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## *Dying to Be Men*

GENDER AND LANGUAGE IN  
EARLY CHRISTIAN MARTYR TEXTS



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*For my parents,*

Sue and Jimmy Cobb

linity, slaves would certainly be located near the bottom of the spectrum. Indeed, there is some evidence that slaves were not considered human—and thus sexed—at all. Richard Saller explains:

According to Latin antiquarian writers, during the Campitalia held in January woolen balls and male and female woolen dolls were hung in the cross-roads—one ball for each slave in the household and one doll for each free member. . . . The ritual gave crude, stark expression to a model of the household in which all members, free and slave, gained protection through this rite, but in a fashion that distinguished visually between those symbolically humanized and gendered, and those dehumanized in form.<sup>69</sup>

The relationship of social status and masculinity can also be seen in Artemidorus's dream interpretations: a dream is inauspicious if the person dreams of engaging in same-sex relations with an equal, but the dream has mostly auspicious meanings if the sex partner is of a lower social status. Rules for sexual morality hinged on accepting one's proper place—either as the dominant, penetrating male or the submissive, penetrated female. Young boys and slaves (regardless of sex) were placed in the female, or submissive and penetrated, category, and thus were acceptable sex partners for free male citizens.<sup>70</sup> The claims of the martyrologies—that Christian men, women, and slaves were manlier than their persecutors—are the all grander and more surprising when considered in the light of ancient constructions of sex and gender.

To enable us to grasp the full significance of depicting the martyrs as masculine, the stories must be understood within the context of the construction of sex in antiquity and its association with virtue. Without this understanding, the exhortation to Polycarp to “be a man” and Perpetua's vision of becoming a man are no more than clichés. Attending to the ways the authors of the martyrologies employed current discourses about sex and virtue, however, reveals the group-building work done by the narratives: equating Christianity with masculinity enabled Christians to establish order in their world. Claiming such a culturally valued trait, moreover, enhanced Christian group esteem.

## 2

*Noble Athletes*GLADIATORIAL, ATHLETIC, AND MARTIAL IMAGERY  
IN THE MARTYR ACTS

*Without an adversary, virtus shrivels.*

—SENECA, *DE PROV.* 2.4

*Your one salvation was to join my camp and die with an unconquered neck.*

—LUCAN, *BELL. CIV.* 9.379–380

Since claims to masculinity in the ancient world were claims not only to strength but also to power and authority over others, Christians could hardly claim for themselves a masculine status: second- and third-century Christians lived at the mercy of the Roman ruler and died by his caprice. As the locus of attack, moreover, the martyrs' battered bodies should have been proof of their lack of masculinity. The textually masculinized martyr, however, challenged the perception of domination. The literary tool of masculinization inscribed resistance to pagan hegemony onto the body of the martyr.

One way the martyrologies demonstrated Christian masculinity was by depicting their heroes as gladiators and athletes—some of the most potent cultural symbols of masculinity—thereby revising their audiences' expectations of the events narrated. As gladiators and athletes, the martyrs were not passive victims of Roman power but active participants in a fight for honor.<sup>1</sup> Even though Christian power was not evident in the public sphere—that is, the martyrs did not wield visible political authority—Christians' perception that they possessed power was all that was needed to affirm a masculine social identity and to enhance their self-esteem.

The martyrs are often portrayed as athletes (ἀθλητής) who contend in conflicts (ἀγών). The heroes and heroines of the martyrologies are referred to as trained (γυμνάς), while those unable to compete successfully are described as untrained or unprepared (ἀγύμναστος). This athletic language is used in conjunction with amphitheatrical language to portray the martyrs as active—and thus manly—in approaching death. As virile fighters, gladia-

tors embodied ideals of Roman masculinity such as strength, courage, and volition. Like their pagan counterparts, the authors of the martyrologies (and presumably their communities) regarded a noble death, similar to that of the gladiator, as honorable. The martyr, like the gladiator, received honor because of his or her display of manliness (*ἀνδρεία*), a virtue that placed the Christian—regardless of his or her sex—in a masculine body.

#### MARTYRDOM AND THE AMPHITHEATER

Although the martyrologies recount the deaths of Christians in the arena, references to the amphitheater and the events that took place within it occur only sporadically and without sustained attention. The lack of narrative attention to the amphitheater as the location of martyrdom is perhaps the result of the “shared territory” between Christians and Romans: as inhabitants of the empire the audiences of the martyrologies would have been familiar with amphitheatrical events and their meanings.<sup>2</sup> Tacitus even complains that what he regards as Roman vices—passions for actors, gladiators, and horses—are so ubiquitous that they must be conceived in the womb. He asks, “How few are to be found whose home-talk runs to any other subjects than these? What else do we overhear our younger men talking about whenever we enter their lecture hall?”<sup>3</sup> The authors of the martyrologies did not need to describe beast hunts, gladiatorial fights, executions, or athletic contests because they could rely on their audiences’ experiences in—or, at the very least, awareness of—the amphitheater to provide a fuller contextual meaning for their narratives.

#### *The Amphitheater: Architecture and Power*

Thanks to the colorful commentary on spectacles in ancient literature, we often imagine the amphitheater as a place of amusement for bloodthirsty Romans. Suetonius, for example, wrote approvingly of Domitian’s spectacles:

He constantly gave grand and costly entertainments, both in the amphitheater and in the Circus where in addition to the usual races between two-horse and four-horse chariots, he also exhibited two battles, one between forces of infantry and the other by horsemen; and he even gave a naval battle in the amphitheater. Besides, he gave hunts of wild beasts, gladiatorial shows at night by the light of torches, and not only combats between men but between women as well.<sup>4</sup>

The amphitheater, however, was not simply a place for entertainment. From its architectural presence in a city to its exhibitions of death, the amphitheater was a symbol of Rome and Roman power. On show days, from morning beast hunts to lunchtime executions to afternoon gladiatorial shows, Rome exhibited a far-reaching and domineering hand.<sup>5</sup> The message displayed on the bodies of slaves, conquered peoples, criminals, and beasts was clear to every last observer: “Rome is invincible.”<sup>6</sup> It was in the amphitheater that the emperor was recognized as emperor and where he displayed his imperial character.<sup>7</sup> It was also in the amphitheater, however, that the emperor was expected to court his people: he was to negotiate political and social issues with them, and at times to appease them by complying with their demands.<sup>8</sup> Thus the amphitheater did not serve as a static demonstration of power.

As rife with meaning as the amphitheater was, scholars rarely consider its importance as the physical location of Christian martyrdom. The amphitheater is not incidental to the story of the martyrs; it is not, in other words, simply the place where Christians were executed. In the martyrologies, the heroes and heroines are deliberately positioned in the complex space of the amphitheater. The author of the *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* explains that the torture of Maturus and Sanctus replaced the gladiatorial entertainment;<sup>9</sup> they were taken into the amphitheater for an initial round of torture, during which they ran the gauntlet, were mauled by beasts, and roasted on iron seats (1.38). Similarly, Alexander and Attalus were led into the amphitheater to face the beasts and endure other tortures (1.51). The first explicit reference to the amphitheater in the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* occurs in Perpetua’s fourth vision.<sup>10</sup> Here, the deacon Pomponius leads Perpetua to the amphitheater, and then into the arena, where she believes she will fight with beasts (10.4). She is wrong, however, and is instead pitted against an Egyptian. The man who judges the contest is taller than the top of the amphitheater and resembles a *lanista*, a gladiator trainer (10.8). After Perpetua wins the contest, she exits the arena through the Gate of Life, one of only two ways a combatant left the arena (10.13).<sup>11</sup> Although the details of her vision did not come to fruition, the author does locate the martyr’s death in the amphitheater. He describes how the Christians marched joyfully to the amphitheater (18.1), and how after their initial torture Perpetua and Felicitas were led through the Gate of Life, ironically, to face the executioner (20.7).<sup>12</sup> The author of the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* invokes gladiatorial imagery again when he states that after enduring a premature delivery, Felicitas was turned over to a gladiator: she went from bloodbath to bloodbath, from midwife to *retiarius* (18.3).

Not all of the martyrologies explicitly state that the events in the narrative took place within the amphitheater. The authors of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*

and the *Martyrdom of Pionius*, for example, do not use the term “amphitheater” (ἀμφιθέατρον) but rather “stadium” (στάδιον).<sup>13</sup> The Christians in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, however, faced beasts—or were threatened with such punishment—an event typically confined to the amphitheater, and Pionius is compared to a voluntary gladiator.<sup>14</sup> The complex discourses associated with the amphitheater are fundamental to the work of the martyrologies: they set the stage at the most basic level for the depiction of the Christian martyrs as masculine, a central element in the identities constructed by the martyrologies.<sup>15</sup> In order to understand the import of these passing and seemingly benign statements about the location of the martyrs’ deaths, we must understand the origins of the amphitheater and gladiatorial activities as well as their social and political significance in the Roman world.

### *The Origins of Gladiatorial Games*

Gladiatorial games did not originate as state-sponsored events. They were initially held as funerary memorials for individuals and were distinct from the public *ludi* (festivals) held in honor of the gods.<sup>16</sup> The *ludi* traditionally consisted of ceremonial processions and chariot races in the Circus Maximus or Circus Flaminius. These were state celebrations overseen by a magistrate and financed by public funds. The *munera* had a different function and history: literally translated “obligations,” *munera* were funeral events financed by private citizens. Even when *munera* were given by public figures, they were perceived as memorials—not mandatory offerings—made in their private capacities and from private funds.<sup>17</sup> For example, according to the *Historia Augusta*, when Hadrian died, Marcus Aurelius presented gladiatorial games “as a private citizen.”<sup>18</sup>

The traditional date given for the first gladiatorial contest in Rome is 264 B.C.E., immediately preceding the First Punic War.<sup>19</sup> Consisting of three gladiatorial pairs, these games were given in honor of Junius Brutus Pera by his sons Marcus and Decimus.<sup>20</sup> Competition among Romans to give impressive *munera* escalated, as Livy attests: in 216 B.C.E. twenty-two pairs of gladiators fought in honor of Marcus Aemilius Lepidus; in 200 B.C.E. twenty-five pairs fought in honor of Marcus Valerius Laevinus;<sup>21</sup> and in 183 B.C.E. sixty pairs fought in honor of Publius Licinius.<sup>22</sup> The numbers continued to rise through the period of the Late Republic.

Although such funerary exhibitions were technically viewed as private affairs, the line between public and private was easily blurred: the *munera* provided occasion to acknowledge publicly the accomplishments, wealth, and prestige of a family, and the political advantage of providing *munera* was not lost on grieving sons, who would often postpone celebrations of

their fathers’ lives until a politically advantageous time. The *munera*, then, became a way for men to win votes for future elections, and they were vital to political survival.<sup>23</sup> Some emperors offered games to introduce their chosen successors. Trajan, for example, chose Hadrian to preside over his victory games.<sup>24</sup> The imperial family also marked special occasions by offering *munera*. The editor of the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* tells us that the gladiatorial games at which Perpetua and her fellow Christians were martyred were convened to celebrate Geta’s birthday.<sup>25</sup> The popularity of the games, and consequently of the men who gave them, was significant. Thus the gladiatorial games provided opportunities for the *editor*, or sponsor, to gain public recognition, popularity, and power.

Augustus recognized the advantages and possible threats of the potent political power of the spectacles, and, as early as the 20s B.C.E. he restricted the number of games praetors could offer and their total number of participants.<sup>26</sup> By the time of Domitian’s reign, only the emperor, or a relative or a magistrate acting on his behalf, could hold gladiatorial games in Rome. Since the games were such powerful political events, the consequent imperial regulation is understandable: the emperor could ill-afford rivals upstaging his spectacle-gifts to the Roman populace.

Many ancient historians not only recorded the number of spectacles an emperor gave but often indicated the reasons an emperor put on a show. As we should expect, some of the spectacles were *munera* offered in honor of a deceased family member. After Hadrian’s death, for instance, Marcus Aurelius sponsored gladiatorial games in his honor.<sup>27</sup> Other times, however, emperors gave gladiatorial shows in hopes of receiving the people’s forgiveness, adoration, or acknowledgment of their imperial claims. After supposedly having four consuls murdered, for example, Hadrian rushed to Rome and, in order to win public approval, gave gladiatorial games and beast hunts that lasted six days and included one thousand beasts.<sup>28</sup> In a rhetorical exercise, an anonymous person wrote an account from the point of view of a gladiator that highlighted the political importance of the games. In part, it reads, “The presenter of the show, who hoped to gain favor with our blood, took his seat.”<sup>29</sup> The games, then, offered one way for the emperor or other sponsor to gain the support of the populace by securing their allegiance, loyalty, and respect.

### *Power: Demonstration or Negotiation?*

Although it seems certain that the emperors tried to assert their imperial power through the events held in the amphitheater, ancient sources make it clear that the amphitheater, and other places where crowds gathered, was

rife with political tension. Romans assembled at the amphitheater not only for entertainment, but also to make their voices heard. As Cicero reports, "For the opinion and feeling of the Roman people in public affairs can be most clearly expressed on three occasions, at a meeting, at an Assembly, at a gathering for plays and gladiatorial shows."<sup>30</sup> "The amphitheater was," in Keith Hopkins's words, "their parliament."<sup>31</sup>

Rather than allowing unfettered imperial power, Romans anticipated reciprocity in the amphitheater: at public events, the spectators expected to be granted a certain amount of power.<sup>32</sup> As David Potter notes, "the exercise of authority in the ancient world was highly theatrical, and for the performance of power to succeed, it was necessary for the audience to be drawn into the act, to be made to feel a part of the action. The person providing the entertainment had to share his power with the crowd."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Thomas Wiedemann notes that for the emperor not to appear at the games "would have been a challenge to the people by denying that the power exercised at these events was shared, even if only symbolically, between emperor and people."<sup>34</sup>

If the amphitheater provided a place for public opinion to be heard, we should expect that on occasion the authority of Rome and its emperor would be challenged there. In the famous incident recounted by Suetonius, a group of condemned criminals—not gladiators, as is popularly depicted—proclaimed to Claudius, "Hail, emperor, we who are about to die salute you," as they entered the arena to face death. Such a tribute to the emperor may seem to signal an obvious and indisputable acknowledgement of authority: condemned, powerless criminals pledge their final allegiance to an unsailable political entity. In the story Suetonius tells, however, the absolute authority of the emperor to command a battle to the death was challenged. Claudius's response to the criminals' salute ("Or not") was (mis-)understood as a pardon: those condemned refused to fight one another. Claudius became so frustrated with their passivity that, "at last leaping from his throne and running along the edge of the lake with his ridiculous tottering gait, he induced them to fight, partly by threats and partly by promises."<sup>35</sup> For a moment, even if brief, the condemned assumed power over the judge. In the end, the preponderance of power was restored to the emperor and the criminals died. The negotiation that took place, however, left a residual mark: because of the criminals' challenge, Claudius was belittled; he was mocked as a ridiculous leader who lacked authority over his own people, indeed, even over condemned criminals.

More commonly, though, it was the spectators, not the participants, who engaged in conflicts over power in the amphitheater. The crowds often

brought demands and petitions to the emperor at the amphitheater. Sometimes requests involved arena events themselves. The *Book of Spectacles* records the audience's demand that a particular gladiator be allowed to leave the arena alive.<sup>36</sup> Tiberius typically avoided the shows "for fear that some request would be made of him."<sup>37</sup> And when the crowds demanded that Tetrinius, a thief, fight in the arena, Caligula accused the crowds of being Tetriniuses, that is, the thief's collaborators and, therefore, the emperor's enemies.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the spectators at public events expected to wield some power that would, on occasion, influence the results of the games.

At public gatherings, moreover, spectators often voiced admiration for or dissatisfaction with their rulers. On one occasion a crowd reportedly affirmed Nero's greatness by declaring, "Good Caesar . . . No one conquers you."<sup>39</sup> Sometimes, however, individuals were compelled to voice support for a ruler. According to Dio, for example, he and other senators were forced to exclaim to Commodus: "You are Lord, and you are first, and you are most fortunate of all."<sup>40</sup> The actions of the spectators could also signal displeasure with the Roman rulers. Suetonius relates that on a certain occasion Caligula became extremely angry with the people because they who "rule the world give more honour to a gladiator for a trifling act" than to their emperor.<sup>41</sup> Cicero records that "at the Games of Apollo Diphilus the actor attacked poor Pompey quite brutally: 'To our misfortune are you Great'—there were a dozen *encores*."<sup>42</sup>

At other times the populace took advantage of their numbers at public celebrations to make concrete, often economic, demands of the emperor. Josephus describes the people's attempt to force Caligula to reduce taxes,<sup>43</sup> and Dio writes of the people's objection to a rise in the price of grain.<sup>44</sup> Emperors who granted the crowd's requests, according to Josephus, were popular: "The Romans . . . gather enthusiastically in the circus and there the assembled throngs make requests of the emperors according to their own pleasure. Emperors who rule that there can be no question about granting such petitions are by no means unpopular."<sup>45</sup>

These stories illustrate the importance of power negotiations between the emperor and the crowd. Thus we should be wary of any unqualified assertions that the amphitheater stood for Roman power: the ancient sources make it clear that the amphitheater was a highly contested site; it was a place full of expectation and tension. According to Wiedemann, the politically loaded nature of the amphitheater should not be surprising:

This constant struggle between emperor and people as to how power was to be distributed and where sovereignty lay, was particularly liable to surface in

the amphitheater, since the three categories of activities that went on in there were particularly symbolic of the exercise of power: power over the natural world, the enforcement of law, and the power to decide whether a particular gladiator was or was not to be classified as a virtuous Roman.<sup>46</sup>

The amphitheater is best understood as a place for the negotiation for power rather than the exertion of it.

The culturally productive value of the amphitheater as a site for the negotiation of power made it a prized location for Christian authors to appropriate and reimagine that power and its dynamics. Locating Christian martyrdom in the amphitheater, then, has great potential for the formation of Christian identities that are based on the possession of strength and power. In addition, the actions deemed significant within that site—combat, heroism, bravery, and death—could be put to good use in the production of Christian identities.

As we have seen, the *editor* of the games, the ultimate arbiter of the contest, often granted, if reluctantly, the requests of the crowd. Gunderson notes that in the amphitheater “the *editor* . . . becomes the lightning rod for the public will in judgment over the utterly subject fighter.”<sup>47</sup> The expectation that the crowd might influence the fate of an arena combatant may be the basis for some scenes in the martyrologies. According to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, for example, Polycarp offered to explain his Christian beliefs to the governor, presumably in the hopes of converting him. The governor, however, refused Polycarp’s offer, suggesting instead that Polycarp “try to persuade the people.”<sup>48</sup> Polycarp, in turn, refused to offer an apology to the crowd, deeming them unworthy. It was the crowd that originally called for Polycarp’s arrest, and the governor’s suggestion may reflect the importance of appeasing them (3.2).<sup>49</sup> It is the crowd, moreover, that the author of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* holds responsible for Polycarp’s death.<sup>50</sup>

The *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* also attests to the role of the crowds in the persecution of Christians. Indeed, the crowd plays such a large role in this martyrology that they seem to propel the story to its conclusion: the people initiate restrictions on Christians<sup>51</sup> and lead them to the forum to be interrogated (1.8); the mob dismisses Zachary’s apology on behalf of Christianity (1.10). In a list of the persecutors, the mob is named first, before the prefect or soldiers (1.17). Bystanders attack the elderly Pothinus (1.30–31). The mob dictates the punishments of Maturus and Sanctus (1.38), and it demands that Attalus be brought out (1.43). The author of this martyrology, however, does not overlook the power of the governor and emperor. Even though the people are enraged and wish to witness Attalus’s death, when

the governor realizes that Attalus is a Roman citizen, he immediately returns him to prison to await the emperor’s decision (1.44).

In the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* the spectators are reportedly so disturbed by Perpetua’s beauty and by the milk dripping from Felicitas’s breasts that they demand that the women be removed from the arena and dressed in tunics; the crowd (or editor) thus protects itself (or his reading audience) from witnessing the destruction of beauty.<sup>52</sup> These examples illustrate the narrative use of spectators’ potential power in the amphitheater. While the crowd’s influence over arena events may be surprising, it can be explained in the light of the contestations of power inherent in the amphitheater.

### *Provenance and Architecture*

Although public gatherings allowed people to be in contact with—and at times even to influence—the emperor or provincial ruler, the negotiations of power that took place within the amphitheater did not ultimately devalue it as a symbol of Roman might. Indeed, as the structure developed over time, it appears to have become an unmistakable sign of Romanization. As the popularity of the *munera* grew, the shift from more-or-less private to public affairs stimulated the design and construction of amphitheaters. In the Greek East, permanent theaters already existed and, with minor modifications, could be used for gladiatorial shows.<sup>53</sup> In the West, though, the first amphitheaters were temporary wooden structures built for specific occasions.<sup>54</sup>

Literary evidence shows that the amphitheatrical structures erected in the Roman Forum were oval from at least the second century B.C.E. The first-century B.C.E. architect Vitruvius explains, “But in the cities of Italy . . . the custom of giving gladiatorial shows in the forum has been handed down from our ancestors. . . . Now let the breadth be so determined that when the length is divided into three parts, two are assigned to the breadth. For so the plan will be oblong, and the arrangement will be adapted to the purpose of the spectacles.”<sup>55</sup> These temporary amphitheaters were elliptical primarily because of the configuration of the Forum: in order to maximize space, semi-circular short sides joined two roughly parallel long sides. Besides taking full advantage of space so that the gladiator was allowed to advance and retreat to the fullest degree, the elliptical shape provided a natural focal point from which the emperor or *editor* could be seen.<sup>56</sup> Wiedemann notes, “A circular building implies the equality of all spectators (at least, all those seated in each row); an ellipse makes most of the spectators face two specific points on the circumference, thus enabling attention to be drawn to the box of the

presiding magistrate.”<sup>57</sup> Since many of our sources for gladiatorial games and other public events focus on proper seating arrangements, the architecture of the amphitheater may also reflect this concern.<sup>58</sup>

The first stone amphitheater in the West was built at Pompeii around 70 B.C.E., soon after Sulla and his military troops settled in the area.<sup>59</sup> Keith Hopkins argues that the popularity of gladiatorial games increased with the cessation of military conquest as a way for men to show their military prowess. Wiedemann, on the other hand, argues that the spread of gladiatorial games was due to a social crisis in the Late Republic. Since the only experience of social cohesion during this time was in the Roman army, during times of peace “only new, artificially constructed, cultural symbols could replace violence as a means to a new consensus.”<sup>60</sup> The spread of gladiatorial games, according to Wiedemann’s theory, continued the process of integration and Romanization begun by military campaigns.

Katherine Welch argues, alternatively, that the games were popular particularly within the military in earlier times, even during the Republic.<sup>61</sup> She accounts for the sparse evidence for gladiatorial games during this period by pointing out that our primary historical source for this period, Livy, gives information about *munera* selectively, singling out those that were given by well-known men whose families were important. Indeed, Livy himself admits that “many gladiatorial games were given in that year, some of them unimportant; one was noteworthy beyond the rest.”<sup>62</sup> Also in support of her thesis, Welch points out that in 105 B.C.E. Roman forces had difficulty fighting the Germans due to a shortage of men trained for war, and they needed an efficient means of preparing new soldiers. Gladiatorial methods met this need and for this reason were introduced into infantry training.<sup>63</sup> She ties the significance of gladiatorial shows to the interests of veteran colonists in the first century B.C.E.

Central to Welch’s thesis is that the architectural form of the amphitheater spread not from Campania to Rome (as traditionally thought) but from Rome to Campania and elsewhere with the establishment of military colonies such as Pompeii and Capua.<sup>64</sup> Welch defends her thesis against more traditional views, such as those held by Hopkins and Wiedemann, when she writes, “The stone arena was born during a time of military activity and cannot, therefore, be explained as a substitute for warfare or as a symptom of collective ennui.”<sup>65</sup> She points out, moreover, that in the imperial period most amphitheaters were built near legionary fortresses. “It is clear,” writes Welch,

why ex-soldiers in the age of Sulla would have been particularly interested in gladiatorial games—not only were *munera* good military-style entertain-

ment, but the technique of the combat may have been familiar to them from their army training. It is not surprising, then, that the earliest securely-datable monumental amphitheatre should appear at Pompeii, a city colonized by army veterans (80 B.C.) soon after gladiatorial training methods were introduced.<sup>66</sup>

Although the permanent amphitheaters built in the region of Campania predate any such structures in the capital, Welch argues that the blueprint for these amphitheaters must be located in Rome. Since there does not appear to have been a development in architectural style over time, she asserts that there must have been one archetype that influenced the building of all other permanent amphitheaters. She presents a compelling argument that the amphitheaters in the provinces were modeled on the temporary structures that Vitruvius described as being erected in the Roman Forum:

How could a temporary wooden structure be so well known that it served as a model for the earliest monumental amphitheatres? Surely it was because of its prestigious location in the Forum in Rome. It was where the *populus Romanus* met to listen to speeches, to vote on legislation and to elect magistrates. It was also the location of the aristocracy’s funeral ceremonies, of which gladiatorial combat had traditionally been a part. Such a model would have been a natural choice for Roman colonists and soldiers, who wished to create a monumental building for gladiatorial shows in a civilian or military context.<sup>67</sup>

In newly established colonies, generals, veterans, and citizens looked to Rome for architectural guidance and in the process paid tribute and established their allegiance to Rome. The veterans wished to assert the Roman-ness of the newly formed colony, and the construction of an amphitheater—a distinctively Roman building—aided in the formation of an unambiguous identity for these cities:

The new building-type and its games were an important component of the Roman public self-image which, during the republic, was largely military. It is surely no accident that most of the earliest amphitheatres appear in the towns of Italy which had especially close ties to Rome, notably *coloniae* settled by army veterans.<sup>68</sup>

The amphitheater at Pompeii, for example, may have been a particularly graphic symbol of Rome and Romanness brought by Sulla and his veterans to a largely Greek and Samnite city: “By building a structure as novel



as an amphitheatre seemed to a viewer in 70 B.C., the colonists were making a statement of their power and of its distinctive character."<sup>69</sup> Cicero notes that there was hostility in Pompeii when Roman colonists arrived.<sup>70</sup> This may have resulted in the veterans' desire to establish a "particularly Roman architectural presence" as a way of asserting their Roman identity and Rome's authority over the colony.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Alison Futrell suggests that "the increased interaction with non-Roman peoples would have heightened the need for self-identity. . . . Public spectacle would have provided that: it not only entertained, it served the purposes of Roman hegemony as a means of bringing together the Roman community to commemorate its shared past and to invoke an ideal of a group future."<sup>72</sup> The amphitheater and its games became a tool for the construction of a Roman social identity in the provinces; it was also an ideal setting for Christians to use in the construction of their social identities.

The first permanent amphitheater for *munera* in Rome was built when Augustus was reining in control of the gladiatorial games.<sup>73</sup> Wiedemann suggests that the move from temporary to permanent buildings in Rome was symbolic of the contemporary political climate: "The transitoriness of the structures erected for such spectacles so long as the republic continued to function parallels the circulation of magisterial power among short-term office holders. Permanent buildings would indicate permanent control."<sup>74</sup> This thesis is supported by Livy's report that the Senate refused to allow two censors to build a theater in 154 B.C.E. because it would have made their censorship too permanent.<sup>75</sup>

If Wiedemann is correct in his assessment that, in Rome, permanent buildings reflected permanent control, it is not surprising that Augustus—who declared that only the emperor, or someone on his behalf, could give *munera*—was the first emperor to build a permanent amphitheater in the capital. The destruction of Augustus's amphitheater in the conflagration attributed to Nero provided opportunity and space for Vespasian to build the monumental Colosseum, the architectural model for all later amphitheaters in the empire. In Welch's words, "the Colosseum canonized the Roman amphitheatre as an architectural form. Amphitheatres securely dated after it (e.g., Capua) self-consciously refer to it in the same way that circuses throughout the empire looked back to the Circus Maximus."<sup>76</sup>

The amphitheater, then, stood as a grand reminder of Rome's centrality and power, and the funeral-ceremonies-turned-political-events became one way for Rome to impose its will on other cities. The spread of the amphitheater from the heart of Rome, the Forum, to the provinces also testifies to the

increasing importance of provincial ties to Rome: the presence of an amphitheater claimed a Roman identity for the city. The building itself became a symbol of Rome's far-reaching influence and authority.

### *The Liminality of the Roman Amphitheater*

Roman power was apparent not only in the architecture of amphitheaters, but also in their location. A significant number of the known amphitheaters are situated on the edges of cities.<sup>77</sup> The amphitheater at Pompeii, for example, sits immediately inside the city wall, while the amphitheater at Trier makes up a part of the city wall. Rome is an obvious exception, but the centrality of the Flavian amphitheater may be incidental: after the destruction of Nero's palace, there was a real estate opportunity for a more centrally located amphitheater, space that was unlikely to be available in other cities.<sup>78</sup>

The amphitheater symbolized liminality: it dramatically displayed the point at which civilization ended and barbarism began. The actors on the sand—both men and beasts—represented the barbarous, and as such they were temporary imports into civilized Roman space.<sup>79</sup> The amphitheater graphically illustrated what was and what was not Roman. The walls of the arena represented, to use J. C. Edmondson's words, a "social barrier": "Those who watched from the *cavea* were ipso facto defined as part of the Roman social order, while those who performed down in the arena were socially dead or, at best, *déclassé*. Thus, *munera* immediately advertised those who belonged within Roman society and those who were excluded from it."<sup>80</sup> The amphitheater, and specifically the arena, differentiated Rome from the rest of the world: it established the divide between "us" and "them," between Roman and barbarian, civilized and uncivilized.

The distinctions between civility and barbarity were also depicted in amphitheatrical events. Here in this space Rome demonstrated its justice.<sup>81</sup> Those who acted against the benefit of the state were displayed in the arena and justly punished. In addition to displaying Roman justice, these events were also intended to deter others from similar actions.<sup>82</sup> All threats to Roman civilization were extinguished in the arena; in this space, Rome displayed to spectators the consequences of civil disorder.

Alternatively, several scholars have proposed that the events of the arena were not, first and foremost, about punishment, but were a dramatic display of Roman protection. Wiedemann, for example, suggests that those condemned to the arena had been rejected from society.

Such criminals no longer had any claim to the protection that society gives its members from the chaos of nature; and consequently they were abandoned to the appropriate natural forces—wild beasts or flames—*ad bestias, ad flammam*. . . . Frequently the criminal is in some sense ejected from the community and left to try to resist the forces of nature on his own, without any of the help with which human society provides its members. The community does not directly take away the criminal's life: but it no longer protects him from the power of nature.<sup>83</sup>

According to this interpretation, the spectacles illustrated the protection Rome provided its inhabitants from criminals and from forces of nature such as beasts and fire. The activities in the amphitheater—barbarians fighting other barbarians or exotic beasts and criminals killed by beasts or fire—represented the dangers of the uncivilized world. By presenting these spectacles, Rome reminded the audience of its power to protect them from or abandon them to these lethal forces. Another proponent of this theory, Erik Gunderson, writes, "Those dying in the sand have been exiled into the non-Roman space; their sufferings are those of the uncivilized world. In this sense, the *populus Romanus* is not even the agent of destruction: beast, fellow criminals, or fellow gladiators are the overt agents, agents of that other world and not the Roman state."<sup>84</sup> Rather than portraying Rome as the hand that punishes, then, the events of the arena displayed to spectators the kinds of brutality, torture, and death to which all people would succumb without imperial protection.

Such a seemingly small shift—from an emphasis on killing to a focus on dying—makes sense in larger discussions about the arena. Ancient philosophers and historians who mention the arena, for instance, emphasize the manner of dying in the arena. As I will show in the following chapters, the focus on Christians dying rather than Romans killing is also central to the message of the Christian martyrologies. In addition, the authors of the martyrologies use the amphitheater to highlight issues of Romanness, justice, civility, and masculinity. They indict Roman actions by appropriating Roman ideals. Far from simply being the historical location of the deaths of Christians, the amphitheater provided a preestablished locus for the contestation of power and for the construction of identities. The inversion of perception—civility for barbarity and justice for criminality—present in these texts draws on issues at stake in the arena and would have been difficult to accomplish outside the walls of the amphitheater.

## THE GLADIATOR IN ANTIQUITY

We turn now from architecture to actor, from amphitheater to gladiator. If, as I have suggested, the site of the amphitheater was not incidental to the narrative of martyrdom, neither was the figure most strongly associated with it: the gladiator. Christian martyrs were not gladiators, but *noxii*, condemned criminals. Unlike gladiators, they were not trained, and they fought *sine missione*, without possibility of reprieve. It is unlikely, furthermore, that the martyrs fought in the afternoon shows against armed combatants; they were probably killed during the lunchtime shows—reserved for the execution of criminals—by wild beasts or fire. Despite these important differences, however, many Christian authors depicted the martyrs as gladiators. In addition to being empirically false, however, the association of Christians with gladiators is surprising because gladiators were often perceived as a particularly seedy lot. Any discussion of identities constructed in the martyrologies must account for the presence of these complex images.

During the Early Republic, gladiators were slaves, criminals, or prisoners of war—members of the lowest stratum of society—who were forced to fight to their deaths.<sup>85</sup> The execution of these individuals by the state was considered proper: these men (and occasionally women) were barbarians who, in various ways, challenged Rome's authority and thus deserved to die. During the period of the Late Republic, however, the figure of the gladiator changed somewhat. Many gladiators were now professionals specializing in various forms of combat, distinguished by their weapons, defensive armor, and opponents. They were no longer regarded as easily replaced prisoners but were instead trained and paid for their services.

By this time spectacles had also become a lucrative business. Owners of gladiators invested quite a lot of money to train their fighters, and they had financial reasons to keep them alive and healthy. In some ways the gladiator's life was better—in the short run, anyway—than is often imagined. In order to extend gladiators' lives, owners of gladiatorial troupes provided ample nutrition for their fighters to provide a layer of fat that might protect them from deadly sword wounds.<sup>86</sup> Wiedemann suggests that the meal provided to gladiators before the games, the *cena libera*, may have been intended to give them the energy necessary to fight successfully.<sup>87</sup> In addition, gladiators often received excellent medical attention. Galen, one of the best-known ancient physicians—Marcus Aurelius's personal physician, in fact—worked for a gladiatorial school for several years. Some owners even provided masseurs for their fighters.<sup>88</sup> It was not only the owners who were

concerned about a gladiator's health, however. The sponsor of a show rented gladiators, and should one die or be permanently disabled, the fee would rise considerably.

Healthy fighters, moreover, made for more interesting shows. In Petronius's *Satyricon*, the *editor* of a recent show was criticized because he hired fighters who were infirm and bromidic:

He produced some decayed twopenny-halfpenny gladiators, who would have fallen flat if you breathed on them; . . . one a spavined mule, the other bandy-legged, and the holder of the bye, just one corpse instead of another, and hamstrung. One man, a Thracian, had some stuffing, but he too fought according to the rule of the schools.<sup>89</sup>

When the *editor* of the show reminded his critic that he had at least given a show, the critic replied: "Yes, and I clap my hands at you. Reckon it up, and I give you more than I got" (46).<sup>90</sup> The figure of the gladiator was not confined to the arena, though. He was not simply an entertaining sideshow. To the contrary, the gladiator held an important place in the collective imagination of Romans.

### *The Gladiator Reviled*

Gladiators held a peculiar position in ancient Roman society: they were both admired for their bravery and detested because of their unabashed public displays.<sup>91</sup> "There is no meaner condition among the people than that of the gladiator"—so thought more than one Roman citizen.<sup>92</sup> Many of Rome's elite thought so little of gladiators that the word itself could be a slur. Cicero, for instance, referred to politicians he disliked as gladiators.<sup>93</sup> As Alison Futrell notes, however, there were also edifying aspects of gladiatorial combat: "The slaves and criminals were not real men . . . yet in the arena they fought bravely and with glory and died with honor like men, like heroes; if such men could die admirably, surely real Romans could do no less."<sup>94</sup> Pliny, in fact, approves of gladiatorial fights because they "inspire [men] to face honourable wounds and look scorn on death."<sup>95</sup>

The paradoxical position of the gladiator should most likely be attributed to the disjunction between the class of people who fought as gladiators, the virtues exhibited by them in the arena, and the popularity accorded them. This was true during the Republic, but by the time of the Empire, when freed and free men (and occasionally women) joined the ranks of the gladiators,

there was even greater ambivalence about the profession. The issue was no longer simply that of class, but of class appropriateness: just as citizens were not to perform on the stage, neither were they to discard their prestige and honor by entering the arena. According to Seneca, in fact, fighting in the arena was even more despicable than acting on stage.<sup>96</sup> Appreciating both the positive and negative social conceptions of the gladiator is critical to understanding his role in society and literature.

Besides class issues and the appropriateness of certain individuals' participation in the games, Romans loathed gladiators for several more specific reasons. Virility, perhaps the most important attribute of the male Roman citizen, was threatening in the person of the gladiator. It seemed impossible to control the gladiator's erotic appeal, and his strength posed a genuine political threat. The gladiator as "sex-symbol" was an imperial development, employed by Ovid, Juvenal, and Martial, and it is also evident in some graffiti in Pompeii. Some gladiatorial terms had sexual connotations as well. The word *gladius*, for example, usually translated "sword," was sometimes used as a term for the penis. In his comedy "Casina," Plautus writes, "While I'm searching for her sword [*gladium*] to see if she has one, I got hold of a hilt. On second thoughts, though, she didn't have a sword [*gladium*], for that would have been cold."<sup>97</sup> Wiedemann, furthermore, points out that some "texts associate the Latin word for the gladiator's trainer (*lanista*) with that for a pimp (*leno*)."<sup>98</sup>

Art also depicted the sexuality of the fighters. A stone relief from Italy, for example, shows a gladiator fighting an engorged penis.<sup>99</sup> A terracotta gladiatorial helmet shaped like a penis was found at Pompeii; also found at Pompeii was a small bronze figurine of a gladiator fighting off a doglike beast growing out of his penis.<sup>100</sup> Michael Grant interprets the dog's vicious attack as "a visual simile for the uncontrollable sexual impulse."<sup>101</sup> Both literary and visual media, therefore, associate the gladiator with rampant sexuality. Carlin Barton suggests that this relationship is due, at least in part, to the inevitability of the gladiator's death. This was a man "free from restraint, a wanton, a sensualist without compunction."<sup>102</sup> Augustine would likely agree with Barton. The sinner, he explains, acts, "with the spirit of a gladiator, since he despairs of his life, he does whatever he can do to satisfy his desires and lusts."<sup>103</sup>

Ancient authors also gave attention to the gladiator's seductive powers. Juvenal's sixth satire, for example, focuses on women's attraction to gladiators. Concerning Eppia, a senator's wife who eloped with her favorite gladiator, he writes,

And what were the youthful charms which captivated Eppia? What did she see in him to allow herself to be called “a she-Gladiator”? Her dear Sergius had already begun to shave; a wounded arm gave promise of a discharge, and there were sundry deformities in his face: a scar caused by the helmet, a huge wen upon his nose, a nasty humour always trickling from his eye. But then he was a gladiator! . . . It was this that she preferred to children and to country, to sister and to husband. What these women love is the sword.<sup>104</sup>

Faustina, Marcus Aurelius’s wife, was suspected of having had affairs with gladiators because her son Commodus, unlike her husband, was engrossed by the sport.<sup>105</sup> And at Pompeii the *retiarius* Crescens was known as “the netter of girls by night” and the “girls’ darling.”<sup>106</sup>

Roman apprehension about the sexual magnetism of gladiators eventually made its way into legislative issues. Augustus, apparently concerned about gladiators’ allure, restricted women—with the exception of the Vestal Virgins—to the rearmost seats at the games, presumably to create distance between Roman women and these exotic, erotic warriors.<sup>107</sup> The Romans’ concern regarding the sexuality of the gladiators is also evident in legislation that classified them with prostitutes and pimps.<sup>108</sup> The *infamia* suffered by gladiators, actors, and prostitutes (people whose living depended on public consumption) had legal ramifications: they were restricted from witnessing wills or other legal transactions and from appearing before a court on their own or another’s behalf.<sup>109</sup> Marcus Aurelius judged these people to be unworthy of paying taxes because their money was covered in blood.<sup>110</sup> These individuals were no longer part of the political or social body, and because of their opprobrious behavior, they may have been refused burial in public cemeteries.<sup>111</sup>

Romans’ unease extended beyond worries about controlling the gladiator’s sexuality; they were also concerned with controlling the gladiators themselves. The Romans never forgot the political and social danger that could stem from the strength and bravery of the gladiators, particularly as it related to their ability to gain massive popular support. There was always the possibility of rebellion, always the image of Spartacus in the collective memory.<sup>112</sup> During Catiline’s conspiracy, for example, the Senate moved gladiators from Rome to Campania, where policing was more effective; in the same year, 63 B.C.E., Gaius Marcellus was expelled from Capua for trying to solicit the support of gladiators for an uprising.<sup>113</sup> When Caesar invaded Italy in 49 B.C.E., his opponents were particularly concerned about the five thousand gladiators owned by him and kept at or near Capua. To prevent them

from causing any trouble, these gladiators were distributed among the city’s population, with only two in each household.<sup>114</sup>

In sum, myriad social and political dangers were associated with the gladiator. The perceived inability to control his image, his popularity, and his strength led society to push the gladiator to the margins, to the “un-Roman” ground where his threat was more clearly defined and managed.

### *The Gladiator Revered*

Although any discussion of the gladiator in antiquity must adequately convey the disgust many Romans felt about the occupation, it should not dismiss the great respect offered to gladiators for their bravery. If, on the one hand, gladiators were despised as socially inferior and suffered *infamia*, they were also heralded as the embodiment of Roman strength and virtue, characteristics traditionally accorded the greatest of men and military heroes. Ancient sources reveal a respect for the moral value of gladiatorial combat, and gladiators were regularly associated with glory, discipline, and, ironically, even an enviable eroticism. They risked death, but they had the opportunity to do what many free men in Roman society did not: to fight well, to die well, and, thereby, to exhibit the highest Roman virtues of bravery, endurance, and self-control.<sup>115</sup> Wiedemann, commenting on the complexity of the gladiator’s place in society, writes, “The gladiator was not simply a social outcast. What made him peculiar was that the particular *virtus* he exercised gave him a claim to be a Roman.”<sup>116</sup>

Philosophers appealed to the spectacles as lessons in masculinity, as demonstrations of military valor or Stoic fortitude.<sup>117</sup> For instance, Pliny the Younger writes that Trajan’s games were “nothing lax or dissolute to weaken and destroy the manly spirit of his subjects, but one to inspire them to face honourable wounds and look scorn on death, by exhibiting love of glory and desire for victory even in the persons of criminals and slaves.”<sup>118</sup> Pliny’s comments were intended to show the usefulness of the spectacles for the spectator and were not a praise of gladiators per se, but his statements do suggest that some ancient writers thought gladiatorial combats could play a positive role in the moral development of Romans. Seneca and Martial also viewed gladiatorial exhibitions as offering examples of *virtus*.<sup>119</sup> Wistrand explains the didactic nature of the spectacles:

It was more important to live well than to live long, and to live well it was necessary to learn to despise death. . . . The performers in the arena, be they

gladiators, professional hunters, or simply criminals who had been sentenced to death, could set a good example. Outcasts as they were, they could give proof of bravery and contempt for death.<sup>120</sup>

The low social standing of many of the gladiators only enhanced the examples of masculinity they offered: even condemned criminals could embody *virtus* or ἀνδρεία (manliness). These virtues could almost be transferred, it seems, from the combatant to the thoughtful spectator.

Particularly important for our purposes, the Late Republic witnessed the addition of *auctorati*, paid volunteers, to the ranks of the gladiators. *Auctorati* were free or freed individuals who hired themselves out as gladiators in hopes of winning fame, profit, or honor. Arguing that *auctorati* were not uncommon, Keith Hopkins writes,

The existence of the word, *auctorati*, for freeborn gladiators suggests that they were commonplace. This is corroborated by the presence of free names (e.g. Q. Petillius) in surviving advertisements or programmes of gladiatorial contests (e.g. *CIL* 4.2508). In one list, 9 out of 28 gladiators are apparently free men (*CIL* 9.465–6). . . . The motives for free men to become gladiators probably ranged from poverty to prodigality (Tatian, *Against the Greeks* 23 = *Patrologia Graeca* 6.857).<sup>121</sup>

There is ample literary evidence for the popularity of gladiatorial games among freed or free persons.<sup>122</sup> Ville and Barton suggest that by the end of Republic, over half of the gladiators were volunteers.<sup>123</sup> According to Dio, several Roman equestrians, two senators, and the son of a praetor fought in Caesar's games alongside those condemned to death. In addition, Dio mentions that one senator asked (but was not allowed) to fight as a gladiator in full armor and that another participated in the gladiatorial games at the dedication of the temple of Caesar.

The popularity of participating in spectacles is evidenced by the enactment of laws intended to curb the participation of free men in gladiatorial combat. Dio, for example, mentions a law that forbade senators from fighting as gladiators.<sup>124</sup> Tiberius punished aristocrats who tried to evade laws concerning gladiatorial combat, and Gaius killed some equestrians for practicing as gladiators.<sup>125</sup> Laws prohibiting people of the senatorial and equestrian rank from participating in spectacles, however, seem to have been difficult to enforce. In 11 c.e. Augustus allowed equestrians to fight because the prohibition was useless.<sup>126</sup> During Nero's reign the prohibitions were not enforced, but Vitellius reestablished them.<sup>127</sup>

At least eight emperors trained as gladiators or fought in gladiatorial contests and on occasion even forced aristocrats to fight in the arena.<sup>128</sup> Caligula, for instance, had Proculus dragged from his seat and forced him to fight in the arena, because, Suetonius intimates, he was handsome. Proculus defeated the two gladiators he fought but was nevertheless beheaded.<sup>129</sup> Suetonius also reports that Nero forced four hundred senators and six hundred equestrians to fight in the arena.<sup>130</sup>

Several scholars have offered theories to explain the increasing interest among men of high social status in competing as gladiators. Carlin Barton suggests that in imperial Rome honor came to individuals, ironically, through dishonor and humiliation. She writes,

The importance of the social and psychological role of the gladiator among the free and privileged classes in Rome developed apace with the notion that with the failure of the aristocratic republic, *dignitas*, "social worth," had become a word whose only content was humiliation. One finds in Roman literature, from Cicero on, a sense that the price exacted for political, social, and economic status (indeed, for life) had become self-abasement, and that honor and dishonor had become synonymous. The traditional testimonials of power, freedom, and pride began to signal as well powerlessness, enslavement, and humiliation.<sup>131</sup>

In some ways aristocrats might not have considered themselves different from gladiators. They were not free—even though they were freeborn—because in order to earn a social standing, they served as the emperor's slaves.<sup>132</sup> These men demonstrated their *virtus* in the arena in order to earn honor. Barton argues that the honor gained through the good fight in the arena outweighed the loss of honor one suffered by entering the arena.<sup>133</sup>

Hopkins, alternatively, is skeptical about interpreting dishonor (e.g., of fighting as a gladiator) as honor. Commenting on the variety of Roman conceptions of gladiators, he writes, "In such a steeply stratified society, it seemed outrageous for men of high status to throw away privilege, to declass themselves, even if 'in this way they achieved death instead of dishonor' (Dio 56.25)."<sup>134</sup> Instead, Hopkins emphasizes the martial elements of gladiatorial training and contests to explain aristocratic participation. He suggests that "what attracted them was the opportunity to display their military prowess, their courage and their skill, plus the desire for victory, and the shouts of the crowd. At the risk of death, it was their last chance to play soldiers in front of a large audience."<sup>135</sup> Men volunteered to be gladiators because the opportunity to demonstrate their valor in war was not readily available. Whether

or not men joined the ranks of the gladiators in order to demonstrate their military prowess, as Hopkins suggests, spectators of the gladiatorial games expected a close-fought battle, one that displayed warlike enthusiasm and courage. "Without an adversary," Seneca asserts, "*virtus* shrivels. We see how great and how efficient it really is, only when it shows by endurance what it is capable of."<sup>136</sup> Gladiatorial games allowed the opportunity for *virtus* to be displayed, even in the bodies of the most unlikely candidates: criminals, prisoners of war, or slaves.

One of the ways *auctorati* revealed their bravery was by taking an oath, the *sacramentum gladiatorium*, to die the good death. Through this oath ("to be burned by fire, bound in chains, to be beaten, to die by the sword"<sup>137</sup>), they became responsible for their own deaths; technically, they were no longer compelled to die but chose to. Barton writes, "Because of the *sacramentum*, the assumption of a solemn obligation, the gladiator's fate became a point of honor. Henceforward *not* to show himself willing to be burned, bound, beaten, and die would be dishonorable."<sup>138</sup> These gladiators replaced dishonorable compulsion with honorable complicity. In this way, what would have been seen as an ignoble death was now imbued with honor. The Christian martyrs are depicted as *auctorati* in the sense that they enter the arena by their own wills. By employing the language of volition, the authors of the martyrologies illustrate Christian honor.

Barton also suggests that in spite of the degradation of the gladiator, he became an image of empowerment to the disenfranchised: "To witness the voluntary gladiator play his role to the moment of truth was to witness the victim die *invictus*. It was a parable of hope to every victim. . . . It was one which offered a pattern of glory to the powerless."<sup>139</sup> If the symbol of the gladiator offered an example of transforming potential humiliation into noble self-sacrifice, then Christian appropriation of such a figure is understandable. As a model of empowerment, furthermore, the portrayal of the martyrs as *auctorati* was particularly useful in the construction of Christian identities. It was a way to show Christians freely choosing their fates—essential to Roman masculinity—rather than Christians as victims of others' power.

In addition to associating the gladiator's battle and approach to death with masculinity and honor, the figure of the gladiator also took on metaphorical meanings: a person exhibiting certain virtues might be described as a gladiator. In the *Phormio*, for example, Terence uses the expression "with the spirit of the gladiator" (*gladiatorio animo*) as the equivalent of "without hope or fear."<sup>140</sup> Seneca uses the image of the gladiator and his oath as the model for his "good man":

You have enlisted under oath. . . . I will not have you deceived. The words of this most honourable compact are the same as the words of that most disgraceful one, to wit: "Through burning, imprisonment, or death by the sword." . . . You must die erect and unyielding. . . . There is no discharge for us from the moment we are born.<sup>141</sup>

Cicero, likewise, uses the gladiator as an illustration of his "good man":

Look at the gladiators . . . what blows they endure! See, how men, who have been well trained, prefer to receive a blow rather than basely avoid it! . . . What gladiator of ordinary merit has ever uttered a groan or changed countenance? Who of them has disgraced himself, I will not say upon his feet, but who has disgraced himself in his fall? Who after falling has drawn in his neck when ordered to suffer the fatal stroke?<sup>142</sup>

The martyrologies may also employ gladiatorial imagery metaphorically: since the martyrs were not trained gladiators and did not have the opportunity to defeat their opponents and thereby live, Christians transferred the virtues of the gladiator to their heroes. The martyrs' nobility and willingness to die exhibited the best characteristics of the gladiator. By depicting the martyrs as gladiators, the authors of the martyrologies acknowledged the social position of Christians, but they also used this characterization to challenge the perception of Christianity.

#### THE ATHLETE AND THE SOLDIER IN ANTIQUITY

Although amphitheatrical imagery dominates much of the martyrological literature, many Christian authors also utilized athletic and martial images.<sup>143</sup> The author of the *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* tells us that, like runners, the martyrs "sped on to Christ";<sup>144</sup> Maturus and Blandina are both described as "noble contestants" (1.17, 19). Blandina was filled with such power and strength that her torturers admitted that they "were vanquished" by this "noble athlete" (1.18–19). Attalus entered the arena as a "well-prepared athlete" (1.43). These "athletes," Christians willing to compete in the games and to die in order to live, were trained in Christian discipline (1.43). Christ himself is described as a "mighty and invincible athlete" (1.42).<sup>145</sup>

We have already seen some of the connections between gladiators and warriors. Seneca, for example, conflates the soldier and gladiator.<sup>146</sup> The soldier's principal weapon was a medium-length sword, the *gladius hispanensis*,



from which the name “gladiator” derives. Since military valor was one of the most effective means of portraying one’s *virtus*, it is not surprising that authors of the martyrologies chose to portray their heroes as soldiers. The depiction of martyrs as athletes, however, is potentially more problematic.<sup>147</sup> According to many ancient historians and philosophers, athletics was a decidedly un-Roman activity. Roman authors rarely discuss athletics in any detail, and those who do often focus on the repugnancy of the required nudity.<sup>148</sup> Romans believed it was degrading to display oneself for the consumption of an audience. As opposed to actors, who typically wore costumes, and gladiators, who were largely covered with protective gear and helmets that concealed their bodies and faces, athletes were completely exposed to the spectators. Athletes thus degraded themselves even more than these other performers.

Philosophers’ judgments against athletics, however, may point to apprehension about other social issues. For example, many of these authors voiced concerns that the self-indulgences of the Greeks would lead to the decline of Roman values: Galen compared athletes to pigs, Plutarch blamed the gymnasium for the political decadence of the Greeks, and Tacitus feared that young men would engage in sport instead of military battles.<sup>149</sup> Seneca believed that physical exertion even dulled the mind.<sup>150</sup> We should note, however, that Seneca’s appraisal of athletics is not wholly negative. He compares the athlete to a wise man wrestling with Fortune: both have to submit to the difficulties of training to increase their endurance and to be victorious. The wise man has to suffer hardship to enhance and prove his *virtus*.<sup>151</sup>

Scholarship on ancient sport has tended to reinforce Roman elite views: Greek athletics found no useful place in the Roman world because Romans were inherently utilitarian and bodily exercise must be directly related to the development of martial skill.<sup>152</sup> More recent scholarship, however, has focused on evidence from nonelite sources and concluded that athletic skill and competition were quite important in imperial Rome. Tacitus reports that the people demanded Greek-style contests.<sup>153</sup> The Imperial baths, furthermore, were constructed with *palaestrae*, which functioned as a place for Greek-style exercise. The popularity of Domitian’s Capitoline games offers yet more evidence of the role of sport in the Roman world. The sheer size of the stadium built by Domitian in Rome, which would hold about fifteen thousand spectators, suggests that athletic events were of interest to Romans. Romans, of course, did enthusiastically compete in some Greek competitions. In particular, they were attracted to the Greek style of boxing, wrestling, and the *pankration*, which combined boxing and wrestling.<sup>154</sup> Athletes were also popular subjects in Roman art.<sup>155</sup>

There is some evidence that the figure of the athlete was associated with the amphitheater. In the Greek East, the classic Greek stadium—where athletic contests were held—was also used for Roman spectacles, including gladiatorial games.<sup>156</sup> The inscriptional evidence at Aphrodisias regarding the city’s devotion to the imperial cult is particularly helpful in showing the association of traditional Greek athletics with gladiatorial combat.<sup>157</sup>

Although the association of the athlete with the amphitheater and the gladiator is interesting, it is neither possible nor necessary to insist that the authors of the martyrologies exploited this relationship. The amphitheater was valuable to the story of the martyrs because it was a place where the possession of power was contested and where masculinity and masculine *virtus* was displayed. The figure of the athlete—regardless of its association with the amphitheater or elite Romans’ disdain of the sport—was commonly used to portray masculine virtues. Dio Chrysostom, for example, praises athletics because it “produces at the same time manliness, strength, and self-control.”<sup>158</sup> And in praise of a recently deceased boxer, Melankomas, he writes,

Indeed, the most amazing thing about the man was his being undefeated not only by combatants but also by labor, burning heat, gluttony, and lust. For the one who intends to be superior to his opponents must be defeated by none of these things. For if he had not been self-controlled and rational, I do not suppose he would have been so superior in strength, not even if he was by nature the strongest.<sup>159</sup>

By portraying the martyrs as gladiators, athletes, and soldiers, the authors focus their reader’s attention on agonistic figures and thus highlight Christian masculinity.

The reward Christians received for competing successfully was a heavenly or spiritual crown—reminiscent of the reward given to the victors of athletic or musical competitions. The crown was also a symbol of military victory.<sup>160</sup> Gregory M. Stevenson notes, “The wreath finds its clearest expression as a symbol of honor within the contexts of military awards and benefactor relationships, even to the extent that *στεφανῶ* could be used as a synonym for *τιμᾶ*.”<sup>161</sup> For Christians this crown was not a symbol of temporal victory but of spiritual and eternal victory: the martyrs competed against the Roman ruler and won, thus earning immortality through an honorable death. The martyrs of Lyons and Vienne earned crowns of immortality by enduring various tortures: “For plaiting one crown from different colors and all kinds of flowers, they offered it to the father. It befits the noble athletes,

then, having endured diverse contests and a great victory, to take the great crown of immortality."<sup>162</sup> In the *Martyrdom of Pionius*, Pionius and his companions were mocked by the crowd, and, like Jesus, were crowned; the martyrs, however, rejected these crowns, tore them apart, and threw them to the ground because they were meaningless.<sup>163</sup> The crowns Pionius and his fellow Christians desired, and ultimately earned, were those that were given by God alone; those given by pagans symbolized apostasy, as the story of Euctemon makes clear. Euctemon, a Christian leader in one of the churches in Smyrna, is described as ridiculous because he wore a crown as he recanted his faith, offered sacrifice in the temple of Nemesis, and swore by the emperor's genius and the goddesses of Fate (18.13–14). The author of the *Martyrdom of Pionius* contrasts temporal crowns received in this world to those crowns that symbolize immortality. Indeed, the author of this martyrology states that Pionius's crown was revealed in his dead—but undefeated—body.<sup>164</sup>

Interestingly, some martyrologies claim that after torture or death, God rejuvenates the martyr's body. Pionius's "crown was made manifest through his body": after the fire was extinguished, the Christians saw Pionius's "body adorned like that of an athlete in his full prime. His ears were not distorted; his hair lay in order on the surface of his head; and his beard was in flower like with the first growth of hair."<sup>165</sup> Similarly, the author of the *Martyrdom of Marian and James* writes, "You hung up his body, beat his sides, racked his bowels, and yet our Marian, with his faith in God, grew great in body as well as in soul."<sup>166</sup>

Through their strength—a vigor often explicitly attributed to the presence of Christ—the martyrs defeated the enemy, envisioned as both the devil and the earthly persecutor.<sup>167</sup> Like *auctorati*, having made the choice to die, Christians had only to persevere in the good death to embody masculine *virtus*.<sup>168</sup> The authors' emphasis on the arena, on the strength of the martyr, as well as explicit references to gladiators and games, provide a social and spatial context for interpreting the martyrologies. When the martyrs "received the fury of the adversary" and "beheld the passion of the enemy," they responded like noble athletes and gladiators, models of masculinity: they focused on dying with honor.<sup>169</sup> Though Perpetua knows she will die, she is also certain of her victory.<sup>170</sup> Justin announces to the prefect, "We are confident that if we suffer the penalty we shall be saved."<sup>171</sup> The martyrs, like the gladiators, needed only to persevere in a manly struggle to receive the victory, the crown, and the promise that they would walk through the Gate of Life.

In a number of ways the martyrologies appropriate both actional and spatial elements of the amphitheater. By contesting the power of the empire,

these authors claimed power for those who seemed least likely to obtain it, those who at that moment were factually powerless. Since the martyrs were condemned to die, it seemed impossible for them to display masculine virtue. Through the production of their texts, however, these authors inscribed resistance and power onto the body of the gladiator-martyr. They insisted that the martyrs chose to die, and that they did so with masculine honor and bravery. Through the reading and consumption of the text, the Christian community appropriated that power and constructed new identities.