



5-15-2011

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Recommended Citation

Cowles, Lauren E. (2011) "The Spectacle of Bloodshed in Roman Society," *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol12/iss1/10>

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The Spectacle of Bloodshed in Roman Society

Abstract

We know relatively little about the role sports played in ancient history. But of all the sports portrayed during antiquity, the gladiatorial combat was one that has been the most commonly portrayed and studied. The spectacle of bloodshed in Roman society is a subject of interest that is generally only viewed in regards to gladiatorial combats. But these spectacles had a wide array of uses. For example, spectacles of death included not only gladiatorial combats but also ritualized executions and animal hunts. These spectacles of death fulfilled a variety of purposes including most predominantly entertainment, but they were also used for the forming of punishments, promoting interacts between the rulers and the ruled and providing meals for the people of Roman society.

The Spectacle of Bloodshed in Roman Society

Lauren Cowles

“The death of humans usually constitutes a spectacle, a disturbing sight which is awful in both senses of the word, an eerie yet intriguing phenomenon demanding acknowledgement and attention.”¹ Despite the death that surrounded their lives, either from battle or as part of religious sacrifices, ancient Romans also viewed the shedding of human blood as entertainment. For example, gladiatorial combats originated as part of wealthy citizen’s funeral ceremonies to symbolize the human struggle to avoid death, but eventually developed into widespread, popular spectacles of bloodshed in Roman society.² Spectacles of death were not only relatively normal events in ancient Rome, but were looked forward to by both the peasant and aristocratic classes and men and women alike. Death as sport was a common occurrence and in fact, Romans of all classes attended, accepted, and enjoyed the games. Throughout the arenas and amphitheatres of Rome, spectacles of death included gladiatorial combats, ritualized executions and animal hunts and these served the purpose of entertaining, punishing the people, serving as an example to other citizens, promoting interactions between the emperor and the ruled and even providing meals and meat rations to Roman citizens. Therefore, it is clear that the spectacle of bloodshed served a practical and significant purpose in Roman society.

Blood shows, known as *munera*, became a spectator sport in ancient Rome, and the main purpose for holding such an event was to entertain the crowds. According to Donald G. Kyle, in his book *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, these spectacles played a major role in the festivals, social life, and public interactions of ancient Roman citizens for over a millennium.³ These events were popular, and Romans of all classes found something redeeming or entertaining about the shows: “[T]he Roman games are *ludi*, amusements, entertainments... and the performers exist for the spectators.”⁴ Many of these spectators saw the bloodshed and death of the gladiators as fun and even relaxing. Romans flocked to the arenas in the thousands. The popularity of these shows can be explained by the Roman love and desire for violence. To exemplify these Roman values, in the spectacles of the Roman amphitheatre the death of the gladiator was not trivial but, instead, was often the entertainment’s climax.⁵ Gladiators often died in these sports and if, by chance, their lives were spared, it was only because the provider of the games wished to spare him.⁶ Romans were attracted to the arena “by the allure of violence, by the exotic and erotic sights, and by an appreciation of the skill and courage of some of the participants...”⁷

Nevertheless, not everyone thought that these shows were entertaining. Lucius Annaeus Seneca, a Stoic philosopher in the 1st century AD wrote:

By chance I went to one of the mid-day shows, expecting some fun, wit and

¹ Donald G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 1998), 1.

² Lynn Hunt et al., *The Making of the West: Peoples and Cultures Volume I To 1740*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2009), 171.

³ Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 2.

⁴ Heather L. Reid, “Was the Roman Gladiator an Athlete?,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 33 (2006): 33.

⁵ Catherine Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 46.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 3.

relaxation... The men have no armour and their entire bodies are exposed to blows, so no one strikes in vain. Many spectators prefer this to the ordinary pairings and even the contests given by popular request. Of course they prefer it! There is no helmet and no shield to stop the weapons... In the morning men are thrown to lions and bears: but it is to the spectators they are thrown at noon.⁸

Seneca wrote these *Moral Letters* to reflect philosophical discourse on Stoic doctrines, and the audience of these letters was Lucilius, whom the letters were addressed to. It is clear that Seneca did not enjoy the severity and violence of the shows. As one of his *Letters* states, he went expecting an “entertainment at which men’s eyes have a break from the slaughter of their fellow men” but instead witnessed the striking brutality of men.⁹ Of course, it is possible that the *Letters* could be subject to some bias. After all, Seneca went to the event, expecting a break from violence, but instead, he found himself at the center of a violent spectacle. Because of his potential shock, he may have been more likely to exaggerate the brutal nature of the spectacles he witnessed.

Besides providing entertainment, these spectacles of blood also served as punishments for Roman citizens, mostly in the form of execution. The writings of the ancient Roman historian Titus Livius (Livy) and the XII Tables of 451 BC show that “in early Rome, while executions were not common, those convicted of treasonous acts were declared *sacri* and could be killed with impunity.”¹⁰ Convicted citizens whose appeals to the assembly failed and who had declined to go into exile faced swift execution by the sword.¹¹ Like the gladiatorial games, these punishments too served as entertainment for the average citizen. For example, Kyle notes that “individually, Romans were drawn to the arena by... the anticipation of the harsh but necessary punishment of others.”¹² Criminals were often executed in humiliating and excruciating ways: crucifixion, burning, death by wild beasts or in pre-determined battle re-enactments were all common methods.¹³ Some of these executions took place in arenas and amphitheatres, but many were often performed in the center of the town, known as the forum, for all Roman citizens to witness. These spectacles of bloodshed were carried out in public often to exhibit the power of the state and to deter potentially disobedient citizens.¹⁴ Therefore, the punitive nature of bloodshed was twofold in purpose: to entertain and to convey a political message.

Strabo, a first century AD historian and the author of *Geography*, witnessed and recorded his account of one of the executions:

And recently in my time, a certain Selurus, called ‘son of Etna,’ was sent to Rome because he had put himself at the lead of an army and for a long time had overrun the area of Etna with frequent raids: I saw him torn to pieces by wild beasts at an organized

⁸ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, “Death as Entertainment,” in *Death in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook*, ed. Valerie M. Hope (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2007), 31, originally published in Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Moral Letters* (1st c. AD) 7.3-4.

⁹ Seneca, *Moral Letters*, 7.3-4.

¹⁰ Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 41.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 3.

¹³ Valerie M. Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2007), 30.

¹⁴ Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 40.

gladiatorial fight in the Forum...¹⁵

Geography, an encyclopedia, was written at the time that the event had occurred, in the early first century AD. Thus, it is subject to less bias and misrepresentation, since the author actually witnessed the event. The author wrote this passage as an entry in his encyclopedia, which was generally used to educate; therefore, he had no need to revise or edit the events which he had witnessed. Thus, his description remains a reliable source of information about the executions.

Through such punishments or in the gladiatorial games, a large number of animals, from elephants to ostriches, were killed.¹⁶ The Romans did not let the pounds of fresh meat go to waste, and instead, they ate the deceased animals. Indeed, the Romans were drawn by “the sounds and smells of the arena ... in anticipation of a meat meal.”¹⁷ Among Romans, animal flesh was a symbolically stimulating and valuable commodity. This was most likely because the diet of most Romans, or at least those who lived poorly, was protein-deficient and, for most Romans, experiencing a meal consisting of any meat was an uncommon occurrence. Thus, the spectacles at the arena were anxiously awaited for the sources of food that they provided to Roman citizens.

Furthermore, the spectacle of gladiatorial combats, ritualized executions and wild beast hunts served the purpose of creating interactions between the emperor and those whom he ruled. These spectacles and entertainments were usually funded by leading politicians who used these shows and games as a way of winning popular support among the people of ancient Rome. For example, in the Late Roman Republic, the dictator Lucius Cornelius Sulla used blood spectacles to “celebrate his victories, legitimate his extraordinary political position and establish him at the centre of power.”¹⁸ The citizens who attended these combats and beast hunts also were able to interact more personally with their leaders, given that all “became players in a communal sporting drama.”¹⁹ By way of wild beast spectacles, emperors were also able to feed and entertain their people, something that citizens demanded of them.²⁰ Many emperors and rulers attended these games and increasingly hosted these spectacles as a way of gaining the support of Roman citizens. For example, Gaius Gracchus, seeking popular support for his office as tribune, took down the barriers around an arena, which allowed all Roman citizens to enter the gladiatorial combats for free.²¹ Also at these spectacles, citizens used their proximity to the current emperor or ruler to demonstrate their opinions participate in riots. At these games, “citizens staged protests... to express their wishes to the emperors, who were expected to attend.”²² Thus, the spectacles served an important political purpose for the emperors of Rome.

It is clear that in ancient Rome, the spectacle of bloodshed served many functions. Gladiatorial combats were viewed as a sport, which provided entertainment for the citizens of Rome. The fulfillment of punishments was carried out through ritualized executions for all of Rome to witness, which not only entertained the crowds but also discouraged citizens from

¹⁵ Strabo, “Death as Entertainment,” in *Death in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook*, ed. Valerie M. Hope (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2007), 30, originally published in Strabo, *Geography* (1st c. AD), 1.

¹⁶ Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 187.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁸ Geoffrey S. Sumi, “Spectacles and Sulla’s Public Image,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 51 (2002): 415.

¹⁹ Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 192.

²⁰ Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 194.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

²² Hunt et al., *The Making of the West*, 172.

disobeying. Likewise, animal hunts and the slaying of beasts as spectacles served the purpose of entertaining and also provided food for the malnourished populace of Rome. All of these events and elements brought the common masses into contact with the current ruler of Rome, which increased interactions between them. Altogether, “Romans confronted the limits of the human versus the natural world in beast combats, the limits of morality, law, and social order in executions, and the limits of human mortality in the gladiatorial *munus*.”²³ Given the nature of these blood spectacles, it is no surprise that the enduring image of Rome, which persists to this day, will forever be marked by the bloodshed of the arena. Therefore, it is evident that the gladiatorial games and other spectacles of death served many purposes beyond sheer brutality.

²³ Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 10.