

Gladiator Fighting In Roman Times

In the book “Social Man: Communities Past and Present”, A.J. Koutsoukis wrote about gladiator fighting in Roman circuses or arenas: “*The Romans seemed to be fascinated by violence, and staged great demonstrations of fighting in public arenas. Sometimes men fought against men, at other times against animals. They were cheered by bloodthirsty crowds who were thrilled by the spectacle of violence and death...*”

Often a gladiator who was beaten would ask for mercy before the death thrust. If the spectators waved handkerchiefs, he was likely to be spared, but if the thumbs-down sign was given, he was killed then and there...

Sometimes, for the sake of variety, a gladiator would have to fight a wild beast. A lion would be starved until it was crazy with hunger, then let loose on a secutor. The gladiator might kill the lion and so live to see another day, but if he lost, he would be torn to pieces and eaten while the crowd roared and shouted. Officials who ran the events in the arenas were always keen to try new events to satisfy a crowd that always shouted for more.

*A common form of entertainment in the arena was the matching of wild beasts in fights to the death. A lion might be matched with a tiger, or an elephant pitted against a rhinoceros.”*¹

The World Book Encyclopedia states: “*Most gladiators were prisoners of war, slaves or criminals condemned to fight in these contests. However, some freemen fought for money and fame, and knights, senators, and even women occasionally fought...These cruel battles were justified as hardening Roman citizens to the sight of human bloodshed, so they could endure war better. The battles were finally banned about AD. 404 by Emperor Honorius.*”²

The New Encyclopaedia Britannica records: “*At shows in Rome these exhibitions became wildly popular and increased in size from three pairs at the first known exhibition in 264 BC (at the funeral of a Brutus) to 300 pairs at the time of Julius Caesar (d. 44 BC). Hence the shows extended from one day to as many as a hundred, under the emperor Titus while the emperor Trajan in his triumph (AD 107) had 500 pairs of gladiators...With the coming of Christianity, gladiatorial shows began to fall into disfavour. The emperor Constantine I actually abolished gladiatorial games in AD 325, but apparently without much effect since they were again abolished by the emperor Honorius (393-423) and may perhaps even have continued for a century after that.*”³

The historians Sinnigen and Boak suggest that Eastern Emperor Anastasius who reigned from 491 to 518 A.D. banned fights between gladiators and wildbeasts.⁴

The Celts engaged in gladiator fighting also

Athenaeus recorded the ancient writer Poseidonius stated the Celts had gladiator fights also: “*The Celts sometimes have gladiatorial contests during dinner. Having assembled under arms, they indulge in sham fights and practise feights with one another; sometimes they proceed even to the point of wounding each other, and then, exasperated by this, if the company does not intervene, they go so far as*

¹ A.J. Koutsoukis, “Social Man: Communities Past and Present”, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1978, pages 136-138.

² “The World Book Encyclopedia”, Volume 8, World Book Inc, Chicago, 2002, page 206.

³ “The New Encyclopaedia Britannica”, Volume 5, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Chicago, 2002, pages 291-292.

⁴ William Sinnigen and Arthur Boak, “A History of Rome to A.D. 565”, Collier Macmillan, New York, 1977, page 464.

to kill. In ancient times, he continues, we observe that when whole joints of meat were served the best man received the thigh. But if another claimed it, they stood up to fight it out in single combat to the death.”⁵

Cicero on gladiator fighting in the Roman Republic

In his “Tusculan Disputations” (Book 2, 17, 41), the Roman senator and statesman Cicero (106-43 B.C.) wrote about gladiator fighting: “Look at gladiators, who are either ruined men or barbarians, what blows they endure! See, how men, who have been well trained, prefer to receive a blow rather than basely avoid it! How frequently it is made evident that there is nothing they put higher than giving satisfaction to their owner or to the people! Even when weakened with wounds they send word to their owners to ascertain their pleasure: if they have given satisfaction to them they are content to fall. 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? Such is the force of training, practice and habit. Shall then the Samnite, filthy fellow, worthy of his life and place, be capable of this, and shall a man born to fame have any portion of his soul so weak that he cannot strengthen it by systematic preparation? A gladiatorial show is apt to seem cruel and brutal to some eyes, and I incline to think that it, is so, as now conducted. But in the days when it was criminals who crossed swords in the death struggle, there could be no better schooling against pain and death at any rate for the eye, though for the ear perhaps there might be many.”

Note Cicero records here:

- gladiators were captured foreigners or what he called “ruined men”.
- in previous times, gladiators were condemned criminals.
- he and some others believed gladiatorial shows were cruel and brutal during his time.
- but he approved of gladiatorial fights between condemned criminals because these supposedly taught Roman spectators how to face pain and death.

In his writing “On behalf of Milo”, Cicero wrote: “For if in gladiatorial combats where the fate of the lowest class of mankind is concerned, it is natural in us even to dislike the quaking suppliant who craves permission to live, while we are anxious to save the courageous and spirited who hotly fling themselves on death, and pity more those who look not for our pity than those who importune us for it, how much the rather should we do this when it is for gallant citizens we do it?”⁶

Here we see that even in the first century B.C., at least some Romans had cruel attitudes to gladiators.

Seneca on gladiators

In his Epistle 70, the Roman statesmen Seneca (approx 4 B.C.-65 A.D.) wrote about men committing suicide so they could avoid fighting as gladiators. One gladiator was being trained to fight wild animals. Seneca wrote: “For example, there was lately in a training-school for wild-beast gladiators a German, who was making ready for the morning exhibition; he withdrew in order to relieve himself, the only thing which he was allowed to do in secret and without the presence of a

⁵ Athenaeus, “Deipnosophistae”, Book 4, 154: a-b and F.H.G. iii, 259.

⁶ Cicero, “On Behalf of Milo”, 92.

guard. While so engaged, he seized the stick of wood, tipped with a sponge, which was devoted to the vilest uses, and stuffed it, just as it was, down his throat; thus he blocked up his windpipe, and choked the breath from his body. That was truly to insult death! Yes, indeed; it was not a very elegant or becoming way to die; but what is more foolish than to be over-nice about dying...

Lately a gladiator, who had been sent forth to the morning exhibition, was being conveyed in a cart along with the other prisoners: nodding as if he were heavy with sleep, he let his head fall over so far that it was caught in the spokes; then he kept his body in position long enough to break his neck by the revolution of the wheel. So he made his escape by means of the very wagon which was carrying him to his punishment.

During the second event in a sham sea-fight one of the barbarians sank deep into his own throat a spear which had been given him for use against his foe. 'Why, oh why,' he said, 'have I not long ago escaped from all this torture and all this mockery? Why should I be armed and yet wait for death to come?' This exhibition was all the more striking because of the lesson men learn from it that dying is more honourable than killing."⁷

Here we see that:

- a) gladiators included Germans and barbarians. Barbarians would be either people from outside of the Roman Empire or from nations conquered by Rome.
- b) some gladiators fought wild beasts. Others fought in mock sea battles.
- c) guards accompanied gladiators everywhere except when going to the Roman version of a toilet.
- d) because Seneca was a Stoic philosopher, he believed it was right to commit suicide in some circumstances.

Women and senators fighting as gladiators

In his Chapter 15 "The Burning of Rome", the Roman historian Tacitus (approx 56-120 A.D.) records how even women and senators fought as gladiators in the year Rome experienced a large fire: *The same year witnessed gladiatorial displays on a no less magnificent scale than before, but exceeding all precedent in the number of distinguished women and senators disgracing themselves in the arena.*"⁸

King Herod Agrippa 1 had gladiators murder each other

The ancient Jewish historian Josephus records how King Herod Agrippa 1 (reigned A.D. 37-44) built an amphitheatre and had 1,400 gladiators fight to the death there: *"Now, as Agrippa was a great builder in many places, he paid a peculiar regard to the people of Berytus: for he erected a theatre for them, superior to many others of that sort, both in sumptuousness and elegance, as also an amphitheatre, built at vast expenses; and besides these, he built them baths and porticoes, and spared for no costs in any of the edifices, to render them both handsome and large. He also spent a great deal upon their dedication, and exhibited shows upon them, and brought thither musicians of all sorts, and such as made the most delightful music of the greatest variety. He also showed his magnificence upon the theatre, in his great number of gladiators; and there it was that he exhibited the several antagonists, in order to please the spectators; no fewer indeed than seven hundred men to fight with seven hundred*

⁷ Seneca, Epistle 70:20-23 and 25-27.

⁸ Tacitus, "The Annals of Imperial Rome", Chapter 15, 32

*other men; and allotted all the malefactors he had for this exercise, that both the malefactors might receive their punishment, and that this operation of war might be a recreation in peace. And thus were these criminals all destroyed at once.”*⁹

It appears that Josephus, the Pharisee approved of this wicked mass murder of gladiators.

Herod Agrippa I was the king who killed James, the brother of John, persecuted the church and put Peter in prison (see Acts 12:1-3). Agrippa I was later slain by the angel of the Lord (see Acts 12:20-23).

The early Christians hated gladiator fighting

From the time of Christ up until the early 300's A.D., the early Christians said it was wicked for any person to watch gladiator fighting as a form of entertainment. In his Chapter 35 “The Christians Condemn and Detest all Cruelty” in his writing “A Plea for the Christians”, Athenagoras wrote in about 177 A.D. that Christians hated and condemned all gladiator contests, staged fights to the death by animals against other animals or against humans and any watching of these cruel evils: “*Who does not reckon among the things of greatest interest the contests of gladiators and wild beasts, especially those which are given by you. But we, deeming that to see a man put to death is much the same as killing him, have abjured such spectacles. How then, when we do not even look on, lest we should contract guilt and pollution, can we put people to death?*”¹⁰

Athenagoras was previously a professor at Athens before his conversion to Christianity.

In his writing “Apology to Autolycus”, Theophilus of Antioch wrote sometime after 180 A.D. to a learned pagan magistrate called Autolycus about Christian teachings and practices.¹¹ In Chapter 15 “The Innocence of Christians Defended”, Theophilus wrote that Christians taught that people who watch gladiator fights were guilty of sanctioning murder and indirectly partaking in the murderous activities of the gladiators: “*...we are forbidden so much as to witness shows of gladiators, lest we become partakers and abettors of murders.*”¹²

This attitude was probably based on verses like 1 Timothy 5:22 in which God commanded: “***Do not...share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure.***”

Cannibalism also sometimes accompanied gladiator fighting

In his work “Apology”, the early Christian leader Tertullian (155-220 A.D.) condemned gladiator fighting and said that often pagan Romans ate the entrails of bears which had been killed after eating gladiators in the arena: “*Those, too, who at the gladiator shows, for the cure of epilepsy, quaff with greedy thirst the blood of criminals slain in the arena, as it flows fresh from the wound, and then rush off – to whom do they belong? Those, also, who make meals on the flesh of wild beasts at the place of combat – who have keen appetites for bear and stag? That bear in the struggle was bedewed with the blood of the man whom it lacerated: that stag rolled itself in the gladiator's gore. The*

⁹ Josephus, “Antiquities of the Jews”, Book 19, Chapter 7, Point 5.

¹⁰ Athenagoras, “A Plea for the Christians”, Chapter 35.

¹¹ Earle Cairns, “Christianity Through the Centuries”, Sixth Edition, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1966, page 117.

¹² Theophilus, “Apology to Autolycus”, Chapter 15.

entrails of the very bears, loaded with as yet undigested human viscera, are in great request. And you have men rifting up manfled flesh? If you partake of food like this..."¹³

In other words, many pagan Romans became *cannibals* who ate undigested human flesh found in dead bears' bodies.

The broad Bible commands against murder include gladiator-fighting

Even though gladiator fighting was so common and popular throughout the Roman Empire in the time of Jesus and the Apostles, and King Herod Agrippa had built an amphitheatre at Berytus for gladiator fighting, Jesus and the Apostles not once in the New Testament condemn gladiator-fighting. Even when writing to the Christians at Rome where thousands of gladiators were murdered every year, Paul did not once condemn gladiator fighting.¹⁴

But note Jesus and the Apostles condemned murder in verses like Matthew 5:21, Mark 7:21, Romans 1:29, 13:9 and Galatians 5:21. The Biblical commands against murder include gladiator fighting. These commands also cover killing new-born babies – another extremely common practice in Roman times which is not specifically named in the Bible.

The “there is no specific Biblical command” excuse

In his writing “The Shows” or “De Spectaculis”, Tertullian (155-220 A.D.) wrote that at the time he was living, some Christians were saying that because the Scriptures do not specifically command “Do not go to watch the gladiator fights!” God approves of Christians watching these: *“Fortified by this knowledge against heathen views, let us rather turn to the unworthy reasonings of our own people; for the faith of some, either too simple or too scrupulous, demands direct authority from Scripture for giving up the shows, and holds out that the matter is a doubtful one, because such abstinence is not clearly and in words imposed upon God’s servants. Well, we never find it expressed with the same precision, ‘Thou shalt not enter circus or theatre, thou shalt not look on combat or show;’ as it is plainly laid down, ‘Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not worship an idol; thou shalt not commit adultery or fraud.’ But we find that that first word of David bears on this very sort of thing” ‘Blessed,’ he says, ‘is the man who has not gone into the assembly of the impious, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seat of scorners’.*”¹⁵

The circuses in Roman times included the Colosseum¹⁶ and the Circus Flaminius.¹⁷ At the Colosseum, there were gladiator combats, fights between wild animals and humans, wild animal fights and other sadistic events.¹⁸ At the Circus Flaminius, there were gladiator fights and violet horse races in which the riders could physically assault each other.¹⁹ Such physical attacks could result in the death of other charioteers.

¹³ Tertullian, “Apology”, Chapter 9.

¹⁴ Between 72 to 82 A.D., the Roman Emperors Vespasian and Titus built the Colosseum – the scene of thousands of gladiator fights and the death of many Christians. But before then, the Romans used other locations for gladiator fights.

¹⁵ Tertullian, “The Shows” or “De Spectaculis”, Chapter 3.

¹⁶ S. Coupe and B. Jenkins, “Progress of Man”, Rigby, Adelaide, 1972, page 61.

¹⁷ Sinnigen and Boak, page 162.

¹⁸ S. Coupe and B. Jenkins, page 61.

¹⁹ Sinnigen and Boak, page 162.

Therefore, even though the Scriptures do not specifically command: “Do not enter a Roman circus” or “Do not look at a gladiator fight at a Roman circus”, this does not mean God approved of Christians going to watch the gladiator fights in the Colosseum, Circus Flaminius or other arenas or circuses throughout the Roman Empire. As Tertullian states, the broader command **“You shall not murder”** (see Romans 13:9-10 and James 2:11) can be rightly specifically applied to gladiator fights.

In 1 Corinthians 13:6, Paul emphasises that love **“does not rejoice in iniquity...”** In Romans 12:9, God commands: **“...Abhor what is evil...”** Therefore, any Christians who enjoyed watching gladiators murdering each other were sinning against God by acting contrary to 1 Corinthians 13:6 and Romans 12:9.

Tertullian then challenged those Christians who tried to justify evil practices which are not specifically mentioned in the Scriptures but are covered by broader commands or teachings in the Bible: *“How vain, then – nay, how desperate – is the reasoning of persons, who, just because they decline to lose a pleasure, hold out that we cannot point to the specific words or the very place where this abstinence is mentioned, and where the servants of God are directly forbidden to have anything to do with such assemblies! I heard lately a novel defence of himself by a certain play-lover. ‘The Sun.’ said he, ‘nay, God Himself looks down from heaven on the show, and no pollution is contracted.’ Yes, and the sun too, pours down his rays into the common sewer without being defiled. As for God, would that all crimes were hid from His eye, that we might all escape judgment! But He looks on robberies too; He looks on falsehoods, adulteries, frauds, idolatries, and these same shows; and precisely on that account we will not look on them, lest the All-seeing see us. You are putting on the same level, O man, the criminal and the judge; the criminal who is a criminal because he is seen, and the Judge who is a Judge because He sees. Are we set, then, on playing the madman outside the circus boundaries? Outside the gates of the theatre are we bent on lewdness, outside the course on arrogance, and outside the amphitheatre on cruelty, because outside the porticoes, the tiers and the curtains, too, God has eyes? Never and nowhere is that free from blame which God ever condemns...”*²⁰

Tertullian applied general Biblical teachings to gladiator fighting

In Roman times, the Colosseum and other circuses at which gladiators fought were also amphitheatres or arenas. Tertullian wrote about the Roman amphitheatres: *“We shall now see how the Scriptures condemn the amphitheatre. If we can maintain that it is right to indulge in the cruel, and the impious, and the fierce, let us go there. If we are what we are said to be, let us regale ourselves there with human blood. It is good, no doubt, to have the guilty punished. Who but the criminal himself will deny that? **And yet the innocent can find no pleasure in another’s sufferings: he rather mourns that a brother has sinned so heinously as to need a punishment so dreadful. But who is my guarantee that it is always the guilty who are adjudged to the wild beasts, or to some other doom, and that the guiltless never suffer from the revenge of the judge, or the weakness of the defence, or the pressure of the rack?** How much better, then, is it for me to remain ignorant of the punishment inflicted on the wicked, lest I am obliged to know also of the good coming to untimely ends – if I may speak of goodness in the case at all! **At any rate, gladiators not chargeable with crime are offered in sale for the games, that they may become the victims of the public pleasure. Even in the case of those who are judicially condemned to the amphitheatre, what a monstrous thing it is, that, in undergoing their punishment, they, from some less serious delinquency, advance to the criminality of manslayers!** But I mean these remarks for heathen. As to Christians, I shall not insult them by adding another word as to the aversion with which*

²⁰ Tertullian, “The Shows”, Chapter 20.

*they should regard this sort of exhibition; though no one is more able than myself to set forth fully the whole subject, unless it be one who is still in the habit of going to the shows.”*²¹

In the above, Tertullian applied general Scriptural teachings to prove that gladiator fighting was evil in God’s sight. Tertullian used these Biblical teachings even though they did not specifically mention gladiator fighting in their specific contexts.

Also Tertullian’s words reveal the following aspects of gladiator fighting in Roman times.

- a) Many gladiators were criminals who had been condemned to death.
- b) Sometimes innocent men were unjustly condemned as criminals to die as gladiators.
- c) Some men who had not committed crimes were sold to fight as gladiators.
- d) It was a wicked thing for the pagan Romans to force gladiators who were condemned to death for lesser crimes than murder, to murder other gladiators.
- e) Tertullian possibly implies that he used to go to gladiator fights.
- f) Christians should never attend a gladiator fight.

Constantine banned gladiators but compromisers kept it going

In his work “Life of Constantine the Great”, the church historian Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea (264-340 A.D.) wrote that the Christian Emperor Constantine I banned gladiator fights in the Roman Empire: *“Consistently with this zeal he issued successive laws and ordinances, forbidding any to offer sacrifice to idols, to consult diviners, to erect images, or to pollute the cities with the sanguinary combats of gladiators.”*²²

But the fact that Emperor Honorius had to ban gladiator fighting again in 404 A.D. and these cruel fights may have continued for even another century after 404 A.D. is proof of how in the 300’s and possibly 400’s A.D., there was much compromising with evil in the supposedly “Christianised” Roman Empire.

²¹ Tertullian, “The Shows”, Chapter 19.

²² Eusebius of Caesarea, “Life of Constantine the Great”, Book 4, Chapter 25.