The Rise Of Gladiatorial Combat In Rome Essay, Research Paper

The Rise of Gladiatorial Combat in Rome

Gladiatorial contests (munera gladitoria), hold a central place in our

perception of Roman behavior. They were also a big influence on how Romans

themselves ordered their lives. Attending the games was one of the practices

that went with being a Roman. The Etruscans who introduced this type of

contest in the sixth century BC, are credited with its development but its the

Romans who made it famous. A surviving feature of the Roman games was when a

gladiator fell he was hauled out of the arena by a slave dressed as the Etruscan

death-demon Charun. The slave would carry a hammer which was the demon’s

attribute. Moreover, the Latin term for a trainer-manager of gladiators

(lanista), was believed to be an Etruscan word. (4:50) Gladiators of Ancient

Rome lived their lives to the absolute fullest.

Gladiatorial duels had originated from funeral games given in order to

satisfy the dead man’s need for blood, and for centuries their principle

occasions were funerals. The first gladiatorial combats therefore, took place

at the graves of those being honored, but once they became public spectacles

they moved into amphitheaters. (2:83) As for the gladiators themselves, an aura

of religious sacrifice continued to hang about their combats. Obviously most

spectators just enjoyed the massacre without any remorseful reflections. Even

ancient writers felt no pity, they were aware that gladiators had originated

from these holocausts in honor of the dead. What was offered to appease the

dead was counted as a funeral rite. It is called munus (a service) from being a

service due. The ancients thought that by this sort of spectacle they rendered

a service to the dead, after they had made it a more cultured form of cruelty.

The belief was that the souls of the dead are appeased with human blood, they

use to sacrifice captives or slaves of poor quality at funerals. Afterwards it

seemed good to obscure their impiety by making it a pleasure. (6:170) So after

the acquired person had been trained to fight as best they can, their training

was to learn to be killed! For such reasons gladiators were sometimes known as

bustuarii or funeral men. Throughout many centuries of Roman history, these

commemorations of the dead were still among the principle occasions for such

combats. Men writing their wills often made provisions for gladiatorial duels

in connection with their funerals. Early in the first century AD, the people of

Pollentia forcibly prevented the burial of an official, until his heirs had been

compelled to provide money for a gladiators’ show. (1:174)

It was in Campania and Lucania that the gladiatorial games came to their

full development and took on their classical form. In these new surroundings

they took root and flourished, as can be seen in fourth century BC, tomb

paintings. These pictures show helmeted gladiators carrying shields and lances,

covered with wounds and dripping with blood. (2:84) For Rome a decisive moment

in gladiatorial history was reached in 246 BC, the year when the first Punic War

began. At the funeral of Brutus Pera, his two sons for the first time exhibited,

in the cattle market, three simultaneous gladiatorial combats. By 216 BC the

number of fights given on a single occasion had risen to twenty two.(14:16) In

105 BC the two consuls of the year made gladiatorial games official. There

were no doubts of religious tendency, but the purpose of Roman spectacles, were

a public display of power, that power was primarily military, and also to

compensate the soft Greek culture which now was abroad. (8:98)

The Gladiators

Those compelled to fight gladiator duels included prisoners of war,

slaves and condemned criminals. Among them were numerous followers of the new

Christian faith. During this time persecution fell heavily on their faith, many

won immortal fame as martyrs. Fighting in the arena was one of the sentences

earned by the sacrilege accused against members of the Christian religion

because of their refusal to sacrifice to the emperor. It was written that these

Christians were forced, as gladiatorial novices to run the gauntlet. At other

times they were thrown to the wild beasts. Criminals that were used had

committed crimes that carried a death sentence or harsh manual labor. The

crimes which led to the arena were murder, treason, robbery and arson.

Criminals sentenced to forced labor were often obliged to serve as gladiators,

and were sentenced to three years of combat and two years in the schools.

Sometimes penalties were differentiated according to social class, thus for

certain crimes which in the case of slaves would involve execution, free men or

freedmen (ex-slaves) were condemned to fight in the arena instead. This did not

of course make them gladiators, unless they were trained first, as those

required to provide this sort of sport not always were. And indeed as

gladiators became more expensive in the second century AD the use of untrained

criminals in the amphitheater increased.(7:537) Most gladiators, at Rome and

elsewhere were slaves, but in addition there were always some free men who

became gladiators because they wanted to. The profession was an alternative to

being a social outcast. They were generally derived from the lowest ranking

category of free persons, namely the freedman who had themselves been slaves or

were the son of slaves. Free fighters were more sought after than slaves,

presumably because they shower greater enthusiasm in the arena. Such a

volunteer was offered a bonus if he survived the term of his contract, yet he

still had to swear the terrible oath of submission to be burnt with fire,

shackled with chains, whipped with rods and killed with steel like the rest of

the gladiators. For the period of his engagement, he had become no more than a

slave. (7:539)

Majestic Exhibitions and Schools

There seemed no end to public entertainment’s of one sort or another at Rome.

First there were the regular functions. The number of days in each year given up

to annual games and spectacles of one sort or another in the city was

startlingly large, and increased continually. Already 66 in the time of

Augustus, it had risen to 135 under Marcus Aurelius, and 175 or more in the

fourth century. Gladiatorial amusement had become an essential feature of the

services a ruler had to provide, in order to maintain his popularity and his job.

Emperors themselves had to attend the shows. Emperors watching the shows were

distinct, vulnerable, and subject to public pressures which could not be

displayed elsewhere. That was why the games were not popular with a few rulers

such as Marcus Aurelius. He directed that if a gladiator was freed as a result

of popular outcry in the amphitheater the liberation was to be annulled.

Aurelius found the sport boring and indeed he was unenthusiastic about Roman

entertainment in general. (10:87)

The teaching of gladiators was highly elaborate affair involving

expertise appreciated by those members of the public who attended the games for

something more than blood and thrills. Gladiators were trained at gladiator

schools established during the late Republic at the time of Sulla 138-78 BC.

(2:86) Novices practiced with wooden swords on a man of straw or a wooden post.

The weapons used in more adept practice were heavier than those used in the

arena. Discipline was severe, with ruthless punishments. The barracks they

lived in were so low inmates could only sit or lie.(3:68) Breaking any rules

was not tolerated and resulted in strict reprimanding: shackles, flogging or

even death. (2:86) The main objective of the schools were to produce the best

possible fighters for the arena, thus scrupulous attention was invested in

gladiator health. Their schools were situated in favorable climates, and

equipped with first class doctors. The schools were also provided with resident

medical consultants to check the men’s diet. Gladiators were called hordearii,

barley men, because of the amount of barley that they ate, a muscle building

food. (12:111)

The Types of Gladiators

From Republican times onward, foreign prisoners were made to fight with

their own weapons and in their own styles. Many of these men, were merely

prisoners herded into the arena, but various classes of professional gladiators

likewise came from this category. Such, for example was the origin of the

gladiators known as the Samnites. Generally regarded as the prototypes of all

Rome’s gladiators, they are said to have come into existence after its Samnite

enemies introduced a splendid new type of military equipment in 310 BC.

Gladiators were ranked in different categories according to their fighting style

and the type of weapon they used. These Samnites wore the heavy, magnificent

armor of soldiers. It included a large shield (scutum), a leather or partly

metal greave (ocrea) on the left leg, and a visored helmet (galea) with huge

crests and plumes. To these were added sword (gladius) or lance (hasta), and

the sleeve on the right arm which was part of a gladiators general

equipment.(11:121) Sectores were armed with a sword and mace loaded with lead.

Thraces carried a curved scimitar of varying shape, and a small square or round

shield. Myrmilliones (?Guals’) carried a shield and a short scythe and wore a

distinctive fish ornament on their helmets. The Retiarii were exceptionally

uncovered, except sometimes for a head band. They carried a trident in one hand

and a net in the other. Because the throwing of a net as a method of combat,

was second rate the Retarii were inferior in status to the ranks, and thus had

the worst living quarters. (2:86) The Myrmillo could fight against the Thracian

or against the Retiarius or net fighter. But the principle opponent of the

Retiarius was the Secutor.(12:109)

The Procedure of the Arena

Gladiatorial shows were intensively promoted and advertised to raise

public attention. Descriptions of upcoming contests, appeared on walls and on

the grave stones beside main roads. The opening ceremonies began the day before

the fights. It was then that the supporter of the show donated a splendid feast

to the contestants about to appear on the following day. The proceedings of the

murderous day began with a chariot drive and parade. Led and presented by the

sponsor of the games. The gladiators displayed themselves in uniforms topped by

cloaks dyed purple with gold embroidery. Climbing down their chariots, they

marched around the arena, followed by slaves carrying their arms and armor.

Gladiators, especially those who belonged to the emperor’s own troop, were often

finely equipped. When the combatants arrived opposite the emperor’s platform,

they extended their right hands towards him and cried ?Hail, emperor, greetings

from men about to die!’ (Ave, imperator, morituri te salutant!) (7:538)

The games often opened with a convicted criminal being thrown to a lion.

The criminal was given a small sword, and if he could kill the lion his life was

spared. Another way in which they opened the games was to tie the criminal to a

pillar and lower him into a pit of hungry beasts. After these morbid killings

took place, the animal events would take center stage. The most common of these

fights would be a lion against bear. To make the beast ready for fighting they

would starved the animals and poked them with sticks while in the cage.(5:17)

These events were followed by a break, during this break Gladiatores Meridiane

took place. This event consisted of a fully armed gladiator against an unarmed

man. The object was simple, to kill your opponent, the winner went on to fight

the next combatant. The overall winner was the person that was standing in the

end.(2:88) The afternoon brought about the beginning of the gladiatorial events.

Staged with a dramatic sense of climax, the afternoon started with second rate

displays that were bloodless. These mock fighters were called

paegniarii.(1:176) After these mock battles came the real fights, the tamest of

these would be the hand to hand combats with one opponent. However, most of the

contests were worst, ranging from armed fighters against unarmed, two criminals

versus a gladiator, and even a group of gladiators versus another group.

While the fighters were at grips, their trainers (lanista) stood beside

them and hounded them on much like a modern boxers trainer would. Meanwhile the

crowd shouted commands of their own including beat, kill and burn. When a man

fell, the herald raised their trumpets, and spectators yelled ?Got him! He’s had

it!’ (habet, hoc habet). The fallen fighter if he was in a state to move, laid

down his shield, and raised one finger of his left hand for mercy. The decision

whether his life should be spared, rested with the provider of the games, but

he generally let the crowd make the decision. Thumbs up, and a waving of

handkerchiefs, meant his life would be spared, thumbs down and he would be

killed without hesitation. While African boys raked over the bloodstained sand,

fallen gladiators were taken away. A Charon would verify the gladiators death

and finish him off it was necessary. The costumes of the Charon were designed

to look like Mercury, divine guide of dead men’s souls to the infernal

regions.(10:167)

If a fighter’s performance had not given satisfaction, or if he was a

criminal whose survival was not desired, his life was sometimes risked again on

the same day by orders for a repeat performance, against specially introduced

understudies. When neither party won and both were spared, each was described

as stans missus, and such a result was often recorded on inscriptions. The

victorious gladiators were presented with palm branches as a prize, and in Greek

lands of the Empire they were given a wreath or crown in addition or instead.

Both palms and crowns are often shown on funeral monuments. The giver of the

games also provided prize money, according to scales stipulated in the

gladiators’ contracts. (10:169)

The Arenas

In early times gladiators’ duels took place in whatever public places a

town might posses. But then , under the emperors, the characteristic place for

such a contest was the amphitheater. This was an oval auditorium surrounded by

rows of seats facing on to the arena, as in modern bull rings, absorbing the

blood of slaughtered men and beasts. The first permanent amphitheater known to

us is not in Rome but in Campania, the country which inherited the gladiatorial

games from Eturia and passed them on to the Romans. (13:225) The largest and

most famous of all such buildings was initiated by the Flavian dynasty. Opened

by Titus in AD 80, this Colosseum is one of the most marvelous buildings in the

world. Its massive overall measurements are 187 by 155 meters, of which the

space for the arena itself comprises 86 by 54 meters. There was accommodation

for perhaps 45,000 sitting spectators and at least 5,000 more willing to stand.

Underneath the arena is a labyrinth of passages for stage effects, pens for wild

beasts, storage rooms and the mechanism by which scenery and other apparatus

were hoisted into the arena. The emperor’s platform was at the center of one of

the long sides, facing across to the portion of the auditorium reserved for

magistrates and the holder of the games. There were also places for priests,

who also attended these bloodthirsty sports. (13:227) The formula of the

collosseum helped to mold renaissance styles. In the eight century they said

that:

As long as it stands,

Rome will stand;

when it falls, Rome will fall;

when Rome falls, the world will fall

The colosseum has often been raided, but has never fallen. It has been made to

serve many purposes, many of which are ironic. These have included sacred

occasions, church services, and plays. Thus through all the depredation the

colosseum has faced over the years inside and outside of the arena, this

indestructible building still towers over the city today. (13:230)

The Gladiator in Society

The reputation of gladiators in the eyes of the public was curiously

mixed. For one thing they were feared. Society was never able to forget for

very long that the gladiators were a potential danger to society. So, of course

were the masses of slaves in general, and that is why their crimes were so

savagely punished, if one slaved murdered his master, the whole household had to

die. But by training the gladiators they spared the rest of the slaves family,

and forced him to fight for his life in front of the community he violated.

Moreover their legal and moral position in the community was one of complete

shame. When a gladiator was killed, his corpse was not permitted honorable to

be buried, unless it was claimed by his family or a friend. (9:91)

However there is ample proof of the admiration and indeed excitement

that the gladiators aroused. Gladiators became so ingrained in the Roman mind

and soul that they believed in superstitions that resulted from munera. It was

believed that the warm blood of a slaughtered gladiator would cure epilepsy.

When newly married women, parted their hair with a gladiators spear, it brought

good luck if this had belonged to a man mortally wounded in the arena. (8:276)

Gladiators were also seen highly upon by women, graffiti at the Pompeii

amphitheater reveal that members of the profession were loved with the

passionate infatuation which teenage females have for pop singers today.

Although gladiators lived relatively short lives it was possible to win

liberation and retire on receipt of the symbolical wooden sword (rudis). It was

also noted that some ex-gladiators moved upwards into respectable smart circles

of local bourgeoisie’s (9:96)

Opposition and Abolition

It was probably assumed that the munera would go on forever, and that

nothing would stop their growth. With the rise of Christianity a religious

presence lingered about such contests once again. The Roman ruling classes

began to view these contest with a favorable eye. The excuse of encouragement

to warlike toughness continued to be put forward until the eve of the Middle

Ages, although it started to become lame and inhumane. Another purpose present

in the minds of Rome’s rulers was the desire that potentially unruly and

dangerous city population should be amused and kept quiet. They should be given

entertainment that they wanted, no matter how disgusting if might be.

The games gradually lost its original intentions and connections to the

earlier funeral games. Once defenseless human beings are thrown to wild

animals, the original purpose is lost, the purpose now is blood-thirsty

spectators viewing inhumane, unjust executions. (2:87) The new religion however

ended them for good. With the rise of emperor Constantine and Christianity came

the fall of the gladiatorial spectacles. In AD 326, Constantine abolished

gladiators’ games altogether. He also stated that all criminals who would have

in the past have been enrolled for the games must in the future be condemned to

forced labor in the mines instead. By the end of the fourth century,

gladiatorial shows had disappeared from the Eastern Empire. (2:87)

Bibliography

1. Cowell, F. Everyday Life in Ancient Rome. London: B.T Batsford Ltd., 1961.

2. Dining, M. A History of Physical Education: Ancient Rome. Toronto: Captus

Press, 1987.

3. Grant, M. The World of Rome. London: Trinity Press, 1960.

4. Hopkins, K Murderous Games. History Today v33 16-22 1983.

5. Harris, H. Sport in Greece and Rome. New York: Cornell University Press,

1972.

6. Hopkins, K. Death and Renewal. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1983.

7. Jory, E Gladiators in the Theatre. Classical Quarterly v36 537-9 1986.

8. Koestler, A. The Gladiators. New York: Macmillan, 1947.

9. Scullard, H. Festival and Ceremonies of the Roman Empire. New York: Cornell

University Press. 1981

10. Whyte-Mellville, G. A Tale of Rome and Judea The Gladiators. New York:

Longmans Green, 1989.

11. Mattingly, H. Roman Imperial Civilization. London: Edward Arnold

publication. 1959

12. Weirdmann, T. Emperors and Gladiators. London: Routledge Press, 1992

13. Yonah, M Illustrated Enclylopedia of the Classical World. New York: Harper

and Roe Pub, 1975.

14. Wilkonson, L. The Roman Experience, Anchor Press, 1975.

15. Compton’s Interactive Encyclopedia, Softkey Multimedia, 1996.