Gladiators, Chariots, and the Roman Games

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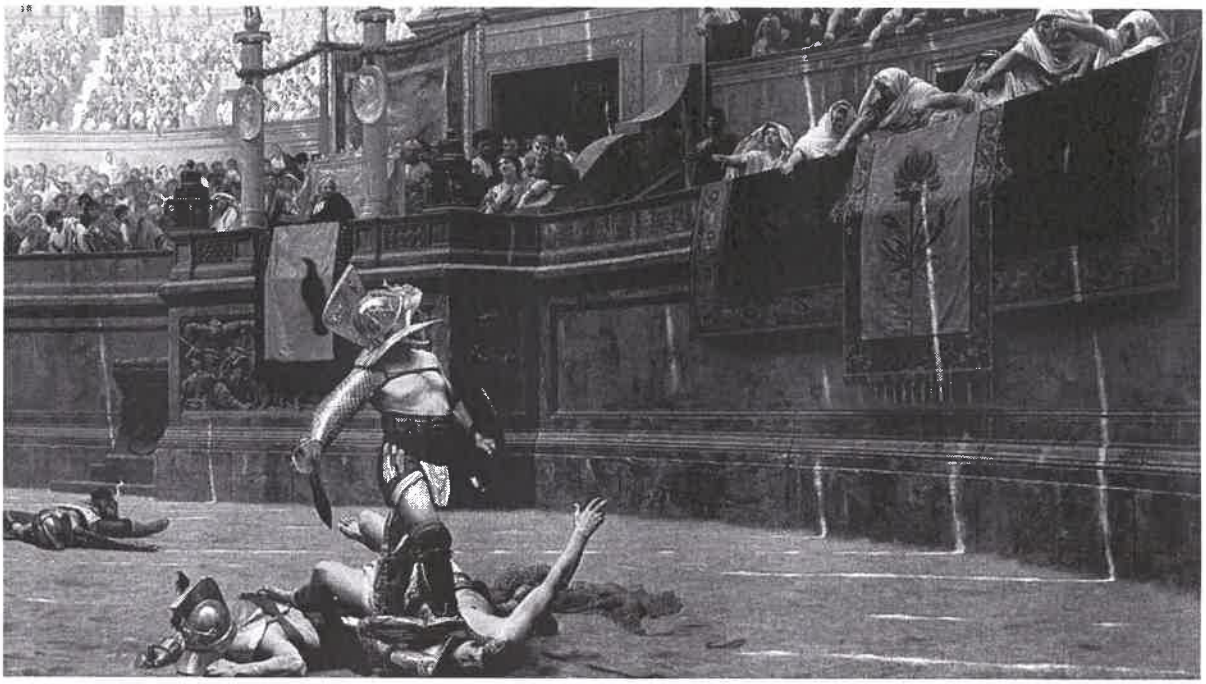

This is an 1872 painting by French painter Jean-Léon Gérôme titled Pollice Verso (translated into English as Thumbs Down). It shows the priestesses of Rome's religion deciding if a fallen gladiator in the arena should die. They would use a thumbs down gesture. The painting had a strong influence on the director Ridley Scott's decision to make the movie Gladiator. Image of painting courtesy of the Phoenix Art Museum.

Two men get their weapons ready. An excited crowd of Romans cheers loudly in anticipation. Both combatants realize full well that this day might be their last. They are gladiators, men who fight to the death for the enjoyment of others.

As the two gladiators circle each other, each knows that his goal is to injure or trap his opponent rather than to kill him quickly. What's more, the fight must last long enough to please the crowd.

The gladiators jab swords and swing clubs. They sweat in the hot sun. Sand and dirt fly. Suddenly, one gladiator traps the other with a net and threatens to kill him with a three-pronged weapon. The victor waits for a sign from the crowd. If the losing gladiator has put up a good fight, the crowd might choose to spare his life — and the vanquished gladiator will live to fight another day. But if the crowd is unhappy with the losing fighter — as was usually the case — its dissatisfaction meant slaughter.

In ancient Rome, death had become a form of entertainment.

Let the games begin

The Etruscans of northern Italy originally held public games, called ludi, as a sacrifice to the gods. The games featured such events as gladiator battles and chariot races.

The Romans continued the practice, holding games roughly 10 to 12 times in an average year. Paid for by the emperor, the games were used to keep the poor and unemployed entertained and occupied. The emperor hoped to distract the poor from their poverty in the hopes that they would not rebel against him.

Over time, the games became more spectacular and elaborate, as emperors felt compelled to outdo the previous year's competitions. The games involved more participants, occurred more frequently and became more expensive.

The Coliseum

In Rome, the gladiatorial contests were held in the Coliseum. This was a huge stadium that first opened in 80 C.E., about 2,000 years ago. Located in the middle of the city, the Coliseum was circular in shape with three levels of arches around the outside. In height, the Coliseum was as tall as a modern 12-story building; it held 50,000 spectators.

Like many modern sports stadiums, the Coliseum had special private seats for the wealthy and powerful. The upper level was reserved for the commoners. Under the floor of the Coliseum was a maze of rooms, hallways and cages where weapons were stored and animals and gladiators waited for their turn to perform.

The Coliseum was also watertight and could be flooded to hold naval battles. Special drains allowed water to be pumped in and released. But naval battles were rarely held there because the water caused serious damage to the basic structure of the Coliseum.

The gladiators themselves were usually slaves, criminals or prisoners of war. Occasionally, the gladiators were able to fight for their freedom. Criminals who were sentenced to death were sometimes thrown into the arena without a weapon to serve their sentence. Some people, including women, actually volunteered to be gladiators.

They were willing to risk death for the chance of fame and glory. Many gladiators went to special schools that trained them how to fight. A few gladiators boxed. They used metal gloves to increase cutting and bleeding.

Some gladiatorial contests included animals such as bears, rhinos, tigers, elephants and giraffes. Most often, hungry animals fought other hungry animals. But sometimes hungry animals fought against gladiators in contests called venationes ("wild beast hunts"). On rare occasions, the animals were allowed to attack and eat a live human who was tied to a stake.

Bread and circuses

Romans loved chariot races, which were held on special racetracks called circuses. The most famous circus, which was in Rome, was the Circus Maximus. In chariot races, two- or four-horse chariots ran seven laps totaling anywhere from three to five miles.

Roman games included other horse-related events. Some races with horses and riders resembled today's thoroughbred horse racing. In one type of race, riders began the competition on horseback but later dismounted and ran on foot to the finish.

As the Roman Empire started its decline, the author Juvenal noted, "The people are only anxious for two things: bread and circuses." In writing this, he was poking fun at the Romans for eating free food while enjoying gory battles. Juvenal believed the people would rather be entertained than engage with more important problems.