

## The Spectators

With a little imagination, the Circus Maximus can be thought of as Rome in microcosm. All ranks and classes were represented, from the emperor to the humblest of proletarians, freedmen, and slaves, all united in their fascination for chariot races. In the first two centuries of the imperial era, Rome had around a million inhabitants. If we stick to the lowest estimate of spectator capacity at the Circus Maximus, 150,000,<sup>1</sup> on a major race day around a seventh of the population of Rome passed through the gates. If we multiply that by twenty, the minimum number of days on which chariot races were organized at the start of the imperial period, it is clear that annually around 3 million people might attend the races. Later the attractions of the Circus Maximus became even greater. In the fourth century there were as many as sixty days a year on which chariot races were held. If all the seats were taken, this would amount to a total visitor number of 9 million, which demonstrates once again the degree to which chariot racing dominated Roman life.

Once the stadium had filled, the dignitaries arrived and made their way to their luxurious seats. The entrance of the emperor was a special event. All the spectators stood up to cheer him and his family as he took his place in his loge. The applause might last a very long time. Martial tells us that the doubtless carefully orchestrated cheers for Emperor Domitian once went on so long that the first four races of the morning program passed unnoticed.<sup>2</sup> Of course there is a degree of poetic license here, but it indicates how much store the emperors set by this applause. During the races the crowd repeatedly struck up chants for the emperor in his loge. Slogans such as "Good luck, emperor, father of the fatherland," "May the gods defend you," and "Rejoice everyone, Rome is

safe, for the emperor is safe" echoed around the stands. The emperor could hear from the intensity of the cheering how much affection the people had for him. An emperor who had stayed away from the Circus Maximus on too many race days would have the point firmly brought home to him by the crowd.

By the beginning of the imperial era ordinary people had lost virtually all their political influence. They could communicate with the emperor only in the ~~Circus Maximus, the Colosseum, or the Theater of Marcellus~~, and the mood might change radically if a crowd that had come to watch the races suddenly turned directly to the emperor, demanding that he reverse a decision only to be rebuffed. The consequences could be serious. Even an emperor who maintained a good relationship with the people of the city ran the risk of facing protests that might lead to riots. Most emperors were aware of this and reacted positively to requests from the people. If they were embarrassed by heckling from the stands and could not decide what to do, they might refuse to give a direct answer or perhaps leave the response to a herald.

Even Commodus (180–92), who although not a particularly tactful emperor was usually acutely aware of the feelings of the people, avoided confrontations with dissatisfied spectators. One day, when he was not present in person at the Circus Maximus, the spectators made known with loud chanting that Commodus must rid himself of Cleander, the prefect of the Praetorian Guard, whom they held responsible for the prevailing shortage of food. Their anger was not spontaneous; Cassius Dio claims it was carefully orchestrated. "It was a race day and the horses were standing ready at the starting line for the seventh race, when suddenly a great host of children ran out onto the racetrack, led by a tall girl who looked fearsome and of whom it was thought, based on all that happened next, that she was a goddess. The children sang in unison many bitter words. The people joined in and shrieked the worst profanities imaginable across the arena. Finally they stood up out of their seats and left the circus to go looking for Commodus (who was in the Quintilian suburb). They wished him every blessing, but they cursed Cleander."<sup>3</sup> Commodus let the people have their way and ordered Cleander's beheading, even though he knew Cleander was not to blame for the inadequate supply of grain but rather the prefect in charge, Papirius Dionysius.

PROTEST

Caligula, in contrast, did enter into open conflict with the crowd, with dire consequences. In the Circus Maximus in 41 he was given to understand that he had acted unjustly in raising taxes. Flavius Josephus, a historian who in *Antiquities of the Jews* throws a great deal of light on Emperor Caligula's final months, describes the confrontation between crowd and emperor that provoked Caligula's murder:

At that time there were chariot races. This spectator sport is extraordinarily popular among the Romans. Enthusiastically they gather in great throngs at the racetrack, and once they are assembled they make known to the emperor their desires concerning the subjects to which they want to call his attention. Emperors who take the view that such requests cannot be denied know they are assured of the people's good will. They made a passionate appeal to Gaius [Caligula] to lower taxes and reduce the financial burdens on them a little. But he refused to discuss any such thing. When they started shouting even louder he sent soldiers among them, who moved in all directions with orders to arrest the protesters, bring them forward, and kill them there and then. Those were the orders he gave. The soldiers charged with carrying them out did as they were told. Very many people were put to death. The people saw it, held back, and stopped protesting, since they saw with their own eyes that campaigning for tax relief incurred the death penalty. For Chaerea this was an extra stimulus to devise a plot to put an end to the way Gaius was carrying on like a beast in his dealings with the people. Often at the entry of the emperors he had been at the point of acting on his plans, but he had always decided against it after a little contemplation. That he wanted to kill Gaius was certain, he had no doubts about that, but he continued to wait for an appropriate moment, since he did not want to take any action that might prove fruitless but rather to make sure his plans would succeed.<sup>4</sup>

Caligula had called down his fate upon himself. He ought to have known that for ordinary spectators the Circus Maximus was more than just a stadium. It was a safety valve, a place where they could air their grievances. Caligula seriously misjudged the situation, perhaps because he

thought the supporters' groups would not act in concert. Blues joining forces with Greens? That could never happen, he must have thought. But he was wrong, and for him the results were disastrous.

### Supporters' Groups Attached to the Racing Stables

The spectators came mainly to see the races, of course. The fact that they were in close proximity to the emperor was a bonus, but their real purpose in coming was to be there in person to see their favorite drivers triumph. Few watched the races with the astonished gaze of Ovid (see chapter 5); the vast majority were there as members of one of the supporters' groups attached to the four racing stables, fervently hoping that their stable would carry off the greatest number of prizes. A supporters' group, like its stable, was called a *factio*. In the stands you could see exactly who belonged to which. Sporting the green, blue, red, or white shirts of their factions, people chanted the names of their heroes and voiced their hatred of charioteers for the other three stables in ear-splitting shrieks. Under Domitian there had been six factions for a short time, but the two new racing stables, the Golds and the Purples, were unable to hold their own and disappeared from the scene after Domitian died. The remaining four factions were in existence throughout antiquity, but the Reds and Whites had smaller memberships than the Greens and Blues, eventually becoming what we would call "satellite clubs." The Whites had a cooperative relationship with the Blues, the Reds with the Greens, although occasionally the Whites and the Greens worked together, as did the Blues and the Reds.

An interesting question, but one that a lack of reliable information makes impossible to answer with any confidence, is why a person would become a supporter of one faction rather than another. It has been suggested that the choice was dictated by the district or street in which the supporter lived, in other words that there were true-Blue and true-Green parts of town. This is one possibility, just as we cannot rule out the idea that a supporter's trade or profession played a role in his choice. Although nothing is said about it in the sources, I can well imagine that in a given district members of a trade association for artisans in the same line of work (*collegium*), who regularly saw each other at parties, funerals, and services of worship for their association's tutelary



A charioteer for the Blues, portrayed in his traditional outfit. (Photograph by Jastrow)

deity, went to the Circus Maximus together and sat next to each other on seats rented by that trade association to cheer on the same charioteering stars. It is possible to envision a situation in which coppersmiths were fans of the Greens while carpenters supported the Blues.

For a number of groups in Roman society this rationale does not hold water, however. Senators and knights were guided in their choice mainly by sympathies dictated by tradition, or in some cases by the political climate, by an emperor's preference for a specific faction. Under capricious emperors who openly expressed their love for one particular stable, senators would need to be extremely loyal supporters to find

the courage to cheer drivers wearing anything other than the emperor's preferred color.

In many families there was no other topic of conversation in the days leading up to the races. Love for a racing stable might be taken to extremes; some people hardly ever missed a race day in the circus and at other times were regularly to be found at their stable's training complex. On the street and at public events they engaged in ferocious verbal exchanges with followers of other factions, and these sometimes degenerated into shouting matches or fights. Only rarely did brawls turn into actual riots, since the Praetorian Guard and the special city cohorts stayed on top of any trouble and intervened at an early stage should disturbances arise.

There was no holding back some supporters. Their fanaticism for their factions was so great that they identified with their heroes, called themselves Scopus, Musclosus, or Diocles, and even imitated their mannerisms. Before the races began, they discussed the tactics their favorite drivers ought to employ, and afterward they commented outspokenly on how the races had gone. Dressed in the colors of their racing stables, they were instantly identifiable, and chance passersby would do well to refrain from making any critical remarks about them or their charioteers.

Some fans lost touch with reality completely and tried to influence the races through magical practices. In the light of comparable scenes today in southern countries, where Catholic priests bless football players' boots and racing cyclists' bicycles, it does not seem particularly odd that they sought the support of the gods and prayed to them to assist their heroes in the struggle. More curious is their habit of writing the names of horses and drivers for other factions on curse tablets, with appeals to the gods and the demons of the underworld to bring their opponents to rack and ruin. Several of these tablets have survived in charioteers' graves. They demonstrate that an unconditional love for one's own faction would be accompanied by an irrational hatred of the opposition.

The most fiercely formulated curses come from North Africa, where the supporters were divided into the same four factions and inspired by a fanaticism much like that of supporters in Rome. A tablet found in Hadrumetum with a text written by a Blue or a Red is a vivid example:

“I adjure you, demon whoever you are, and I demand of you from this hour, from this day, from this moment, that you torture and kill the horses of the Greens and Whites and that you kill in a crash their drivers Clarus, Felix, Primulus, and Romanus and leave not a breath in their bodies.”<sup>5</sup> Even more outspoken and detailed is the following text from a curse tablet found in Carthage. The writer invokes an unknown person, someone who died young and whose name he apparently does not know, using various epithets:

I call upon you, spirit of an untimely deceased, whoever you are, I call upon you by your almighty names SALBATHBAL AUTHGERO-TABAL BASUTHATEO ALEO SAMABETHOR. . . . Bind up the horses whose names and likenesses I hereby confide in you. From the team of the Reds: Silvanus, Sevator, Lues, Zephyrus, Blandus, Imbraius, Dives, Mariscus, Rapidus, Oriens, Arbustus; from the Blues: Imminens, Dignus, Linon, Paezon, Chryspaspis, Argutus, Diresor, Frugiferus, Euphrates, Sanctus, Aethiops, Praeclarus. Restrict their ability to run, their strength, their spirit, their acceleration, their speed. Deny them victory, tangle their feet, obstruct them, so that tomorrow morning in the Hippodrome they are unable to run or even to walk slowly, to get to the starting stalls or make headway on the track. May they fall down, along with their drivers, Euprepes, son of Telesphorus, and Gentius and Felix and Dionysius the scrapper, and Lamurus. Bind up their hands, snatch victory from them, deny them sight, so that they cannot see their rivals. Lay hold of them, lift them up out of their chariots, pull them out of their chariots and onto the ground, so that they fall and are dragged all around the track, especially through the turns, and are gravely injured, along with their horses. Do it now, quickly.<sup>6</sup>

The production of curse tablets did not end when Christian emperors took control of Rome; they were merely adjusted to suit the new religious climate, as demonstrated by tablets found along the Via Appia, close to the Porta Sebastiano. They date from the late fourth century, when Theodosius and Honorius were emperors, and they use what is obviously a combination of Christian and heathen invocations. Angels

are named alongside the demons of the underworld. The job asked of them is the same: to ensure that the cursed charioteer does not win.

I call on you, holy angels and holy names, to join with the power of the magic spells; bind up Eucherius the charioteer tomorrow in the arena of Rome, trap him, make him fall, cause him injury, destroy him, kill and crush him. Make the starting stalls fail to open properly, stop him from entering the contest fast enough. Stop him from passing the others. Stop him from getting through. Stop him from winning. Stop him from taking the turns properly. Stop him from receiving the accolades. Stop him from getting through to take the lead. Stop him from dashing out from the back of the pack and passing the others and instead make him crash. See to it that he is tethered by your power, that he is crushed, that he is dragged along at the back of the field, both in the early morning races and in all the rest. Now, now. Quickly, quickly.<sup>7</sup>

Some supporters were even prepared to die in order to be united with their heroes. The most striking example of unconditional loyalty is the story of a fan at the burial of Felix, a famous charioteer for the Red faction who had crashed and whose cremation drew a large crowd. The instant the body was laid on the pyre, the supporter threw himself onto the flames next to his dead idol.<sup>8</sup> Followers of the other racing stables, keen to prevent the deceased charioteer from becoming even more famous in death than he had been in life, promptly declared that the unfortunate suicide had acted as he did because he was intoxicated by gaseous emissions from perfume, released by the cremation. But they knew as well as anyone that the fan had been motivated by immeasurable grief and by a longing to be united with his favorite driver in death.

The enthusiasm of the common folk for charioteers who had achieved star status stands in stark contrast to the loyalty toward their supporters, or lack of it, shown by the charioteers themselves. We have no explicit reports of the feelings of drivers for their fans, but from inscriptions, which make clear that many successful charioteers drove for all four stables, it is possible to conclude that they failed to reciprocate the love of their fans in any lasting fashion and that they were primarily



A charioteer in a *quadriga* on a mosaic from Dougga. To his name has been added *Omnia per te* ("Everything through you"). His green helmet and shirt indicate the stable to which he belonged. The names of his horses, Amandus and Frunitus, are also given. (Photograph by Pascal Radigue)

concerned with their own honor and rewards. The disadvantage to a racing stable of their departure and the disappointment of their supporters did not ultimately trouble them much. They wanted to rake in the maximum possible prize money in the ten to fifteen years on average in which they were active, and the color of the stable they raced for did not greatly matter. Their attitude is not so very different from that of today's professional football players, who likewise show little real love for a specific club. They serve the highest bidder and leave before long for a different side, abandoning their old supporters. They are cheered by new fans, sometimes by followers of a local rival who hissed at them only recently. Nobody nowadays is shocked by the transfer of a soccer player from Atletico Madrid to Real Madrid, from AS Roma to Lazio, from Botafogo to Fluminense, even from Glasgow Rangers to Celtic. It takes a little while for supporters to adjust when called upon

to cheer for a former "enemy" who is now wearing their own club colors, but as soon as the new acquisition starts to contribute to success on the field, their mistrust evaporates.

In ancient Rome it was no different. The love of supporters for their favorite drivers was severely tested by transfers of top charioteers, but it was unthinkable for any true fan of the Greens to follow his or her beloved charioteer to the Blues. Fans following their favorites to another stable would not have been accepted by the supporters of that stable, and the supporters of their own stable would have threatened to kill them. It would not even have crossed their mind. They felt at home with their faction, which for them was not just a sports club, it was almost a way of life. For those who did more than simply attach themselves to a faction and clap for it, those who became bosses of local branches, for instance, active support was a source of power, and they could briefly forget that in everyday life they were of little or no significance. Their faction gave them a chance to scream away all their frustrations and to achieve some kind of status. It was an outlet for their aggression and other emotions. So each remained loyal to his or her own racing stable and would welcome a new charioteer, having jeered and wished him dead only a little while earlier, when he was a driver for the opposition.

### Intellectuals' Writings about Chariot Racing

The loyalty displayed by supporters was not seen by everyone in a positive light. In a letter to his friend Calvisius, Pliny the Younger makes perfectly clear what he thinks of the love of the fans for their club colors. His letter expresses downright incomprehension and contempt. After explaining that he has absolutely no interest in the circus shows—they hold no appeal for him, having neither novelty nor variety—he continues in a facetious tone:

It amazes me to see thousands and thousands of grown up people behaving like children. All they want to do is to watch the horses galloping and the men standing in the chariots, and they do so over and over again. It might be understandable if it were the speed of the horses or the skill of the charioteers that attracted

them, but really all they're interested in is a color. That's what they support, that's what captivates them. Just imagine if all the charioteers, halfway through a race, exchanged colors. I'm certain the fans would withdraw their support and immediately drop the charioteers and horses whose names they'd been shouting across the arena and whom they can identify from a long way off. The overpowering influence of one cheap tunic is as enormous as that, and not only on the vulgar herd but on many respectable men.<sup>9</sup>

Pliny makes it sound as if the supporters were in love merely with the color of a shirt, but this indicates that he understood little about fanaticism among fans. Like many other intellectuals, he made no attempt to comprehend the emotions of the crowds in the stands, and he refused to acknowledge that they became instantly heartbroken and suffered real pain if one of their favorite charioteers was defeated. He could not comprehend their great affection for the drivers of their factions or why they said of themselves not "I'm for the Greens" but "I'm a Green." Pliny and those of like mind reasoned purely from their own perspective. With deep-rooted prejudice they contrasted their own intellectual activities with the concerns of the supporters massed around the racetrack.

Remarkably, three hundred years later church father Augustine did show some understanding for the behavior of fans at the Circus Maximus. Although he too was an outsider who felt little affinity for the phenomenon of chariot racing, his comments reveal that he well understood the emotions that governed supporters. He even used their fanaticism, their unconditional, steadfast love for their favorite drivers, in a sermon, presenting it as a good example to his Christian brothers and sisters. The heathen fans were completely absorbed by this love of theirs, forgetting everything else until they no longer knew who or where they were, and in a similar way the faithful must set everything else aside and rely totally, in love and hope, on the one true God.<sup>10</sup>

The historian Tacitus was no less reluctant than his friend Pliny the Younger to empathize with the fans' behavior. He deplored the fact that every child acquired a passion for the theater, gladiator fights, and chariot races on its mother's knee.<sup>11</sup> Nero's desire to perform as a charioteer—he argued that he was acting in the tradition of his an-

cestors—was incomprehensible to Tacitus, who speaks of a scandalous intention<sup>12</sup> and makes it seem as if others wholeheartedly endorse his criticism. In describing how Subrius Flavus, an officer of the Praetorian Guard, defended before Nero his involvement in a coup, he puts the following words into his mouth: "I hated you. Yet in your army there was not one soldier more loyal than I, as long as you were worthy of the people's love. I began to hate you when you became the murderer of your mother and your wife and revealed yourself to be a charioteer, a play actor, and a firesetter."<sup>13</sup> Tacitus agreed with those who said that people from the better circles should strive after higher goals and not concern themselves with chariot races, since such events only distracted them from the finer things in life, the arts that really counted: literature and philosophy. How could charioteers, those infamous characters, teach the people anything of value? Theirs was an entertainment from which intellectuals should distance themselves.

The pronouncements of Pliny and Tacitus might give the impression that they never saw the inside of the Circus Maximus, but a brief remark in a letter from Pliny to a man called Maximus reveals that Tacitus, at least, had certainly been there.<sup>14</sup> It seems his intellectual disdain for the chariot races was not so profound as to make the stands around the racetrack forbidden territory to him. He was no doubt far from the only aristocrat whose low opinion of chariot racing was less deeply rooted than he was willing to admit. In truth such contempt was probably aimed primarily at those who visited the circus regularly: the plebeians.

The attitude of Stoic philosopher Seneca tends to confirm that this kind of hostility was really targeted at ordinary people as such. He barely mentions chariot racing and says little about charioteers. For him the racing is all about the environment, the craze, the frenzy, the heaving circus with its thousands of spectators casting off all restraint, no longer in control of their emotions. They represent the masses, people miles removed from him. The fact that chariot races appeal to the common herd is enough in itself to make them a far from elevating spectacle. Surely intellectuals could never expose themselves to that crowd. They should have other, higher aims in view.

The only authors who do have some understanding of the world of the Circus Maximus are those already quoted: Martial and Juvenal.

Their comments reveal that they knew the circus at first hand, and they speak in favor of it quite openly. Martial refers to horses and drivers by name; he writes about the supporters' groups, the colors, and the racing stables. One problem here is that with Martial it is always hard to tell when he is expressing his own opinions and when he is voicing the thoughts of ordinary people themselves. He sounds negative only when he brings up the subject of the earnings of the most successful charioteers. He cannot resist expressing his disapproval of their extravagant prizes.

Juvenal too probably had firsthand experience of the Circus Maximus. He names horses and drivers but gives no details about how the races went or which particular charioteering skills were on show. He cannot have been a regular visitor, since in his *Satires* he writes quite disapprovingly about chariot races, making a firm connection between them and the passions of the common folk.<sup>15</sup> His famous and much cited maxim about "bread and circuses," which sums up his negative view of ordinary people, is illustrative of his outlook.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, the appeal of the chariot races to countless Romans is probably the most important reason that the writers of antiquity say so little about them. They did not want to be accused of enthusiasm for the same form of entertainment that was enjoyed by the masses. There were only two ways they could avert this kind of suspicion: by ignoring the chariot races altogether or by limiting themselves to oblique remarks about the baleful influence of the circus on ordinary folk. Sometimes authors could not resist writing about the races, but they generally chose their words with such attention to "political correctness" that the elite would have few grounds on which to reproach them.

In his passage about club colors, Pliny could not ignore the fact that there were senators who thought differently, indeed more positively, about chariot racing. With obvious reluctance he had to admit that those contemptible tunics worn by the charioteers captivated not only the rabble but some very prominent figures—Marcus Cornelius Fronto, for example. This senator, who had schooled emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus in the art of rhetoric, wrote in a letter that a problem with his hand one day had made it impossible for him to annotate a manuscript he had been asked to comment on, but it had not deterred him from visiting the circus. The ailment was playing up pain-

fully, yet he had once more been gripped by the thrill of the racetrack.<sup>17</sup> He would not have been alone, although the number of senators who openly admitted to such enthusiasm was small.

### Betting on the Contests

Another reason that intellectuals were less than keen to write about the Circus Maximus was that betting on the outcome was common, both prior to and during the races. All sectors of the population participated. Their bets varied, but not the zeal with which they placed them. Betting on the races or on other contests such as games of dice was in bad odor with the elite, since a wise person was supposed to avoid taking blind risks. Gamblers were regarded as individuals who had no control over their affairs, who surrendered themselves to folly with unpredictable consequences. Gambling was a threat to the integrity of a person's character, and it led to addiction. Those who placed bets often had other vices, and the word *aleator* (gambler) was used as a term of abuse along with other negative epithets like "adulterer" and "drunkard." Status was relevant here as well. Because the common people were not expected to live thoughtful, rational lives, it was among their ranks, so people felt, that gamblers were most likely to be found.

Of course everyone in Rome knew that holders of high office placed bets just as fanatically as ordinary Romans and that past emperors had included several notorious gamblers and dice players. Augustus, who took pride in having restored the old norms and values, made no secret of the fact that he regularly played dice for high stakes.<sup>18</sup> Caligula was an avid gambler, too; he even failed to turn up on the day of his sister Drusilla's funeral, so absorbed had he become in games of dice.<sup>19</sup> Claudius must really have gone too far in the eyes of more conventional aristocrats, since not only was he a dedicated dice player but he wrote a book about it. Even while he was traveling, he could not keep his hands off the dice.<sup>20</sup> Seneca regarded Claudius's addiction as so extreme that as a punishment he wished upon him an eternal game of dice with a bottomless cup.<sup>21</sup> Nero, Vitellius, Domitian, Lucius Verus, Commodus, and Didius Julianus were among the other emperors who threw themselves into dice playing with wild abandon.<sup>22</sup> All of them, with the possible exception of Augustus, had a great fondness for chariot racing as

well, and so it is safe to assume that they combined their two passions and bet large sums on the outcome of the races.

Gladiator fights and chariot races lent themselves particularly well to gambling, since gamblers could use known facts about the competing parties to help them decide how high their stake should be. Regular visitors to the Colosseum knew the background of every gladiator who was due to perform. Posters and program booklets told them who would be fighting whom in the arena, and they could decide how much to bet accordingly, although these cool calculations of chance would be balanced by a preference for one particular type of fighter in a contest. It was rare for two gladiators to confront each other with exactly the same weapons. Gladiator bosses usually selected combatants with contrasting equipment. A follower of the fighters with small shields, the *parmularii*, would not readily put his money on a gladiator of the type who fought with large shields, the *scutarii*. Nevertheless, if a favorite fighter stepped into the arena against a renowned opponent likely to be stronger than he was, reason would often have prevailed over emotion, and the bet would have been placed on the likely winner.

The volume of betting on chariot races, whether at home, in the street, or at the Circus Maximus, must have been far greater still. The crowd was more numerous, shows were held more often, and the charioteers and horses, each performing more frequently than any gladiator, held few potential surprises for experienced gamblers. Everyone placing a bet in the Circus Maximus knew how many victories his chosen charioteer had to his name, the color of his racing stable, and which particular horses he drove.

Irrational arguments and sentiment played their part, too. For days before the charioteering began, astrologers were consulted and asked to predict the outcome of races by studying the stars. A Byzantine manuscript from the thirteenth century, which describes practices that go back to the Roman imperial era, includes the following text: "You should know that the moon helps the Greens, the sun the Reds, and Saturn and Venus the Blues. So if the sun conjuncts Venus precisely at the moment the Blues shoot forward in the race, they will achieve victory. If the sun conjuncts Mars, it is the Greens who will triumph. Because Mars assists them. And if Jupiter is directly overhead, then the Blues are sure to win, especially if the moon is deprived of light at that

moment."<sup>23</sup> This pronouncement was made by a professional astrologer in a study into the influence of astrologers on supporters in Rome and Constantinople in the distant past. The writer does not describe the extent of their power or say whether they were consulted regularly, or even whether they were paid for their services, but when we consider the curse tablets in which demons of the underworld were exhorted to annihilate the drivers of all other parties, it does not seem at all strange that keen gamblers among the supporters, longing for good results, turned their eyes to the heavens, to the stars and the planets, and to the gods who were so inextricably associated with them.

Despite the popularity of betting on chariot races, it seems unlikely that any large betting shops existed. We have no reports of anything of the kind, although of course we cannot exclude the possibility that this is simply due to the low opinion many aristocrats had of all things connected with gambling. There were few, if any, firm rules governing bets, which were made informally between random individuals, at home, in bars, in the street, and in the circus. Sometimes a shrewd businessman would take the initiative, coordinating the bets and acting as a bookmaker. It may seem rather odd to us, but it was perfectly natural from the Romans' point of view that fewer bets would be placed on individual drivers and horses than on racing stables. The choice was between the Greens, the Blues, the Reds, and the Whites, and which particular chariot won for its stable was of secondary importance. By betting on the Blue or the Green racing stable, the two known to have the best drivers and horses, you were more likely to win than by betting on the Reds or the Whites, but the odds, the ratio between money put down and winnings paid out, made up for this. With the Greens and the Blues you could win a maximum of double the amount wagered; with the Whites and the Reds six times the sum would not have been unusual. If a top charioteer was racing for one of the two minor stables, however, this gap closed right up. Diocles, who raced successfully for the Reds for a long time, made his small stable suddenly the favorite. It went to the top of the bookies' lists, and so the amounts paid out in individual winnings were lower.

It seems very likely that people could bet on a combination of racing stables. In the imperial era, mention is repeatedly made of a merger of the Blues with the Reds and the Greens with the Whites. The question

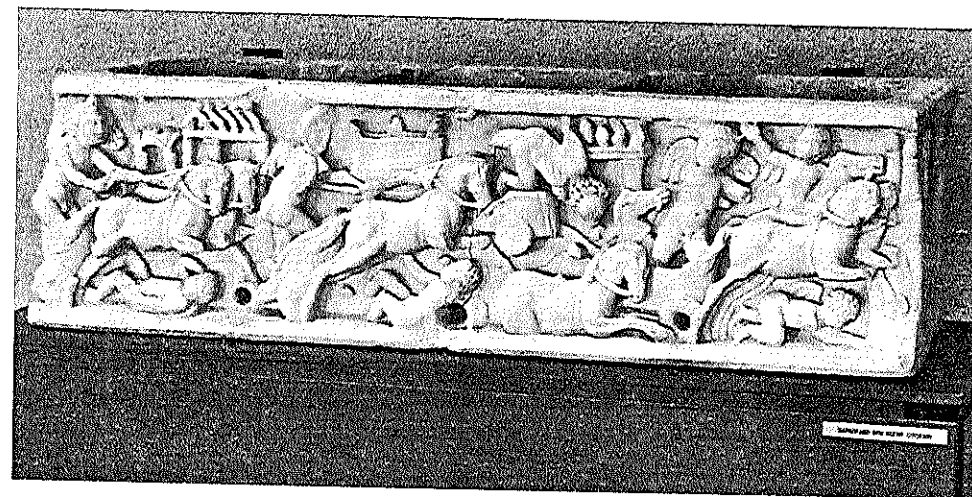


as to why they performed together in a number of races can in my view be answered only if we accept that people were able to bet on such "combinations." Instead of four, the gambler now had only two options, which made for increased eagerness among those with few resources, who would otherwise be unable to bet at all. They needed to calculate the odds for only two possible outcomes. For example, a bookmaker could offer bets on a favorite team of Blues and Reds at 1:2 and on the other team at 2:1, thereby creating a pool of 100 percent with a stake of two sesterii for the Reds or the Blues and one sesterius for the Greens or the Whites.<sup>24</sup> For the leaders of the small racing stables, this kind of cooperation offered a major advantage in that it increased their chances of success in the races. They would probably take a share of the prize money even if the winner was not from their stable. So gambling contributed to the survival of the racing stables.

Spectators who had placed bets must sometimes have panicked as they watched their favorite drivers and horses being outpaced and their stakes evaporating. Perhaps it was more painful still for people who could not be present at the races in person and had placed substantial bets through trusted intermediaries. They had to wait for quite some time, especially if they lived a long distance away, to hear the results of a race. A certain Caecina from Volaterrae, two hundred kilometers to the north of Rome, found the wait unbearable and thought of a way around it, knowing his gambling fellow citizens would be longing to hear the results. Pliny the Elder claims Caecina took a swallow (perhaps he means a homing pigeon) to the races in a basket.<sup>25</sup> As soon as the race on which his fellow townspeople had gambled was over, he painted one of the bird's wings in the winning color and freed it. The swallow flew away, and within hours it was able to inform the gamblers of the result, long before the news would otherwise have reached them.

### Riots?

The ferocity shown by supporters' groups toward each other will surprise no one. Spectators sat mixed together, but the hard core of the four factions had their own seats and made a considerable noise. They stamped their feet, clapped their hands, shouted the names of their



A relief on a panel from a sarcophagus, depicting a chariot race. The drivers have been replaced by little cupids, which do not look at all like real charioteers. (Photograph by Georges Jansoone)

favorite charioteers, and tried to shout down the followers of the other stables. In the pandemonium of the Circus Maximus, large groups must surely have got out of hand fairly regularly, with outbreaks of serious violence. But questions as to what form this violence took inside and outside the circus are not dealt with by the authors of the ancient world. They suggest it could be turbulent up in the stands, but they do not go into detail. There are no stories about supporters rioting, about vandalism or fighting, or about dead or wounded spectators.

It is therefore difficult to say whether there were any major riots in the first two centuries of the imperial era. Most historians follow Alan Cameron in his standard work *Circus Factions* in thinking that the violence around the racetrack was not particularly serious in this period. According to Cameron, there was no real fighting between supporters of the four factions, only arguments that arose from a sense of impotence among individuals or groups of supporters, who then lost their self-control out of frustration and disappointment.<sup>26</sup> Only later in antiquity and in the Byzantine period did anything occur that could be described as organized mass violence among supporters. It is undeniable that from the fourth century onward the factions were seen in a

more political light than in the first three centuries AD (see chapter 8), but this does not mean we should assume that large groups of fans had rarely, if ever, been known to misbehave before.

As we have seen, all over the Roman Empire curse tablets have been found on which fanatical supporters wish upon the drivers of the other racing stables the worst fates imaginable. It would surely be odd if the fury and hatred expressed in these texts toward individual opponents, racing stables as a whole, and crowds of opposition supporters did not sometimes translate into violent behavior in the stands. Whether or not this led to large-scale confrontations, the fact remains that the conditions for such an outcome were present. In my view the apolitical character of Roman plebeians is too often given as a reason that they did not become an organized force and use violence to back up their demands. The poet Juvenal observed that a defeat for the Greens could deeply distress supporters, and he compares their dejection to the despondency that overcame Rome after its defeat at Cannae by the Carthaginians in 216 BC,<sup>27</sup> but he does not take this point any further. He says nothing about how they dealt with their disappointment.

It is clear that Roman audiences could kick up a storm and did not shrink from rioting. We need only to look at the theater, where people lost control of themselves during stage shows and expressed their dissatisfaction through violence. Sometimes it was confined to minor scuffles, sometimes there were brawls that continued outside the theater. The authorities were often forced to intervene. Descriptions of the behavior of theater audiences seem far removed from accounts that point to relatively restrained conduct by supporters in the Circus Maximus. It seems almost as if these were two different worlds, whereas in fact the same ordinary people went to watch both forms of popular entertainment.

No one in Ancient Rome was surprised that theater audiences regularly turned into a rabble, with plays prompting unrestrained aggression in spectators. To some extent this is attributable to the subjects dealt with in works for the stage, which quite often portrayed recent events with highly emotional content. The actors, insignificant members of Roman society in social, legal, and political terms, heightened the effect by giving their plays a political twist, exciting audiences and inciting aggressive behavior. The actors, frustrated in everyday life, felt

themselves lord and master on stage and “took revenge” by pandering to feelings of dissatisfaction among the common folk, who then completely let themselves go, just as the leading actors intended them to.

Sometimes the situation deteriorated, and audiences engaged in fist-fights both with each other and with the forces sent to restore order. After the theater was cleared, they would continue fighting outside, vandalizing the surrounding area until the police put a stop to that, too. The Roman elite abhorred the popular theater and all the peripheral phenomena associated with it.

Police units of the Praetorian Guard and the city cohorts, who were responsible for upholding law and order, often watched helplessly as the interplay between actors and audiences led to explosions of violence. The government did not always have a ready-made solution. Peace was usually restored after a while, but often the tension remained palpable, and there was a risk the actors might prompt a resumption of violence. The ultimate response from the authorities was to punish the actors severely. They would be charged with posing a threat to public order and safety and with serving up plays that had a pernicious influence on public morals. Sometimes, if all other measures had proven ineffective, they were banned from the city. Even Nero, not exactly a paragon of decency, felt compelled at one point to crack down on actors and their most fanatical followers, although he did so only after allowing the situation to get out of hand.

Given that disturbances among theater audiences were so common, it is strange that the authors of antiquity, in the brief references they make to shows in the Circus Maximus, seem to suggest that the crowds and the main players behaved very differently there. It is almost as if those 150,000 spectators sat in disciplined rows to watch the chariot races and kept their emotions completely under control. I feel forced to question the impression that arises from these ancient writings, since to me it is barely conceivable that in the seething Circus Maximus feelings never flared up. We need only think of today’s football stadiums to realize where bottled-up emotions and outbursts of rage can lead. I do not have in mind hooligans who go to the stadium with the premeditated intention of raising hell but loyal fans who live and suffer along with their favorite stars and occasionally throw off all restraint. It would surely be very strange if ancient Rome were any different, if the crowds

there summoned so much self-control that they never turned into a mob. Supporters of the Greens or the Blues who identified with their heroes in the arena must have been driven to despair at regular intervals by crashes, by seeing their heroes defeated right at the finishing line, and by provocative chants from other groups of supporters. Situations must surely have arisen in which they could no longer contain themselves and expressed their frustration in violence.

In that case, why do Roman authors never mention it? Why do they tell us the theaters were cleared and actors banished from the city but say nothing about disturbances in the Circus Maximus? Are we to conclude that there were no riots or at least none so serious that the authors considered them worth writing about? That would be too simple an explanation. Even in our own day very few literary authors report directly on football matches and the disturbances that occur at them. If they throw any light on such events at all, they do so in columns, essays, letters to the editors of newspapers and magazines, or in literary periodicals, in the form of detached analysis, not in factual reports describing the extent of the violence and specifying the number of casualties. In Roman literature, too, remarks about the chariot races and all that went with them appear almost exclusively in works written for some other purpose. There are no direct references to the friction and commotion of a race day at the Circus Maximus.

It would be intriguing to be able to study Roman newspaper reports of riots, but unfortunately no newspapers have come down to us, and it is far from certain the Romans had anything of the kind. Reports of community events were written on white plaster tablets that have since been lost. The closest to our newspapers were the *acta diurna*, daily bulletins introduced by Caesar and used by the emperors as an ideal medium for publicizing news about "the emperor and society." Emperors would not have allowed negative reports about the racetrack or anything else that displeased them to be included. For an emperor to admit he was incapable of keeping order would have been to label himself impotent, thereby seriously damaging his image as "patron of all."

The fact that literary sources make little mention of circus riots has to do above all with the world writers moved in. Many critics did not have any real understanding of chariot racing and made little secret of

the fact, but they also realized that many in their own circles saw things quite differently. They knew they were free to write negative things about the popular theater because it was not authentically Roman and it challenged many traditional virtues. Actors were seen as feeble, effeminate individuals who led people away from the straight path of virtue with their provocative performances. Their success was ephemeral. When they were chased out of town, protests from their fans were vehement but short lived. They were quickly forgotten. Writers had to be more careful when it came to damning criticism of chariot races. Charioteers were star athletes who could achieve limitless popularity despite their low social status. They were revered for their daring and dexterity, and, perhaps most important of all, theirs was a sport firmly rooted in Roman society whose origins lay in the activities of the elite in the time of the kings.

Emperors were well aware that they had to proceed with caution when riots broke out in the Circus Maximus. If they used the same policies to quash disturbances as they did to punish impertinent stage actors, they would only succeed in fanning the flames of unrest. A ban on chariot racing would inevitably have led to more riots and perhaps to orchestrated anger among the people, something all Roman emperors were apprehensive about, since they could not rule out the possibility that a frustrated populace would receive moral support from aristocrats who were just as fanatically keen on chariot racing as they were.

An emperor knew that any rioting that broke out in the course of a day at the races was not aimed at him personally but was the result of the way the racing had gone. He too was a follower of one of the racing stables, and so a situation might arise in which he would have to punish violent supporters of his own faction. That would not do his popularity any good. By the same token, measures taken against the fans of other factions were hazardous, since the emperor might find himself accused of bias.

So when disturbances broke out in the Circus Maximus, the emperor faced a dilemma. Should he take action at all, and if so what should he do? He could ignore minor instances of disorder, playing them down to avoid having to act or at least keeping his response to a minimum, or he could take firm measures to sort things out. Although in the first and second centuries imperial authority was usually sufficient to

maintain order, meaning there was no need to resort to the same repressive measures as in the theater, situations must regularly have arisen in which emperors had to intervene to put a stop to outbreaks of violence by force. The authors, who often belonged to the emperor's circle of acquaintances, ignored this, on the one hand because they did not think such things worth mentioning and on the other because they wanted to avoid any possibility of reports of disturbances being interpreted as veiled criticism of an emperor who had allowed matters to get out of hand.

To some outsiders who did not belong to the traditional Roman elite, the Circus Maximus was clearly a place where frenzy was unleashed, where spectators lost all self-control. In the early third century, Tertullian, a Christian writer from North Africa and a self-declared opponent of all Roman spectator sports, advised his fellow believers to keep away from the circus because the things that went on there were totally unacceptable:

Since this madness is forbidden to us as Christians, we stay well away from every show, including those in the circus, where a particular insanity prevails. Just look at the people, how quickly they become enthralled by this spectacle, how completely unrestrained, blind, and agitated they are in their delusion. When the praetor performs his tasks it all goes too slowly for them, their eyes are fixed on the urn he has in his hands, in which they are shaken up together, as it were, along with the lots. Then they wait full of anxious suspense for the starting signal, united by their shrieks, united in their frenzy. You can tell they are mad from their behavior: the *quadrigae* have barely set off before they start reporting on what they have seen. I regard it as a form of blindness. They don't see what's been thrown down, they think it's the starting flag, but in reality it's the figure of the devil flung from the dizzying heights.

And immediately the insanity begins, the frenzy, the vexation, the discord, and all those things that are unbefitting to the priests of peace [i.e., Christians]. Then you hear abuse everywhere, curses not justified by any hatred and encouragements not inspired by any love. What do they aim to achieve with their excitement, if

they can't even keep themselves in hand? Perhaps simply to cease being their own masters. They mourn for the mishaps of strangers and rejoice at the good fortune of others. Whatever they desire and whatever they abominate, it has nothing to do with them. Consequently their love is senseless and their hatred unfounded. Or is it permissible to love without reason and to hate without cause?

God forbids us to hate, even when we have reason for it. He instructs us to love, even to love our enemies. God simply will not tolerate cursing, even when there are grounds for it. He commands us to speak positively about even the most evil-minded person. But what could be more abominable than the circus, where the spectators have no consideration even for the highest officials or their fellow citizens?<sup>28</sup>

Putting Tertullian's Christian bias aside, we are forced to conclude that in the circus an atmosphere prevailed in which the slightest incident could spark hatred, fury, and madness. At some distance from Rome, in provincial towns, writers were less scrupulous and less hesitant about speaking openly of misbehavior and violence in the circus. The most gripping testimony about a crowd that lost control is that of Dio Chrysostom in the second half of the first century AD. To judge by what he wrote, he had experienced chariot racing at close proximity, drinking it in. He is amazed by the fanatical enthusiasm for the races in Alexandria. He writes that the Alexandrians were not simply supporters, they were obsessed with the hippodrome. When they gathered at the race-track, they behaved as if under the influence of drugs: "They constantly leapt up from their seats, they screamed and yelled, they let fly at each other and from their mouths came the most terrible curses. They flung their clothes at the charioteers and sometimes even left the circus completely naked."<sup>29</sup> Outside the hippodrome they simply carried on. They hit each other with sticks, drew their swords, threw stones, and caused serious damage to property.<sup>30</sup> Although Dio Chrysostom devotes only a few lines to the "sickness" of the Alexandrians, I think his depiction of a crowd worked up into a frenzy comes closer to the reality than do the aloof observations of Roman authors. His report has a familiar ring. It would not be out of place in the sports section of a newspaper today.

## Emperor and Faction

We have already noted that emperors were frequently to be found in the Circus Maximus. Most did not sit there as neutral spectators but as fans of a faction. They openly demonstrated their support outside the racetrack as well, and so spectators knew exactly how far they could go without turning the emperor against them. Emperors almost always favored the Blues or the Greens, hardly ever the Reds or the Whites. "Good" emperors had some sense of moderation; "bad" emperors did not know when to stop, going so far as to interfere with the races personally to influence the outcome. A few even climbed into a racing chariot and took part in races themselves.

The first emperor, Augustus, was in many respects an enigmatic figure, and it is difficult to know how great his enthusiasm for the chariot races really was. Suetonius says of him:

He himself generally viewed the games at the Circus Maximus from the dining room of a friend or a freed man, sometimes from the emperor's loge, where he would sit in the company of his wife and children. For hours at a time, sometimes for whole days, he absented himself from the games, having first offered his apologies and appointed people to preside in his place. When he was present, he did not busy himself with other things, perhaps so as not to be exposed to the sort of remarks people made about his father Caesar, as he remembered it, complaining about the way Caesar spent his time at the shows reading and answering letters and petitions, and perhaps also because of his own fascination for the games and the pleasure they gave him.<sup>31</sup>

His successor, Tiberius (14–37), was rarely to be found in the Circus Maximus. He did not like major spectacles and made no secret of the fact. Caligula (37–41), however, who succeeded him, was a true devotee; in fact, it would not be unfair to say that his feelings about the races were those of absurd infatuation and that he indulged in all the deeply unattractive practices that accompany such a phenomenon. There was little harm in his habit of regularly dining and spending the night in the Greens' stables, but the fact that once, at a victory party, he made

the charioteer Eutychus a gift on the spot of the astronomical sum of twenty million sestertii is a little harder to take. That he was not above having his rivals' horses and drivers killed simply adds to the evidence of his base character.

His love for a horse called Incitatus could safely be described as pathological. Once, on the day before the races began, he told soldiers near the stable in which the horse was resting to make sure everyone was absolutely silent so that its sleep would not be disturbed. To ensure it optimal care he provided not only a marble stable, an ivory feeding bowl, purple horsecloths, and strings of pearls but a house, servants, and household goods so that the horse would be able to entertain appropriately any guests invited to a banquet on its behalf. Caligula regularly asked Incitatus to dinner. He would serve the horse grains of barley in a gold feeding bowl and have wine poured into gold cups to drink its health. It is said he even considered appointing Incitatus to the position of consul. Cassius Dio wrote almost two centuries later that he would certainly have done so had he lived long enough.<sup>32</sup>

Lucius Verus (161–69), who died young and was coemperor with Marcus Aurelius, went to comparable extremes more than two centuries later out of love for his favorite horse, Volucer (Flyer). Like Caligula, he was a great fan of the Greens, and he regularly prompted catcalls from the Blues by showering excessive honors on Volucer after yet another victory. The followers of the Greens profited from his enthusiasm, since every time Volucer stepped onto the racetrack the coemperor gave the Green stable money. He personally saw to it that the horse wanted for nothing and even ordered the stable lads to include nuts and wine-quality grapes in Volucer's daily diet. Outside the racetrack his love for the horse assumed grotesque proportions. In his palace he named an enormous crystal goblet after it, and when he traveled, he always had a small picture of the creature with him. When Volucer died, Lucius Verus had a mausoleum built at the top of the Vatican hill.<sup>33</sup>

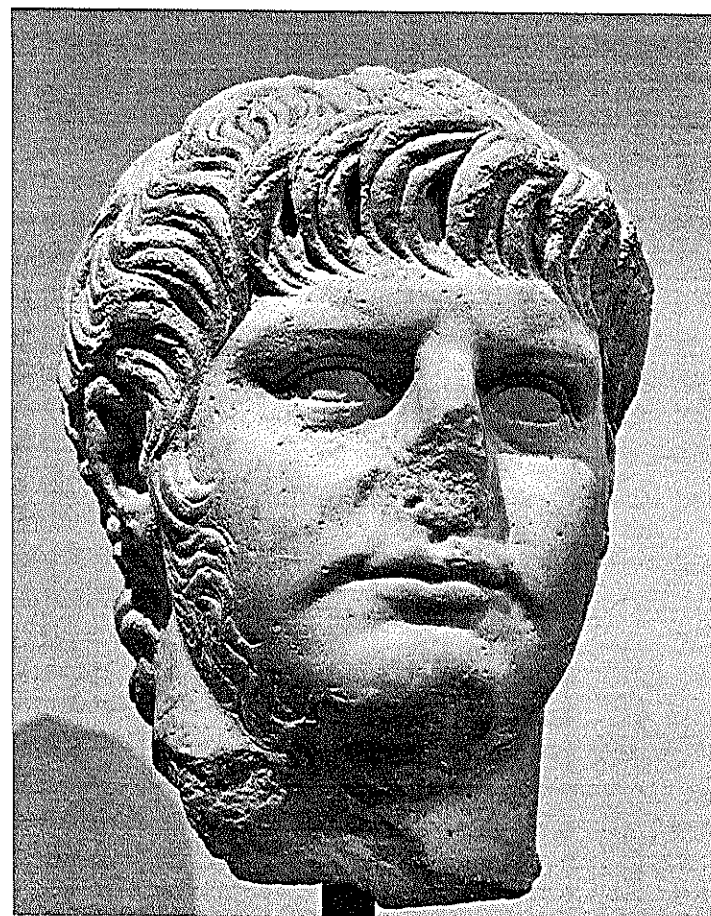
Different but certainly no less eccentric was the behavior of supporter Nero (54–68). Ever since childhood he had adored the races in the Circus Maximus, a fact that did not please everyone. In his early youth he spoke one day to a couple of fellow pupils about the sorry fate of a charioteer for the Greens who had been dragged along the track by his horses. When he was reprimanded by his teacher, who felt

he ought to be discussing more elevated subjects, he responded that he had been referring to Hector, the Trojan hero who was dragged along behind Achilles' chariot.<sup>34</sup> The races always remained his great passion. He was present as often as possible, and he personally saw to it that a day at the Circus Maximus lasted until well into the evening. Perhaps it was the emotions aroused by the chariot races that caused Nero to lose what was left of his self-control when, after a long day in the Circus Maximus, he kicked his heavily pregnant wife, Poppaea Sabina, to death after she criticized him for coming home late.

Nero took the reins himself, training in the Circus Vaticanus. Unconfirmed reports suggest he was following the example of Caligula, who had laid out this arena purely for his own entertainment. Nero's ambition, however, went beyond personal performances closed to the public. He invited many members of his inner circle to attend the "shows" in his private circus. Predictably, all those present praised him to the skies. Tacitus, in whose work this anecdote is to be found, adds cynically that the common people were delighted that the emperor shared their interest in chariot racing.<sup>35</sup>

It is unlikely Nero was a great charioteer. As far as we know, he never took part in an official race in the Circus Maximus, although he did perform on the racetrack at Olympia. During the Olympic Games he jumped in at the deep end by signing up for a race between ten-horse chariots. It was not exactly a success. During the race he was thrown out of his chariot. After being helped back into it by staff who rushed to his aid, he resumed the race but failed to reach the finishing line, as he was unable to keep control of his team. This did not prevent the organizers from declaring him the winner.<sup>36</sup>

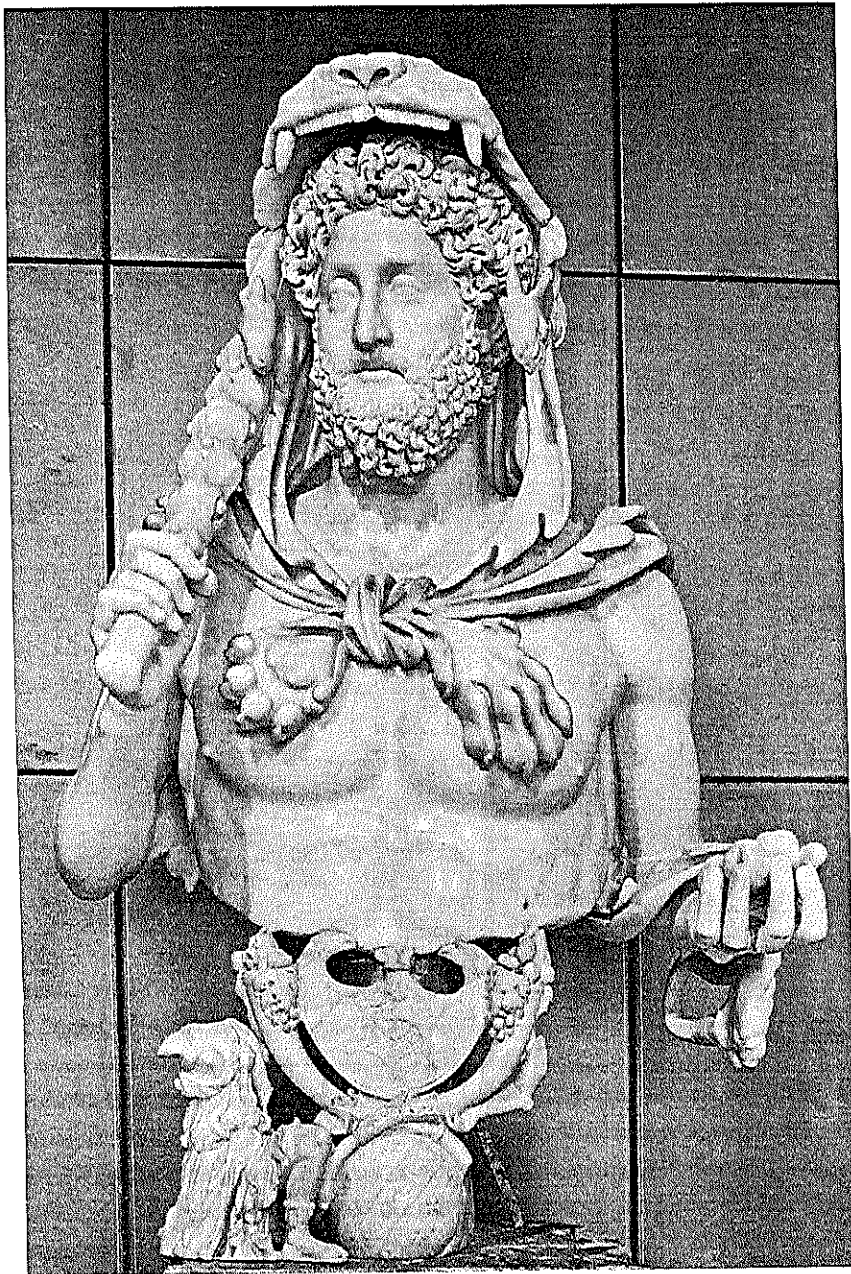
Another fan of the Greens was Commodus (180–91), son of Marcus Aurelius. His father, a true Stoic, had a deep aversion to mass popular entertainment and visited the Colosseum and the Circus Maximus only when absolutely obliged to do so, but his son could barely be dragged away. He won a degree of renown as a gladiator and as a hunter in the arena but made no impression at all with his performances as a charioteer. He drove only on moonless nights, well away from the gaze of an inquisitive public. He never took part in races at the Circus Maximus, supposedly regarding it as beneath his dignity. The real reason was probably that he was not particularly good and feared the common



Nero. (Photograph by Jastrow)

people would quickly realize this.<sup>37</sup> When he drove his chariot under cover of darkness, he always wore the shirt of the Greens—his love for that faction was boundless.

Commodus too had a favorite horse, Pertinax (the Persistent), which had won many victories. The name of the horse caused him serious embarrassment on a number of occasions in the last year of his reign. After Pertinax won a race, while the Greens were loudly shouting his name, fans of the other factions yelled, "If only that were true," an allusion to the aspirations of one of the consuls, who was also called

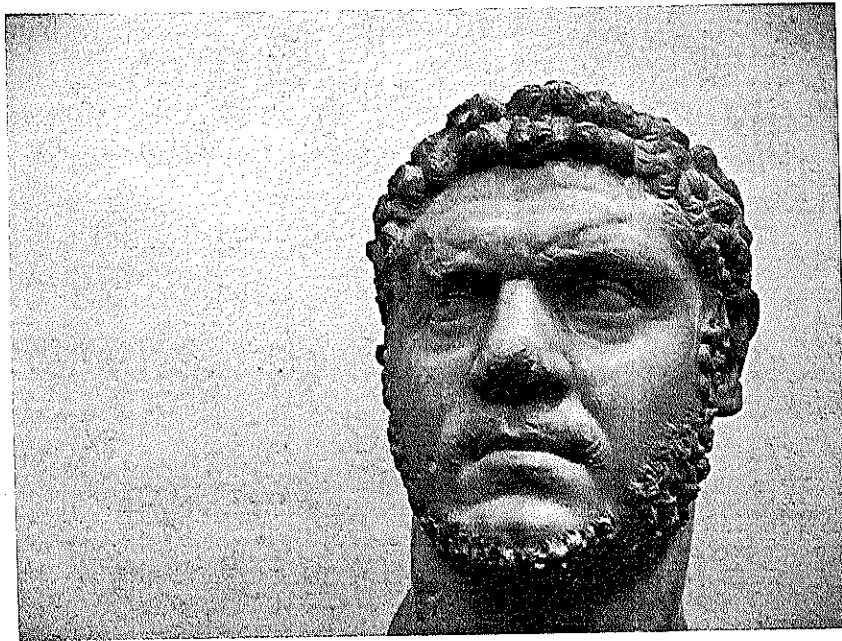


Commodus. (Photograph by Jastrow)

Pertinax. Later that year, when age forced Pertinax to retire from the arena, Commodus had the horse appear there for the last time, with its hooves gilded and its skin painted gold. The people shouted en masse, "It is Pertinax," implying that for Commodus too the time had come to make way for someone else. A few days later he was assassinated, and Pertinax became the new emperor.<sup>38</sup>

Heliogabalus (218–23), the most eccentric of all the emperors from just about every point of view, regarded no means of attracting attention as too ridiculous. Everything had to be bigger and more impressive, and he simply did not care whether it passed muster with those around him. He had an odd way of expressing his passion for chariot racing. Although not blessed with any discernible talent, he insisted on becoming a charioteer. Fearful of proving a huge disappointment, he performed in his own Circus Varianus rather than the Circus Maximus. He drove his laps of the track in the Green tunic, watched by those loyal to him, including his grandmother, his mother, several other women, and a group of senior functionaries including judges and knights, imperial officials, senators, and the city prefect. He copied everything that real charioteers did, asking for gold coins as a winner's bonus and giving the traditional salute to the organizer of the "games" and the followers of his faction.<sup>39</sup> Sometimes he went a step further and arranged for the chariots to be drawn by elephants, camels, dogs, or deer, on a few occasions even by lions and tigers.<sup>40</sup> It did not make him popular. The people regarded his intemperate behavior as yet more evidence of a disturbed personality.

Only two emperors, Vitellius (69) and Caracalla (211–17), openly admitted that they were followers of the Blues. They did not balk at having fans of other factions killed, especially those of their main rivals, the Greens. In 69 Vitellius had only just come to power when he started a real crusade against the Greens. Whenever he heard that something unpleasant had been said about the Blues, he took it as a form of *lèse majesté* and condemned the detractors to death or captivity. These harsh punishments are particularly remarkable given that considerable doubts exist as to whether his sympathies lay with the Blues all his life. If Suetonius is not mistaken, he was a Green for a while in his youth and during Caligula's reign he assisted the emperor in his attempts to become a good charioteer. It is possible that he was a sincere supporter



Caracalla. (Photograph by iessi; CC-BY-2.0.)

of the Greens in those years, but it seems more likely that he did not want to get on the wrong side of Caligula, whose fits of temper and ungovernable behavior were legendary, and therefore took to behaving like a Green for the time being.<sup>41</sup>

In Caracalla we see a similar hatred of everyone who was not a fan of the Blues. The situation was even more intimidating than under Vitellius, since Caracalla regularly performed in public in the Blue tunic, not just in Rome but on racetracks along the Danube and farther east. He acted like a real charioteer, greeting the crowd from the racetrack with his whip and asking for gold coins when his performance was over. Anyone with the audacity to take the emperor's act less than seriously was risking his or her neck. Once, when the people booed a driver for the Blues who was especially revered by Caracalla, several paid with their lives.<sup>42</sup> His irrational rage toward the Greens was fueled in part by his hatred of his brother Geta, a fanatical follower of that faction. He killed his brother with his own hands, and the charioteers Geta

had adored were made to pay too. They were slaughtered along with several gladiators, musicians, and actors.

None of the fanatical emperors mentioned here enjoyed a good reputation; they all fall under the heading of "bad emperors." "Good emperors," such as Trajan, Hadrian, and Antoninus Pius, behaved far more cautiously, attending the chariot races without making any personal preference for either stable too obvious. We cannot exclude the possibility that the authors of antiquity exaggerated the reprehensible habits of "bad emperors." It is worth noting in this context that the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius said of himself that he had never been a supporter of either the Greens or the Blues,<sup>43</sup> thereby conforming to the ideal image of a good emperor as *pater patriae*, "father of the fatherland." An overly blatant expression of support for one or other racing stable would have been incompatible with this ideal.



Chariot Racing  
in the Roman Empire

FIK MEIJER

TRANSLATED BY LIZ WATERS

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