals convicted of capital crimes ('men of no moral worth') or prisoners of war ('barbarians') taken captive in one of the countless wars the Romans waged during the Republic and the empire.² The criminals had been condemned in court to live in a gladiator school (*damnatio ad ludum gladiatorium*), where they would be trained for a gladiatorial career. This penalty provided a rich resource of recruitment. In the province of Bithynia (modern north-west Turkey) in the early second century AD, so many convicts were given this penalty that the gladiator schools could not accommodate them and they were forced to become public slaves.³ Some convicts were sentenced to a school for arena hunters (*ludus venatorius*), a penalty equivalent to service in the gladiator school, although the risk of death was probably less.⁴ In the category of 'men of no moral worth', Cicero probably would also include slaves. The ancients believed that slaves were not capable of moral judgement: a slave's testimony in court was accepted only if it was given under torture. Slaves were bought

by *lanistae* on the open market and sometimes were sold by their masters directly to *lanistae*, usually as punishment. The future emperor Vitellius once sold a difficult slave to an itinerant *lanista*, but relented just before the man was to appear as a gladiator and gave him his freedom.⁵ In fact, a significant number of gladiators were slaves.⁶

The men who fell into the hands of a *lanista* had little control over their destiny. They were the property of the *lanista*, whom the Romans generally considered a heartless seeker of profit.⁷ Seneca compares the *lanista* with a slave dealer who fattens up his slaves like cattle and keeps them in good condition to get a better price for them.⁸ In one of his letters, Seneca puts the *lanista* in the same class as the pimp (they are both traffickers in human flesh), each a despised outcast from decent society.⁹ Under the control of these ruthless owners, gladiators found themselves forced to embrace the life of a gladiator, spending their best years risking serious injury and an early death in the arena. There could be an upside to a career as a gladiator, but it was a long shot. The loss of a match did not automatically mean death. A loser could be granted discharge, which would allow him to come back and fight another day. There was even the possibility of eventual permanent release from the arena for the lucky few. Despite the odds, there were undoubtedly a significant number of gladiators who embraced the terms of their new life as a gladiator. They welcomed the chance to win glory in the arena as a mitigating factor of their slavery.

A good example of gladiator 'recruitment' is the best-known gladiator in both the ancient and the modern world, Spartacus. His rejection of the career that slavery had imposed on him and his desperate fight for freedom is well known from a novel by Howard Fast (*Spartacus* 1951) and a popular film starring Kirk Douglas based on this novel and directed by Stanley Kubrick (1960). Since the eighteenth century, Spartacus has been used by various novelists, dramatists and film makers to comment on contemporary issues of personal freedom. For example, the revival of Bernard-Joseph Saurin's tragedy *Spartacus* in 1792 gave public voice to the desire for freedom that fuelled the French Revolution. Dr Robert Montgomery Bird's play *The Gladiator* (1831) was a veiled attack on the institution of slavery in America. In early twentieth century Italy, Spartacus was depicted as a symbol of Italian nationalism in Giovanni Enrico Vidali's film *Spartaco o Il gladiatore della Tracia* (1913), based on Raffaello Giovagnoli's epic novel, *Spartaco* (1874).

Howard Fast, in his novel *Spartacus*, made Spartacus into a communist revolutionary intent on making Rome a classless society:

*The whole world belongs to Rome so Rome must be destroyed and made only a bad memory, and then where Rome was, we will build a new life where all men will live in peace and brotherhood and love, no slaves and no slave masters, no gladiators and no arenas, but a time like the old times, like the golden age. We will build new cities of brotherhood, and there will be no walls around them.*¹⁰

When the novel reached the screen, Fast's communist message was toned down to make the film acceptable to a mass American audience of the post-McCarthy era. Spartacus became simply a slave trying to lead his army of slaves back to their homelands, symbolically suggesting at the same time contemporary black and Jewish aspirations and in general the uncontroversial ideal of human freedom. The film even appealed to political and religious conservatives of that era by presenting a crucified Spartacus at the end of the film as a Christ figure and by substituting religious piety for class struggle as a motivation for Spartacus' resistance to Roman tyranny. Thus, conservatives were encouraged to see Spartacus as a symbol of America's cold war struggle against godless communist dictatorships.¹¹

The views of Spartacus in these and other modern representations are quite different from how this rebel was perceived by the Romans themselves. The Roman author Florus expresses a typical Roman attitude when he cites his disdain for Spartacus' army of slaves led by gladiators in rebellion against their Roman masters. He calls slaves human beings of the lowest type, and adds that their gladiator leaders were the lowest of the low. In the Roman view, the success achieved by Spartacus' army against Roman armies reversed the natural order of things. Roman soldiers, freemen enjoying full citizenship rights, were not supposed to lose to a ragtag collection of slaves, but in a number of embarrassing defeats, they had become prisoners of war and thus objects of contempt.¹² The ultimate in Roman shame was Spartacus' use of four hundred captured Roman soldiers as gladiators at the funeral of a woman said to have committed suicide because she had been raped by a Roman. This event reversed the Roman custom of using slaves like Spartacus and his colleagues to fight at funerals of notable Romans. Now, like a wealthy aristocrat at Rome, a gladiator had become an *editor* of a *munus* with Romans soldiers providing the entertainment.¹³

Spartacus' native land was Thrace, which today cuts across the boundaries of three modern nations on the north Aegean coast: Greece, Bulgaria and European Turkey. Spartacus had been a mercenary in the Roman army, probably in the First Mithridatic War in the 80s BC, but had deserted and become a bandit. He was captured and, because of his outstanding strength and military experience, was sold to Lentulus Batiatus, a *lanista* who ran a gladiatorial school (*ludus*) in Capua in southern Italy. Since the third century BC, Roman conquests in the eastern Mediterranean and Aegean areas had provided a steady supply of slaves to Italy, fuelling an agricultural and pastoral economy that produced unparalleled affluence in Italy. Capua, the chief city of Campania, with its excellent soil and the influx of slaves to work the land, enjoyed great prosperity. Cicero says that this affluence fostered an attitude of *luxuria* and *superbia* ('luxury and arrogance') that no doubt played a role in the growth of gladiator shows in that area.¹⁴ The training of slaves as first-class gladiators along with the cost of their armour and maintenance was indeed an expensive luxury. Campanian gladiators were considered the *crème de la crème* of the profession. Their stellar reputation was still evident in the middle of the third century AD when a *munerarius* in Minturnae (modern Minturno) proudly boasted of having ordered the deaths of 'eleven leading gladiators of Campania' during his *munus*.¹⁵ This boast of the *munerarius* calls attention to how great his costs were in denying eleven appeals for release from such valuable gladiators, for whom he must compensate the *lanista* on top of the considerable rental fee. The *superbia* of the spectators was also engaged by their experience of *Schadenfreude* as they watched men whom they scorned degrade themselves by participating in bloody fights as an entertainment. Appian reports that Spartacus' speech to his fellow gladiators in favour of escape from the *ludus* focused on this very subject: the shame of being put on view for the amusement of others.¹⁶ The same *luxuria* and *superbia* were evident at an even more affluent Rome and not surprisingly helped promote the spectacular growth of gladiatorial games there.

We can only speculate what Spartacus' period of training was like in Batiatus' gladiatorial school in Capua. It was no doubt as thorough and harsh as necessary to prepare the trainees for their violent careers as gladiators. There was another reason for their harsh treatment. A substantial number of the trainees were men who, like Spartacus, had been condemned to a gladiator school (*damnati ad ludum*) for some crime. They were prisoners

in the school, who had to be carefully supervised and kept under lock and key while they were not training. Plutarch's account notes that the rebellion began when they seized knives and skewers from a kitchen. Although these are not formidable weapons, they seem to have been enough to hold their guards at bay while they escaped. Plutarch goes on to report that they obtained real weapons when they had the good fortune to come upon a wagon full of gladiatorial weapons going to another city. Later, when they seized weapons from Capuan soldiers trying to stop them, they threw away the gladiator arms, which they considered 'dishonorable' and 'barbaric'.¹⁷

Plutarch, no admirer of Roman gladiatorial combat, criticizes the 'injustice' of these men being forced by their owner to fight as gladiators.¹⁸ As a man well versed in philosophy, his views in this matter were in line with those of some other Greek intellectuals, but differed from those of the rest of Greek society, who, like the Romans, believed that gladiators, as men of low status and worth, deserved whatever fate befell them.¹⁹ The Roman contempt for slaves in general and for gladiators in particular no doubt contributed to the Romans' slowness in realizing that Spartacus and his colleagues, who were disciplined and skilled fighters, posed a greater threat than two earlier slave revolts in Roman Sicily in the previous century. At first, the Roman authorities did not take the runaways seriously, assigning smaller armies under lesser commanders. Their disdain for Spartacus' slave army had led them to react with less than an all-out military effort. After several disastrous Roman losses, however, their contempt was dispelled. Even then the Romans suffered losses. Two Roman armies, each led by one of the two consuls (the chief executive magistrates of Rome) engaged Spartacus' followers and were soundly defeated. The army of the provincial governor of Cisalpine Gaul suffered the same fate. It was only when M. Licinius Crassus, one of the richest men in Rome and a man of great determination, was appointed general that the tide turned. He restored discipline to his army by applying the penalty of decimation to soldiers guilty of cowardice, putting to death fifty out of a five hundred man group. In a final confrontation, Spartacus was killed in battle (his body was not found) and the six thousand captured survivors of his army were crucified along the complete length of the Appian Way from Rome to Capua, a distance of 125 miles. Over this distance, there would have been one cross every 35–40 yards.²⁰

What do we know of Spartacus the gladiator? Was he only a gladiator in training or is it possible that he was already a well-known gladiator? The fact

that he was housed at a gladiatorial school does not necessarily mean that he was only a trainee; gladiators who had already embarked on their professional careers also lived in these schools. There is a fresco at the entrance to a house in Pompeii that depicts two gladiators on horseback fighting each other.²¹ Each gladiator is named on the fresco, although only one name can be made out clearly: Spartaks, an Oscan (the native Italic language of Campania) form of the name Spartacus.²² Could this be the famous Spartacus or, since Spartacus was a Thracian name, just another Thracian of the same name? Unfortunately, we have no way of telling. All we know is what Plutarch tells us that the gladiators of Batiatus' *ludus* were mostly Thracians and Gauls, so there could easily have been more than one Spartacus in the school.²³

Volunteer gladiators (*auctorati*)

Although most men became gladiators involuntarily, there were freemen (and later even women) who were willing to assume the life of a gladiator temporarily. Who were these people and what was their motivation to become gladiators? During most of the Republic, there were no doubt enthusiastic young men of the lower classes, seeking fame and fortune in the arena, who volunteered themselves. After all, they had little to lose. The stigma attached to the profession of gladiator, however, seems to have had considerable force in a society preoccupied with social standing and reputation. It kept men from the two upper orders, the senatorial and equestrian classes, from fighting in the arena.²⁴ This stigma was called *infamia* ('disgrace') a legal penalty that resulted in disqualification from exercising certain citizen rights in the public and private sectors, such as serving in the army, voting for magistrates or on the passage of laws, serving on juries, immunity from physical attacks or corporal punishment, and acting on behalf of another person in court. *Infamia* could be incurred in various ways: for example, a judge accepting bribes, a soldier avoiding his duty or showing cowardice in battle, any conviction in court, bankruptcy.²⁵ *Infamia* also applied automatically to anyone engaged in certain lines of work. One of these professions was prostitution, which does not come as a surprise, but also included under this censure was any profession connected with entertainment such as acting or fighting as a gladiator or an arena hunter.

Catharine Edwards points out that what these professions had in common was the production of pleasure:

*In the theaters, arenas, and brothels of Rome, the infamous sold their own flesh (in the case of actors, gladiators, and prostitutes; and the flesh of others, for pimps and trainers of gladiators were also stigmatized). They lived by providing sex, violence, and laughter for the pleasure of the public – a licentious affront to Roman gravitas.*²⁶

By the early empire, however, even the threat of *infamia* was not sufficient to deter significant numbers of freemen of any class from becoming a gladiator. The life of a gladiator seems to have been especially appealing to the financially desperate, whose only hope to make some money was to fight for a price in the arena. In fact, becoming a gladiator was one of the most common options of the insolvent. Satirists saw the bankrupt man's choice to become a gladiator as the equivalent of hitting rock-bottom. Horace's victim of insolvency has only three options: to become a gladiator, a professional gardener or a driver of a carriage.²⁷ Juvenal saw the ultimate fate of a bankrupt as 'resorting to the pot-luck meals of the gladiator school'.²⁸ We hear of recruiters of gladiators who took advantage of inexperienced young men.²⁹ These recruiters, looking for handsome and well-built young men with potential as a sword fighter, no doubt painted an overly positive picture of life as a gladiator to entice them. Such young men were not just of the lower classes, but also from the upper orders of society. Many of the elite volunteers, having acquired an addiction to luxury in their upbringing, had managed to impoverish themselves very quickly.³⁰ A speaker in a rhetorical exercise gives a good account of their plight, disowned by their families for their spendthrift ways and other unacceptable conduct:

*Young men who come from wealthy families of the highest rank, suddenly separated from not only their wealth but lacking even the basic necessities to sustain life and spirit will not engage in everyday work, not being able to endure the drudgery of labour. Their only alternative is to take on a dangerous occupation that could cost them their life [i.e., become a gladiator].*³¹

The authorities tried to stem through legislation the tide of elites volunteering as gladiators. Suetonius tells us that aristocratic spendthrifts of both upper orders deliberately brought *infamia* upon themselves in other ways

so that they could lose their status as members of the senatorial or equestrian orders and thus circumvent the ban against elites fighting as gladiators.³²

Bankruptcy was not the only reason for signing up as a gladiator. Ville adds love of glory, a longing to engage in combat, and more sinister motives: a taste for killing, sadism and a death wish.³³ Boredom with peace, the desire to avoid the long-term commitment of military service (20 to 25 years) and the need for a new identity have also been suggested.³⁴ Carlin Barton has argued eloquently for a psychological explanation of the free-born Roman's desire to take up the life of a gladiator. She sees this aspiration as a desperate response to the devastation of the civil wars that brought an end to the Roman Republic.³⁵ Samuel Dill suggests some shallower reasons for signing up: 'the splendour of arms, the ostentatious pomp of the scene of combat, the applause of thousands of spectators on the crowded benches, [and] the fascination of danger . . .'.³⁶

There was a legally prescribed process (*auctoratio*) for free men who desired to become a gladiator. A person who went through this process was called an *auctoratus*, that is, 'one who hires himself out to another for a price'. This process was also available to prospective wild-beast fighters (*bestiarii* and *venatores*). The first step was to declare one's intention to a tribune of the people, who could either approve or disapprove.³⁷ If approved, the candidate entered into a contract with a *lanista*, or directly with an *editor* of a gladiator show. The latter method was mostly for the upper orders and the commitment was usually for one appearance only. The usual contract specified the amount of money to be paid to the *auctoratus*, the specific length of service as a gladiator and the maximum number of combats required of the *auctoratus*.³⁸ The contract probably also specified the cost of release from the agreement for the *auctoratus* before its terms were fully met. Just as a slave could buy his own freedom from his master, an *auctoratus* could buy out his contract with the *lanista* or have someone else do it. The rhetorician Quintilian tells a story of a sister who had redeemed her *auctoratus* brother a number of times. Apparently, he would sell himself to a *lanista* whenever he needed money. The sister, disgusted with having to redeem her brother so many times, cut off his thumb while he was asleep to prevent him from fighting again. He took her to court and she expressed her reaction in this way: 'You really deserved to have your hand intact.' Quintilian explains this cryptic statement by adding that the phrase 'so that you could fight [and be killed in the arena]' is understood.³⁹ Ovid notes

that some *auctorati* did not know when to call it a career.⁴⁰ The typical Roman attitude towards this business deal between *lanista* and *auctoratus* can be best summed up in Livy's phrase: '[the *auctorati*] put their blood up for sale'.⁴¹ The candidate solemnly swore 'to be burned, bound, beaten and to be put to death by the sword' and to do 'whatever else was ordered', a total dedication of body and mind.⁴² The burning, binding and beating were punishments that could be imposed by his superiors in the course of his training or even in the arena, while death by sword refers to the losing gladiator's willingness to accept death at the hands of his opponent if ordered by the *editor* of a *munus*.⁴³ This oath was most likely sworn only to a *lanista*. Since the commitment on the part of a *lanista* was a substantial one, involving expensive long-term training in a gladiator school, he needed the firmest possible guarantee of the applicant's sincerity and cooperation. This process was not necessary for an equestrian or a senator in good standing, who generally made an agreement with the *editor* (most often the emperor) for one event only and did not require any special training. The last step in the process of becoming an *auctoratus* seems to have been an initiation ritual in the arena in which the *auctorati* were whipped with rods, perhaps while running a gauntlet of veteran gladiators.⁴⁴ In the late Republic, large numbers of freeborn men became gladiators, but by the middle of the first century BC, slaves still outnumbered free gladiators.⁴⁵

The gladiator school (*ludus*)

Each *ludus* housed of a troupe of gladiators (*familia gladiatoria*), who were trained in various styles of fighting. (Note that the singular of the word *ludus* denotes a gladiator school whereas the plural *ludi* refers to games celebrated annually in honour of various gods.) Typically, the gladiator school was owned by a *lanista*, often an ex-gladiator, who rented his troupe to givers of gladiator shows. In Capua, however, the owners of major schools that we hear of belong to upper-class Roman families, for example Lentulus Batiatus (Vatia) and Julius Caesar himself. C. Aurelius Scaurus, whose gladiatorial school provided instructors in swordplay to the Roman army in 105 BC, may have been another Roman aristocrat who owned a *ludus* in Capua.⁴⁶ Caesar purchased his *ludus* in anticipation of his aedileship in 65 BC during which he planned to offer a grand *munus* to ensure his election to higher office. He maintained ownership of this school even after

his election to the praetorship and the consulship. By 49 BC, this school housed perhaps as many as a thousand gladiators.⁴⁷ The fact that Caesar held on to a school of this size after his aedileship was undoubtedly a sign of the scale of his political ambitions beyond even the highest magistracies.

The decision of a Roman politician to own his own gladiator troupe may have been made in good part for economic reasons. First, *lanistae* often charged outlandish fees for the use of their gladiators. Moreover, an *editor* renting gladiators from a *lanista* often found himself in a bind in the midst of a *munus*. The purpose of his giving a *munus* in the first place was to please the people to advance his political career. What if the crowd vociferously demanded the death of a defeated gladiator? The *editor* would have to think twice about ordering the death of a defeated gladiator to please the spectators because of a hefty compensation fee due to the *lanista* in this circumstance. According to one legal source, the compensation was legally defined as fifty times the rental price of the gladiator.⁴⁸ On the other hand, failure on the part of the *editor* to cater to the desires of the crowd usually meant a damaging loss of favour and respect. Given these considerations, the choice to own a troupe might seem prudent, especially since the surviving gladiators could be sold at a profit after the *munus* or given to friends to strengthen political alliances. The purchase of a gladiatorial school, aside from its political advantages, could be a good investment. Cicero's best friend Atticus, a member of the equestrian order, invested in a *ludus*. In a letter to Atticus, Cicero is quite enthusiastic about the purchase because of the report he has heard about the excellence of Atticus' gladiators. He points out to Atticus that if he had been willing to hire them out for two recent gladiatorial shows, he would have recovered all his costs in purchasing the school.⁴⁹ One might justly wonder how the equestrian Atticus performed what is essentially the function of the disgraced *lanista* without incurring *infamia*. Cicero expresses no disapproval at all of Atticus' investment. Perhaps Atticus, like the members of the senatorial class mentioned above, was able to distance himself from this disreputable business by not being involved in the day-to-day affairs of the school and using representatives to run the school for him. Another consideration is that Atticus, already a wealthy man, did not make his living from his investment; his gladiatorial venture may have been, in effect, a hobby. The same justification could be applied to Caesar's owning a *ludus*, but there is a difference. Caesar established his school to train gladiators for his own use and not as

an investment. If he occasionally rented out gladiators to other *editores*, he, too, undoubtedly did it through representatives, anticipating the later practice of emperors as owners of imperial gladiator schools.

The training of gladiators

The training of gladiators was serious business; spectators wanted to see gladiators who were experts at their profession and could produce an exciting fight. The instruction they received in gladiatorial schools was famous for its high quality. Christian writers reluctantly praised the discipline that gladiators attained, which enabled them to kill more effectively. The Christian apologist Minucius Felix, in condemning 'the evil pleasures' of Roman games, notes 'the discipline of killing' in the training of gladiators.⁵⁰ Cyprian of Carthage makes the point even more forcefully:

*Skill, discipline, art, all enable [a gladiator] to kill. Not only a crime is committed, but it is taught; what can be more inhuman, what can be more repulsive? Instruction makes it possible to kill and once the slaying is accomplished, there is glory.*⁵¹

The satirist Juvenal in the course of his lampoon of a woman who undergoes gladiator training (perhaps in preparation for the arena), gives an idea of what took place on the exercise grounds of the *ludus*. The most basic drill involved attacking a wooden post called a *palus*, on which she inflicted 'wounds' with repeated attacks of a wooden sword and her shield. (Note that the shield could be used as an offensive, as well as a defensive, weapon.) These attacks, however, are not performed in a random fashion, but follow prescribed and systematic directions of a teacher of gladiatorial skills (*doctor* or *magister*) standing nearby. Juvenal calls these directions 'numbers' (*numeri*), which elsewhere are referred to as 'instructions' (*dictata*).⁵² Although there is no clear evidence of exactly what these numbers or *dictata* were, in general they must have been a predetermined series of offensive and defensive movements. A speaker in Petronius' *Satyricon* complains of a gladiator who fought only by the numbers, that is, mechanically.⁵³ Although following these rules too closely might on occasion have resulted in a boring fight, nonetheless the *dictata* represented a crucially important facet of the gladiatorial art and could not be ignored. Julius Caesar urged trainers to impart the *dictata* to his inexperienced gladiators.⁵⁴ The following comment

by Tertullian reveals that fans were familiar with these *dictata*, and would try to help a gladiator who was not putting them into practice by shouting them from their seats. Sometimes this practice actually helped the gladiator:

*Not only trainers and those placed in charge urge the best gladiators [to pay attention to the dictata] but also the untrained and amateurs [among the spectators] from afar [from their seats], with the result that often the dictata suggested by the crowd itself are profitable [to the gladiators].*⁵⁵

Seneca records traditional wisdom regarding defensive techniques. An old Latin proverb warns the gladiator to keep his head about him and observe warnings given by the face, hands and bending of the body of his opponent.⁵⁶ Robert points out that skill was even more important for a gladiator than force.⁵⁷ Later in their training, gladiators would engage in practice fights with each other, still using the wooden sword. At the most advanced stage of their training, gladiators practised with opponents, using real weapons.⁵⁸

A description of a training session for new recruits (both soldiers and gladiators) written by Vegetius, a fourth century AD author, gives us more details. In this account, Vegetius looks back to the training techniques of the past. Trainees worked out carrying shields made of twigs that were woven in such a way as to be double the normal weight of wicker-work and wooden swords that were double the weight of real swords. In the morning and afternoon they practised at the *palus*, which each recruit stuck in the ground so that it was 6 (Roman) feet high (5 feet 8 inches in modern measurements).⁵⁹ The recruit treated the *palus* as an imaginary opponent, which was approximately the size of a tall Roman. The moves described by Vegetius give us some sense of the nature of the *dictata*:

*[The trainee] pretended he was now attacking his opponent's face, now threatening his sides, sometimes striving to cut his knees and legs. He would draw back, spring forward, and attack his imaginary opponent. He would apply every kind of attack, every technique of warfare. And in this practice, caution was observed so that the recruit tried to inflict a wound on his opponent in such a way that he in no way laid himself open to a blow from his opponent.*⁶⁰

The teachers in the *ludus* were called *doctor* or *magister* and were usually ex-gladiators or, in some cases, active gladiators, who passed on their

knowledge and experience to their students. Included in Martial's litany of the achievements of the great gladiator Hermes is the statement that he is 'both an (active) gladiator and a *magister*'. Martial also points out that he is skilled in all methods of fighting.⁶¹ Normally, a *magister* or *doctor* would teach only one or two styles of fighting. We hear of *doctores* who taught styles of fighting employed by various types of gladiators: *thraex*, *hoplomachus*, *murmillo*, *provocator* and *secutor*.⁶² Juvenal's female student-gladiator seems to be learning two different styles of fighting indicated by the two kinds of protective armour she possesses. For the first style of armament, the poet lists a belt worn around a loincloth (*balteus*), an arm protector consisting of thickly wrapped linen (*manica*), 'crests' (perhaps a crested helmet), and a greave (a metal protector) on the left leg. This last piece of equipment on the left leg suggests that the gladiatorial type here may be the *secutor* ('pursuer').⁶³ Her other armament (helmet and linen leg protectors on both legs) is enough to tell us a different kind of gladiator is indicated but is too vague for an exact identification.⁶⁴

The *ludus* as living quarters

The *ludus*, which was not only a training institution but also served as living quarters for gladiatorial troupes, existed at Rome from at least the second century BC. Travelling troupes might not have their own *ludus*, but presumably they would stay at a *ludus* in the town or city where they were going to perform, either paying rent or receiving hospitality as a professional courtesy. Eppia, a senator's wife who fell in love with a gladiator named Sergius belonging to a travelling *familia*, followed him to Alexandria in Egypt.⁶⁵ It is likely that she and her lover stayed at the famous *ludus* in Alexandria. Although we hear of only a few specific gladiator schools in Republican times, there must have been a great number of gladiator troupes housed in small gladiatorial schools at Rome in the first century BC. This is indicated by the danger the Roman Senate saw in their presence at Rome during the imminent threat of the Catilinarian revolution in the 60s BC. It was the concern of the Senate that the revolutionaries might attempt to use gladiators as a military force. The Senate had learned the hard way what military success a gladiator-led army could achieve during Spartacus' revolt. Therefore, the Senate decreed that these *familiae* be transferred to Capua and neighbouring towns in southern Italy.⁶⁶

In the late Republic, Capua surpassed Rome as a centre for gladiator training and lodging. The most famous schools were located in Capua, like those of Batiatus and Julius Caesar. The choice of Capua as a site for a gladiatorial school was not fortuitous. Capua, like Praeneste (modern Palestrina) and Ravenna in Italy, and Alexandria in Egypt, was thought to foster good health in gladiators because of their sea breezes.⁶⁷ Although climate was important for gladiators, diet was even more crucial for these athletic men. The food served at gladiator schools (known by the generic term *sagina*) may deservedly have had a reputation for being unappetizing. A fictional gladiator describes the *sagina* he was fed at a school as 'worse than any hunger'.⁶⁸ On the other hand, the typical gladiator diet, which Juvenal calls *miscellanea* ('hodge-podge' or 'potluck'), was no doubt nourishing and designed to produce strength.⁶⁹ We know that, from the earliest days, barley was the chief staple of gladiators' diet. In fact, gladiators were often called *hordearii* ('barley men').⁷⁰ The cheapness of this grain no doubt made it popular with *lanistae*. The portions, as the diet of men engaged in such a profession required, were generous, even larger than the rations given to Roman soldiers. Tacitus notes that Vitellius served gladiator-sized rations to his soldiers during the civil wars of AD 69.⁷¹ Another indication of the large amount of food gladiators consumed is Augustus' banishment of *familiae gladiatoriae* in schools at Rome to a distance of 100 miles from the capital during a famine.⁷² The large number of these *ludi* probably represented a considerable drain on the food supply.

The living conditions in a *ludus* were no doubt substandard. There were complaints about the 'filthy condition' of the cells in which gladiators were required to live.⁷³ The cells in the *ludus* at Pompeii were quite small, between 32 and 49 square feet, accommodating two or at most three men. In as much as there were no beds, the inmates probably used straw mattresses.⁷⁴ The *ludus* was not a prison as such. There were gladiators who were allowed to leave and return as they wished. Nonetheless, it was a prison for those gladiators who could not be trusted. They were usually kept in chains in a separate part of the *ludus*. Juvenal mentions a prison within the *ludus*.⁷⁵ A fictional inmate of a *ludus*, a freeman who had been sold to a *lanista* by pirates, was naturally desperate to escape and therefore could not be allowed the freedom to come and go. He compares his *ludus* unfavourably to a work-farm (*ergastulum*) where inmates worked in chain gangs and protests the 'disgraceful confinement' to which he was subjected.⁷⁶ As we

have seen, Spartacus and his comrades were kept under lock and key because they were believed most likely to attempt escape – a belief that later proved to be well founded. But even the rebellious Spartacus was allowed to live with his wife in his cell.⁷⁷ A woman who lived with a gladiator in a *ludus* was called a *ludia*, that is, ‘a woman of the *ludus*’.⁷⁸ The word often had a derogatory meaning. The Eppia mentioned earlier is referred to by Juvenal as a *ludia*, which in this case seems to mean something like ‘a gladiator groupie’, a woman who formed a temporary relationship with a gladiator.⁷⁹ The famous gladiator Hermes attracted the attention of the *ludiae*. Martial calls him ‘the focus of the groupies’ affections’.⁸⁰ It may be hard to think of gladiators as family men, but some gladiators had not only wives but children as well who were housed in the *ludus* or, sometimes even in a private house. In epitaphs, the wife is often mentioned as responsible for having set up the memorial for her dead husband. In one epitaph there is a reversal of the favour: a veteran *equus* (‘horseman gladiator’) named Albanus, stationed at the *Ludus Magnus* in Rome, had set up a memorial for his ‘dearest wife’ Publicia. In another, a certain Euche, who set up a memorial for her gladiator husband Faustus, is called a *contubernalis*. One could not contract a legal marriage with a slave, so a man and his slave partner who lived under the same roof were referred to as *contubernales* (literally, ‘sharing the same tent’), something like our ‘common law spouse’.⁸¹ Suetonius tells the story of an *essedarius*, whose four sons’ urgent request that he be discharged completely from service as a gladiator was granted by Claudius.⁸² There is a moving epitaph of Urbicus, a *secutor*, who at age 22 was killed in his eighth fight, leaving behind his wife Lauricia and a 5-month-old daughter Fortunensis.⁸³ Some schools even allowed fans to visit on a regular basis to keep up with the latest gladiatorial news. Apuleius criticizes the uncle and guardian of his stepson for allowing the boy to waste so much time in a *ludus*, talking with the *lanista* about the names, fights and wounds of his gladiators.⁸⁴

The criminal background of many of the men in the *ludus* probably made life as difficult as the living conditions. These were rough men, whose belligerent character was suited to their profession as a gladiator. Many of them had been judged guilty of the most heinous crimes: temple-robbing, arson and murder.⁸⁵ They probably made it especially tough on inexperienced newcomers in the *ludus* by subjecting them to verbal and physical abuse as a kind of initiation ritual.⁸⁶ From the point of view of the *lanista*, however, the crimes committed by these inmates before entry into the *ludus*

were irrelevant as long as they did not seriously harm other members of the *ludus*, and were not disobedient.

The social structure of the *ludus* reflected the Roman love of organization and hierarchy. Each category of gladiators was divided into four segments named after the post used for training exercises: first, second, third and fourth *palus*.⁸⁷ Gladiators of the same gladiatorial type were ranked in these hierarchical groups according to the number of times they had been victorious in the arena. For example, all the *thraeces* in the school were divided in these four ranks. Robert notes that, in inscriptions, gladiators very seldom mention their membership in the two lowest classes (*tertius* and *quartus palus*).⁸⁸ There was no glory in advertising membership in these lowest ranked groups. On the other hand, gladiators trumpeted their membership in the *primus* and *secundus palus*.⁸⁹ Record-keeping was an important function in the *ludus*. Slave functionaries called *tabularii* or *commentarienses* (‘secretaries’) kept careful records of winners and losers in the arena and other details in order to keep the status of each gladiator up to date within each category. These records were also useful in putting together programmes for spectators (*libelli*).⁹⁰ Knowing the records of paired gladiators added interest to the fight and was useful in placing bets, a favourite activity of the Romans at gladiator shows. The *primus palus* in each category of fighting style consisted of the most successful gladiators in the *ludus*, while the *quartus palus* contained those with the smallest number of victories. The gladiator in training, called a *tiro* (‘apprentice’), could become a part of this ranking system only when he was promoted to the status of ‘veteran’ after his first bout, if he survived. In fact, many *tirones* never received that promotion because they were killed in their first bout. A *tiro* could be quite young. A funerary inscription honours a gladiator who entered the *ludus* at age 17.⁹¹

The leader of a group of gladiators of the same type (*thraeces*, *murmillo*, etc.) in a school received a title derived from name of the highest-ranked group in that category. He was called the *primus palus*. For example, the emperor Commodus, whose fantasy of gladiatorial glory was nourished by his unbalanced mind, considered himself the leading *secutor* (‘pursuer’) in that category in Rome and thus was given (or took) the title of *primus palus*, which entitled him to a special cell in what was probably the largest gladiatorial school in the empire, the *Ludus Magnus* in Rome. Commodus was extremely proud of his unearned top ranking among *secutores* in the

ludus. In order to memorialize his imagined excellence as a gladiator, he had the following words inscribed on the base of the colossal statue of Nero adjacent to the Colosseum, the head of which he had replaced with his own likeness: 'primus palus of the *secutores*, the only left-handed fighter to win . . . twelve thousand matches'.⁹² This number of wins seems grossly exaggerated even for a narcissistic emperor like Commodus. Could the source (Cassius Dio) have got the number wrong? Possibly. Herodian gives the much more realistic number: one thousand.⁹³ No matter what the number of 'victories' Commodus may have won, his success was due to the fact that his opponents were smart enough to concede victory to him rather than lose their own lives, if they won.⁹⁴ In a further act of self-promotion, he made more changes to the statue. His extreme fascination with, and participation in, the events of the arena led him to identify closely with Hercules, the patron saint of gladiators and arena hunters. Therefore, he proclaimed himself a second Hercules by adding a club (Hercules' signature weapon) and a bronze lion (the Nemean lion, killed by Hercules as his first labour) at the feet of the statue.⁹⁵

The *familia gladiatoria* in a *ludus* was multi-ethnic. Their native lands were widely scattered across the empire, from Spain to the near and middle east.⁹⁶ Eastern gladiators frequently made their way west, and occasionally gladiators from the west are found in the east.⁹⁷ Despite the cultural and language differences, emotional attachments among gladiators were quite common; there are numerous examples of surviving comrades paying for the burial of their cellmates.⁹⁸ Sometimes all the members of the troupe (*familia*) chipped in to pay for the burial.⁹⁹ Robert gives an example of a funeral monument set up by a certain Paitracites (an alternative spelling of the common gladiator name Petraitēs) and other cellmates in the *ludus* for their beloved colleague Hermes (not the Hermes celebrated by Martial).¹⁰⁰ An extraordinary example of loyalty among gladiators is an epitaph telling of members of troupe of *paegniarii* ('play gladiators', who did not use lethal weapons) in the *Ludus Magnus*, who paid for the burial of one of their fellow *paegniarii*.¹⁰¹ What is unusual about this act is that the deceased, Secundus, had died at age 98, five or even six decades after the end of his gladiatorial career. Strong friendships were also formed in the *ludus* between teacher and student. A trainer (*doctor*) in a *ludus* in Brixia (modern Brescia) paid for the burial of a *provocator* ('challenger') named Antigonus, while at Rome a *doctor* named Marcion did the same for another *provocator*

by the name of Anicetus.¹⁰² Generosity in this area could also come from other sources. Non-gladiatorial friends took care of the burial of a *thraex* called Volusenus; fans of a gladiator named Glauco in Verona helped his wife finance his burial.¹⁰³ On one occasion, a *munerarius* honoured three gladiators whose deaths contributed significantly to the success of his *munus* by building a tomb for them.¹⁰⁴

It was not unusual for friendships to be formed not just among gladiators of the same type but also across types. Thus, since members of the same *familia* fought each other in the arena, it was not uncommon for friends to be matched against each other.¹⁰⁵ Seneca writes of men in the *ludus* 'living with each other and fighting each other'.¹⁰⁶ Cicero notes that a *murmillo* killed a *thraex*, who was his friend.¹⁰⁷ No doubt the pairings in some cases even involved two cellmates. An inscription from Rome mentions a *retiarius* and a *murmillo* as cellmates, a possible pairing in the arena.¹⁰⁸ Helmets with visors that covered the face made it easier to wound and kill an opponent who, in some cases, was a close friend.¹⁰⁹

There was some segregation in the *ludus*. Juvenal tells us that light-armed gladiators were kept separate from the heavy-armed.¹¹⁰ The poet criticizes a *retiarius* for having rejected the heavy armature of a *murmillo*, *secutor* or *thraex*, expressing a strong condemnation: 'You have earned the scorn of the city'.¹¹¹ One could argue that a light-armed gladiator in combat with a heavy-armed opponent is owed greater respect for his courage, but in the Roman mind, the heavy armour (helmet, shield and so forth) bestowed a much greater aura of virility. The vulnerability of the *retiarius*, whose defensive armour consisted only of minimal protection for the left shoulder and arm and both shins, seems to have suggested effeminacy.¹¹² This attitude is best illustrated in Homer's *Iliad*, when the Trojan Hector considers removing his armour and approaching Achilles, with a proposition to end the war by giving back Helen:

*I am afraid that if I go up to him, he will not pity me
Nor will he respect me, but he will kill me naked as I am
Just as if I were a woman.*¹¹³

There was even some separation within the same gladiatorial type. Volunteer *retiarii*, probably because they were inept amateurs, were kept separate from the regular professional *retiarii*, as Juvenal tells us, in a remote part of the school.¹¹⁴ The difference between these two types of

retiarii may have been signified outwardly by the wearing of a tunic by the volunteers and the naked torso of the professional.¹¹⁵ Then there were the effeminate homosexuals among the gladiators whom Seneca says were banished to ‘the repulsive’ (*obscoenam*) part of the school where they practised their ‘disease’.¹¹⁶

The *ludus* was a common feature of large towns and cities throughout the empire. Extant inscriptions often tell us how the construction of a *ludus* was financed. For example, in the town of Este in northern Italy, a *ludus* was built at public expense and, at Praeneste, a private citizen (his name has been obliterated by damage to the stone) paid for the *ludus* out of his own pocket. He also built a brand new *spoliarium*.¹¹⁷

Although there were many gladiatorial schools throughout the empire, archaeology can provide us with significant evidence of material remains in only one town outside Rome: Pompeii, where the preservation of buildings has been good because of their burial under tons of volcanic ash during the famous eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. The first *ludus* in Pompeii was a residential house dating from the first century BC which was used as quarters for what must have been a limited number of gladiators.¹¹⁸ This house continued to serve as a *ludus* during the first half of the first century AD. Its use as a *ludus* is revealed by the great number of graffiti found on the columns of the house’s peristyle, which were no doubt written by the gladiators themselves.

Sometime in the middle of the first century AD, Pompeiiian gladiators were given a larger space for living quarters and training. A *quadriporticus*, a central courtyard surrounded on all four sides by a portico containing cells and larger rooms was converted into a *ludus* (Figure 1). This structure had originally been used by theatregoers during intermissions at the theatre to stretch their legs out of the sun (without artificial lighting, plays were presented during the day) or to avoid cold winds. Its identification as a *ludus* is also confirmed by the discovery of gladiatorial armour (helmets, greaves, shields and one belt) in the cells as well as some interesting gladiatorial graffiti. The inscription of a certain Samus is typical of these graffiti. He speaks of himself in the third person: ‘Samus, [the winner] of one victory, one [laurel] crown, a *murmillo* and an *eques*, lived here’.¹¹⁹ He is especially proud of his crown, which was a gladiator’s reward for an outstanding performance in victory. Samus also notes his versatility in being able to perform in the arena as either a *murmillo* or as an horseman gladiator. A gladiator

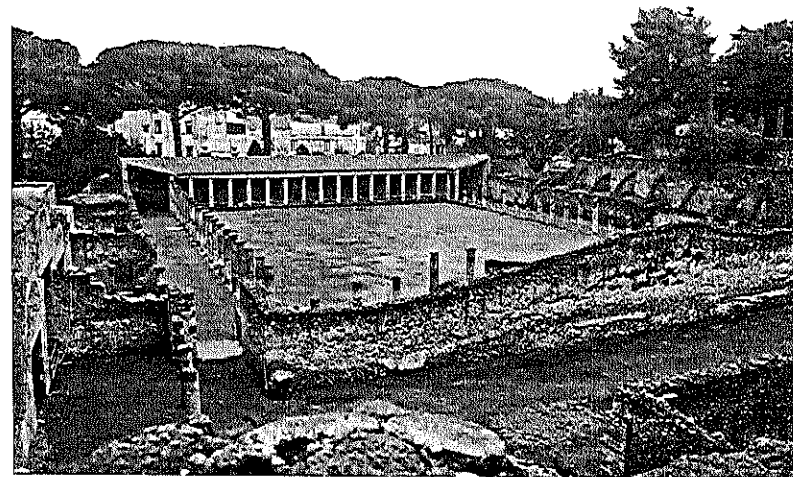


Figure 1 *Ludus* at Pompeii. Tarina Peterson, with permission

named Mansuetus inscribed his vow to Venus, the patron divinity of Pompeii, to dedicate his shield to her if he should win.¹²⁰ Also included among these graffiti are the much-quoted boasts of two gladiators, proud of their success with the opposite sex: Celadus, a *thraex* and Crescens, a *retiarius*. Celadus calls himself ‘the one whom girls sigh for’ and ‘the one whom girls honor’.¹²¹ Crescens refers to himself as ‘the lord of girls’ and, as ‘the netter [*retiarius*] of girls at night’.¹²² He is a typical example of Tertullian’s description of gladiators as ‘the most enthralling objects of love to whom women surrender their bodies’.¹²³ In Crescens’ case, however, there is another consideration with regard to his sex appeal: the fact that he was a *retiarius*. Since the *retiarius* did not use a shield, his body was more exposed to the spectators than any other gladiator, making this type of gladiator a sexually charged figure. Although some took the *retiarius*’s near-nakedness as a sign of effeminacy, the *retiarius* also could embody heterosexual attraction. This seems to be the case in Artemidorus’ interpretation of a dream in which the dreamer fights a *retiarius*: the dreamer will marry a sexually promiscuous woman.¹²⁴ It should also be noted that there was another important reason for female fascination with gladiators in addition to physical attraction. Hopkins and Beard write of a *nostalgie de bouc* (‘longing for the

gutter', literally 'mud') among upper-class Roman women who were attracted by the degraded social status of gladiators.¹²⁵ A female slave in Petronius' *Satyricon* criticizes the sexual tastes of her mistress, who shows a predilection for slumming. She says that sexual arousal is only possible for her mistress with men who are socially far beneath her: servants with hitched-up tunics, gladiators, who fought with a minimum of body cover, muleteers and actors.¹²⁶ A common slur against unpopular Romans of note was that they were fathered by gladiators. Upper-class women were commonly accused of affairs with gladiators, like Faustina, the wife of the emperor Marcus Aurelius and the mother of the 'gladiator' emperor Commodus.¹²⁷ Another prominent example is Juvenal's story about the senator's wife named Eppia who ran away to Egypt with a gladiator named Sergius mentioned earlier in this chapter. The poet points out that Sergius' actual looks did not seem to justify her obsession with him:

*What did Eppia see in him that she allowed herself to be called a gladiator groupie? For her dear Sergius had been shaving for a long time already and with a wound in his arm was looking forward to retirement. Moreover, there were many disfigurements evident on his face, for example where it had been chafed by his helmet and then there was the wart on his nose and the unpleasant disorder of a continually dripping eye. But he was a gladiator. This profession makes them all Adonises. She preferred a gladiator to her children and homeland and to her sister and her husband. It is the sword that they love.*¹²⁸

After the conversion of the *quadriporticus* to a *ludus*, the open courtyard became a training ground. A sundial found in the courtyard was probably used as a timing device for the gladiators' exercises. The two stories of space behind the four porticoes were converted into living quarters for the gladiators, and on these two levels there were approximately seventy cells that housed at least two gladiators each. The capacity of approximately 140 gladiators at one time permitted the presentation of a good-sized *munus* outside of Rome.¹²⁹ There were larger rooms that must have served as the kitchen, dining room and storerooms, and a meeting room (*exedra*) with images of gladiatorial armour on its walls. Another room may have served as a stable because the skeletons of a horse and a man were found there. Perhaps the horse was used by horseman gladiators. The prison is identifiable because of

the shackles attached to the walls which made it impossible for a fettered man to stand. Four skeletons were found in the prison but they were unchained. Also found in one of the cells was a female skeleton wearing jewels, suggesting that this *ludus* was accessible to the public.¹³⁰ What this woman was doing in a gladiator cell is open to all sorts of speculation. She could have been having an affair with gladiator or merely had sought the gladiator school as a last refuge during the final destruction of the city. The discovery of a skeleton of an infant in the *ludus* might be further evidence that some gladiators lived with their families in the *ludus*.¹³¹

Imperial gladiators

Julius Caesar set the direction of the gladiatorial system that was to characterize the imperial era with the ownership of his own *ludus* and enormous *familia gladiatoria* in Capua. Just before the beginning of the civil war with Pompey, Caesar was planning another *ludus* in Ravenna, which was not built until after his death, probably by his adopted son Octavian, who was later known as Augustus. Caesar had recognized that the possession of a large number of gladiators was not only a sign of his ability and willingness to entertain the people but also a symbol of his political power supported by the favour of the people. Caesar's gladiators became known as *Iuliani* ('Julius' gladiators'). (Note that Julius is a surname. His first name was Gaius.) After his assassination, they retained this name when they were inherited by his adopted son Octavian, who became a member of the Julian family.¹³² These gladiators became the nucleus of what eventually was known as the imperial *familia gladiatoria*. Under the Julio-Claudian dynasty, *Iuliani* was the generic name for gladiators owned by the emperor. Imperial gladiators were not just stationed in Rome, but were found throughout Italy and the rest of the empire. These gladiators represented the best sword fighters available throughout the empire and could usually be relied upon to give the best show. Nero formed another group of imperial gladiators named after himself, the *Neroniani* ('Nero's gladiators') which coexisted with the *Iuliani*. No other Julio-Claudian emperor named a *familia* after himself. Nero's fervent devotion to his gladiators was indicated by his extravagant gift of a magnificent house and a large amount of cash to one of his *Neroniani*, a *murmillio* named Spiculus. Suetonius comments that the value of these gifts was equal to the wealth of a Roman

general who had enjoyed a triumph.¹³³ This observation is meant to highlight the inappropriateness of Nero's act, which gave a mere gladiator financial equality with a Roman aristocratic hero. With the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty in AD 69, the names *Iuliani* and *Neroniani* were no longer relevant and ceased to be used. Imperial gladiators began to be known merely as the gladiators of the *princeps* ('first citizen'), or of Augustus, or of Caesar, all three of these words having acquired the meaning of 'emperor'.

We have some information about the imperial schools of Caligula and Claudius, but it amounts only to odds and ends. (Tiberius had little interest in gladiators.) Pliny the Elder says that Caligula had twenty pairs of gladiators in his school and that two of his gladiators, as noted in Chapter 1, were famous for their unblinking stare.¹³⁴ A gladiator named Studiosus from Caligula's school was well known for having a right arm longer than his left, no doubt because of his constant practice with the sword.¹³⁵ Caligula took a close personal interest in his school, as shown by the story of his habit of practising with a gladiator (*murmillo*) from his school. Both used wooden weapons. When the gladiator threw himself prostrate on the ground in admission of defeat (a wise act for any opponent of this unstable emperor), Caligula treacherously stabbed him with a real dagger and then ran around the practice area with a palm branch, as winners in real gladiatorial duels did in the arena.¹³⁶ Of Claudius' school we only hear of the name of the *procurator*: Sulpicius Rufus.¹³⁷ The first evidence of a *procurator* as administrator of an imperial school is from the time of Augustus in reference to the famous imperial school in Egyptian Alexandria.¹³⁸ The *procurator*, generally of equestrian rank, was an agent of the emperor in various capacities. Many procurators had significant administrative experience outside the gladiatorial system, even governing imperial provinces as a representative of the emperor. P. Bassilius Crescens served as procurator of the *Ludus Matutinus* ('Morning School'), an imperial school for the training of animal fighters, in addition to his supervision of the grain supply at Ostia.¹³⁹ P. Cominius Clemens, who had been prefect of the praetorian fleets at Misenum and Ravenna and procurator of the imperial province of Dacia Apolensis (modern Romania) served as procurator of an imperial gladiatorial school in northern Italy.¹⁴⁰ In the late second century AD, T. Flavius Germanus at different times was procurator of the *Ludus Matutinus* and the *Ludus Magnus* at Rome. He was also the supervisor (*curator*) of

Commodus' grand triumph in 180 AD.¹⁴¹ The appointment of able, experienced men like these as *curatores* of gladiator schools was no doubt a big step forward in the professionalization of the gladiatorial system. Procurators not only administered individual schools, but sometimes were in charge of all the schools in a given area that cut across the boundaries of provinces.¹⁴² For example, in the west one procurator administered the imperial schools in northern Italy, Pannonia and Dalmatia, the last two provinces encompassing the area of modern Austria, Hungary and the former Yugoslavia. Another procurator named L. Didius Marinus had experience in supervising imperial schools in both the west and the east: (in the west) the Gauls, Britain, Spain, Germany and Raetia (modern Switzerland and Bavaria); (in the east) Asia, Bithynia, Galatia, Cappadocia, Lycia, Pamphylia, Cilicia, Pontus, Paphlagonia (all nine provinces covering most of the area of modern Turkey) and Cyprus.¹⁴³ These procurators were not former gladiators like many *lanistae* but astute businessmen who, on behalf of the emperor, supervised the acquisition, training, maintenance and rental of imperial gladiators.

Imperial gladiators naturally were featured in the *muncera* given by the emperor, but they could be also rented out to an *editor* who was willing to pay a higher price for the sake of a quality show. Procurators of imperial schools regularly rented out gladiators to *editores* throughout Italy and in the provinces. These rentals made the imperial schools a money-making proposition for the emperor. In Pompeii, the aedile A. Suettius Certus presented *Neroniani*, while an *editor* named M. Mesonius was able to present both *Iuliani* and *Neroniani* at his *munus*.¹⁴⁴ Also in Pompeii, N. Festus Ampliatus gave a *munus*, the significance of which is indicated by a monumental tomb that memorialized it.¹⁴⁵ An inscription on the wall gives the results of the gladiatorial duels on the last day of Ampliatus' *munus*.¹⁴⁶ All the gladiators mentioned in this inscription are *Iuliani*. It is notable that these gladiators are called by their individual names; usually inscriptions when referring to imperial gladiators just call them *Iuliani* or *Neroniani*. Therefore, we can be certain that these gladiators were among the best of imperial gladiators, well known by name.

Since imperial gladiators belonged to the emperor, technically he could sell them, but this was not normal practice. Emperors usually did not want citizens to have access to a resource that could win them significant public favour. It would also have diminished the emperor's stock of top-notch

gladiators. The supply of imperial gladiators was already subject to loss in the normal course of events as they appeared in *munera*. Although imperial gladiators most often fought ordinary opponents, they were sometimes matched against each other, ensuring that at least some would be killed.¹⁴⁷ The only emperor who sold imperial gladiators was Caligula, and that was under circumstances better described as the theatre of the absurd. Caligula, having found that the imperial treasury was almost empty (due to his financial irresponsibility), resorted to a desperate measure to replenish it. He auctioned off gladiators from his imperial school. Aponius Saturninus, a distinguished man who had held the office of praetor, made the mistake of nodding off to sleep as he attended this auction. Caligula, immediately sensing an opportunity, told the auctioneer to watch the frequent nods of Aponius as he slept. The auctioneer realized that Caligula wanted him to interpret the nods as signs of bidding. Before Aponius awoke, he had bought thirteen gladiators for 9 million sesterces, an enormous sum of money.¹⁴⁸

Medical care

Imperial gladiators generally enjoyed excellent physical care. Tired and aching muscles were worked back into shape by skilled masseurs (*unctores*). Under Commodus, there was a noted masseur at the *Ludus Magnus* nicknamed Pirata ('Pirate').¹⁴⁹ Most important of all, physicians (*medici*) looked after the gladiators' general health and cared for their wounds. Medical care was also available in lesser gladiator schools, but probably of much lower quality. In such schools, even if there was a trained medical doctor in residence, his care was usually inferior. In some cases, *lanistae*, having gained some practical medical knowledge by experience, administered medical treatment themselves.¹⁵⁰ On the other hand, some imperial schools had at their disposal a whole staff of doctors who were of the highest quality.¹⁵¹ The most famous doctor of a *ludus* was a Greek named Galen, the greatest physician and medical writer of the ancient world, who early in his career was appointed gladiatorial doctor by the high priest in charge of the imperial cult of the province of Asia (AD 157–161).¹⁵² The *ludus* where Galen worked was in Pergamum (modern Bergama), the greatest city of the province and one of the first provincial cities to have an imperial cult. The *ludus* in this city was one of the most prestigious gladiatorial schools in the Greek east.

On assuming his position at Pergamum, Galen's first concern was the diet of his gladiators. He complained that their current diet, barley gruel mixed with beans, produced an undesirable flabbiness in their body, and substituted more nutritious food.¹⁵³ Galen, however, was not just a nutritionist. His expertise in treating wounds, especially those of the thigh, was quite effective in keeping his gladiators alive and in condition to fight again. During his tenure at this school (almost four years), only two gladiators died from injury. To appreciate this achievement fully, one must consider that sixty gladiators had died during the term of Galen's predecessor as *medicus*.¹⁵⁴

Other imperial schools probably could not approach the excellence in medical care that Galen provided, but no doubt still provided the best care available in the area. Arena hunters in Corinth showed their gratitude for the excellent medical care provided by their doctor by setting up a statue of him in the arena near where the animals came out of their cages.¹⁵⁵ We also hear of the name of a medical doctor in the *Ludus Martulinus* at Rome, Eutyclus, recorded in an inscription on a family tomb which he had constructed.¹⁵⁶ Whether owned by the emperor or a *lanista*, gladiators and *venatores* represented a large investment. The prudent owner kept them in the best physical shape possible.

The character of imperial gladiators

Imperial gladiators enjoyed the best training, armament and accommodation. Thus it is not surprising that the gladiators' morale was high in the imperial schools. It would be rare for an imperial gladiator to be less than eager to fight and prove his worth. Although most imperial gladiators were slaves, there probably would have been virtually no need in imperial schools to apply force to get them to fight. Imperial gladiators were made of stronger stuff and were imbued with an abundance of competitive spirit. During the reign of Tiberius, the great gladiator Triumphus chafed under the infrequency of *munera*. His comment has become famous: 'How our beautiful age perishes!'¹⁵⁷ The philosopher Epictetus gives more details about how imperial gladiators reacted to infrequent appearances in the arena:

... among the imperial gladiators, there are some who are annoyed because no one leads them forth [from the ludus], or pairs them in fights and they pray to the god and they approach their procurators with requests to fight in the arena.¹⁵⁸

This was the reputation of the imperial gladiators, which led Roman spectators to look forward to their appearance in the arena. Perhaps we get the best sense of how imperial gladiators were viewed by Roman spectators from Suetonius' mention of a standing promise that the emperor Domitian had made to spectators at the annual quaestorian games in December: to present two pairs of his imperial gladiators, if requested by the crowd.¹⁵⁹ This favour of Domitian was in accordance with a custom of allowing the crowd to request gladiators in addition to those who had been advertised before the *munus*. The added gladiators were called *postulaticii* ('requested') in contrast to the scheduled combatants, who were known as *ordinarii*. It might be interesting to speculate on Domitian's motivations for this promise. First, Domitian had a strong interest in spectacles, especially gladiatorial games, which he spruced up with novelties, such as presenting gladiatorial games at night with female and dwarf gladiators.¹⁶⁰ Moreover, Domitian had revived the annual quaestorian games in December, which had not been given for about a decade, so he must have felt some responsibility for their success.¹⁶¹ The board of quaestors, who were legally required to finance the December *munus*, were relatively young magistrates (in their early thirties) on the lowest rung of the Roman political ladder. The quaestors may not always have had the financial resources to rent the best gladiators, so their shows may have gained the reputation of falling below the standard set by the *munera* of the emperor. Suetonius records one occasion when the quaestors' *munus* may not have pleased the spectators, because they took Domitian up on his promise. In response, the emperor ordered two pairs of gladiators from his imperial school to appear last in the arena, probably to give the *munus* a grand finale and make the crowd forget what had gone before. Suetonius' description of their appearance is brief but significant: they appeared 'in imperial splendor', a phrase that must refer to the impressive armour they were wearing, which no doubt gleamed in the bright sunlight.¹⁶² We can imagine the rest. They were most likely carrying their helmets as they entered the arena, as gladiators usually did when they marched into the arena in procession, and in all probability were better-looking than the ordinary gladiator.¹⁶³ Beauty of face and body was much valued, especially in imperial gladiators, and was reflected in their monetary value.¹⁶⁴ There must have been great excitement among the crowd at the appearance of these four gladiators. This initial thrill of their appearance was no doubt soon replaced by the anticipation of two great

fighters as one would expect of gladiators with superior fighting skills and great professional pride. Although Suetonius does not record anything about the duels themselves, we may presume that the crowd enjoyed the fights immensely, especially if the preceding part of the show had been disappointing. Given the pride that Domitian no doubt took in his *familia gladiatoria*, it is somewhat ironic that gladiators from his school took part in his assassination.¹⁶⁵

The imperial *ludus*

Early in the first century AD, imperial gladiators were housed in pre-existing schools in Ravenna and Capua, but more imperial schools were needed, especially in Rome. Around the middle of the first century AD, two schools had been built in Rome that had no specific name besides *ludus*, one for gladiators and one for beast fighters. After the building of the Colosseum (dedicated in AD 80) in the heart of the city, there was a need to centralize the housing and training of gladiators near their place of performance. It made sense to build a school immediately adjacent to the Colosseum rather than having to transport gladiators a long distance from imperial schools in Praeneste and Capua. Late in his reign, Domitian (AD 81–96) may have begun to restore the existing gladiator school, but more likely he began to build a completely new structure. Its name was the *Ludus Magnus*, but before it was completed, he was assassinated. Trajan started the building all over again and it was finally finished under his successor, Hadrian. Domitian built two other gladiatorial schools in roughly the same area: the *Ludus Gallus* and the *Ludus Dacicus* (their exact location is not known). There is hardly any evidence available beyond the mere mention of these schools, but the former was probably for training Gallic prisoners of war and the latter for training Dacians, who must have been plentiful at Rome after the two military expeditions Domitian had sent against Dacia. There were even more Dacian prisoners after Trajan's two successful campaigns there in the early second century. Included in this complex was an *armamentarium* (a gladiatorial armoury), a *sanitarium* (hospital), a *spoliarium* and a *choragium*, a warehouse for stage properties used in the arena.

The *Ludus Magnus* was built adjacent to the Colosseum to which it was connected by an underground passageway to allow gladiators to make their

way to the arena without being seen and to transport animals to the arena without having to take them through the streets. As its name indicates, it was a huge structure, undoubtedly the largest in the empire, which housed hundreds of gladiators, a large staff of trainers, referees, medical doctors, masseurs, armourers, maintenance personnel, administrative officials and their staff, and other functionaries. We know the names of two low-level managers of the *Ludus Magnus*, Nymphodotus and Hyacinthus. A man named Tigris served as a courier. A certain Demosthenes was a maker of the *manica* (perhaps also at the *Ludus Magnus*), a protective sleeve worn by gladiators. One of the most respected positions in the *ludus* were the trainer/referees, former gladiators who had distinguished themselves in the arena and had been granted release from fighting and their freedom (more in Chapter 3). Trophimus was the name of a *secunda rudis* (instructor/referee second class) in the *Ludus Magnus* as probably was Q. Titius Lathricus. Cornelius Eugenianus and Flavius Sigerus, each a *summa rudis* (instructors/referees first class), the former in Rome and the latter in Mauretanian Caesarea (North Africa). Another important functionary was the herald, whose job it was to communicate with the crowd in the arena. We do not have the name of a herald at the *Ludus Magnus*, but we meet a herald in an epitaph, T. Claudius Celer, who had served in that position in Ancona (central Italy) and whose burial was taken care of by a *secunda rudis* named Beryllus and all the officials of the *ludus*.¹⁶⁶

Except for its monumental size, the plan of the *Ludus Magnus* is very much like that of the gladiatorial barracks of Pompeii, a structure with a central exercise arca surrounded by living quarters (cells) for the gladiators attached to the inside of the outer walls (Figure 2). The one difference is that the exercise ground of the *Ludus Magnus* is surrounded by seating arranged in the oval shape of an amphitheatre. As one might expect, the arena of the *Ludus* is significantly smaller than that of the Colosseum, but still about the size of arenas outside of Rome. The seating could accommodate as many as three thousand spectators, who could indulge their fascination with gladiators on a daily basis, watching them practise.¹⁶⁷ This is a good indication that fan interest was generated not just by bloodshed and death but also by an appreciation of the art of fencing, since gladiators practised with wooden swords or blunted metal swords. Imperial gladiators at last had a home worthy of their talents in the greatest city of the empire.

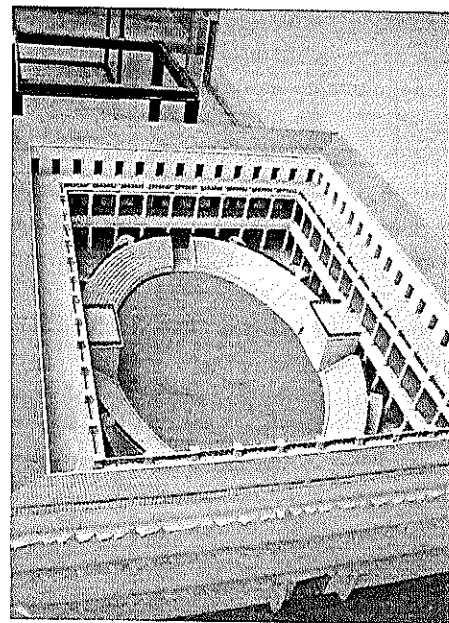


Figure 2 A model of the *Ludus Magnus* showing the three tiers of gladiator quarters and the practice arena with seating Rome, Museo della Civiltà Romana. © Jona Lendering; from www.Livius.org, with permission

The high costs of gladiators

The steady rise in prices of gladiators during the late Republic and the early empire was fuelled by a mounting demand for them. One only has to compare the 4,000 sesterces required as a minimum expenditure for a *munus* given by the authorities in the Roman colony of Urso (modern Osuna) in Spain (middle 40s BC) with the cheapest category of *munus* offered free to the public (30,000–60,000 sesterces), as stipulated by imperial legislation late in the reign of Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–80).¹⁶⁸ Of course, allowance has to be made for inflation over a more than two-century period, but it should be noted that the figures given in the legislation were price controls establishing prices lower than they had been in the past.

As we shall see, almost every *editor* wanted to surpass his predecessors in the quantity and quality of his *munera*. Fortunes were lost in pursuit of bigger and better *munera*. During the early imperial period, there were attempts

to prevent prodigal spending on *munera*. When Augustus gave the board of praetors control of *munera*, he tried to minimize the financial problems they might face by assigning them an appropriation from the imperial treasury to help defray their costs. He also forbade any one of the praetors to spend more than his colleagues and limited them to two *munera* a year with no more than sixty pairs of gladiators.¹⁶⁹ Augustus wanted to ensure that there would be no more ruinous competition among aristocrats with each trying to outdo his rivals at any cost. Tiberius, followed his adoptive father's policy in this matter. He decreed a reduction in the expenses of gladiatorial shows by strictly limiting the number gladiators in a *munus*.¹⁷⁰

Competition among wealthy elites in the provinces, however, continued unabated and uncontrolled. By the end of the second century AD, the situation had reached a crisis. High priests of the imperial cult in various cities of the provinces were being bankrupted by their sponsorship of *munera* associated with the worship of the emperor.¹⁷¹ We hear from one aristocrat in Gaul, who considered his fortune lost when he was appointed high priest and appealed to the emperors to be released from this onerous financial burden.¹⁷² This complaint is contained in a famous inscription engraved in bronze called the *Aes Italicense* ('the bronze from Italica'), which was found in an amphitheatre near the Roman town of Italica in Spain (near Seville).¹⁷³ This inscription contains a record of a Senate discussion of a proposed decree of the co-emperors Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus limiting the size of *munera* and the prices of gladiators in the provinces and outlines in detail how this is to be accomplished.¹⁷⁴ Imperial policy had contributed to the problem when Aurelius drafted gladiators into his armies fighting barbarian invasions from the north, creating a shortage in gladiators and a steep rise in their value.¹⁷⁵ The government also had imposed a 25–33 per cent tax on money made by *lanistae* on the rental of gladiators, who in turn passed this business expense on to their customers by increasing their prices for gladiators.¹⁷⁶ This tax brought an estimated 60–120 million sesterces annually into the imperial treasury, which *munerarii* throughout the empire were paying on top of the already inflated cost of the gladiators. David Bomgardner estimates the modern value of the tax at approximately £375 million–£750 million, or roughly \$690 million–\$1.5 billion.¹⁷⁷ This meant that *munerarii* throughout the empire were spending an enormous amount of money just on gladiators, not including the other major expense of a *munus*: the importation of animals for the

venationes along with other necessary expenses. Thus, the emperors decided to repeal this tax and place controls on the prices of gladiators to protect *munerarii* from financial ruin.¹⁷⁸

The emperors' proposal involved the creation of categories of *munera* and gladiators according to cost. The categories are differentiated according to the amount of money the *editor* was willing to spend, with subdivisions consisting of prices permitted for gladiators of various levels of quality, from high to low (except for the highest category in which the prices of gladiators are listed from low to high). The legislation does not take into account different types of gladiators (*retiarii*, *secutores*, etc.) and mentions only briefly *munera assiforana*, which were small gladiatorial shows given for profit, perhaps with the *lanista* as *editor*.¹⁷⁹ These shows were to retain their old limit in cost of 30,000 sesterces.¹⁸⁰

Below, categories 1–4 refer to the range of the total cost of a show, while items a–e refer to classes of gladiators according to cost per gladiator. The first two categories of *munera* allow the *editor* to choose among three classes of gladiators, while the last two categories have five. (HS is the Roman abbreviation for sesterces.) As Michael Carter argues persuasively, the reason for this discrepancy is that the relative costs of gladiators in the legislation is based on the four *palus* ranks in the *ludus*, discussed earlier with the addition of the *tiro* class, the gladiator in training with no experience in the arena.¹⁸¹ For example, in 1 and 2 below, c would be the cost of the *tiro*, b of the fourth *palus* and a of the third *palus*. The reason for the absence of the second and first *palus* in 1 and 2 is that it would be financially foolish to risk upper-level gladiators in these low-priced shows. As one would expect, all four categories of the *palus* ranking system (along with the *tiro* class) are accounted for in the five price levels of the two most expensive shows.

- 1) 31,000 to 60,000 HS
 - a. 5,000 HS
 - b. 4,000 HS
 - c. 3,000 HS
- 2) 60,000 to 100,000 HS
 - a. 8,000 HS
 - b. 6,000 HS
 - c. 5,000 HS

- 3) 100,000 to 150,000 HS
 - a. 12,000 HS
 - b. 10,000 HS
 - c. 8,000 HS
 - d. 6,000 HS
 - e. 5,000 HS
- 4) 150,000 to 200,000 HS
 - a. 6,000 HS
 - b. 7,000 HS
 - c. 9,000 HS
 - d. 12,000 HS
 - e. 15,000 HS¹⁸²

The key provision to limiting spending is the requirement that the *editor* choose an equal number of gladiators from each class from high to low to counteract the tendency of *editores* to select only the most expensive gladiators to produce the best quality show. There is one other provision: in addition to the gladiators who fight in duels, the *munerarius* must rent an equal number of fighters called *gregarii* ('fighters in a group') who fight in small infantry skirmishes. These gladiators naturally were inferior in quality to the duellers. This difference is reflected in their price: 2,000 sesterces for a team leader and not less than 1,000 sesterces apiece for the rest. This provision of the legislation seems to be an attempt to 'beef up' the *munus* without significantly greater expense to compensate for the smaller number of duelling gladiators the *munerarius* would be able to hire. One illustrative example should be sufficient to explain how this system works. Suppose that the *munerarius* was willing to spend between 150,000 and 200,000 sesterces on gladiators who fought in pairs, the most expensive of the four categories of show (category 4 above). First, one needs a sense of perspective to appreciate how much the new imperial legislation benefited an *editor* of a high quality *munus*. In the middle of the first century AD, a character in Petronius speaks of a local patron in an unnamed Italian town being able to spend 400,000 sesterces on a *munus*.¹⁸³ Compare this outlay (which would have been significantly higher over a century later) to the cap of 200,000 sesterces allowed by law for the most costly *munus*. In order to keep within the prescribed range for expenditures on gladiators, he could

choose three gladiators from each of the five classes, which would come to a total of 147,000 sesterces for fifteen gladiators, seven pairs with one gladiator to serve as a replacement. In addition, he would have to choose fifteen *gregarii* at a minimum of 1,000 sesterces apiece, except for the team leader, who would get 2,000 sesterces, for a total of 16,000 sesterces. The grand total would be 163,000 sesterces.¹⁸⁴ Besides the benefit of lower expenditure for a *munus*, another effect of these stipulations was to forestall accusations of stinginess against the *editor* for giving a bare bones show. After all, he was just following the law.

The problem with the model of the ratio of price to number of gladiators suggested above is that seven matches seems arguably much too low a number for the highest quality *munus* of the high priest at Pergamum, the most prominent provincial centre of the imperial cult in the Greek east, if not in the whole empire. There is, however, another possibility. Michael Carter maintains that these prices were not for the lease of the gladiators, but in fact represented their purchase value. He points out that the prices given in the legislation are comparable to the purchase prices of other kinds of slave performers. Thus, the lease price would be a percentage of the overall value of the gladiator. The lease rate for each gladiator would not be fixed, but determined by negotiation between the *lanista* and the representative of the high priest, anywhere from as low as 2 per cent to as high as 20 per cent or more. (Carter argues that the *editor* would not have wanted to have direct contact with the lowly *lanista*, who, like his charges, was contaminated with *infamia*.)¹⁸⁵ Some gladiators in the same price level would command a higher lease rate, while others would be leased at a lower rate.¹⁸⁶ It would all depend on the results of the bargaining. For the sake of argument, suppose that these two bargainers were negotiating in the context of the most expensive *munus* (category 4 above) and decided on an average lease rate of 10 per cent for the trained gladiators. This rate would allow the *editor* to hire twenty trained gladiators in each price class, a total of one hundred gladiators. The cost would be 98,000 sesterces for the trained gladiators and 101,000 sesterces for an equal number of *gregarii*, amounting to a total of 199,000 sesterces. Raise the average lease rate to 15 per cent and the total number of gladiators and *gregarii* would fall to eighty, while a 20 per cent lease rate would buy the services of sixty-five from both groups. These numbers of combatants would have been more in

keeping with the quality of show expected of the high priests in provincial centres. There is, however, an unknown factor here. Did the 200,000 sesterces cap include just the combatants or all the expenses of the *munus* like those outlined by Carter?

. . . officials to oversee the combats, animals for a venatio, and perhaps convicts (*damnati*) to be publicly executed . . . , not mention the costs of advertisement, gifts to be distributed to the people and preparing the amphitheatre . . . for the show.¹⁸⁷

If the cap included all expenses for the *munus*, the *editor* would have had to scale back dramatically the numbers of leased gladiators mentioned above to keep within the cap. Another expense of the *editor* cited by Carter (which likely did not count under the cap) is the huge sum that the *editor* would have had to put on deposit upfront to reimburse the *lanista* with the full purchase price for any gladiators seriously injured or killed in the *munus*. The *editor* could control this post-*munus* expense to some degree by ignoring the request of spectators to kill losing gladiators, but this practice came with the serious risk of losing the favour of the people, which he was seeking to win with the *munus*. On the other hand, however, the lower expenditures thanks to the legislation might have encouraged some *editores* to make more crowd-pleasing decisions.

Given the fact that the financial tables had been turned on the *lanistae* and they were feeling the crunch of lower prices for their product, it is likely that they would have held out for higher lease rates, especially in the case of *editores* willing to spend the highest amount of money allowed by the new law. The new limits on spending for *munera* represented a steep decline in cash flow for the *lanista* in comparison with the *munera* of the past. Moreover, some *lanistae* still owed back taxes on gladiator sales to the amount of more than 5 million sesterces, a debt that Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus had proposed to forgive, at least in part, to relieve the financial pressure that their new decree put on the *lanistae*.¹⁸⁸

Another cost-saving measure of this legislation applied only to Roman Gaul. There was an ancient and eagerly anticipated sacrificial ritual involving the death of victims called *trinqu* at spectacles given during the celebration of the imperial cult at Lyons, where the council of the three Gauls (Lugdunum, Belgica and Aquitania) convened. The measure put controls on the price that provincial procurators could charge *lanistae* for *damnati*

to serve as *trinqu* (six gold coins or 600 sesterces per man) and on the price that *lanistae* could charge the high priests of the imperial cult who served as *munerarii* (2,000 sesterces per man).¹⁸⁹ This price control was very beneficial to the Gallic *munerarii*, who undoubtedly did not want to disappoint spectators by reducing the size of, or even omitting, this traditional part of the festivities. In 1955, Oliver and Palmer proposed a theory that the cheaper prices for *damnati* explains the famous persecution of Christians at Lyons in AD 177, who, instead of expensive gladiators, were used as *trinqu*.¹⁹⁰ This theory enjoyed general acceptance for a time, but in 1972 Musurillo pointed out that there is no support for this thesis in the ancient sources and other scholars proposed other more compelling reasons for the executions of Christians at Lyons.¹⁹¹

There was one other measure in this legislation that dealt with the financial plight of the provincial high priests. The decree sanctioned an informal practice of high priests in various provinces, which effectively passed over the *lanista* in the process of obtaining gladiators. In order to cut the costs of hiring gladiators, priests in some provinces, upon entering office, bought gladiators who had been purchased and trained by their predecessors. At the end of his term, he then would sell the gladiators to his successor at a higher price. The only stipulation that the decree adds is that the sale prices must follow its dictates, which were primarily designed to restrain the greed of *lanistae*.¹⁹² Another benefit of the new legislation was the replacements for injured and dead gladiators for priestly *familiae* could be purchased from *lanistae* at more reasonable prices.

We do not know how effective this legislation was in solving the economic crisis. One would guess that it must have had at least temporary success, but more economic problems were coming. Inflation was creating a major economic problem during the third century as evidenced by Diocletian's edict in AD 301, which set maximum prices, in all probability including outlay for gladiators.¹⁹³ The cost of a *munus* was still a major problem in the late fourth century. A letter from the city prefect of Rome, Symmachus, to the emperors Theodosius and Arcadius in the late fourth century speaks of a need to limit expenses for shows including *munera* and warns of the possibility of wealthy men leaving the city to avoid the expense of a *munus*.¹⁹⁴