



BREAD AND CIRCUSES – THE DEVELOPMENT, SYMBOLISM AND REPRESENTATION OF GLADIATORIAL GAMES

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The gladiatorial games and the gladiators themselves are an important historical and social topic, with a large curious audience and a multitude of historical works of art. Therefore, the text below brings the main ideas of the origin, beginning and development of gladiatorial fights. Explains types gladiators, as well as gladiators, but also the battle scenarios themselves. The work brings a lot of historical artistic representations and statements that convey many stories. It is a self-examination the beginning and development of gladiatorial games, their cessation, up to modern art and fascination of the same events.

Keywords: *gladiator, Roman Empire, Rome, art of antiquity, gladiatorial fights, amphitheater*

Introduction

The foundation of Rome in the 8th century BC will mark a great change on the territory of Europe. From then on, until the 5th century, and in some areas even longer, the culture of the Roman city had the greatest influence on the development and changes of the mentioned areas. Initially a small town, then a Republic, and finally an Empire, the level was reached that Europe was ruled from Rome. The ancient Romans were known for many achievements in the fields of law, politics, architecture, urbanism, art and the military. It is precisely to their warrior army that they can thank the constant expansion, which they would then incorporate under their administration through reliable urban planning and legal processes. Many social benefits were tested in this period. Due to the advanced style of construction, as well as the multitude of financed artworks, today we can speak of a partial knowledge of the history of ancient Rome, primarily thanks to archaeological findings.



From the end of the Roman Empire, many centuries will pass on the European soil, until the rediscovery of the same topics that the Romans dealt with, as well as the progress of law, economy, architecture, urbanism, art and the military. Thus already in the Renaissance, art will look for inspiration in ancient works, and with the arrival of the period of historicism, this process will suddenly expand, when there had been a greater number of archaeological excavations and finds. With each discovery of a new and unknown find, the interest in antiquity did not weaken, but on the contrary, fascination and interest among professionals and ordinary people only grew. Among all the valuable and artistic objects, records and stories found, one form of entertainment is probably the most popularly researched topic of ancient Rome. It is about the most famous “sport” in Rome – the gladiatorial fights.



Picture 1. A gladiator relief from Halicarnassus, 1st century, Turkey, British Museum

Origins of gladiatorial games

Many unrelated archaeological finds and observations have created different interpretations of the origins of gladiatorial games. The most famous

theory says that the idea of gladiatorial games has its roots in the Etruscans, which were part of funeral rituals in honour of the dead. This is supported by frescoes from Etruscan tombs, which depict a fight between two warriors.¹ It is also known that the Romans successfully adopted different customs from the Greeks, Carthaginians and Etruscans and used them for their own purposes. It is primarily about construction, politics and military endeavours. However, recently, this theory has been strongly criticized.²

The following theory also says that gladiatorial fights originally had a sacred character. The theory is based the belief that Roman soldiers, after their death, were honored with the sacrifice of prisoners of war and similar manifestations were carried out by the Greeks and Etruscans.³ Similar considerations are made by the early Christian writer Tertullian in his work *De spectaculis*, writing: "The ancients thought that with this kind of spectacle they were doing a favour to the dead, after they softened it with a more cultural form of cruelty... Because from ancient times, they believed that the souls of the dead were propitiated with human blood, at funerals they sacrificed captives or slaves of poor quality that they had bought... So they found solace for death in murder."⁴ According to this theory, the practice of simple sacrifices grew into a mutual fight to the death, which would eventually grow into gladiatorial combat.



Figure 2. A relief with gladiators, 20 - 50, National Archaeological Museum in Naples, Italy

The last in this text, also the least widespread theory, recognizes the origins of gladiatorial fights in the overlapping of deadly fights as a form

- 1 Bishop, M. C. "Gladiators: Fighting to the Death in Ancient Rome." *Casemate Publishers: Oxford* (2017), p. 16
- 2 Wisdom, Stephen. "Gladiators: 100 BC–AD 200." *Osprey Publishing; Oxford* (2001), p. 10
- 3 Bishop, M. C. "Gladiators", p. 14 – 15
- 4 Tertullian. "De spectaculis." *Harvard University Press: London* (1931), p. 263 - 265

of sacrifice and the ancient Roman festival called *Saturnalia*, which was held on December 17, and was later extended to the 23rd day of the same month. The aforementioned festival was held in honour of the god Saturn, whose counterpart in Greek mythology is Chronos, also with his own festival called *Kronia*, held in his honour and for the harvest celebration. The *Kronia* was especially celebrated in Athens and other Ionian cities during the summer. Saturn, like Chronos, is the father of the supreme god Jupiter, whose Greek counterpart is Zeus. Both will overthrow their father to take the place of supreme god. The highlighted theory has several inconsistencies that are evident in the very celebration of the mentioned festivals. Namely, on the day of *Kronia*, the usual social differences were annulled, and the slaves would be entertained by their masters and allowed to run wild in the city, making as much noise as they wanted, and similar patterns are repeated in Rome.⁵ However, the Greeks often identified Chronos with unpleasant foreign deities such as Moloch, the Semitic god to whom human sacrifices were made.⁶ The latter interpretation of the worship of the mentioned god speaks in favour of the prominent theory. Also, we can add the three-day deadly battles organized by Titus Flaminius in Rome, which overlapped with the aforementioned *Saturnalia* festival.⁷ Then Titus pitted 74 men against each other, which only shows the development of gladiatorial fights, but can also be connected to human sacrifice.



Picture 3. A terracotta lamp depicting two gladiators 51 - 100, British Museum

We can also add a theory that says that the gladiatorial games arose from the development of public events in Rome that included activities

5 Hard, Robin. "The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology: Based on H.J. Rose's Handbook of Greek Mythology." London, New York (2004), p. 70 - 71

6 *Ibid.*, p. 71

7 Wisdom, S. "Gladiators", p. 10 - 11



such as racing, wrestling, and, on the other hand, theatre, singing, and playing musical instruments. However, it turned out that traditional public ceremonies in Rome did not include gladiatorial games at that time.⁸

The beginning of gladiatorial combat

The presented theories about the origin of gladiatorial games assume different scenarios of origin. This is precisely why it was necessary to present several different interpretations. Be that as it may, already in the third century BC, gladiatorial fights were held and the oldest finds refer to the year 264. It was at the funeral of Junius Brutus Pera, on the eve of the First Punic War, when his sons Marcus and Decimus organized fights to the death of three pairs of gladiators at the Forum Boarium in Rome.⁹ Over time, the popularity of gladiatorial fights grew, and the Roman historian Titus Livius, in his overview of the period from 218 to 167 BC, shows many gladiatorial fights, primarily at funerals. Here, it is important to add the author's interpretation, which predominantly links gladiatorial fights with a sacred character, but still brings important information about the development of gladiatorial fights. And so Livius brings, and Wiedemann conveys, several events. In 216 BC, at the funeral of Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, there were twenty-two gladiators; then in 200 BC, under Marcus Valerius Laevin, twenty-five; then in 183 BC, under Publius Licinius, sixty years and finally, in 174 BC, BC, Titus Flaminius, in honour of his father, the already mentioned seventy four fighters.¹⁰ Gladiatorial fights were not limited to Rome, so Livius also described the gladiatorial games that Scipio Africanus held in honour of his father and uncle in New Carthage, modern-day Spain.¹¹ The games were held in 206 BC, after both had died fighting the Carthaginians.

As the popularity of these forms of entertainment grew, gladiatorial games became a lucrative business throughout the Roman Empire. For this purpose, special schools (*ludus gladiatorius*) were opened and suitable arenas (*amphitheatres*) erected, battles driven by historical events with various technological-military devices held and their popularity will become rooted among all inhabitants, even the emperors.

8 See more: Wiedemann, Thomas. "Emperors and Gladiators." Routledge: London (1992), p. 2 - 3

9 *Ibid.*, p. 5

10 Wiedemann, T. "Emperors and Gladiators.:", p. 6

11 *Ibid.*, p. 37



Picture 4. Scenes of gladiators from the “Villa Dar Buc Ammera” mosaic, Tripoli Archaeological Museum, Libya

The gladiator

Participants in a deadly battle, where every moment could mean death, delighted the population of ancient Rome and later that of modern times. In these, most often inhumane conditions, individuals fought to survive another day and, ultimately, perhaps reach freedom. This makes it clear that the gladiators were not free citizens. Rather, they were mostly prisoners of war, convicted criminals, exiles (including Christians during one period) and others. They were slaves and, only later, professional fighters. Most of the gladiators were forced to fight because they were forced to do so and only a few volunteered. And in these cases, it was often about lost and depressed citizens, who wanted to try their hand at the search for fame. Paradoxically, the lowest social classes, through gladiatorial fights and victories, could reach glory. In order to reach glory, gladiators attended a full day of gruelling training to perfect their skills and increase their strength. This is precisely why gladiator schools were opened all over the Republic and then the Empire, the most famous of which were the schools in the town Capi, where Spartacus’ uprising started, in Pompeii and in Rome (*Ludus Magnus*). Gladiator schools were mostly run by successfully retired gladiators.

The main task of every gladiator is to shed the blood of his opponent and thus it is evident: the more successful a gladiator was in his job, the more popular he became. With popularity came awards.

In contrast to the position at the bottom of society, that is to say the position of slaves, gladiators had access to plenty of food, in order to be stronger and more ready in the arena. The more popular and skillful fighters could thus achieve significant monetary gains, women or men, and the best and bravest gladiators could win awards from the emperor himself.

Many politicians and emperors would later realize that the Roman populace craved such combative thrills, which they used to increase their own popularity by various sponsorings of gladiatorial games. At the height of the games, Roman emperors sponsored fights in which numerous gladiators participated. The tombstone of a gladiator bearing a victorious palm leaf speaks in favour of the value of the gladiator, and there is also an inscription in Greek on it, translated by Wiedemann¹², which read: "The Familia [erected it] to Saturnilos, to remember him."¹³ The monument was found in Anatolia, and today it is part of the Archaeological Museum in Leiden, the Netherlands.



Picture 5. Tombstone of a gladiator, 3rd century, National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden, Netherlands

12 Wiedemann, T. "Emperors and Gladiators.", p. 134

13 "The Familia [erected it] to Saturnilos, to remember him."



The evolution of gladiatorial games

The image of gladiatorial fights from today's point of view is, in reality, drastically simplified. Two imagined men in an arena fight to the death or until one gladiator knocks the other down. After the gladiator had overcome the opponent, he had the choice to deliver the death blow, which he leaves to the audience or the organizer. Then, the audience or the organizer of the games decides over the life of the overpowered gladiator by the position of the thumb. Common depictions are thumbs up for life and thumbs down for death. In case the defeated gladiator's life is spared, he returns to training and fighting again. The aforementioned fights, which are the main perception of gladiatorial games from a modern point of view, were held, but that was not all. In reality, a large number of versions of the battle took place. It would often be about historical battles of Rome itself, where a multitude of gladiators would stage a certain success. This type of gladiatorial games was common, and one of them was held in 44 BC, when Emperor Claudius organized gladiatorial games, staging the siege and conquest of a British city, with many war machines, in the amphitheatre of Titus Statilius Taurus, in Rome.¹⁴ Sometimes the gladiators would have to stage naval battles, when the arena would fill with water and the gladiators had to save their lives on improvised rafts. Therefore, fighting in larger groups required sophisticated movements and not all slaves were equally trained. Precisely because of this, a division of roles arises, from which many different forms of gladiators will emerge. Over time, gladiatorial games would last for days, where the excitement would gradually build. The beginning of the games usually involved animals, in the form of hunting or fighting. After that, gladiator fights would become more and more intense, and the climax would come with the reconstruction of historical fights.

Contrary to popular belief, not all gladiators were men, but also women. A modern version, the *gladiatrix*, was coined for them, which was not known to the Romans.¹⁵ It is the marble relief from Halicarnassus (Turkey) from the period of the 1st - 2nd century that shows two women gladiators, Amazonia and Achillia, which is today kept in the British Museum. The relief depicts their dismissal from service. The two women gladiators are armed and ready to attack, with swords

14 Wisdom, S. „Gladiators“, str. 7.

15 Bishop, M. C. „Gladiators“, str. 88.



and shields. The right gladiator's head is missing, and they are standing on a raised platform and, in the bottom, on each side, is the spectator's head. Female gladiators are depicted with the same equipment as male gladiators, but without helmets. There are rare findings like the ones mentioned above that talk about female members of this cruel sport, but it is known that the Roman emperor Septimius Severus banned women gladiators in the year 200.¹⁶



Pictue 6. A marble slab depicting two women gladiators, British Museum

Types of gladiators

The name gladiator stems from the Roman name for a short sword – the *gladius*. This sword was also the most common weapon of gladiators, which is not surprising due to the great success of the Roman army with this version of the sword. It is one of the most skilful war achievements, when Roman organization and mobility overlapped with the advantages of the aforementioned sword. Precisely because of this sword, the Roman army was able to make such progress. Namely, the swords of that time, which were heavy, too long or curved, spoiled the Roman formations. This is precisely why the spear could not be the main weapon of the Roman army. In addition to oversized and heavy shields, the army needed a light and strong sword. Although gladiators took up the *gladius*, not all did, which is why there are different types

16 *Ibid.*, str. 5., 116.

of these fighters. Each type is characterized by a certain advantage, as well as a different choice of equipment. The oldest known types are certainly the *Samnite* and *Thracian*, and, in addition to the above, the four most famous types include the *murmillo* and the *retiarius*. Below are the types of gladiators, along with certain characteristics.



Picture 7. An illustration of the *Bestiarius* from the mosaic from Villa Nennig, Austria

The *bestiarius* - fighters who fought against animals, also known as hunters. Less respected than real gladiators; also, they were not technically considered gladiators. No definitive conclusions can be drawn about their equipment due to conflicting findings. Namely, reliefs from the period of the Republic show fully armed gladiators fighting wild animals, but in the imperial period *bestiarii* fought with spears and without armor.¹⁷

The *murmillo* - the name comes from a small sea fish, and the heavy helmet of this gladiator has fish motifs. They were equipped with a helmet, an arm guard, a rectangular shield and a sword.¹⁸ This type of gladiator was the most common opponent of the *retiarius*, but also of the *Thracians*.

17 Bishop, M. C. "Gladiators", p. 84 - 85

18 *Ibid.*, p. 89 - 90



The Samnite - one of the earliest types of gladiators. They owe their origin to the Samnite Wars, which Rome waged against the inhabitants of Samnia, during the second half of the 4th century BC. The Samnites fought with a *gladius* and carried a curved, rectangular body shield. They usually wore a cloak on the left shin and had some form of protection on their sword arm, either padding or a metal arm guard. On their heads they wore a wide-brimmed helmet with a visor that completely covered the face.¹⁹

The secutor - the meaning of the name can be translated as “pursuer” or “follower”, due to his fighting style. He was generally depicted armed with a classical short sword and protected by a helmet, a curved rectangular shield, a hand guard on the sword arm and armour on the leg of the shield.²⁰ Secutors had a high status among gladiators. This type of gladiator was a standard opponent for the *retiarius*, relentlessly chasing him around the arena. In the next picture we can see a vase with a *secutor* and a *retiarius*, the latter raising his finger as a sign of grace.

The provocator - whose name means “challenger”, was equipped in much the same way as the *murmillo*: with a helmet, a rectangular shield, an arm guard and armour. His main weapon was a short sword. Inscriptions mentioning this type of gladiator are known from Rome (Anicetus and Pardus), Pergamum (Nympheros) and Pompeii (Mansuetus).²¹




Picture 8. A relief of a tombstone with the depiction of two provocators from the time of the Republic. Rome, around 30 BC

19 *Ibid.*, p. 95 – 96

20 *Ibid.*, p. 96 – 97

21 *Ibid.*, p. 91



The *retiarius* - the name of this gladiator translates as “net man” or “net fighter” because of the net he wears. This type of gladiator was considered superior, due to its distinct offensive arsenal and mobility. Armed only with a trident (or spear), a net and a knife, he was lightly armoured, mostly wearing only shoulder and arm protection. His only clothing was cloth on his hips and ankle bandages.²² Because of this, he relied on mobility and unobstructed vision, in an attempt to trap his opponent with a net, after which he would deliver the final blow with a spear.

The *Thracian* - one of the earliest types of gladiators, originating from captives from Roman wars at the beginning of the 1st century BC. Equipped with a small circular or square shield, their main weapon was a curved Thracian sword.²³ The famous Spartacus was a *Thracian*.

The listed types of gladiators are not all versions of these ancient fighters, but only the most famous ones. It is noticeable that certain types of gladiators were named after conquered regions or were taken from the same regions. To those already mentioned, we can add the *gallus* - after the province of Gaul, and the *hoplomachus* - a derivative of the Greek name *hoplites* (a military unit). The use of weapons varies greatly: from spears, swords, bows and arrows, as well as protective elements. Gladiators who drove chariots - *essedarius* - are also known.



Picture 9. A depiction of a fight between the *retiarius* and the *secutor* on the mosaic from Villa Nennig, Austria

22 Bishop, M. C. “Gladiators”, p. 91 – 92

23 *Ibid.*, p.. 97

Gladiatorial arenas

The name arena comes directly from the Latin word for “sand”, called *harena*, because gladiators fought on sand.²⁴ The first public fights of gladiators were organized in the Forum Boarium and Forum Romanum in Rome, and later circuses, theatres and areas for chariot races were used to stage fights between gladiators. This is supported by findings throughout Europe. In Ephesus (Turkey), the theatre, only some 900 m southwest of the gladiatorial cemetery, contains finds that show the presence of gladiators, and the same processes can be recognized in theatres in Athens, Aphrodisias, Assos and Hierapolis.²⁵



Picture 10. Scenes of the bestiarius in battle from the “Villa Dar Buc Ammera” mosaic, Tripoli Archaeological Museum, Libya

Over time, amphitheatres, which at first were temporary wooden structures, began to appear. The word *amphitheater*, translated as “universal theatre”, originates from the shape of the *theater*, which is carefully extended to a full circle. Namely, the *theater* was a semi-circular building with distinct acoustic advantages, in which performances were held. Architecturally speaking, the *amphitheatre* is not circular, but oval. After using wood and erecting temporary structures, the process of building stone amphitheatres began. The earliest stone amphitheatre was not in Rome, but in Capua.²⁶ But while this amphi-

24 *Ibid.*, p. 101

25 *Ibid.*

26 Wisdom, S. “Gladiators”, p. 7.

theatre was changed in the imperial period, the stone amphitheatre in Pompeii, which dates back to around 70 BC. BC, is the oldest preserved stone amphitheatre in the world. In 29 BC, the Roman senator Titus Statilius Taur financed the construction of the stone amphitheatre in Rome. As the Roman Empire expanded, so did the amphitheatres, and with the popularity of gladiator fights, they would become the main entertainment venues in the cities. Over time, this form of entertainment and construction would spread throughout the Roman Empire, from the Mediterranean to the British Isles.



Picture 11. Scenes of gladiators from the “Villa Dar Buc Ammera” mosaic, Tripoli Archaeological Museum, Libya

Thus, scenes from the “Villa Dar Buc Ammera” mosaic were found in present-day Libya, which are kept in the National Museum in the capital of Libya. The scenes on the mosaic represent hunting in the arena, gladiators, and executions, all with orchestral accompaniment. The mosaics date from the era of Emperor Vespasian, more precisely, between the years 70 and 75. Similar finds of mosaics were found near Basel, Switzerland. It is about four scenes representing gladiatorial games: two horses in battle; the *secutor* raises his sword to declare victory over the *retiarius*; the gladiator lowers his shield to admit defeat; the *murmillo* kicks the *retiarius* in the thigh, while the *retiarius* delivers a fatal blow to his opponent’s neck.



Picture 12. A gladiator lowers his shield to admit defeat, Augusta Rauric, Switzerland

The peak of constructing edifices, in connection with the gladiatorial games, will come from 70 to 80 AD, when the Amphitheatre of the Flavians, better known as the *Colosseum*, will be built. The arena, with 50,000 seats, offered an unprecedented view of gladiatorial games, animal fights, historical land and sea battles. Although the Colosseum was used earlier, in 80 AD, Vespasian's son Titus opened the Colosseum with a grand program of games that allegedly lasted 100 days and led to the death of 5,000 animals.²⁷

The end of the gladiatorial games

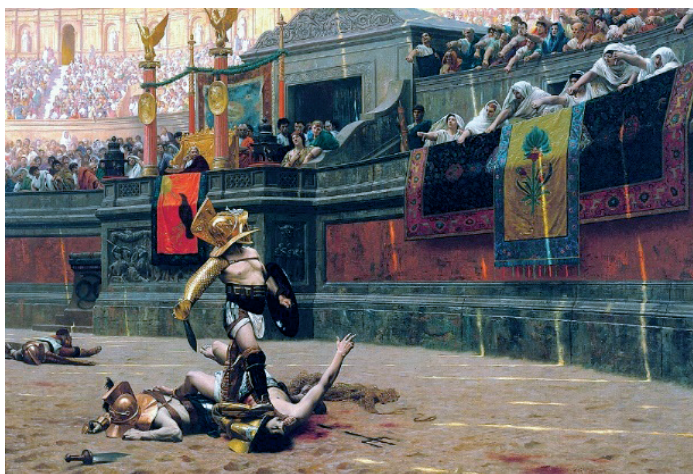
With the Edict of Milan in 313, Christianity became a recognized religion and, as such, equal to all others. Then with the Edict of Thessalonica in 380, the Roman Emperor Theodosius I declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, which would ultimately play a major role in ending the tradition of bloodshed and sacrifice in gladiatorial games. Throughout the 4th century, the popularity of gladiatorial games was in decline, and in 404 Emperor Honorius will completely ban gladiatorial games. One of the last references to gladiators is related to the story of the monk Telemachus, who was torn apart by an angry mob when he tried to intervene to stop the gladiatorial fights in Rome, after which Honorius would make the aforementioned decision.²⁸

27 Bishop, M. C. "Gladiators", p. 106

28 Wiedemann, T. "Emperors and Gladiators", p. 158

Gladiatorial games in the art of the modern era

The modern interest, and later fascination, with gladiatorial games began with the discovery of Pompeii, especially with the discovery of the amphitheatre (1823) and the gladiatorial chambers (1864).²⁹ Not long after these archaeological discoveries, the French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme immortalized the fascination of gladiatorial games with an oil painting, one of the most beautifully rendered artworks on the subject of gladiators. The work is called *Pollice Verso*, which loosely translates as *Turned Thumb*, created in 1872, and is now kept in the Phoenix Art Museum, Arizona. The painting shows a victorious gladiator, erect and pinning his opponent, who asks the audience to decide whether to deliver the death blow to the gladiator on the ground. The painting shows several dead gladiators, the audience is shown and the use of bright red, gold and then blue colours deepens the sophistication of this artwork. The audience gives a thumbs down, which would mean death for the fallen gladiator. Furthermore, in the twentieth century, two novels on the subject of Spartacus' uprising, James Leslie Mitchell in 1930 and Howard Fast in 1951, will be published, further extending the fascination with gladiators. In 1960, the same theme will emerge in artistic cinematographic guise, under the baton of Stanley Kubrick. At the beginning of the new millennium, another artistic - cinematographic event will mark the topic of gladiators, with the simple title of the movie *Gladiator*, but very strong among the audience.



Picture 13. Jean-Léon Gérôme, "Turned Thumb" (*Pollice Verso*), Phoenix Art Museum

29 Bishop, M. C. „Gladiators“, p. 5

Conclusion

At the very mention of ancient Rome, at the very top of the association, will be the gladiator. Numerous finds show how important the games were in Rome itself. From numerous arenas, that is to say amphitheatres, which are scattered all over Europe, various depictions of gladiatorial fights on the mosaics of urban villas of wealthy citizens, reliefs depicting gladiators, vases, lamps and many other objects. The spread of finds, from the African shores of the Mediterranean Sea and the British Isles, to Hispania (modern-day Spain) and the Middle East, shows us the popularity of gladiatorial fights. Many tombstones speak in favour of the popularity of the gladiators themselves, through inscriptions and memories. That is why, in this work, we brought many reliefs with depictions of gladiators. We referred to various gladiator-themed items, such as antique vases and terracotta lamps. The preserved mosaics from this work come from the area of modern-day Libya, Austria and Switzerland, and faithfully depict gladiators in action. We have not even gone into the depth of the biggest, most grandiose construction successes – the amphitheatres – which only show how much interest there was in this form of entertainment.



Picture 14. A movie clip from the film *Gladiator*, directed by Ridley Scott

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that it was a cruel and bloodthirsty form of entertainment, in which participated those who had had to, be it slaves, prisoners or prisoners of war. The participants were most often from the lowest social strata, who were faced with



misery, poverty, inhumane conditions and insecurity for their own lives. Although they were rewarded for their own success, their stake was the greatest possible - their lives. Also, in numerous cases, it concerned the torturing of animals. Nevertheless, due to all the findings, we can assume that visiting gladiatorial fights was a frequent activity, almost a custom. Scenes of killing people and animals, although it is a staged historical battle, that is to say success, are certainly not pleasant. However, it was accepted by the population of the city of Rome, something that the politicians saw and used their wealth to organize more and more, until it reached the emperor himself.

From today's point of view, the fascination with gladiators exists, but we must say that it is still a certain divagation. Therefore, historians continue to research further, in order to faithfully depict all aspects of the life of a gladiator, who enjoyed glory, but paid a heavy price for it, the highest one.

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