Ancient Rome Essay, Research Paper

ANCIENT ROME

The gladiator?s world was a Roman world. According to tradition, Rome was founded on April 21, 753 B.C. The legend says that Romulus and Remus were the twin sons of the war god, Mars. As infants, they were abandoned in a basket by the River Tiber. There they were found by a she-wolf, who carried them back to her den and protected and nurtured them until they were old enough to survive on their own.1

It was when he was a young man that Romulus established the city that bears his name by carving its borders with a plow. Watching his brother work hard and doing nothing to help, Remus teased his brother, making fun of his hard labor. When he could take it no longer, Romulus flew into a rage and attacked his twin, killing him. Romulus then became Rome?s first king.

THE FIRST GLADIATORS

The first known gladiatorial combat in Rome took place at the funeral of a nobleman named Junius Brutus in 264 B.C.2 His sons Marcus and Decimus revived an ancient Etruscan custom of having slaves fight at the funeral of a great leader in the belief that such a sacrifice would please the gods. During the ceremony, three pairs of slaves were forced to fight to the death. In 216 B.C., twenty-two pairs of slaves fought at the funeral of a man named Marcus Lepidus. Sixty pairs of slaves fought when Publicus Licinius died in 183 B.C. These slave fighters were now known as bustiarii, or funeral men.3 By the time of Julius Caesar, any direct association with funerals and religion was gone, and these fighters, now known as gladiators, meaning swordsmen, were a powerful force in Roman politics. He bought the affection of the people with magnificent banquets and spectacles that were open and free to the public. Caesar then established the precedent of keeping the populace occupied with chariot races and gladiator shows. The bigger the event, the more impressed the people were. In 46 B.C. Caesar staged a battle between two armies, each with 500 men, 30 calvarymen, and 20 battle elephants. He topped that with a naval battle with 1,000 sailors and 2,000 oarsman staged on a huge artificial lake dug just for that purpose.4

WHO WERE THE GLADIATORS

Of the thousands of men who ended up in the arena, the vast majority were prisoners of war, criminals, or slaves. As the Roman Empires grew through constant wars of conquest, soldiers of the defeated armies found themselves on the way to Rome, roped neck and neck with their arms tied behind their backs. Criminals were another major source of gladiators. Originally, those convicted of murder, robbery, arson, or sacrilege were sent to the arena to be killed by an executioner with a sword or thrown to the beasts, in the belief that this would act as a deterrent for would-be criminals.5

As the games grew in popularity and entertainment became more important than deterrence, more criminals were sentenced to train in gladiator schools. Champion gladiators who showed exceptional skill and bravery in the arena were sometimes presented with a wooden baton, the rudius, which awarded the champion honorable retirement from further combat. The emperor Tiberius offered one thousand pieces of gold per performance to entice retired gladiators back to the roar of the crowd and experience the thrill of combat.6

Occasionally a noble man would dare to be a gladiator. An appearance by one of these wealthy thrill-seekers would send the audience into a frenzy. To see an aristocrat fighting among the salves and criminals thrilled the mob of plebeians, or common people, in the stands.

THE SCHOOLS

It was no easy task to transform hordes of unwanted men into professional fighting machines. After all, many gladiators didn?t volunteer. It took brute force, lots of money, sophisticated training techniques, and an understanding of the human mind to get thousands of men to fight to the death and demonstrate not only power and skill but pride and dignity.

Early in the history of the gladiators, it was wealthy individuals who bought the men, trained them, and organized their combats. The private schools rented out gladiators for a set free and received a standard price for any men killed. Imperial schools supplied gladiators exclusively for the emperor and for official state games. Gladiators? schools were both prison camps and training centers.

ANIMALS IN THE ARENA

Displays of exotic animals were seen in every ancient civilization. Strange and ferocious animals captured in faraway lands were the perfect symbol of a ruler?s power. The Romans, however, weren?t content with passive displays of wild animals, and they added the ingredient that was the hallmark of all their public spectacles?bloodshed. They liked to watch animals fight each other to the death.

The Roman state used three methods to find animals: they were bought from agents throughout the empire who specialized in the trapping and trading of wild animals; the emperor could as a provincial governor to supply them, which the governor promptly did if he wanted to keep his job; or they were acquired through military conquest?victorious generals always brought back exotic creatures among their spoils of war to be used in the games given to celebrate their triumph.7 Another feature of the games was watching animals fight each other. Rhinoceroses fought elephants, their horns and tusks sheathed with sharp iron spikes. Elephants would fight huge wild bison, now extinct, due in part to their popularity in the arena. Bison fought bear; bear fought lion.8

THE SEA BATTLES

The biggest gladiatorial combats in the history of the Roman Empire took place on water. Manmade lakes were dug specifically to stage full-scale naval battles. Some sea battles were staged in the amphitheater, the arena flooded for the occasion. They would release sharks and other sea creatures into the water-filled arena.9 The battle was real enough to the gladiators, who probably didn?t enjoy the thought of hungry fish waiting for them if they fell into the water.

THE END OF THE GLADIATORS

From the first recorded gladiator fights in 264 B.C. to their final abolition almost seven hundred years later, countless thousands died in the arena, all victims of some of the greatest exhibitions of brutality in history.10 Like all great empires, Rome reached the height of its power and then, over a long period of time, began to collapse. In A.D. 404, a tragic event finally put an end to the gladiators. A Christian monk named Telemachus jumped into an arena in Rome and tried to separate two fighters. The crowd went berserk, climbed over the walls into the arena, and tore the monk limb from limb. In response to this very ugly incident, the emperor Honorius immediately and permanently banned all gladiator combats. The era of the gladiator was over.