4

The Life of the Gladiator

The first *munera* were probably fairly simple and straightforward. With the growth of the combats in size, frequency and complexity, institutional support was needed to provide for such development, to locate, house and train likely gladiators and to arrange the facilities required for the show. Gladiatorial schools, or *ludi*, were established, run by a *lanista*, who was responsible for the acquisition and training of new gladiators. The importance of spectacle for Roman politics created new questions about what sort of relationship the spectacle professionals would have with the sources and agents of power. Would gladiators themselves eventually control the show? What kinds of life expectations did the arena performers have?

Where Did Gladiators Come From?

There were three main sources for the performers in the arena: slaves, criminals, and free volunteers. The chief supply of Roman slaves during the Republic and early empire was Roman warfare: enemies of Rome captured on the field of battle were typically sold as slaves. The skills gained as former soldiers could be adapted for performance in gladiatorial matches. As the population of slaves grew, the number of *vernae* or people born in slavery also increased, creating a local source of unfree labor that could, potentially, be channeled into the arena as into other occupations. Criminals also appeared on the sands, both those who had been condemned to death in the arena as well as those who had been condemned to the gladiatorial school, a lesser penalty. Some performers were neither slaves nor criminals, but chose freely to become gladiators; the legal liabilities this entailed may, for some, have been balanced by the positive benefits that came to some gladiators. Shockingly, some elites chose to enter the arena, including some emperors; the scandal generated by this reversal of social standing led to legislation against the occurrence.

Prisoners of war

Gladiators were created by the enactment of Roman justice and Roman authority: the first gladiators were probably prisoners of war, and war would prove to be an ongoing major source for combatants in the arena. The Junii and the Aemilii Lepidi, sponsors of the first recorded *munera* in Rome, had family members renowned among Roman generals and thus probably had access to such prisoners. Use of prisoners of war also seems to have been the custom at the early Campanian banquet combats. The armature of some gladiators may be connected to the specialized weaponry of enemy combatants, such as the Samnite, the *Gallus* and the *Thraex* as well as the *essedarius* introduced by Caesar, who had personal battlefield experience of this British style of fighting from chariots. Resistance to Rome in war had put these people beyond the circle of Roman obligation. They deserved nothing from Rome; granting them slavery instead of death was considered a gift by the Roman victors. For many of these prisoners, however, death was simply deferred until the spectacle was prepared. Death in such a setting could thus serve as an object lesson about those who opposed Rome's empire. In some instances, however, the use of prisoners of war in the arena was complicated, even for the Romans.

When the last survivors of the second Sicilian slave war surrendered to proconsul Manius Aquilius in 100 BCE, they were taken to Rome and made to fight animals; here the intent was to execute the captives, as punishment for their rebellion against Roman authority. Their resistance continued in the arena as they asserted the right to choose their own method of death and to deny Rome the power to kill them. The choice made by the defiant prisoners was recognized as an honorable one by some of the Roman witnesses; this notion of the "heroic" gladiatorial suicide is also found in other contexts (see below).

> Source: Diodorus Siculus 36.10:[1] Aquillius was sent against the rebels, and by his personal valor won a resounding victory over them . . . a thousand were still left . . . Aquillius at first intended to subdue them by force of arms, but when later, after an exchange of envoys, they surrendered, he released them from immediate punishment and took them to Rome to do combat with wild beasts. There, as some report, they brought their lives to a most glorious end; for they avoided combat with the beasts and cut one another down at the public altars . . . the final survivor died heroically by his own hand.

The emperor Claudius celebrated his conquest of Britannia in 43 CE with a triumph, lavish spectacles, and annual commemorations of the achievement. He extended these honors to include Aulus Plautius, the field general who oversaw the invasion. Here, the prisoners channeled for this purpose seem to become a resource available for state "use."

Source: Dio Cassius 60.30:[2] Plautius for his skilful and successful conduct of the war in Britain not only was praised by Claudius but also obtained an ovation.[3] In the gladiatorial combats many persons took part, not only of the foreign freedmen but also the British captives. He used up many men in this part of the spectacle and took pride in the fact.

After the capture of Jerusalem in 70 CE, Titus delegated the duty of deciding what to do with all the survivors of the siege (those who hadn't been killed by Roman troops as they pillaged the city) to his friend Fronto Haterius. The children were sold as slaves, while the adults met various fates, thousands of them providing an object lesson on the danger of rebellion in the spectacles presented at town after town as the victorious general reasserted Roman control over Judaea. By combining these demonstrative shows with celebrations of the new imperial family, multiple purposes are served.

Source: Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 6. 418:[4] Fronto put to death all the seditious ones and the brigands, information being given by them against each other; he selected the tallest and most handsome of the youth and reserved them for the triumph; of the rest, those over seventeen years of age he sent in chains to the works in Egypt, while multitudes were presented by Titus to the various provinces, to be destroyed in the [arena], by sword [as gladiators] or by wild beasts.

Source: Josephus, *The Jewish War* 7.37–40, 96:[5] During his stay at Caesarea Maritima [in the fall of 70], Titus celebrated his brother's birthday[6] with great splendor, reserving for his honor much of the punishment of his Jewish captives. For the number of those destroyed in contests with wild beasts or with one another or in the flames was more than two thousand five hundred. Yet to the Romans, notwithstanding the myriad forms in which their victims perished, all this seemed too light a penalty. After this, [Titus] Caesar passed to Beirut, a city of Phoenicia and a Roman colony. Here he made a longer stay, displaying still greater magnificence on the occasion of his father's birthday, both in the costliness of the spectacles and in the ingenuity of the various other items of expenditure. Multitudes of captives perished in the same manner as before . . . Leaving from Beirut, Titus exhibited costly spectacles in all the cities of Syria he passed through, making his Jewish captives serve to display their own destruction.

Condemned criminals

Executing, in a spectacular fashion, people who had proven to be dangers to the safety of the state was meant to demonstrate the power of the emperor

and to restore the order that had been challenged by the criminal behavior. More and more elaborate contrivances for killing the condemned were developed under the emperors, culminating in the mythicized narratives seen in chapter 3. Criminals became a resource for spectacle, with more emphasis placed on the potential showmanship of the individual miscreant. The "best" criminals, those whose physical stamina or familiarity with combat promised a "good" show, were reserved for the games in the capital, with imperial administrators mandated to assess the spectacle value of those in custody. Legal evidence suggests that some unauthorized exchange of performance-worthy convicts may have been going on in the provinces; this was to be discouraged, as the emperor should determine the distribution of such resources.

Source: *Digest* 48.19.31:[7] Modestinus, *Punishments*, book 3 . . . The governor should not, at the whim of the people, release persons who have been condemned to the beasts; but if they are of such strength or skill that they can fittingly be displayed to the people of Rome, [the governor] should consult with the emperor [about transferring custody]. The deified Severus and Antoninus wrote in a rescript that condemned persons should not be transferred from one province to another without the emperor's permission.

Different crimes directed the condemned toward spectacle in different ways. Capital offenses entailed the exposure to lethal danger, as convicts were sentenced to the arena or the sword or to the beasts. Being sentenced to the *ludus* or gladiatorial school was a lesser penalty, one involving high-risk servitude but "only" for a limited time period, as spelled out in legislation by the emperor Hadrian.

Source: *Collatio Mosaicarum et Romanarum legum* 11.7:[8] Ulpian, in the eighth book of *The Proconsular Functions*. The late Emperor Hadrian, in a rescript to the Council of Baetica concerning the punishment of cattle-raiders, wrote as follows . . . The terms of the Emperor Hadrian's rescript would imply that labor in the mines is the severer punishment [in comparison to being sentenced to the sword]. Unless, possibly, the Emperor Hadrian meant by the phrase "punishment of the sword" the gladiatorial games. There is, however, a distinction between those sentenced to the sword and those sentenced to the *ludus*; the former are dispatched without delay, or at any rate ought to be dispatched within a year, and this instruction is contained in the Orders. But those condemned to the *ludus* are not necessarily dispatched; they may even, after a time, be restored to freedom, or be discharged from the obligation of being a gladiator; since, after five years, they may be restored to freedom, while, on the expiration of three years, they are permitted to receive their discharge (*rudis*) from the gladiatorial games.

"Bad" emperors were suspected of abusing the judicial supplies for the shows. Gaius Caligula is a particular target of such accusations, in which the excessive emperor reacts inappropriately to resulting shortages. The following two selections may refer to the same event, although different kinds of despotism are in play: in the first, Caligula dehumanizes the prisoners by making them into "food" for animals, even those whose lesser crimes may not have warranted death; in the second, Caligula reaches beyond the criminal supply to draw upon audience members as fodder for the shows.

Source: Suetonius, *Caligula* 27:[9] Having collected wild animals for one of his shows, [Caligula] found butcher's meat too expensive and decided to feed them with criminals instead. He paid no attention to the charge-sheets, but simply stood in the middle of a colonnade, glanced at the prisoners lined up before him, and gave the order; "Kill every man between that bald head and the other one over there!"

Source: Dio Cassius 59.10:[10] The same trait of cruelty led [Caligula] once, when there was a shortage of condemned criminals to be given to the wild beasts, to order that some of the mob standing near the benches should be seized and thrown to them; and to prevent the possibility of their making an outcry or uttering any reproaches, he first caused their tongues to be cut out.

Claudius also was blamed for his seemingly excessive presentation of *munera*, excessive in the high level of mortality exacted on the sands. Claudius tapped a new source of potential victims among the ranks of the low-status informers utilized by his predecessors. These people served in the prosecutions of those charged with *maiestas*, offenses against the "majesty" of Rome, a category of criminal behavior that could be expanded to include snide comments about the emperor or insufficient reverence shown to images of the current or former *princeps*. In exchange for their testimony, informers were eligible to receive a sizeable portion of the estate of those convicted. While slaves and freedmen may indeed have had access to secretive behavior of their owners, they may also have carried resentment because of harsh treatment received over the years and elected to serve as informers for personal motives beyond mere greed. Elite authors did not approve of the practice or the practitioners, but neither did they approve of excessive punishment like that attributed to Claudius.

Source: Dio Cassius:[11] [Claudius] was constantly giving gladiatorial contests; for he took great pleasure in them, so that he even aroused criticism on this score . . . a great many human beings [perished], some of them fighting with one another and others being devoured by the animals. For the emperor detested the slaves and freedmen who in the reigns of Tiberius and Gaius had conspired against their masters, as well as those who had laid information against others without cause or had borne false witness against them, and he therefore got rid of most of them in the manner related . . . Indeed, the number of those who were publicly executed was becoming so large, that the statue of Augustus which stood on the spot was taken elsewhere, so that it should not either seem to be witnessing the bloodshed or else always be covered up.

Slave gladiators and the Spartacan war

There is a good deal of overlap between this category of gladiator and the others; in part because prisoners of war were often sold as slaves to a gladiatorial school, just as those condemned to the *ludus* by criminal conviction were considered slaves legally. More importantly, the taint of becoming a gladiator essentially took away one's free status, even from those who entered the profession voluntarily. One could say that all gladiators were slaves.

Perhaps the most famous slave gladiator is Spartacus, leader of a notoriously dangerous rebellion against Rome from 73–71 BCE. The Spartacan war was the last and perhaps most memorable of a series of major slave wars in the later Roman Republic; this one took place in Italy and was a direct threat to the heartland of the Roman hegemony. Rome's military resources were being stretched thin by civil war and rebellion: Spartacus' efforts followed soon after the war between Rome and her Italian allies in 91–89 BCE and the military coup led by Sulla 83–82 BCE. Pompey was in Spain suppressing the rebellion of Sertorius from 77 and Lucullus was fighting Mithridates, king of Pontus and thorn in the side of Rome's eastern interests. M. Licinius Crassus would use the uprising to establish his military reputation: he and Pompey would jointly force the Senate to grant them the consulship in the wake of their success over the rebels. The prominence of gladiators in the Spartacan war fired the Roman imagination, because of the popularity of gladiatorial combat and its increasing identification with the machinery and imagery of Roman politics. It is after the Spartacan war that we see the first efforts to control gladiators in the capital city, as a recognized danger. And within a generation of Spartacus' death, Roman politicians would marshal gladiators to intimidate their rivals on the streets of Rome.

So what happened? Who was Spartacus and how did he manage to put together such a successful revolt? How and why did he eventually fail? The stories the Romans told themselves about Spartacus are shaped by what they needed to know about this blot on their impressive record of victory and control. None of the ancient authors are sympathetic to the rebellion, but

they do find different nuances in their analyses of motivation and achievement and how they measured up against Roman expectations for authority and military success.

To a certain extent, Rome was culpable for Spartacus and the revolt. Appian claims he started as an auxiliary in the Roman army, while Plutarch suggests that mistreatment by the *lanista* was the catalyst for what was initially an unarmed outbreak.

> Source: Appian, *Civil Wars* 1.116:[12] Spartacus, a Thracian by birth, who had once served as a soldier with the Romans, but had since been a prisoner and sold for a gladiator, and was in the gladiatorial training school at Capua, persuaded about seventy of his comrades to strike for their own freedom rather than for the amusement of spectators.

> Source: Plutarch, *Crassus* 8:[13] A man called Lentulus Batiatus had an establishment for gladiators at Capua. Most of them were Gauls and Thracians. They had done nothing wrong, but, simply because of the cruelty of their owner, were kept in close confinement until the time came for them to engage in combat. Two hundred of them planned to escape, but their plan was betrayed and only seventy-eight, who realized this, managed to act in time and get away, armed with choppers and spits which they seized from some cookhouse.

Spartacus himself is singled out among the leaders of the revolt for praise: he is not bestial, not uneducated, not slave-like at all, but a civilized man, whom the gods have selected for an extraordinary event.

> Source: Plutarch, *Crassus* 8:[14] He was a Thracian from the nomadic tribes and not only had a great spirit and great physical strength, but was, much more than one would expect from his condition, most intelligent and cultured, being more like a Greek than a Thracian. They say that when he was first taken to Rome to be sold, a snake was seen coiled around his head while he was asleep and his wife, who came from the same tribe and was a prophetess subject to possession by the frenzy of Dionysus, declared that this sign meant that he would have a great and terrible power which would end in misfortune.

The goals of the gladiators are initially to escape the bad treatment of confinement and to find a better life than one servicing, as Appian claims, the amusement of spectators. Soon they are joined by thousands of supporters, who do not come from gladiatorial schools nor entirely, it seems, from the slave class, but rather from those agricultural laborers and small farmers who had been displaced by changes in Rome's economy and land use that favored the growth of large plantations owned by the wealthy few.

Source: Appian, *Civil Wars* 1.116:[15] There many fugitive slaves and even some freemen from the fields joined Spartacus, and he plundered the neighboring countryside, having for subordinate officers two gladiators named Oenomaus and Crixus. Because he divided up the plunder impartially, he soon had plenty of men.

How many this "plenty of men" included varies in the ancient accounts, from 60,000 in Eutropius to 120,000 in Appian. The economic interest of these men is often noted; whether this reflects the hardship of the disenfranchised or the greed of the selfish thug depends on the author. Florus' analysis is fairly hostile toward the rebels, emphasizing not only their sinister and shameful origins but also their literally ludicrous pretensions.

Source: Florus *Abridgement* 2.8: [Spartacus] also celebrated the funerals of his officers who had died in battle with the rituals reserved to top generals and made prisoners of war fight to the death around the funeral pyre, as if he wanted in this way to wipe out all the previous shame of having been a gladiator by becoming the presenter of gladiatorial games.

Appian likewise notes the presentation of gladiatorial games, as well as sacrifice of prisoners, at the funeral of Crixus, one of Spartacus' fellow leaders. Absent the class-based condemnation in Florus, Appian's account allows for the calculated use of these shaming and terrifying procedures by Spartacus, meant specifically to have an emotional impact on his enemy's morale. The long-term goals of Spartacus and his army are only discussed in general terms, often addressing what must have been a powerful question at the time: why did they not march on Rome?

Source: Appian, *Civil Wars* 1.117:[16] Spartacus tried to make his way through the Apennines to the Alps and the Gallic country, but one of the consuls anticipated him and hindered his flight while the other hung upon his rear. He turned upon them one after the other and beat them in detail. They retreated in confusion in different directions. Spartacus sacrificed 300 Roman prisoners to the spirit of Crixus and marched toward Rome with 120,000 infantry, having burned all his useless material, killed all his prisoners, and butchered his pack animals in order to expedite his movement. Many deserters offered themselves to him, but he would not accept them. The consuls again met him in the country of Picenum. Here there was fought another great battle and there was, too, another great defeat for the Romans. Spartacus changed his intention of marching on Rome. He did not consider himself ready as yet for that kind of a fight, as his whole force was not suitably armed, for no city had joined him, but only slaves, deserters, and riff-raff. However, he occupied the mountains around Thurii and took the city itself.

Source: Plutarch, *Crassus* 9:[17] Spartacus had grown to be a great and formidable power, but he showed no signs of losing his head. He could not expect to prove superior to the whole power of Rome, and so he began to lead his army towards the Alps. His view was that they should cross the mountains and then disperse to their own homes, some to Thrace and some to Gaul. His men, however, would not listen to him. They were strong in numbers and full of confidence, and they went about Italy ravaging everything in their way.

The lack of discipline in the Spartacan army sounds an ominous tone, but would have been expected of such "riff-raff" by a Roman audience. The presence of deserters[18] suggests that Rome cannot retain the loyalty of its troops; given the recent repeated experiences of civil war, the problem may be systemic at this time. Yet, the deserters may be opportunistic support at best for Spartacus. The Roman leadership in the Spartacan war was apparently cursed by bad luck; certainly it was failing, until M. Licinius Crassus was granted the command.

Source: Appian, *Civil Wars* 1.118:[19] This war, so formidable to the Romans (although ridiculed and despised in the beginning, as being merely the work of gladiators), had now lasted three years. When the election of new praetors approached, fear fell upon everyone, and nobody offered himself as a candidate until Licinius Crassus, a man distinguished among the Romans for birth and wealth, assumed the praetorship and marched against Spartacus with six new legions.

A brief reference in Plutarch to a failed escape attempt by Spartacus is a rare link to some sort of anti-slavery ideology among the rebels, some universal fight for freedom for all slaves. Even this pushes the available evidence pretty far in terms of his motivation; long-term social change does not seem foremost on his mind.

Source: Plutarch *Crassus* 10:[20] Spartacus . . . marched through Lucania to the sea. At the Straits he fell in with some pirate ships from Cilicia and formed the plan of landing 2,000 men in Sicily and seizing the island; he would be able, he thought, to start another revolt of the slaves there, since the previous slave war had recently died down and only needed a little fuel to make it blaze out again. However, the Cilicians, after agreeing to his proposals and receiving gifts from him, failed to keep their promises and sailed off. So Spartacus marched back again from the sea.

Meanwhile, successful campaigns both east and west had made veteran Roman troops now available for the effort against Spartacus, and Lucullus

and Pompey were recalled to Italy. Appian's Spartacus senses the reduction of options, but in Plutarch's account, Spartacus is forced to abandon a sustainable strategy by dissension among his followers, a motif that recurs throughout the ancient narrative.

Source: Plutarch, *Crassus* 11:[21] Spartacus turned on his pursuers [and] the Romans were entirely routed . . . this success turned out to be the undoing of Spartacus, since it filled his slaves with over-confidence. They refused any longer to avoid battle and would not even obey their officers. Instead they surrounded them with arms in their hands as soon as they began to march and forced them to lead them back through Lucania against the Romans. This was precisely what Crassus most wanted them to do . . . Spartacus, realizing that he had no alternative, drew up his whole army in order of battle.

For the Romans, it was useful to blame Spartacus' failure on his army's inherent willfulness, short-sightedness and inability to recognize appropriate hierarchy. Spartacus' success then becomes more of a fluke, a result of the extraordinary capacity of one man, rather than a dangerous flaw in the Roman institution of slavery or the weakness in Roman leadership. The punishment for the survivors of the rebellion was typical for those who revolted against Roman rule; the choice of location would remind every gladiator moving between the training schools in Capua and the spectacular *munera* in Rome of the consequences of resisting the system.

Source: Appian, *Civil Wars* 1.120:[22] The body of Spartacus was not found. A large number of his men fled from the battle-field to the mountains . . . they continued to fight until they all perished except 6,000, who were captured and crucified along the whole road from Capua to Rome.

There were immediate political benefits for Crassus and for Pompey. The Spartacan war boosted them into the consulship for 70 BCE with coercion playing a role in the appointment. Gladiators were perceived as more of a security risk in the last years of the Republic, allegedly recruited to fight for a number of ambitious and radical politicians. "Escaped" gladiators had a very different experience in 31–30 CE, when a troupe of gladiators drafted to the cause of Antony were cut adrift in the days following Antony's catastrophic loss at the Battle of Actium. The presence of gladiators enrolled in the Roman legions was a sign of confused and desperate times; normally, Rome's generals scorned such *infames* people as unworthy of the honor of fighting for Rome. In Dio's account of this particular *familia*, however, the gladiators become models of loyalty, a commodity in short supply for Marcus Antonius.

Source: Dio Cassius 51.7:[23] Peoples and princes without exception refused their assistance to Antony . . . yet the men who were being kept for gladiatorial combats, who were among the most despised, showed the utmost zeal in [Antony and Cleopatra's] behalf and fought most bravely. These men, I should explain, were training in Cyzicus for the triumphal games which they were expecting to hold in celebration of [Octavian's] overthrow, and as soon as they became aware of what had taken place, they set out for Egypt to bear aid to their rulers. Many were their exploits against Amyntas in Galatia and many against the sons of Tarcondimotus in Cilicia, who had been their strongest friends but now in view of the changes in circumstances had gone over to the other side; many also were their exploits against Didius, who undertook to prevent their passing through Syria; nevertheless they were unable to force their way through to Egypt. Yet, even when they were surrounded on all sides, not even then would they accept any terms of surrender, though Didius made them many promises. Instead, they sent for Antony, feeling that they would fight better even in Syria if he were with them; and then, when he neither came himself nor sent them any message, they at last decided that he had perished and reluctantly made terms, on condition that they were never again to fight as gladiators. And they received Daphne, the suburb of Antioch, from Didius, to live in until the matter should be brought to [Octavian's] attention. These men were later deceived by Messalla and sent to various places under the pretext that they were to be enlisted in the legions, and were then put out of the way in some convenient manner.

Gladiators and status

By law, gladiators were not entitled to the full range of rights guaranteed to other Romans. They were considered *infames*, a category of shame that also included actors, prostitutes, pimps, and *lanistae*, all occupations that involved the submission of the body to the pleasure of others. These others, be they the audience, the *lanista*, the pimp, or the sexual client, controlled the body of the *infamis*; the absence of basic authority this entailed indicated to Romans that the *infames* were incapable of control, of the proper use of authority. Thus they were legally prohibited from a range of privileges that involved power. *Infames* were barred from running for office and from voting. The testimony of *infames* was not allowed in court. Those condemned to the arena lost control over dispensation of their property; they could not make wills before their execution.

Source: *Digest* 28.3.6.5–6:[24] [from Ulpian] A will is rendered ineffectual whenever something has happened to the testator himself . . . even if someone has been condemned to capital punishment, to fight with beasts or to be beheaded, or condemned to another punishment which deprives him of life, his testament will become ineffectual and that not as at the time when he is killed, but when he comes under sentence; for he is made a *servus poenae* [slave due to his punishment].

Condemnation to the *ludi* carried, in the eyes of Roman jurists, a double penalty: not only was the criminal bound to risk mutilation and possibly death, but the condemned also suffered a loss of status. Condemnation to the gladiatorial school was among those punishments that made one a slave, whatever one's status had been prior to sentencing. Slaves who received this sentence ceased, however, to be property of their former owners and became instead "slaves of the penalty."

Source: *Digest* 48.19.8.11–12[25]: [Ulpian, *Duties of Proconsul*, book 9] We must see whether all those who have been condemned to the wild beast hunts are made slaves of the penalty; of course, it is customary for the younger men to suffer this punishment. Therefore, we must see whether these are made slaves of the penalty or whether they retain their freedom. The prevailing view is that they too are made slaves; for they only differ from the others [condemned to life sentences] in this, that they are set to be *venatores* or Pyrrhic dancers or to provide some other kind of pleasure by pantomime or other movements of their bodies. There is no doubting that slaves are customarily condemned to the mines or to the mine-works[26], or again to the wild beast hunts; and if they are handed over for these they are made slaves of the penalty and will no longer belong to him whose property they were before their condemnation.

The legal status of all gladiators, whether condemned, purchased, or volunteer, is essentially that of slaves; their bodies were not theirs to control, due to the fact that they could be beaten, wounded, and subjected to the threat of death, all at the decision of the *lanista* with no institutional protection. Such *infames* were susceptible to public demonstrations of this vulnerability. Magistrates, for example, could arbitrarily abuse the bodies of *infames*, such as actors, who had no real recourse from such actions. Slave gladiators also were deprived of the right to make decisions about their own lives; this is illustrated by the example of Asiaticus, who, as slave of the future emperor Vitellius, had access to all sorts of physical comforts but, because he was a slave, he could lose them all on the whim of the emperor. Asiaticus' oscillation between privilege and degradation demonstrates the vulnerability of the slave, with, however, a "happy ending" in his elevation to equestrian status.

Source: Suetonius, *Vitellius* 12:[27] [Vitellius] based many important political decisions on what the lowest performers in the theater or arena told him, and relied particularly on the advice of his freedman Asiaticus. Asiaticus had been Vitellius' slave and boy lover, but soon grew tired of this role and ran away. After a while he was discovered selling cheap drinks at Puteoli, and put in chains until Vitellius ordered his release and made him his favorite again, However, Asiaticus behaved so insolently, and so thievishly as well, that Vitellius became irritated and sold him to an itinerant trainer of gladiators; but impulsively

bought him back when he was just about to take part in the final match of a gladiatorial contest. When sent to govern Lower Germany, Vitellius freed Asiaticus, and on his first day as emperor presented him with the gold ring of the equestrian order; although that very morning he had rejected a popular demand for this award, with the emphatic statement that Asiaticus' appointment would disgrace the order.

Over time, some protections were built into the system. Hadrian was an important innovator in this regard, with measures introduced specifically to limit the practice of punishing slaves by sending them to the *ludus* without due process, strictly on the order of the owner. This was expanded under Antoninus Pius to include further limitations on the capacity of owners to punish disobedient slaves with condemnation *ad bestias*; in this case, specific penalties for the former owner and *lanista* would be imposed, for which the jurist Modestinus claimed the precedent of legislation from the reign of Tiberius. The development gradually would incorporate those of slave status into the Roman judicial system and remove them from utter dependence on the goodwill of their owners.

Source: Historia Augusta, *Hadrian* 18:[28] [Hadrian] prohibited the killing of slaves by their masters, and he ordered that they should be sentenced by judges if they deserved it. He prohibited the sale of a male or female slave to a pimp or a *lanista*, without the case being presented.

Source: *Digest* 48.8.11.1–2:[29] Modestinus, *Rules* book 6. If a slave be thrown to the beasts without having been before a judge, not only he who sold him but also he who bought him shall be liable to punishment. Following the *lex Petronia* [of 19 CE] and the senatorial decrees relating to it, masters have lost the power of handing over at their own discretion their slaves to fight with the beasts; but after the slave has been produced before a judge, if his master's complaint is just, he shall in this case be handed over to punishment.

Free gladiators

Some Romans of free status voluntarily became gladiators; in doing so, they bound themselves to the status of slaves, surrendering authority over their own bodies to the *lanista*. They were required to take a formal oath to allow themselves to be disciplined and subjected to physical abuse of the kind associated with training in the *ludus*. Seneca finds the selfless dedication implied by the gladiators' oath admirable, even if the gladiators themselves are socially repugnant.

Source: Seneca, *Letters* 37:[30] The words of this most honorable compact are the same as the words of that most disgraceful one, i.e. "Through burning, imprisonment, or death by the sword." From the men who hire out their strength for the arena, who must pay for what they eat and drink with their blood, security is demanded that they will endure such things even if unwilling . . . The gladiator may lower his weapon and try the pity of the people; but you will neither lower your weapon nor beg for life.

The fact that legal penalties were involved meant that free volunteers had to formally register with the Roman government to become gladiators. The *senatus consultum* on limiting prices of gladiators, promoted by Marcus Aurelius in 177 CE, suggests that this registration was typically for a limited period of time, after which the individual could re-enlist with his pay scale increased in recognition of his experience. This portion of the law is concerned about setting some limit on payments demanded for veteran gladiators with established reputations.

Source: *CIL* 2.6278, lines 62–63:[31] In the case of him, however, who voluntarily, in the presence of His Excellency the tribune of the plebs, may announce his intention to fight at the legal price of 2,000 sesterces, if this man, when he has obtained his release, reenters his dangerous occupation, his valuation thereafter shall not exceed 12,000 sesterces.

The presence of free men in the *ludus* is also documented by epitaphs and other monuments. Free status is indicated sometimes by an explicit reference to status, sometimes by the use of the *tria nomina*, the three names that marked the possession of Roman citizenship. On this tombstone from Rome, the career high points of the free Exochus (who bears the *tria nomina*) against an imperial slave, Araxes ("slave of Caesar" being a translation of "Caesaris"), and against a free competitor are detailed. Note that the games referred to here are the famously lavish ones of Trajan to commemorate success over the Dacians; 10,000 gladiators fought, including these three.

Source: *CIL* 6.10194: The Thraex Marcus Antonius Exochus, a native of Alexandria, fought as a *tiro* against Araxes Caesaris on the second day of the games for the triumph of the deified Trajan in Rome. He was dismissed while still standing. In Rome, on the ninth day of the same *munus*, he fought Fimbria, a free man who had fought in nine gladiatorial contests; Fimbria was dismissed while still standing. In Rome, at the same *munus*.

Choosing gladiatorial status

Why would anyone want to become a gladiator? What positive reasons were there for free people, even those of high status, to voluntarily choose this occupation? Strong motivations, surely, would be needed to outweigh the loss of honor, the risk of death, the regular infliction of corporal punishment, and the day-to-day inability to make decisions about one's own body, what to eat, where to go.

Money was an issue for some of these, according to the literary evidence. Sometimes the financial motivation is framed negatively, suggesting that people are forced by dire circumstances to enter the arena. When death by starvation threatened, perhaps the high costs of the gladiators' life were worth paying.

Source: Tatian, *To the Greeks* 23:[32] Some, giving themselves up to idleness for the sake of profligacy, sell themselves to be killed; and the indigent barters himself away, while the rich man buys others to kill him.

The rhetorical schools, which debated this question as part of the education of young Romans, suggest that mere poverty is insufficient reason to become a gladiator, that this would just be the lowest point on a downward spiral of degradation. They emphasize exceptional circumstances that would mitigate the shame and give the choice moral weight. If the individual were not motivated solely by his own survival, but entered the arena in order to perform a filial duty, such as the proper burial of a parent, or a social duty, of rescuing a friend from poverty and death, then the choice would be a proper one.

Source: Lucian, *Toxaris* 58–59:[33] We discussed the situation to see what we should do, now that we had become absolutely penniless in a strange country . . . [my friend] begged me not to [commit suicide], for he himself would discover a means of our having enough to live on. . . . we took our seats and first we saw wild beasts brought down by javelins, hunted with dogs, and loosed upon men in chains – criminals, we conjectured. Then the gladiators entered, and the herald, bringing in a tall youth, said that whoever wanted to fight with that man should come forward, and would receive ten thousand drachmas in payment for the fight. Thereupon [my friend] Sisinnes arose, and, leaping down, undertook to fight and asked for weapons. On receiving his pay, the ten thousand drachmas, he promptly put it in my hands, saying: "If I win, Toxaris, we shall go away together, with all that we need; but if I die, bury me and go back to Scythia."

The following passage, from a rhetorical exercise used to train young men in argumentation and persuasion, presents the pathetic story of two youthful friends, one wealthy, one poor, and the moral value of sacrifice. The wealthy young man is kidnapped and sold to a *ludus*. His friend comes to save him and enters the arena in his place, only to die on the sand. The surviving young man fulfills his promise to help the grieving father but, in so doing, provokes the anger of his own father, who despises the poorer family. The surviving young man argues in defense of his dead friend, asserting that there are good reasons to become a gladiator and that his friend had demonstrated them.

Source: Ps-Quintilian, *Declamations* 9:[34] It is a terrible shame that his courage and fervor were not employed in the army, in military combat . . . with what vigor did he rush out into the fray, enraged against his opponent as though he were still mine! . . . offering his bared body to his opponent's blows . . . he died standing up . . . he received the sword blow facing straight ahead . . . Neither a criminal nor down on his luck, he entered the arena. Gentlemen, when did you ever hear of such a thing? He became a gladiator because of his virtue!

Glory

Some authors suggest volunteer gladiators, especially those from the wealthier classes, went into the arena in the pursuit of "glory," weighting the acclaim of the crowds higher than the shame brought by the violation of traditional ways of measuring status, or the danger of wounds and death. Tertullian contrasts this kind of fleeting earthly fame to an eternal glory to be found in martyrs' piety (see chapter 5).

Source: Tertullian, *To the Martyrs* 4–5:[35] Earthly glory has so great power over the strength of body and mind, that men despise the sword, the fire, the cross, the beasts, the tortures, for the reward of the praise of men . . . How many men of leisure does a display of weapons hire to the sword! Truly they go down to the very beasts for the motive of display, and see themselves as more beautiful from their bites and their scars.

Some gladiators were real celebrities, immortalized in inscriptions, art, and in song. Pliny describes how this fame might be captured for permanent commemoration; gladiator art was very popular, both portraits of individual gladiators and representations of specific events. The mosaic portraits of performers at the Baths of Caracalla are surviving testimony to this kind of fame, however fleeting it might ultimately be (see figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Baths of Caracalla, portraits of spectacle stars. Scala/Art Resource, NY

Source: Pliny, *Natural History* 35.52:[36] When a freedman of Nero was putting on a gladiatorial show at Antium, paintings containing life-like portraits of all the gladiators and their assistants decorated the public porticoes. Portraits of gladiators have commanded the greatest interest in art for many generations. It was, however, Gaius Terentius Lucanus who began commissioning pictures of gladiatorial shows and having them publicly exhibited.

Martial's poem about the fighter Hermes may encapsulate some of the enthusiastic chants that rose on game day from stands stuffed with his fans. It also suggests some of the reasons for Hermes' fame, such as wins over rivals like Helius and Advolans, technical ability reaching beyond a single armature, sex appeal, and economic value.

Source: Martial 5.24:[37] Hermes, favorite fighter of the age; Hermes, skilled in all weaponry; Hermes, gladiator and trainer both; Hermes, tempest and tremor of his school; Hermes, who (but none other) makes Helius afraid; Hermes, before whom (but none other) Advolans falls; Hermes, taught to win without wounding; Hermes, himself his own substitute; Hermes, gold mine of seat-mongers; Hermes, darling and distress of gladiators' women; Hermes, proud with battling spear; Hermes, menacing with marine trident; Hermes, formidable in drooping helmet; Hermes, glory of Mars universal; Hermes, all things in one and thrice unique.

Tertullian acknowledges the fame and adoration given to the performers in the arena; he also finds it a target for his criticism, because of the ambiguity of the gladiator's position. The Christian author juxtaposes the admiration and desire directed toward gladiators with their degraded status to point up the hypocrisy of the situation, that someone can be both revered and reviled for the same action.

Source: Tertullian, *On the Spectacles* 22.3–4:[38] Take the treatment the very providers and managers of the spectacles accord to those idolized charioteers, actors, athletes, and gladiators, to whom men surrender their souls and women even their bodies, on whose account they commit the sins they censure: for the very same skill for which they glorify them, they debase and degrade them; worse, they publicly condemn them to dishonor and deprivation of civil rights, excluding them from the council chamber, the orator's platform, the senatorial and equestrian orders, from all other offices and certain distinctions. What perversity! They love whom they penalize; they bring into disrepute whom they applaud; they extol the art and brand the artist with disgrace. What sort of judgment is this – that a man should be vilified for the things that win him a reputation?

Strange though it may seem to a modern reader, some volunteer gladiators committed themselves to this risk without asking payment for their efforts. The presence of this group of "amateur" fighters is acknowledged in the corpus of Roman law, as decisions had to be made about their status. The absence of payment apparently removed some portion of the legal and social taint that was transmitted by performance in the arena. The jurist Ulpian discusses who is allowed to make claims before the magistrate, or rather, those who are limited in the demands they can make on the praetor's time. Some cannot make claims at all, some can make claims only for themselves, some can make claims for themselves and for a select number of others. The types of people being excluded here are those considered "disabled" by reason of age, sex, or incapacity and those considered "exceptionally disreputable" or *infamis*, into which falls the professional *venator*, but not the amateur.

Source: *Digest* 3.1.1.6:[39] [Ulpian, *Edict* book 6] . . . [the man] who has been condemned on a capital charge does not have the right to make legal claims on behalf of another . . . so too with the man who has hired out his services to fight against beasts. But we ought to interpret the term beasts by reference to the animal's ferocity rather than to its species. For what if it should be a lion, but a tame one, or some other tame carnivore? It is, then, only the man who has hired out his services who is blacklisted, whether he ends up by fighting or

not. For if he fights when he had not hired out his services, he will not be liable. For it is not the man who has fought against beasts who will be liable, but only the man who has hired out his services for this purpose. Accordingly, the old authorities say that those who do this without pay to demonstrate their manliness are not liable, unless they have accepted [cash] prizes in the arena.

An epitaph of a retired gladiator from Ankara lists a number of achievements, including, interestingly, a list of cities that granted him honorary citizenship in recognition of his success as a combatant; the public awards here fall much more into the Greek tradition of esteem for successful athletes, in which the grant of civic honors was not uncommon. In the eastern Mediterranean, then, a competing tradition offered local rehabilitation from the legal limitations of the *infamis* status.

Source: Robert #90: To the gods below. Aelia to Publius Aelius, the illustrious Pergamene *summa rudis*, a member of the *collegium* of the *summae rudes* in Rome, to my own husband, happily joined to me in life, having lived 37 years, Aelia set this up in memory. And he was a citizen of these cities in order: Thessalonica, Nikomedia, Larissa, Philippopolis, Apros, Berga, Thasos.

Life in the *Ludi*

Soon after entering the *ludus*, the *tiro* or beginning gladiator was placed in an armature and assigned to a *doctor* for that particular specialization. The *lanista* oversaw the training process, hiring *doctores* (specialists in the various styles of combat) and *magistri* (former gladiators with experience in the arena). He then negotiated the performance contract with the *editor* of a given set of games, balancing skill level and showmanship of the fighters against risk of loss. Importantly for the gladiators, the *lanista*, in a real sense, owned them.

Training for gladiatorial combat was done using a wooden sword or *rudis*, to limit damage in practice. In addition to sparring with each other, the *tiros* used a wooden stake driven into the ground, with the remaining above-ground portion standing about man height. On this they could practice full-strength blows with the *rudis* as well as body slams with the shield. The rhetorician Quintilian compares the process of formal argumentation to the exchange of blows by gladiators; scholars have interpreted this passage to indicate that different kinds of strokes were numbered and that gladiators were trained to parry specific attacks with specific counter-attacks, much as is done in more recent fencing.

Source: Quintilian, *Oratorical Institute* 5.13.54:[40] But from our answers to objections fresh objections will arise, a process which may be carried to some length. The strokes of gladiators provide a parallel. If the first stroke was intended to provoke the adversary to strike, the second will lead to the third, while if the challenge be repeated it will lead to the fourth stroke, so that there will be two parries and two attacks. And the process may be prolonged still further.

Gladiatorial training involved a number of regimens, from the learning of specific weapons techniques to specific kinds of physical discipline, meant to develop strength and endurance. Epictetus compares the conditions of the *ludus* to the training of the rhetorician, in terms of commitment to a set of rules for success.

Source: Epictetus, *Discourse* 3.15:[41] In every affair consider what precedes and follows, and then undertake it . . . consider what precedes and follows, and then, if it be for your advantage, engage in the affair. You must conform to rules, submit to a diet, refrain from dainties; exercise your body, whether you choose it or not, at a stated hour, in heat and cold; you must drink no cold water, and sometimes no wine, – in a word, you must give yourself up to your trainer as to a physician. Then, in the combat, you may be thrown into a ditch, dislocate your arm, turn your ankle, swallow abundance of dust, receive stripes [for negligence], and, after all, lose the victory. When you have reckoned up all this, if your inclination still holds, set about the combat. Otherwise, take notice, you will behave like children who sometimes play wrestlers, sometimes gladiators; sometimes blow a trumpet, and sometimes act a tragedy, when they happen to have seen and admired these shows . . . For you have never entered upon anything considerately, nor after having surveyed and tested the whole matter; but carelessly, and with a half-way zeal.

The kind of blows wielded by gladiators were supposed to be controlled, even elegant, to maximize accuracy and to save their strength for an extended combat. This is acknowledged by Cicero, who also compares this economy of motion to training in rhetoric.

Source: Cicero, *Orator* 228:[42] For as we observe that boxers, and gladiators not much less, do not make any motion, either in cautious parrying or vigorous thrusting, which does not have a certain grace, so that whatever is useful for the combat is also attractive to look upon, so the orator does not strike a heavy blow unless the thrust has been properly directed.

In addition to training in wounding and in wielding death, gladiators were trained in how to die, i.e. how to properly submit to a death blow when the judgment of the *editor* and crowd has made that decision. Numerous pieces of visual art depict this crucial moment, just before the fatal strike, the moment engaging the peak of control for all concerned: the *editor*'s well-considered determination of death, the victor's clean kill and the loser's proper positioning, breast exposed, steeled not to flinch, face betraying no fear nor pain.

Source: Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 2.17:[43] 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?

Veteran gladiators became practiced at dealing with death, not just the careful infliction of it, but how to deal with the effects of potentially mortal combat. The danger lay not just in being wounded oneself, but in how the opponent's wounds shaped the fight.

Source: Seneca, *Controversies* 9.6: Among gladiators the worst position for a victor is to have to fight a dying opponent. You should fear no adversary more than one who cannot live, but can still kill . . . when his chance of *missio* is removed, a gladiator will pursue naked the opponent he had fled under arms.

Galen the physician, writing in the late second century CE, had more understanding than most of the costs of the gladiatorial lifestyle: he had received a good portion of his medical training in practice at a *ludus*, where he would have daily evidence of the long-term effect of the arena on the bodies of athletes. His discussion of the choice of profession argues against the life of the athlete and the fighter, not just because of the danger of trauma, but because of the unhealthy lack of balance he finds in their physical training and dietary regimen.

Source: Galen, *Exhortation to the Study of the Arts* 4:[44] In the amassing of [the athletes'] great quantity of flesh and blood their mind is lost in the vast mire. Receiving no stimulation to develop, it remains as stupid as that of brutes . . . They fatigue themselves to the limit and then gourmandize to excess, prolonging their repast often into the middle of the night. Analogous rules to those guiding their exercise and eating regulate also their sleep. At the hour when people who live according to the laws of nature quit work to take their lunch, the athletes are rising . . . While athletes pursue their profession their body remains in this dangerous state [of hyperdevelopment]. When they quit it, they fall into a state even more dangerous. Some die shortly after, others live a little longer, but never reach old age . . . their bodies enfeebled by the jolts they have received, [they] are predisposed to become sick on the least provocation. Their eyes, ordinarily sunken, readily become the seat of fluxions; their teeth, so readily injured, fall out. With muscles and tendons frequently torn, their articulations become incapable of resisting strain and readily dislocate. From the standpoint of health no condition is more wretched . . . many who have been perfectly proportioned fall into the hands of trainers who develop them beyond measure, overload them with flesh and blood, and make them just the opposite . . . [fighters] develop a disfigured countenance hideous to look upon. Limbs broken or dislocated and eyes gouged out of sockets show the kind of beauty produced. These are the fruits they gather. When they no longer exercise their profession, they lose sensation, their limbs become dislocated, and, as I have said, they become completely deformed.

Against this pessimistic view of the gladiator's life experience, the personal suffering caused by the wounds and beatings in training and the risk of death in the arena, one must weigh the fact that the *lanista* had an economic interest in maximizing his investment. A well-fed, well-exercised, well-rested gladiator was more likely to fight well and thus return the costs expended. An appearance of health and strength also drew the favor of the crowd, which could bring in additional prize money and lead to repeat performances. Cyprian's Christian condemnation of the *munera* emphasizes the physical development of gladiators and the care taken to enhance their appearance.

Source: Cyprian, *Letter to Donatus* 7:[45] The gladiatorial games are prepared, that blood may gladden the lust of cruel eyes. The body is fed up with stronger food, and the vigorous mass of limbs is enriched with brawn and muscle, that the wretch fattened for punishment may die a harder death. Man is slaughtered that man may be gratified, and the skill that is best able to kill is an exercise and an art . . . What state of things, I pray you, can that be, and what can it be like, in which men, whom none have condemned, offer themselves to the wild beasts – men of ripe age, of sufficiently beautiful person, clad in costly garments? Living men, they are adorned for a voluntary death.

Evidence points to some positive amenities to be found in the gladiatorial schools. *Ludi* employed *unctores*, who used oil to massage the gladiators after a workout. Buildings of the *ludus* were sited in healthful locations. Morsels of information about the gladiatorial diet lurk in the ancient texts. A number of references to the consumption of carbohydrates and fatty foods, such as the "stronger food" Cyprian mentions, suggest that trainers may have made some connection between food and endurance. Gladiators ate grains, as Pliny tells us.

Source: Pliny, *Natural History* 18.14:[46] Barley is the oldest among human foods, as is proved by the Athenian ceremony recorded by Menander [i.e. its use as a prize in the Eleusinian Games], and by the name given to gladiators, who used to be called "barley-men" (*hordearii*).

There were separate quarters for different armatures and for those who arrived in the *ludus* for different reasons. Still, the *ludus*, as the residence of *infames*, was understood by Roman norms to be a squalid place, whatever the physical amenities. This expectation is used by the satirist Juvenal for shock value, as he condemns the licentiousness of Roman women in their preference for lovers outside their class and culture.

Source: Juvenal, *Satire* 6. Oxford fragment 7–13:[47] The *lanista* runs a cleaner, more decent house than yours: he quarters the fag targeteers and the armored heavies well away from each other; *retiarii* aren't required to mess with convicted felons, nor in the same cell does he who strips off to fight discard his shoulder-guards and defensive trident. Even the lowest scum of the arena observe this rule; even in prison they're separate.

Two structures at Pompeii have been identified as gladiatorial barracks. The older of these is a private dwelling converted to this use, in which perhaps fifteen to twenty performers could be accommodated. The barracks were then moved to another, larger remodeled structure; previously a quadroportico or colonnaded plaza in the theater district, this was converted after the earthquake of 62 CE to provide basic sleeping rooms and training areas for as many as 100 gladiators (see figure 4.2). Storage areas for weapons and armor were created, along with a kitchen and a new access way, after the passage into the theater was blocked up. There seems to be little structural effort to limit the mobility of the residents of the *ludus*; a possible guard post may have served to monitor movements of gladiators and visitors, rather than bar access in either direction. A small room found in the complex may have been used for disciplinary measures; built along the lines of the medieval

Figure 4.2 Pompeii, barracks of gladiators

"small ease" chambers, a person placed in this cell could neither stand nor stretch out fully inside. Graffiti recovered from the barracks were written by and about the gladiators, giving us glimpses into their lives.

Source: *CIL* 4.4304: Servilius is in love: may he have no success. Servilius the sucker.

Death or Survival

Calculating the individual mortality rates for gladiators is heavily dependent on the existing database, which is minimal at best. Information about surviving the arena comes mostly from epitaphs of gladiators, graffiti, and edicts from Pompeii, and occasional references in the literary sources. The inscriptions carry an important bias: money. Erecting any kind of tomb monument required a substantial financial investment. Those individual gladiators documented by such inscriptions are more likely to have been successful, to accumulate the needed resources. Georges Ville has done the most work on estimating the rates of survival, focusing in particular on the first century CE. One hundred bouts, by his calculations, would likely result in nineteen fatalities. Assuming that one hundred combatants lost their

match, the death rate for losers would be about one in five, while the risk of death for all who entered the arena was about one in ten. Whether these nineteen were actually killed in the arena and not granted *missio* by the editor, or they died shortly after the match of blood loss, shock or infection is not known. Ville suggested that the odds of survival got worse in the second and third centuries. This later evidence indicates that half of all matches ended in the death of one of the gladiators. Those entering the arena in this later period had a one in four likelihood of death. This may suggest that the audiences of the later empire were more sophisticated, perhaps, with very demanding standards for gladiatorial performance. *Missio* was thus more difficult to achieve, more rarely given.[48]

Paradoxically, the longer one was a gladiator, the less likely was death in the arena. Experience of combat and years of training paid off in honed fighting skills, of course. Because of the audience's preference for equal matches, a veteran of twenty or thirty bouts had fewer opponents at his level; he also was more costly for an *editor* to acquire. The frequency of matches for him was thus lower. His success over time had also built a reputation among the fans, who were thus more likely to call for *missio*, should he be defeated. Inscriptions and graffiti referring to such veterans have been found in various parts of the empire. This pattern is supported as well by the career records of gladiators from Pompeii that document the ongoing careers of combatants with dozens of matches they'd survived, not always by winning. These were fighters whose skill or showmanship had won them reprieve or *missio*, even though they'd been disarmed or downed by their opponents.

Source: *CIL* 12.5837: To the . . . spirits. Asiaticus, first fighter, released after 53 combats. His wife had this made.

Source: *CIL* 6.33952: Maximus, *essedarius* from the Julian *ludus*, 40 combats, 36 victories.

Source: *CIL* 4.2387: Pinna of the Neronian *ludus*, 16 combats, winner. Columbus, released, 88 combats, died.

Source: *CIL* 4.5306: Auctus of the Julian *ludus*, 50 combats.

Source: *CIL* 4.2451: Viriotas, 150 combats, against Sextius, 100 combats. Valerius, 25 combats, against Viriotas, 150 combats. Amon . . . 75 combats, against Valerius, 75 combats. Servilius, 100 combats, against Valerius, 75 combats. Marcus, 50 combats. Sequanus, 75 combats. Sedulatus, 25 combats.

The fact that *editores* had to make the effort to specify that some games were *sine missione* likewise argues that mandatory death was not typical of matches in the arena. The pattern of praise and blame for emperors' stances on the issue of *missio* suggest that the possibility of release was regarded as a positive element.

Source: Suetonius, *Augustus* 45:[49] [Augustus] banned gladiatorial contests if the defeated fighter were forbidden to plead for mercy.

Forcing death in the arena was interpreted as the action of a cruel emperor; to some extent, this diminished the importance of skill and the role of fortune in combats. The risks of combat could be prepared for; death that resulted from the whimsy of the emperor could not and presented a real danger for performers in the arena.

Source: Suetonius, *Caligula* 30:[50] A group of *retiarii*, dressed in tunics, put up a very poor fight against the five *secutores* with whom they were matched; but when [Caligula] sentenced them to death, one of them seized a trident and killed each of the victorious team in turn. Gaius then publicly expressed his horror at what he called "this most bloody murder" and his disgust with those who had been able to stomach the sight.

Claudius' *sine missione* games emphasized the punishment of error, not only on the part of combatants but also for the support personnel.

Source: Suetonius, *Claudius* 34:[51] His cruelty and bloodthirstiness appeared equally in great and small matters . . . At gladiatorial shows, whether or not they were staged by himself, he ruled that all combatants who fell accidentally should have their throats cut – above all *retiarii* so that he could gaze on their death agony . . . after he had spent the whole morning in the amphitheater from daybreak until noon, he would dismiss the audience, keep his seat, and not only watch the regular combats but extemporize others between the stage carpenters and similar members of the theater staff, as a punishment for the failure of any mechanical device to work as it should.

Sexy Gladiators

A fringe benefit for surviving combatants was the sexual glamour that surrounded winning performers. The graffiti of Pompeii document the sexual allure of the gladiators, with repeated connections between specific combatants and "the girls" or "the dollies." Without knowing the writers of these comments, it's hard to say whether these are boasts by the gladiators or appreciative accolades by fans, male or female.

Source: *CIL* 4.4342: Celadus the *Thraex*, the sigh of the girls, three combats, three victories.

Source: *CIL* 4.4345: Celadus the *Thraex*, the glory of the girls.

Source: *CIL* 4.4353: Crescens the *retiarius*, *doctor* . . . of nighttime dollies.

A notorious scandal is recounted by Juvenal in his detailed critique of Rome's immoral women. The appeal of the arena performer for an elite woman was probably intensified by his degraded status, his difference; the risk of his profession also probably added savor to the relationship.

Source: Juvenal, *Satire* 6.102–112:[52] What beauty set Eppia [a senator's wife] on fire? What youth captured her? What did she see that made her endured being called a *ludia* [gladiator's woman]? For her darling Sergius had already begun to shave [i.e., he was middle-aged], and to hope for retirement due to a wounded arm. Moreover, there were many deformities on his face; for instance, there was a huge wart on the middle of his nose which was rubbed by his helmet, and a bitter matter dripped continually from one eye. But he was a gladiator: this makes them Hyacinthuses. She preferred this to her children and her country, that woman preferred this to her sister and her husband. The sword is what they love.

These beloved "swords" gained symbolic power; the actions of the arena became metaphors for sex and conjugal interaction, a linkage firmly embedded in the Roman worldview. In Artemidorus' book of dream interpretation, a man dreaming of being a gladiator could anticipate a marriage in the near future. More than that, the specifics of his dream combat had significance for the upcoming marital pairing.

Source: Artemidorus 2.32:[53] I have often observed that this dream indicates that a man will marry a woman whose character corresponds to the armature that he dreams he is using or to the type of opponent against whom he is fighting . . . For example, if a man fights a *Thraex*, he will marry a wife who is rich, crafty and fond of being first. She will be rich because the *Thraex's* body is entirely covered by his armor; crafty, because his sword is not straight; and fond of being first, because this fighter employs the advancing technique.

Rumors abounded about high-born ladies and the low-born objects of their desires, rendered even more desirable because of the thrill of violating status expectations by associating with one so vile. Even the empress could be suspected of harboring such desires, especially the mother of Commodus, the notorious gladiator emperor (see below). Faustina's lusts, in one of the numerous rumors in circulation, proved a danger to one particular gladiator, demonstrating the tremendous vulnerability of his status, alongside the potential benefit of being "noticed" by the powerful.

Source; Historia Augusta, *Marcus Antoninus* 19:[54] Some say, and this seems plausible, that Commodus Antoninus, [Marcus Aurelius'] son and successor, was not begotten by him but from an adulterous union, and they embroider such a tale with a story current among the common people. Allegedly Faustina, Pius' daughter and Marcus' wife, had once seen gladiators pass by and was inflamed with passion for one of them. While troubled by a long illness she confessed to her husband about her passion. When Marcus had related this to the Chaldaean [soothsayers], it was their advice that the gladiator be killed and that Faustina should wash herself from beneath in his blood and in this state lie with her husband. When this had been done the passion was indeed abated, but Commodus was born a gladiator not a *princeps*; for as emperor he put on nearly a thousand gladiatorial fights, with the people looking on . . . Many relate, however, that Commodus was actually begotten in adultery, since it is reasonably well known that Faustina chose both sailors and gladiators as paramours for herself at Caieta.

Death and Choice

The suicide of a gladiator became a philosophical trope, particularly powerful because of the legal and social powerlessness of the gladiator. One of Seneca's moralizing letters to his friend Lucilius cites a number of examples of suicides at the *ludi*, which can be interpreted a number of ways. Some have suggested that these document the abject misery of these performers' lives, including the constant scrutiny that deprived them of privacy. Seneca does not, however, focus on the poor quality of life available in the *ludus*. His point is that value

of life comes with self-determination, with choosing the proper moment for death and acting upon that decision. Seneca does, however, imply that there are minimal standards to be met for life to be worth living. General circumstances of the gladiator's life, such as the forced daily submission as well as the shame of display, would be part of the calculation.[55]

Source: Seneca, *Letters* 70.20–27:[56] You need not think that none but great men have had the strength to break the bonds of human servitude . . . For example, there was lately in a *ludus* for *bestiarii* a German, who was preparing for the morning exhibition; he withdrew in order to relieve himself – the only thing he was allowed to do in secret and without the presence of a guard. While so engaged, he seized the stick of wood, tipped with a sponge, which was used for the vilest purposes[57], and stuffed it, just as it was, down his throat; thus he blocked up his windpipe and choked the breath from his body . . . what a brave fellow! He surely deserved to be allowed to choose his fate! How bravely he would have wielded a sword . . . cut off from resources on every hand, he yet found a way to furnish himself with death, and with a weapon for death . . . the virtue of which I speak is found as frequently in the *ludus* for the *bestiarii* as among the leaders in a civil war. Recently a certain fighter, who had been sent for the morning spectacle, was being transported 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 rotation of the wheel. So he made his escape by means of the very wagon which was carrying him to his punishment . . . more illustrations drawn from the same games. During the second event in a mock sea battle 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, all this humiliation? 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 honorable than killing.

Gladiator *Familiae*

The gladiatorial *familia*, the group of fighters who all belonged to the same *ludus*, formed a communal bond of some complexity. Typically, only one *ludus* supplied performers for a given set of games, so members of the same *familia* fought against each other in the arena, wounding and even killing the people they lived and worked with. At the same time, the gladiatorial *familia* was the social support network for its members; the familial relationship formed here was on display in the final meal before the *munera* and is evidenced in the monuments set up to honor *familia* members. The following inscriptions are epitaphs from the eastern part of the empire, from such towns as Smyrna and Thessalonika, set up by *familiae* as a whole or

by fellow-gladiators for their fallen friends. Victor's monument indicates the emotional investment of the *familia* in defending the reputation of its members.

Source: Robert #241: The *familia* set this up in memory of Saturnilos.

Source: Robert #12:[58] For Nikephoros, son of Synetos, Lakedaimonian, and for Narcissus the *secutor*. Titus Flavius Satyrus set up this monument in his memory from his own money.

Source: Robert #109: For Hermes. Paitraeites with his cell-mates set this up in memory.

Source: Robert #34: I, Victor, left-handed, lie here, but my homeland was Thessalonica. Doom killed me, not the liar Pinnas. No longer let him boast. I had a fellow gladiator, Polyneikes, who killed Pinnas and avenged me. Claudius Thallus set up this memorial from what I left behind as a legacy.

Outside Italy, a connection between the priests of the Imperial Cult and support of gladiatorial troupes can be traced. *Munera* were regularly included in the festivals celebrating the deified emperor, so maintaining the necessary personnel and expertise may have made economic sense for the long run. Inscriptions erected by these *familiae* at Aphrodisias celebrate the range of expertise assembled by the troupe owner as well as his efforts on behalf of the city. The series of monuments commemorating such *familiae* suggests that this responsibility was passed down through multiple successions of priesthoods. The inscription set up by the *familia* of Zeno Hypsicles is dated to the late first or early second century. Interesting to note is the explicit reference to *katadikoi* or convicts.

Source: Roueche #14 = Robert #157:[59] The *familia* of Zeno Hypsicles, son of Hypsicles, son of Hypsicles the natural son of Zeno, high-priest, [the *familia*] of gladiators and convicts and bull-catchers.

The monument set up for M. Antonius Apellas Severinus incorporates some of the symbology common to the arena. The panel on which the

inscription is carved is held up by a pair of winged Nikes, sculpted in relief, who flank a female figure holding a wheel, identified as Nemesis with her wheel of fortune, one of the primary deities of the amphitheater.

Source: Roueche #15 = Robert #156:[60] To Good Fortune. Memorial of the *familia* and of the *venatores* of Marcus Antonius Apellas Severinus, son of Marcus Antonius Hypsicles, high priest.

The ties between gladiators and their blood relatives are likewise assessed by the ancient evidence. An incident from the reign of Claudius suggests the strength of these bonds endured despite the degradation of status, a valuable asset indeed.

Source: Suetonius, *Claudius* 21:[61] When four brothers pleaded for the discharge of their father, an *essedarius*, Claudius presented him with the customary wooden sword amid resounding cheers, and then circulated a placard: "You now see the great advantage of having a large family; it can win favor and protection even for a gladiator."

The following epitaphs document these kinds of relationships, as well as the fact that gladiators had spouses and children who likewise registered their devotion with permanent monuments. Here, a gladiator honors his youthful dead wife.

Source: *CIL* 6.10167: To the departed spirits of Publicia Aromtis. Albanus, a veteran *eques* gladiator from the *Ludus Magnus* had this made for his dearest wife, who lived twenty-two years, five months and eight days. The tomb is allocated a space of three by eight feet.

A two-sided tombstone provides evidence of a family unit for one gladiator, who, with his wife, commemorated the passing of their toddler-age son, and then honored his deceased wife with an inscription on the other side.

Source: *CIL* 6.10176: Side 1: To the departed spirits of Alcibiades, dearest son, who lived two years, eleven months, seventeen days, eleven hours. His extremely devoted parents had this made.

Side 2: To the departed spirits of Julia Procula. Gaesus, a veteran *murmillo* gladiator, put this up for his well-deserving spouse.

On another tombstone, a couple shares commemoration by their adult daughter; the veteran gladiator in this case was discharged from the arena with its highest honor, the *summa rudis*. The fact that this gladiator and his wife shared the same *nomen* suggests that they were former slaves.

Source: *CIL* 6.10201: To the departed spirits of Cornelius Eugenianus, awarded the *summa rudis*, and of Cornelia Rufina. Their daughter had this made for her well-deserving and sweetest parents.

This tombstone, also from Rome, includes an unusually effusive tribute to the wife of a gladiator.

Source: *CIL* 6.10193: To the departed spirits of Maria Thesidis. Publius Aelius, a veteran *Thraex* gladiator from the Troad, put this up for his most holy, most devoted, well-deserving wife.

This epitaph, from Rome, documents the long-term connection between an apparently freeborn gladiator and his wife; the son of this union joined his mother in this tribute to the dead *murmillo*.

Source; *CIL* 6.10177: To the departed spirits of Marcus Ulpius Felix, veteran *murmillo* gladiator, who lived forty-five years. From the Tunger nation. Ulpia Syntyche, a freedwoman, along with Justus, his son, had this made for her sweetest and well-deserving spouse.

The family of Danaos, a gladiator from Cyzicus (figure 4.3) is represented visually on the tombstone, which depicts a family banquet, possibly meant to represent anticipated comforts of the afterlife. The father and his youthfully beardless son, Asklepiades, share a couch, while the matron, Eorta, sits on a chair, as respectable matrons did. A dog joins them near the table. The family scene is framed by nine crowns, representing the nine victories won by Danaos, along with some of his armature; the crowns and weapons are more crudely carved than the banquet and were probably done specifically for the customer, while the more generic funeral scene may have been ready-made.

Source: Robert #293: Eorta his wife and Asklepiades his son set this up in memory of Danaos, second *palus*, *Thraex*. After nine combats he departed to Hades.

Figure 4.3 Tomb monument of Danaos. Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

Three tombstones from Gaul were built by the wives of the gladiatorial deceased. One notes that the money used was hers, which likely indicates she was a free woman of substance, even though her name does not survive.

Source: *CIL* 12.3323: [For] Beryllus, an *essedarius*, freed after the twentieth combat, a Greek, twenty-five years old. Nomas, his wife, set this up for her well-deserving husband.

Source: *CIL* 12.3327: [For] the *retiarius*, L. Pompeius, winner of nine crowns, born in Vienna, twenty-five years of age. His wife put this up with her own money for her wonderful spouse.

Source: *CIL* 12.5836: [For] M. Quintus Ducenius, best. Three combats, three victories. Hateria Potita, his wife, had this made.

The tombstone of Glauco fits into the "advice from the deceased" pattern of Roman commemoration; here, the dead person "recommends" caution in relying on Nemesis, one of the prominent deities of the amphitheater, who was supposed to see that events transpired as they should.

Source: *CIL* 5.3466: To the revered spirits of the dead. Glauco, a native of Mutina, fought in seven fights and died in the eighth. He lived twenty-three years and five days. Aurelia and his friends [set up this epitaph] for her well-deserving husband. I [Glauco] advise you to find your own star: do not trust Nemesis: that's how I was deceived. Hail and farewell.

Female Performers: *Gladiatrices* and *Ludia*

Women did appear as combatants in the Roman games, fighting other women as well as animals with mixed reactions to their presence. How frequently this occurred and when this practice began is unclear. Likewise confusing is the use of the term *ludia* as well as *gladiatrix*: the latter seems to be a female gladiator, but is a *ludia*, literally a woman of the *ludus*, a performer or a woman who services the various needs of members of the *familia*?

Female performers often appear in the ancient texts as exotic markers of truly lavish spectacle. The following references in Martial seem to allude to vignettes at the spectacles of Titus in which women played the main role: in one instance, the performer was apparently clothed as the goddess of love, ancestress of the Roman people, and in another a female fighter overcame a lion.

Source: Martial, *On the Spectacles* 7:[62] It is not enough that warrior Mars serves you in unconquered arms, Caesar. Venus herself serves you too.

Source: Martial, *On the Spectacles* 8:[63] Illustrious Fame used to sing of the lion laid low in Nemea's spacious vale, Hercules' work. Let ancient testimony be silent, for after your shows, Caesar, we have now seen such things done by women's valor.

The dour emperor Domitian showed some innovative qualities in his arrangement of shows, as Suetonius notes, in which the combats of women were enhanced by special lighting.

Source: Suetonius, *Domitian* 4:[64] Domitian presented many extravagant entertainments in the Colosseum and the Circus . . . a sea-fight in the amphitheatre; wild-beast hunts; gladiatorial shows by torchlight in which women as well as men took part.

Statius may refer to the same set of games given by Domitian; the poet emphasizes the strangeness of the combats, soft women and tiny dwarves being inherently un-virile and thus un-warlike in Roman expectations.

Source: Statius, *Silvae* 1.6.53–64:[65] Women untrained to the *rudis* take their stand, daring, how recklessly, virile battles! You would think Thermodon's bands were furiously fighting by Tanais or barbarous Phasis. Then comes a bold array of dwarves, whose term of growth abruptly ended has bound them once and for all into a knotted lump. They give and suffer wounds and threaten death – with fists how tiny! Father Mars and Bloody Virtus laugh, and cranes, waiting to swoop on scattered booty, marvel at the fiercer pugilists.

Women from the elite class performed in *munera* during the reign of Nero; Tacitus acknowledges the lavishness of this display but also assigns a negative moral value to the spectacles. These are not the only crimes against class associated with Nero.

Source: Tacitus, *Annals* 15.32:[66] The same year [64 CE] witnessed shows of gladiators as magnificent as those of the past. Many ladies of distinction, however, and senators, disgraced themselves by appearing in the amphitheater.

Juvenal's tirade against depraved matrons notes with contempt the amateur *gladiatrix*. The problem here is not necessarily that these female combat enthusiasts will actually appear in public games, so much as the transgression of gender norms. These are, after all, married women, whose pursuit of "manly" skills unbalances the distribution of authority in the marital relationship. It also represents to Juvenal a betrayal of Roman tradition, an absence of matronly dignity inappropriate to the noble descendants of worthy ancestors.

Source: Juvenal, *Satire* 6.246–67:[67] Women in purple exercise clothes, women who wrestle – these are a common sight. So are our lady-fencers – we've all seen them, stabbing the practice stump with a *rudis*, shield well-advanced – just the right training needed to blow a matronly horn at the Floralia, unless their aim is higher, to make the real arena. But then, what modesty is there in some helmeted hoyden, a renegade from her sex, who adores male violence – yet wouldn't want to be a man, since the pleasure is so much less? What a sight, if one's wife's Samnite equipment were sold at auction, helmet crest, *balteus*, armlets, and one half of the left-leg shin-guard! Or if the other armature attracts her, how happy you'll be when the dear girl sells off her greaves! . . . Hark how she snorts at each practice thrust, bowed down by the weight of her helmet; see the big coarse *fascia* wrapped round her ample hams . . . Tell me, you noble ladies, descendants of Lepidus, blind Metellus, Fabius Gurges – what gladiator's woman ever dressed up like this, or gasped at the practice-stump?

Blame accrued to emperors that allowed inappropriate performers to debase themselves by appearing in the arena. In describing the inaugural games of Titus, Dio is careful to mention that the female *venatores*, the same noted by Martial in poetic form, are not from an elite background. Their presence in the shows is thus titillating but not necessarily shameful and Titus escapes moral culpability in his sponsorship of such fights.

Source: Dio Cassius 66.25:[68] In dedicating the amphitheater and the baths that bear his name [Titus] produced many remarkable spectacles . . . animals both tame and wild were slain to the number of nine thousand, and women (not those of any prominence, however) took part in dispatching them.

A ban on the appearance of women in the arena was mandated under Septimius Severus, provoked not so much by unusually high numbers of women in blood games, but rather because of disrespectful comments about high-born women that were made in conjunction with competitions.

Source: Dio Cassius 76.16:[69] There took place also during those days a gymnastic contest, at which so great a multitude of athletes assembled, under compulsion, that we wondered how the course could contain them all. And in this contest women took part, vying with one another most fiercely, with the result that jokes were made about other very distinguished women as well. Therefore it was henceforth forbidden for any woman, no matter what her origin, to fight in single combat.

Crimes of Status: Elites in the Arena

An individual's radical deterioration in status challenged the perceived stability of Roman order, as well as the reigning emperor's ability to preserve the status quo. If the empire were really stable, really ordered, such things could not happen at all. It also challenged the moral basis by which the Roman hierarchy was legitimized. Elites were supposed to control their social and political inferiors, not be controlled by the *lanista* and the shrieking crowd at the arena. To see senatorials and equestrians in the arena was bad enough; it was worse to see the emperor make himself into a performer. Nepos says this is the difference between Romans and others, that non-Romans can see elites on the stage with some equanimity, whereas for Romans this is a source of shame.

Source: Cornelius Nepos, *Lives* pref 5: While all Greece honored an Olympic victor and to go onstage as a spectacle for the people was held in no way shameful to them, all these things are considered by us to be *infamia*, *humilia* and far from honorable.

The first known prohibition of Roman elites from appearing as performers in spectacle dates to 46 BCE and the triumphal games sponsored by Julius Caesar as dictator. It is unknown whether this was a formalization of earlier practice or if this was an innovation, perhaps prompted by the civil war context that made boundaries between different statuses in Roman society distressingly fluid. Roman populists, such as Caesar and the more radical Clodius, intensively wooed the lower classes as a useful political constituency, using measures that tended to act against traditional elite privilege. The power of mob politics degraded the cachet of Rome's elite, a slippage that many found troubling, including even those of lower status who might be considered to benefit from this leveling trend. Throughout the rest of the Republic period and the reign of Augustus, various efforts were made to spell out which elites, under which circumstances, could appear in the arena.

A bronze tablet found in Larinum gives the text of a law passed by the Senate under Tiberius that categorizes the performance of equestrians in theatrical presentations and in *munera* as violations of the status ideals established by Augustus in much of his social reform legislation. The prohibition here extends beyond the actual performance to include practice bouts, seemingly, and possibly non-lethal "demonstration" performances. The law also refers to fraud as a motivation for elites to engage in such shameful practices; some suggest that becoming an actor or gladiator may have been a means for some to evade the elite behavioral restrictions of the Augustan legislation on marriage, for example.

Source: Senatorial Decree of 19 CE:[70] Whereas M. Silanus and L. Norbanus Balbus the consuls declared that in accordance with the commission given them they had drawn up a memorandum on . . . those who, contrary to the dignity of the order to which they belonged, were appearing on the stage or at games or were pledging themselves to fight as gladiators, as forbidden by the senatorial decrees that had been passed on that subject in previous years, employing fraudulent evasion to the detriment of the majesty of the senate: on this matter, the senate's recommendation was as follows: no one should bring on to the stage a senator's son, daughter, grandson, granddaughter, great-grandson, great-granddaughter or any male whose father or grandfather (paternal or maternal) or brother or female whose husband or father or grandfather (paternal or maternal) or brother had ever possessed the right of sitting in the seats reserved for the equestrians; or induce them by means of a fee to fight to the death in the arena or to snatch the helmet-crests of gladiators or to take the practice-sword off anyone or to take part in any way in any similar subordinate capacity; nor, if anyone offered himself to do this, should he hire him; nor should any of these persons hire himself out; and that particular precautions were necessary because certain persons of equestrian standing had, for the sake of diminishing the authority of that order, seen to it that they either suffered public disgrace or were condemned in a case involving them in *infamia* and, after they had withdrawn of their own free will from the equestrian seats, had pledged themselves as gladiators or had appeared on the stage; nor should any of these persons, if they were taking that action in contravention of the dignity of their order, have due burial, unless they had already appeared on the stage or hired out their services for the arena or were the offspring male or female of an actor, gladiator, *lanista* or pimp. And with regard to the provisions of the senatorial decree passed by the consuls Manius Lepidus and Titus Statilius Taurus, namely that it should be permissible for no female of free birth of less than twenty years of age and for no male of free birth of less than twenty-five years of age to pledge himself as a gladiator or hire out his services for the arena or stage.

Later references to elites in the arena register shock, indicating their presence there was not typical, and identify this as a sign that behavioral standards have slipped, a failure usually attributed to poor leadership at the top. Juvenal recounts a series of scandals in which scions of noble families bring disgrace by venturing into the arena. In the case of Rutilus, at least, the reason stipulated for this shameful action is poverty following extravagance.

Source: Juvenal, *Satire* 11.3–8, 18–20:[71] Every dinner-party, all the baths and arcades and theater foyers are humming with the Rutilus scandal. He's young still, physically fit to bear arms, and hot-blooded. Gossip claims that with no official compulsion, but no ban either, he'll sign his freedom away to some tyrant of a *lanista*, take the gladiator's oath . . . they'll hock the family plate, or pledge poor Mummy's portrait, and spend their last fiver to add relish to their gourmet earthenware: thus they're reduced to the gladiators' mess-stew.

Imperial Gladiators

Some emperors became notorious not merely as fans of the arena, but as actual participants in spectacular events. This is strongly criticized in the ancient authors, as a horrific violation of the hierarchy of power and as evidence of moral failure. Nero and Commodus were the most reviled for their gladiatorial tendencies.

Nero's own need to perform (and to be acclaimed as a performer) finds satisfaction first indirectly, by staging elaborate yet technically "private" shows. He then creates "cover" for his own actions by exploiting the circumstances and fears of other elites, to make them perform.

> Source: Tacitus, *Annals* 14.14:[72] Imagining that he mitigated the scandal by disgracing many others, he brought on the stage descendants of noble families, who sold themselves because they were paupers. As they have ended their days, I think it due to their ancestors not to hand down their names. And indeed the infamy is his who gave them wealth to reward their degradation rather than to deter them from degrading themselves. He prevailed too on some well-known Roman equestrians, by immense presents, to offer their services in the amphitheater; only pay from one who is able to command, carries with it the force of compulsion.

Commodus was the first emperor born to the purple, i.e. born to a reigning emperor. His entire life was spent in privilege, a fact that probably affected his sense of entitlement and of license. Much of the ancient criticism levied against his rule focuses on what have, by the time of Commodus, become standard targets of imperial blame: excesses of self-indulgence, lack of discipline, and corresponding inattention to the tasks of government. Much of the description of Commodus' arena excess parallels similar activities attributed to Nero and to other "bad" emperors. Unlike Nero, however, Commodus seems to have performed in public *munera* himself, although some have questioned the extent of that performance. Dio Cassius was a senator in Rome under Commodus and thus an eye-witness to his rule. His description may suggest that Commodus' public performances were set apart from the regular shows as special "exhibitions" and consisted of stylized killing of select criminals and exotic animals, with the specific intent to compare the emperor's efforts to the labors of Hercules, Commodus' patron deity. The concentration on this kind of activity and the huge sums paid to support such grand gestures as spectacle and *sparsiones* (see chapter 3) eventually proved an intolerable strain on Commodus' rule.

Source: Dio Cassius 73.16–17:[73] Now this "Golden One," this "Hercules," this "god" (for he was even given this name, too) . . . was also fond, it is true, of bestowing gifts, and frequently gave largesses to the populace at the rate of one hundred and forty denarii per man; but most of his expenditures were for the objects I have mentioned . . . he saved nothing, but spent it all disgracefully on his wild beasts and his gladiators . . . As for wild beasts, however, he slew many both in private and in public. Moreover, he used to contend as a gladiator; in doing this at home he managed to kill a man now and then, and in making close passes with others, as if trying to clip off a bit of their hair, he sliced off the noses of some, the ears of others, and sundry features of still others; but in public he refrained from using steel and shedding human blood . . . As for the lion-skin and club, in the street they were carried before him, and in the amphitheatres they were placed on a gilded chair, whether he was present or not. He himself would enter the arena in the garb of Mercury, and casting aside all his other garments, would begin his exhibition wearing only a tunic and unshod.

Why did emperors do this? Individual reasons probably varied, from thrill-seeking in a fishbowl existence to the need for demonstrations of approval, of "love," to a display of power not just in the use of weapons but in the deliberate flouting of social norms. The emperor proved he was so powerful that rules no longer applied to him.