

## The Roman Games



This document is designed to assist with the teaching of learning outcomes 2.9, 2.10 and 2.11 in the Leaving Certificate Classical Studies specification.



### The Roman Games

The idea of a crowd of spectators watching trained fighters fight (potentially to the death) appears to have reached the Romans via the Etruscans. The Etruscan tradition was for pairs of gladiators to fight at the funerals of important men. These fights would be organised and paid for by family members of the deceased. The Romans copied this funeral tradition and used the Latin word *munera* to describe these fights. In later centuries the Romans used the word *munera* to describe all types of gladiatorial combat.

Eventually the state became involved in the organisation of games, and the *Ludi Romani* (a.k.a. the *Ludi Magni*) in honour of Jupiter became the largest and most important annual games. The *Ludi Romani* included theatrical performances and chariot racing in addition to gladiatorial combat. Early Roman games were held in the *Forum Romanum*, and Rome did not get its first stone-built amphitheatre until the reign of the emperor Augustus. It would be another 100 years after that before the Colosseum was built (AD 80).

The number of annual games increased over time and there were also one-off games in some years, e.g. as part of a triumph. The use of animals in the games evolved from the use of animals in triumphal processions. The earliest recorded example we have is from 252 BC, when the Romans had a triumphal procession to celebrate a victory over the Carthaginians.

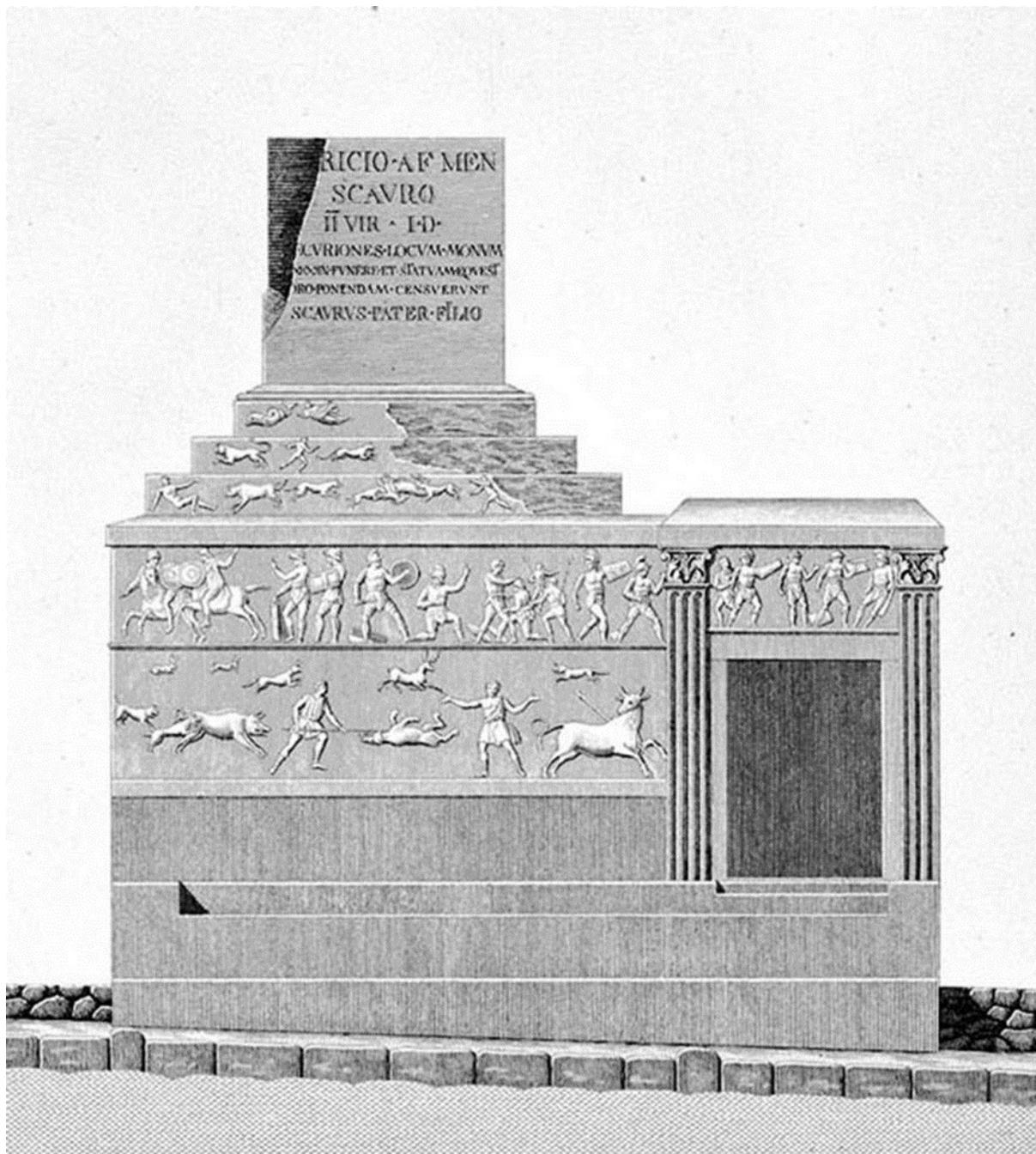
*A large number of elephants were captured from the Carthaginians in Sicily . . . they were ferried across [from Sicily to mainland Italy] on rafts which Metellus had made by putting a layer of planks on rows of wine jars secured together. Verrius records that these elephants fought in the Circus [Maximus] and were killed by javelins. Pliny, Natural History 8.16–17*

The height of popularity of the games and the majority of the written sources fall roughly between 200 BC and AD 200. These notes will focus on this time period. A very interesting change occurs during this period. Until 27 BC Rome was a republic. This meant that many ambitious Roman politicians competed with one another for popularity with the people. One of the best ways to do this was by being involved in the organisation of games. After 27 BC Rome had emperors, and they dominated the organisation of games as they did not want to allow anyone else to gain popularity with the people. In the days of the Republic, the elected public officials responsible for organising all religious festivals (including games) were called aediles. An ambitious aedile knew that, if they put on games that went down well with the people, it would greatly improve their chances of getting elected to a more senior office in the future.

The path to senior political office in the Roman Republic was called the *Cursus Honorum* and involved four main stages. Stage one was to get elected as a quaestor. Quaestor was a relatively junior political office concerned with public finances. Quaestors were responsible for administering all government spending. For example, Roman provincial governors would usually have at least one quaestor on their staff who was responsible for overseeing tax collection and public spending in that province. The next stage was to run for the position of aedile. In addition to organising games and festivals, aediles were responsible for all public works, e.g. roads, bridges, aqueducts and public buildings. The next stage after aedile was praetor. This was considered a senior position. The closest modern comparison in Ireland would be Minister for Justice. The praetors were responsible for law and order, the courts, etc. The most senior position was that of consul. The Romans elected two consuls every year and they acted as the heads of government, i.e. equivalent to Taoiseach/Prime

Minister. The *Cursus Honorum* was like a pyramid, with fewer positions available each time you tried to move up the ladder. This created intense political competition.

**Relief sculpture from a tomb in Pompeii depicting gladiatorial combat.**



Putting on successful games became such a proven route to popularity with the voters that ambitious politicians were willing to spend their own money on them. For example, it became very common for aediles to top up the public money put aside for games with their own money. This practice also saw many politicians run up large debts.

In the extract below Cicero comments on the use of games by a politician called Murena to boost his popularity. Murena appears to have struggled to get elected as praetor because he did not put on games during the election campaign. He did not repeat this mistake when running for consul.

*There were two things which Murena, in his campaign for the praetorship, suffered seriously from the lack of, but which were both of considerable benefit to him when he came to stand for the consulship. One was games, the expectation of which had been brought about by certain rumours and by the deliberate suggestion of his rivals for office . . . as for his not having put on games, a factor which had hampered Murena in his campaign for the praetorship, this deficiency had been made up for by the extremely lavish games he put on in the course of his year as praetor . . . this was unquestionably of enormous help to him [when running for consul]. Do I need to point out that the people and the ignorant masses adore games? It is hardly surprising that they do. Cicero, **Pro Murena 37–39***

The two sources below describe the lengths Julius Caesar went to when putting on games and the costs he was willing to incur.

*Not for this alone did Caesar receive praise during his aedileship, but also because he exhibited both the Ludi Romani and the Megalenses [a religious festival held in April every year] on the most expensive scale and furthermore arranged gladiatorial contests in his father's honour in the most magnificent manner. For although the cost of these entertainments was in part shared jointly with his colleague Marcus Bibulus, and only in part borne by him individually, yet he so far excelled in the funeral contests as to gain for himself the credit for the others too, and was thought to have borne the whole cost himself. Dio Cassius **37.8***

*Caesar spent money recklessly, and many people thought that he was purchasing a moment's brief fame at an enormous price, whereas in reality he was buying the greatest place in the world at inconsiderable expense. We are told, for instance, that before entering upon public office, he was 1,300 talents in debt<sup>1</sup> . . . and, when he was aedile, he provided a show of 320 pairs of gladiators fighting in single combat, and with this and all his other lavish expenditure on theatrical performances, processions and public banquets, he threw into the shade all attempts at winning distinction in this way that had been made by previous holders of the office. Plutarch, **Caesar 5.9***

The exorbitant cost of putting on games (if paid for privately) is commented upon repeatedly in the ancient sources. Here are some examples:

*On the occasion of his father's funeral Fabius wished to give a gladiatorial show, but because of the immense cost of such entertainments, he was unable to meet the expense, whereupon Scipio [a friend and political ally of Fabius] provided half the amount out of his own resources. Polybius **31.28***

*In our own country, even in the good old times, even the most high-minded citizens were generally expected to produce grandiose displays during the year when they were serving as aediles. Mamercus' refusal to seek office as aedile, on grounds of the expense involved, meant that later on he was rejected for the consulship. Cicero, **On Duties 2.57–58***

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<sup>1</sup> It is very difficult to convert ancient money to modern currency values, but 1 talent is worth approximately €1,150. This means that Caesar was roughly €1.5 million in debt.

*Milo is preparing games on a most magnificent scale, at a cost, I assure you, that no one has ever exceeded. It is foolish, on two or even three accounts, to give games that were not demanded – he has already given a magnificent show of gladiators; he cannot afford it. Cicero, Letters to his Brother Quintus 3.8.6*

Lending money for games was one way to help a friend or political ally, but there were other ways to help. The extracts below are taken from an exchange of letters between Cicero and his friend Caelius Rufus in 51 BC. Rufus had been elected aedile for the following year and Cicero was serving as governor of Cilicia, an area corresponding to southern Turkey today.

***A letter from Caelius Rufus to Cicero, September 51 BC***

*In almost every letter I have written to you I have mentioned the subject of panthers. It will be little to your credit that Patiscus has sent ten panthers for Curio (but Cicero had sent none to Rufus). Curio has given me these same animals and another ten from Africa . . . if you will but keep it in mind and send for beasts from Cibyra and write to Pamphylia – they say the hunting is better there – the trick will be done . . . do be a good fellow and give yourself an order about it . . . As soon as the creatures are caught, you have the men I sent to look after feeding and transport to Rome.*

***A second letter from Rufus to Cicero, October 51 BC***

*Curio is behaving handsomely to me and has made me a somewhat onerous present in the shape of the African panthers which were imported for his show. Had he not done that, one might have let the thing go (i.e. not put on games). As it is, I have to give it. So, as I have asked you all along, please see that I have a few beasts from your part of the world.*

***Cicero's reply***

*About the panthers, the usual hunters are doing their best on my instructions, but the creatures are in remarkably short supply . . .*

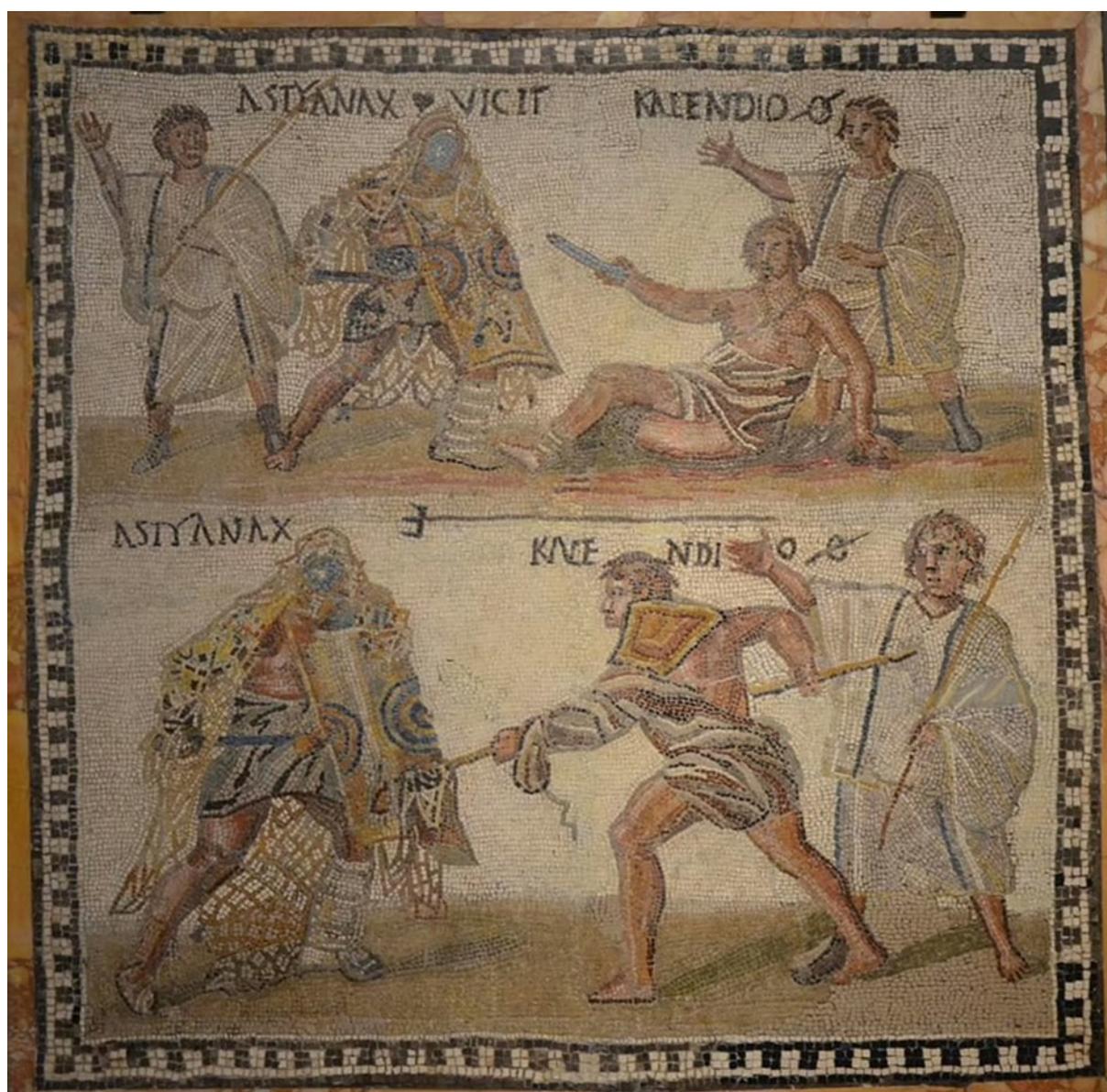
The games became so political that the senate felt compelled to pass a series of laws in the first century BC which were designed to depoliticise the games. These included a law called the *Lex Calpurnia*, which included on a list of acts which counted as electoral bribery the organiser of games giving the best seats at the spectacle to their own supporters. Another law, called the *Lex Tullia*, made it illegal for any politician to put on gladiator shows within two years of running for office. There were so many loopholes in both laws that they appear to have been widely ignored by Roman politicians of the period.

In 56 BC a prominent politician called Sestius appeared in court on charges of organising and arming a mob with the intention of physically attacking some political rivals and their supporters. Cicero, who had been a barrister before going into politics, defended his friend Sestius. During his defence speech Cicero attempted to discredit the chief witness for the prosecution, a politician named Vatinius. One of the accusations Cicero levelled against Vatinius was that he had organised large games in breach of the *Lex Tullia*.

*Vatinius despises that law which expressly forbids any one to exhibit shows of gladiators within two years of his having stood, or being about to stand, for any office . . . he acts most openly against the law; he does so and yet is neither able to slip out of the consequences of a trial by his pleasant*

*manner, nor to struggle out of them by his popularity, nor to break down the laws and courts of justice by his wealth and influence . . . I imagine it is out of his excessive desire for popularity that he bought that troupe of gladiators, so beautiful, noble and magnificent. He knew the desire of the people, he saw that great excitement and gatherings of the people would ensue. And elated with this expectation, and burning with a desire for glory, he could not restrain himself from bringing forward these gladiators. If that were his motive for his violation of the law, and if he were prompted by zeal to please the people . . . still no one would pardon him; but the fact is that this band did not consist of men picked out of those who were for sale, but of men bought out of jails and given gladiatorial names. Cicero, Pro Sestius 133–135*

**Roman mosaic from Madrid showing Astyanax (a secutor) vs Kalendio (a retiarius). Astyanax fights on and wins even after being entangled in the net of the retiarius.**



In 63 BC a Roman politician named Catiline planned to seize power in Rome using armed supporters. This group included gladiators who had been purchased by Catiline. Catiline's plan was discovered before it could be executed and Catiline was arrested, but the senate now realised the danger of allowing private citizens to bring large numbers of gladiators into the city to celebrate *munera*. To combat this danger the senate passed a law restricting the number of gladiators a private citizen was allowed to use. These events are reflected in the next two sources:

*Caesar . . . put on a gladiatorial show, but he had collected so immense a troop of combatants that his terrified political opponents rushed a bill through the house, limiting the number of gladiators that anyone might keep in Rome; consequently far fewer pairs fought than had been advertised.*

**Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 10.2**

One politician, named Clodius, even disrupted the voting during an election using gladiators. He probably did it because he suspected the vote would not go his way.

*Many disorderly proceedings were the result, chief of which was that during the very taking of the vote . . . Clodius took the gladiators that his brother held in readiness for the funeral games of Marcus, his relative, and rushing into the assembly, wounded many and killed many others. Dio*

**Cassius 39.7**

The same Clodius mentioned above also engaged in political street violence against his bitter rival, Milo. Both men used gladiators to attack the supporters of the other.

*While contesting this very point Milo caused much disturbance, and at last himself collected some gladiators and others like minded with himself and kept continually coming to blows with Clodius, so that bloodshed occurred throughout practically the whole city. Dio Cassius 39.8*

It is very clear from the ancient sources that the spectators at games would sometimes reveal the public mood by booing, hissing or clapping a particular politician on their arrival. The crowd would even chant political slogans on occasion, making it very clear where they stood on a particular issue.

*Pompey, has, to my infinite sorrow, ruined his own reputation . . . the feeling of the people was shown as clearly as possible in the theatre and at the games. For at the gladiators both master and supporters were overwhelmed with hisses. At the Ludi Apollinares the actor Diphilus made a smart reference to Pompey, in the line "By our misfortunes thou art great". He was encored countless times. When he delivered the line "The time will come when thou wilt deeply mourn", the whole theatre broke out into applause, and so on with the rest . . . Caesar entered as the applause died away, followed by the younger Curio. The latter received an ovation such as used to be given to Pompey . . . Caesar was much annoyed (presumably because they clapped Curio and not him). Cicero,*

**Letter to Atticus 2.19**

*But the strongest expression of the judgement of the whole Roman people was plainly given by an audience at gladiatorial games. . . into that crowd of spectators came Publius Sestius . . . and showed himself to the people, not that he was eager for applause, but he wished that our enemies themselves might recognise the goodwill of the whole Roman people. At once from all the spectator seats right down from the Capitol (hill), and from all the barriers of the Forum, there were heard such*

*shouts of applause, that it was said that the whole Roman people has never shown greater unity in any cause. Cicero, Pro Sestius 124–125*

The next extract is taken from a speech delivered by Cicero in the senate. In it he taunts his political rival Piso, daring him to attend upcoming games. Cicero is confident that Piso's unpopularity with the people will be revealed.

*Come on, the senate hates you . . . the Roman equestrians cannot bear the sight of you . . . The Roman people wishes your destruction. All Italy despises you . . . Test this excessive and universal hatred if you dare. The most carefully prepared and magnificent games within the memory of man are now at hand, games not only like none ever shown before, but such that we cannot even imagine how any like them ever could be exhibited in future. Trust yourself to the people . . . Are you afraid of [their] hisses? . . . Are you afraid that there will be no voice raised in your honour? . . . You are afraid that violent hands may be laid on you . . . about this I have no question. He will never dare to come near the games. Cicero, Against Piso 64–65*

In 44 BC, after Caesar's assassination, Cicero claims that the crowd at the games desired the recall of (the now-exiled) Brutus to Rome. This claim was made by Cicero during a speech denouncing Marc Antony.

*Think of the clamour raised by countless citizens at gladiatorial shows, think of all the [chanted] popular slogans . . . I should call it the testimony and judgement of the entire Roman people . . . Brutus was the man for whom the cheering and the prize were intended. He could not himself attend the games . . . but the Romans who witnessed that show paid their tribute to him in his absence and sought to comfort the sadness which they felt because their liberator was not with them by incessant cheers and shouts of sympathy. Cicero, Philippics 1.36*

**Spanish King Juan Carlos I being hailed by the crowd at his final bullfight before abdicating in 2014.**



When Augustus became Rome's first emperor in 27 BC, he took steps to restrict the putting on of games. He also built Rome's first amphitheatre and established imperial *ludi* (i.e. gladiator training schools). During his reign Augustus also oversaw the construction of amphitheatres in other parts of the empire. In short, the emperor made absolutely certain that all future games, in all parts of the empire, would be associated with the imperial family. Technically Roman senators could still organise games but there were now all sorts of regulations around how often, how much money could be spent on them, etc. One of Augustus' most canny changes was to stipulate that praetors would now be responsible for the games, not aediles. This meant that young, ambitious men could no longer put on games in the early stages of their political career. These sorts of restrictions were continued and even expanded by Augustus' successors.

Augustus included a description of some of the games he hosted in the *Res Gestae*. The fact that he chose to include games in the *Res Gestae* shows that he fully understood the political nature of the games. He also held games in honour of Julius Caesar.

*Three times I gave gladiatorial games in my own name and five times in the names of my sons and grandsons; at these displays about ten thousand men fought . . . I gave the people twenty-six venationes [animal hunts] of African animals in either the circus, the forum or the amphitheatre; about thirty-five hundred animals were killed in these spectacles. Augustus, Res Gestae 22*

*At the consecration of the shrine to Julius there were all kinds of contests . . . wild beasts and tame animals were slain in vast numbers, among them a rhinoceros and a hippopotamus, beasts then seen for the first time in Rome . . . Dacians [from Romania] and Suebi [from Germany] fought in groups against one another . . . the whole spectacle lasted many days, as one would expect, and there was no interruption, even though Augustus fell ill, but it was carried on in his absence under the direction of others. Dio Cassius 51.22*

The next passage describes games given by Gaius and Lucius, the grandsons of Augustus.

*They did, in fact, have the management of the Circensian games on this occasion . . . Two hundred and sixty lions were slaughtered in the Circus. There was a gladiatorial combat in the Saepta [a very large public building in Rome normally used for casting and counting votes during elections], and a naval battle between the "Persians" and the "Athenians" was given on the spot where even today (200 years later) some relics of it are still pointed out. Dio Cassius 55.10*

As stated in the introduction to this section, the emperors who came after Augustus continued to restrict the ability of anyone outside of the imperial family to host games. This is reflected in the next three passages.

*[The emperor Claudius] ordered the praetors not to give the customary gladiatorial exhibitions and also commanded that if anyone else gave them in any place whatsoever, it should at least be recorded or reported that they were being given for the emperor's preservation. Dio Cassius 60.5*

*Several arrangements were made on the Senate's authority [when Nero became emperor]. No one was to receive a fee or a present for pleading a cause; the quaestors-elect were not to be under the necessity of exhibiting gladiatorial shows. Tacitus, Annals 13.31*

*The emperor [Nero – in 57 BC] by an edict forbade any magistrate or procurator in the government of a province to exhibit a show of gladiators, or of wild beasts, or indeed any other public entertainment; for before this our subjects had been as much oppressed by such bribery as by actual extortion, while governors sought to screen by corruption the guilty deeds of their own doing.*

**Tacitus, Annals 13.31**

The most famous quote about the games, and arguably one of the most acerbic, comes from the poet Juvenal (c. AD 55 – 127). His famous, disparaging remark is a comment on the fact that the Roman people no longer cared about the quality of their political leaders or the state of their society as long as they were given “*panem et circenses*” (*bread and games*): **Juvenal, Satires 10.81**. The “*panem*” part of the quote refers to the fact that the poorest citizens of Rome were given free food by the government as a form of social welfare.

The games were also a great opportunity for emperors to show themselves to the people. Many emperors seem to have understood that attendance at public events like the games was essential to maintain a link with the people. Otherwise a negative public perception of the emperor as aloof and uncaring could develop. The next three passages show that the emperors Claudius and Trajan understood this.

*He [Claudius] gave many gladiatorial shows and in many places . . . Now there was no form of entertainment at which he was more familiar and free, even thrusting out his left hand, as the plebs did, and counting aloud on his fingers the gold pieces which were paid to the victors; and always and repeatedly he would address the audience, and invite and urge them to merriment, calling them “domini” [masters] from time to time, and interspersing feeble and far-fetched jokes. Suetonius,*

**Claudius 21**

*Scarcely anyone has equalled Trajan in popularity with the people . . . the emperor did not neglect even actors and the other performers of the stage, the circus, or the amphitheatre, knowing as he did that the Roman people are held fast by two things above all, the grain-dole and the shows, that the success of a government depends on games as much as more serious things. Fronto, Preamble to*

**History 17**

*Leader and people alike are seated on the same level. From one end to the other [of the circus] is a uniform plan, a continuous line, and Caesar [Trajan] as a spectator shares the public seats as he does the spectacle. Thus your subjects will be able to look on you in their turn; they will be permitted to see not just the Emperor's box, but their emperor himself, seated among his people. Pliny, Panegyric*

The emperor Commodus took things one step further by fighting as a gladiator himself! Obviously, these fights were staged so that the emperor would remain unharmed. Commodus really did fancy himself a champion gladiator and also had statues erected in Rome showing him wearing a lion skin and wielding a club like the mythical hero Hercules. Commodus has gone down in history as a particularly dangerous and erratic Roman emperor, as the next two passages illustrate.

*When he fought, we senators always went together with the equites, although Claudius Pompeianus the elder never happened to appear . . . preferring to have his throat cut for this rather than to look at the emperor, son of Marcus Aurelius doing such things. For among other things that we did, we would shout out whatever we were commanded, and especially these words continually: "You are lord and you are first, of all men most fortunate! Victor you are, and victor you shall be; from everlasting, Amazonian, you are victor!"* **Dio Cassius 73.20**

*This fear [of Commodus] was shared by all, by us senators as well as by the rest. And here is another thing that he did to us senators which gave us every reason to look for our death. Having killed an ostrich and cut off its head, he came up to where we were sitting, holding the head in his left hand and in his right hand raising aloft his bloody sword; and though he spoke not a word, he nodded his head with a grin, indicating that he would treat us in the same way.* **Dio Cassius 73.21**

After Commodus' death the crowd at the games voiced their delight that he had been assassinated. He had been strangled in the bath by a professional wrestler. The passage below repeatedly refers to him as "parricide". The term parricide means someone who has killed a member of their own family. During his reign Commodus had killed his own sister for plotting against him.

*Let the parricide be dragged away! Let the enemy of the fatherland, the parricide, the gladiator, be mangled in the charnel house! . . . He that killed the senate, let him be dragged with the hook! He that killed the innocent, let him be dragged with the hook! . . . Good fortune to the Praetorian Guard [who had arranged his death] . . . Let the memory of the parricide, the gladiator be wiped out! Let the statues of the parricide, the gladiator, be dragged away!* **Historia Augusta, Commodus 18–19**

It became common during the Imperial period for the crowd as a whole, or individual members of the crowd, to shout out to the emperor at the games asking for things they wanted. The more astute emperors usually agreed to do whatever was being asked, but some were less keen on agreeing to every request, and others, like Caligula, made a point of refusing every request or doing the opposite to what the crowd demanded. The following passages provide examples of both emperors who tried to please the crowd and those who did not.

*What generosity went to provide this spectacle! And what impartiality the emperor [Trajan] showed, unmoved as he was by personal feelings or else above them. Requests were granted, unspoken wishes were anticipated, and he did not hesitate to press us urgently to make fresh demands . . . How freely too the spectators could express their enthusiasm and show their preferences without fear! No*

*one risked the old charge of impiety if he disliked a particular gladiator: no spectator found himself turned spectacle, dragged off by the hook to satisfy grim pleasures, or else cast to the flames! Domitian [Trajan's predecessor] was a madman, blind to the true meaning of his position, who used the arena for collecting charges of high treason, who felt himself despised and condemned if he failed to revere his gladiators, taking any criticism of them as criticism of himself. **Pliny, Panegyric 33***

*In the same year [AD 33, i.e. during the reign of Tiberius] the high price of grain nearly caused riots. In the theatre, for several days, sweeping demands were shouted with a freedom of language rarely displayed to emperors. Upset, Tiberius rebuked the officials and senate for not using their authority to curtail popular demonstrations. He listed the provinces from which he was importing grain – more than Augustus. So the senate passed a resolution of old-fashioned strictness censuring the public. The consuls too issued an equally severe edict. Tiberius was silent. However, this was not taken for modesty as he hoped, but for arrogance. **Tacitus, Annals 6.13***

*During these and the following days many of the foremost men perished in fulfilment of sentences of condemnation and many others of less prominence in gladiatorial combats. In fact, there was nothing but slaughter; for the emperor [Caligula] no longer showed any favour even to the populace, but opposed absolutely everything they wished, and consequently the people on their part resisted all his desires. The talk and behaviour that might be expected at such a juncture, with an angry ruler on one side, and a hostile people on the other, were plainly in evidence. The contest between them, however, was not an equal one; for the people could do nothing but talk and show something of their feelings by their gestures, whereas Gaius would destroy his opponents, dragging many away even while they were witnessing the games and arresting many more after they had left the theatres. The chief causes of his anger were, first, that they did not show enthusiasm in attending the spectacles and again, that they did not always applaud the performers that pleased him and sometimes even showed honour to those whom he disliked. Furthermore, it vexed him greatly to hear them hail him as "young Augustus" in their efforts to extol him; for he felt that he was not being congratulated upon being emperor while still so young, but was rather being censured for ruling such an empire at his age. He was always doing things of the sort that I have related; and once he said, threatening the whole people: "Would that you had but a single neck." **Dio Cassius 59.13***

*Now at this time came the Circensian games; this spectacle was eagerly desired by the people of Rome, for they come with great alacrity into the circus at such times, and petition their emperors, in great multitudes, for what they need; the emperors usually did not deny them their requests, but readily and gratefully granted them. Accordingly, they most importunately desired that Gaius [Caligula] would now ease off on their tribute and reduce the harshness of the taxes imposed upon them; but he would not hear their petition; and when their appeals increased he sent soldiers . . . and ordered them to seize those that made the disturbance and bring them out and put them to death . . . and the number of those who were killed on this occasion was very great. Now the people saw this, and bore it so far, that they stopped making noise, because they saw with their own eyes that this petition to have their payments reduced brought immediate death upon them. These things made Chaerea [one of Caligula's Praetorian guards] more determined to go ahead with his plot, in order to put an end to this barbarity of Gaius against men. **Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 19.24–27***

This image depicts the Magerius mosaic, found in an excavation of Roman remains in modern Tunisia. The mosaic celebrates the staging of games by a man named Magerius. A number of gladiators fighting animals can be seen, along with an individual holding a tray with bags of money (possibly prize money for the victors).



### The Colosseum

The construction of the Flavian amphitheatre began during the reign of Vespasian in the 70s AD and was completed by his son Titus in AD 80. The site they built it on originally had a manmade lake that made up part of the grounds of the palace of the emperor Nero. The lake had to be drained before construction began. The site also had an enormous statue (a colossus) that had been erected by Nero, and this is where we get the name “Colosseum” from. In AD 70 Vespasian had dispatched Titus to Judaea (modern Israel) to put down a Jewish revolt against Roman rule. Titus returned to Rome in AD 71 after sacking Jerusalem – the main centre of Jewish resistance. He returned with a large number of Jewish prisoners-of-war, who were put to work building the new amphitheatre.

The Flavian amphitheatre was the largest amphitheatre built anywhere in the Roman Empire and could hold at least 50,000 spectators (some experts think it could hold up to 80,000). Each arched entranceway was numbered, as was each horizontal section of seats, individual row and seat. Each spectator was given a ceramic ticket with the relevant numbers on it. Once a spectator entered the building, a series of passages, stairs and ramps directed them towards their seat.

For the first ten years of its life, the amphitheatre had a solid arena floor, but this was then replaced by a removable floor which had trap doors to allow for the sudden release of animals and gladiators from below. The substructure consisted of a series of small passageways and rooms for holding animals, prisoners, gladiators and props/machinery. Manually operated lifts were used to raise and lower sections of the arena floor. This elaborate substructure was called the *hypogeum*. The fact that the *hypogeum* was only installed ten years after the construction of the building meant that *naumachia* (naval games) were possible in the Colosseum in the first decade of its existence.

The building contained public toilets and around 100 water drinking fountains. The interior was highly decorated with brightly coloured wall paintings. There were two boxes (i.e. special seating areas) in the Colosseum, one at the north end and one at the south. One was reserved for the emperor, and the other for the Vestal Virgins. Senators sat in a special section called the podium. The exterior was equally impressive, with four different levels clearly visible. The bottom level has Doric columns, the next level has Ionic columns, and the third level has Corinthian columns. In some places exterior stone corbels survive. They were used to support wooden posts which helped to support the building’s awning (velarium) as it did not have a permanent roof.

Throughout the Colosseum there were restrictions on who could sit where. Some of these designations pre-dated the building of the Colosseum and applied generally to seating in all public venues. The first 14 rows were reserved for equestrians, and women had to sit in the back rows, i.e. in the fourth tier of seating. There was also a ban on the wearing of dark cloaks in all tiers except the fourth tier. By the time the Colosseum was built, the old practice of being allowed to occupy any seat you wished the night before an event had been discontinued.

*Horatius was watching the show just now in a black cloak, the only one in the entire crowd, while the plebs and the equestrians and the senators sat dressed in white together with our revered leader.*

*Suddenly snow fell from the sky. Horatius watches in a white cloak. **Martial, Epigrams 4.2***

### Naumachia

Naumachia was what the Romans called the naval games. These were special events that involved the recreation of famous naval battles. There was no permanent venue for these events. Instead, when needed, the Romans would flood a suitable area and erect temporary seating around it. Once the event was over, the area would be drained again. Because of the huge volumes of water involved, and the use of very large ships, a large area was needed. There is some evidence to suggest that the Colosseum was used for naval games in the first ten years of its existence.

*For Titus suddenly filled this same theatre with water and brought in horses and bulls and some other domesticated animals that had been taught to behave in the water just as on land. He also brought in people on ships, who engaged in a sea-fight there. **Dio Cassius 66.25***

*At the dedication of the amphitheatre and the baths, which had been hastily built beside it, Titus provided a most lavish gladiatorial show; he also staged a sea-fight on the old artificial lake, and when the water had been let out, used the area for further gladiatorial contests and an animal hunt. **Suetonius, Titus 7***

*Domitian presented many extravagant entertainments in the Colosseum and the Circus. Besides the usual two-horse chariot races he staged a couple of battles, one for infantry, the other for cavalry; a sea-fight in the amphitheatre. **Suetonius, Domitian 4***

*If you are here from a distant land, a late spectator for whom this was the first day of the sacred show, let not the naval warfare deceive you with its ships, and the water like to a sea: here but lately was land. **Martial, Spectacles 27***

### The Gladiators

The first step for an *editor* organising games was to source gladiators. The way to do this was to contact a *lanista* (owner/manager of a *ludus*) and negotiate the number and types of gladiators to be used, and their cost. If any famous, champion gladiators were to be used, this would have a significant impact on the cost.

There were three basic categories of “performer” used in the games. The first was prisoners-of-war. These prisoners could be made fight to the death for the amusement of the crowd. Technically they were not “proper” gladiators as they had not gone through specialist training in a *ludus*. This extract describes the use of Jewish prisoners-of-war by the emperor Titus as he travelled through the Middle East on his way back to Rome.

*During his stay at Caesarea Maritima Titus celebrated his brother’s birthday with great splendour, reserving for his honour 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 . . . After this Titus passed to Beirut . . . here he made a longer stay, displaying still greater magnificence on the occasion of his father’s birthday . . . Multitudes of captives perished in the same manner as before. Josephus, The Jewish War 7.37–40*

The second category was that of condemned criminals (*Damnati*). These criminals would be executed in front of the crowd. There were two basic ways of doing this: armed and unarmed. Sending unarmed criminals into the arena against wild animals was very common. The other common method was to arm them and make them fight each other in groups but, like the prisoners-of-war, they were not true gladiators. Very occasionally, instead of facing certain death in the arena, a condemned criminal would be sent to a *ludus* to be properly trained. This gave them a chance of surviving and fighting their way to freedom.

The last group consisted of proper gladiators, those who had been trained professionally over a long period of time. These were usually slaves purchased by a *lanista* who saw potential in them. Some free citizens did choose to become gladiators, but this appears to have been very rare. There were lots of different types of gladiators, each with their own style of armour and weapons. What type you were greatly influenced your fighting style. These “real” gladiators were the highlight of the games and stood a reasonable chance of surviving even if they were defeated.

The Roman attitude towards gladiators was contradictory. On the one hand they were looked down on because of their status as slaves but, on the other, they were revered as sporting heroes and sex symbols. Some of the graffiti about gladiators found in Pompeii reveals this:

*Celadus the Thraex, he makes the girls moan. Three fights, three victories.*

*Celadus the Thraex, the glory of the girls.*

In one of his poems Juvenal wrote about the wife of a senator who had left her husband for a gladiator.

*What beauty set Eppia on fire? What youth captured her? What did she see that made her endure being called a gladiator's woman? For her darling Sergius was already middle-aged and had begun to hope for retirement due to a wounded arm. Moreover, there were many deformities on his face . . . but he was a gladiator: this makes them hyacinthuses [beautiful]. She preferred this to her children . . . that woman preferred this to her husband. The sword is what they love. Juvenal, Satire 6.102–112*

It was even rumoured that Commodus' father was not Marcus Aurelius but one of his mother's gladiator lovers.

*Some say, and this seems plausible, that Commodus . . . was not begotten by him [Marcus Aurelius] but from an adulterous union . . . Allegedly Faustina, 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 . . . it is reasonably well known that Faustina chose both sailors and gladiators as lovers for herself. Historia Augusta, Marcus Antoninus 19*

The overwhelming majority of gladiators were male, but there is evidence for the rare appearance of female gladiators at the games, though their level of training does not appear to have matched that of the men. The emperor Septimius Severus (reigned from AD 193 – 211) eventually banned female gladiators entirely.

*In dedicating the amphitheatre 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 took part in dispatching them. Dio Cassius 66.25*

*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. Suetonius, Domitian 4*



This graffito from Pompeii praises the accomplishments of a novice gladiator called Marcus Attilius. The middle line reads:

*Marcus Attilius the novice won. Hilarus of the Neronian school, 14 fights, 13 wins, was reprieved.*

The bottom line refers to the second fight of Marcus Attilius:

*Marcus Attilius 1 fight, 1 win, won. Raecius felix 12 fights, 12 wins, was reprieved.*

The top line says that the games were at Nola and there was a four-horse chariot race. It also depicts musicians on the right. It then gives the following results:

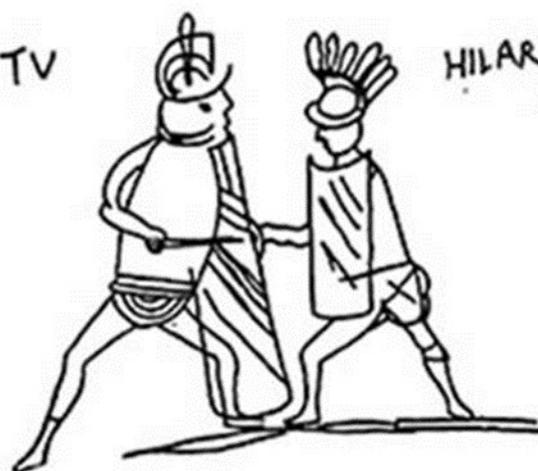
*Prieps of the Neronian school, 12 fights, 10 wins, won.*

*Hilarus of the Neronian school, 14 fights, won.*

*Creunus, 7 fights, 5 wins, was reprieved.*



M ATTILIVS TV



HILARVS NER XIV) XIII  
 M

MATT

M ATTILIVS I) I  
 V



L RAECIVS FELIX  
 XII) XII. M



### A Day at the Games

A typical day at the games consisted of three parts: animal hunts in the morning (*venationes*), executions of criminals at midday and gladiatorial combat in the afternoon. The games would be advertised in advance by painting notices on buildings. None of these advertisements survive in Rome today but a number of them have been found in Pompeii.

*Twenty pairs of gladiators provided by Decimus Lucretius Satrius Valens . . . and ten pairs provided by Decimus Lucretius Valens, his son, will fight at Pompeii 8–12 April. There will be a really big hunt and the awnings will be up.*

Of course, news of upcoming games also spread through word-of-mouth. On the morning of the games there would be a parade of the gladiators taking part before any fighting began. The parade also included musicians (a bit like a marching band) and men carrying statues of the gods and other religious symbols placed on wooden platforms, which were then carried on their shoulders. After the parade an announcer would call out details of the day's planned events. This would always include key details about the gladiators taking part, for example how many previous victories they had.

The *venationes* followed a set pattern. Either animals would be pitted against one another or animals would be sent in to the arena against human gladiators (*bestiarii*). The Romans used all kinds of dangerous animals for these fights but the most common were large cats, e.g. lions, leopards and cheetahs.

*At these spectacles [given by the emperor Septimius Severus] sixty wild boars . . . fought together at a signal, and among many other wild beasts that were slain were an elephant and a hyena . . . The entire arena of the amphitheatre had been constructed to resemble a boat in shape, with a capacity for holding or releasing four hundred beasts at once; and, as it suddenly fell apart, bears, lionesses, panthers, lions, ostriches, wild asses and bisons . . . came rushing out so that seven hundred beasts total, both wild and domesticated, all at once were seen running about and were slaughtered. Dio*

**Cassius 77.1**

*To be sure, the show, if you are interested, was on the most lavish scale, but it would have been little to your taste, to judge by my own . . . the venationes, two every day for five days, magnificent – nobody says otherwise. But what pleasure can a cultivated man get out of seeing a weak human being torn to pieces by a powerful animal or a splendid animal transfixed by a hunting spear? Anyway, if these sights are worth seeing, you have seen them often; and we spectators saw nothing new. Cicero, **Letters to his Friends 7.1 (Written to Marius in 55 BC)***

The Romans used a bewildering variety of methods to execute criminals but the two most common were forcing them to fight one another or releasing wild animals to attack them. The next three passages all describe executions.

*I happened to go to one of these shows at the time of the lunch-hour interlude, expecting there to be some light and witty entertainment then, some respite for the purpose of affording people's eyes a rest from human blood. Far from it. All the earlier contests were charity in comparison. The nonsense is dispensed with now: what we have now is murder pure and simple. The combatants have nothing to protect them; their whole bodies are exposed to the blows; every thrust they launch gets home . . . There are no helmets and no shields repelling the weapons. What is the point of armour? Or of skill? All that sort of thing just makes the death slower in coming . . . The spectators insist that each on killing his man shall be thrown against another to be killed in his turn; and the eventual victor is reserved by them for some other form of butchery; the only exit for the contestants is death. Fire and steel keep the slaughter going. And all this happens while the arena is virtually empty. **Seneca, Letters 7***

*Recently, in my own experience a certain Selouros, called the "Son of Etna", was sent to Rome because he had commanded an army and terrorised the area around Mount Etna for a long time with frequent raiding [Mt. Etna is in Sicily, and Selouros was the leader of a large gang of armed criminals]. I saw him torn to pieces by the beasts in the amphitheatre while a contest of gladiators was being performed. He had been put on a high platform, as though on Mount Etna, and when the platform suddenly broke up and collapsed, he himself crashed down into wild-beast cages which easily broke open, placed beneath the platform in readiness for this purpose. **Strabo, Geography 6.2***

*As Prometheus, bound on a Scythian crag, fed the tireless bird with his abundant breast, so did Laureolus, hanging on no fake cross, give his naked flesh to a Caledonian boar. His lacerated limbs lived on, dripping gore . . . Finally he met with the punishment he deserved; the guilty wretch had plunged a sword into his father's throat or his master's, or in his madness had robbed a temple of gold, or laid a cruel torch to Rome. The criminal had outdone the misdeeds of ancient story; in him, what had been a play became an execution. **Martial, Spectacles 9***

**A Roman mosaic from North Africa, c. AD 200.**





The highlight of the day was the fights between the gladiators. Strange as it might seem, these fights had a referee (called the *summa rudis*). The referee would pause the fight if the weapon(s) of one of the gladiators broke or if the fight had been going on for a long time and the referee judged that both gladiators needed a break. The fight would also be paused if one of the gladiators was unable to fight on due to wounds and/or exhaustion. The defeated gladiator could ask for *missio* (a reprieve) by raising a finger. The *summa rudis* would then look to the *editor*, who would usually be seated somewhere prominent, to decide the outcome. Normally the crowd would shout out either *missum* (let him go) or *lugula* (slit his throat). The call of *missum* could be accompanied by the waving of a cloth. The shout of *lugula* was often accompanied by a raised fist with the thumb out. The thumb being out was the “kill” gesture. There is no agreement amongst the experts on the exact form of the thumb gesture. The idea of a thumbs up or thumbs down for save/kill is a Hollywood invention. The desire of the crowd for either kill or save was influenced by how well the defeated gladiator had fought and how well established they were as a champion fighter. An *editor* could make themselves unpopular very quickly by going against the crowd so they usually went with the crowd’s choice. If the decision was “kill” the victorious gladiator would finish off the loser and their body would be dragged away using a hook. We have some examples of fights that were so evenly matched that the *editor* eventually declared a draw and allowed both gladiators to live, but this was very, very rare.



Once the games were over the results of the fights would be painted alongside the original advertisements for the games. Some examples of this have survived in Pompeii.

*Pugnax, a Thracian of the Neronian school with three fights to his credit, won.*

*Murranus, a myrmillo of the Neronian school with three fights, was killed.*

*Cycnus, a hoplomachus of the Julian school with eight fights, won.*

*Atticus, a Thracian with fourteen fights, was reprieved.*

The crowd could get very excited at the games in their support of a particular gladiator, and it was not unheard of for violence to break out between members of the crowd. The most famous example of this happened in AD 59, during the reign of the emperor Nero.

*About the same time a trifling beginning led to frightful bloodshed between the inhabitants of Nuceria and Pompeii at a gladiatorial show . . . they began with abusive language of each other; then they took up stones and at last weapons, the advantage resting with the populace of Pompeii, where the show was being exhibited. And so there were brought to Rome a number of the people of Nuceria, with their bodies mutilated by wounds, and many lamented the deaths of children or of parents. The emperor entrusted the trial of the case to the senate . . . the inhabitants of Pompeii were forbidden to have any such public gathering for ten years. Tacitus, Annals 14.17*

This contemporary wall-painting depicts the riot of AD 59.



During the Imperial period free food would be handed out at the games, and small wooden balls with inscriptions on them would be thrown into the crowd. These wooden balls could then be exchanged for prizes including clothing, silver and gold cups, horses, cattle and slaves. The prize won would depend on the inscription on the surface of the ball. Unsurprisingly, with some very valuable prizes up for grabs, the crowd would be very keen to get possession of the wooden balls. Seneca, writing in the first century AD, describes this competition for the prizes.

*Some of these prizes have already been torn to pieces in the hands of those who try to snatch them, others have been divided among untrustworthy partnerships, and still others have been snatched to the great detriment of those whose possessions they have come . . . others have been lost to their seekers because they were snatching too eagerly for them and, just because they are greedily seized upon, have been knocked from their hands . . . The most sensible man, therefore, runs from the theatre as soon as he sees the little gifts being brought in; for he knows that one pays a high price for small favours. No one will grapple with him on the way out, or strike him as he departs; the quarrelling takes place where the prizes are. Seneca, Letters 74.7*

It is clear from a number of different sources that, before the segregation of men and women at the games, they were viewed as a great opportunity for young, single people to meet.

*Don't overlook the meetings when horses are running; in the crowds at the track opportunity waits . . . sit as close as you like; no one will stop you at all. In fact, you will have to sit close – that's one of the rules, at a race track . . . contact is part of the game. Try to find something in common, to open the conversation . . . if her cloak hangs low, and the ground is getting it dirty, gather it up with care, lift it a little, so! Maybe, by the way of reward, and not without her approval, you'll be able to see ankle or possibly knee. Then look around and glare at the fellow who's sitting behind you, don't let him crowd his knees into her delicate spine . . . There is another good ground, the gladiatorial shows. On that sorrowful sand Cupid has often competed, and the watcher of wounds often gets wounded himself. While he is talking, or touching a hand . . . he groans to feel the shaft of the arrow; he is a victim himself, no more spectator, but show. **Ovid, The Art of Love 1.135–170***

*A few months afterwards there was a gladiatorial spectacle, and since the places for men and women in the theatre were not yet separated, but still promiscuous, it chanced that there was sitting near Sulla a woman of great beauty and splendid birth; she was a daughter of Messala, a sister of Hortensius the orator, and her name was Valeria, and it so happened that she had recently been divorced from her husband. As she passed along behind Sulla, she rested her hand upon him, plucked off a bit of wool from his cloak, and then proceeded to her own place. When Sulla looked at her in astonishment, she said: It's nothing of importance, Dictator, but I too wish to benefit a little from your good luck. Sulla was not displeased at hearing this, no, it was at once clear that his fancy was taken, for he secretly sent [a slave] and asked for her name, and inquired about her family and history. Then followed mutual glances, continual turnings of the face to gaze, interchanges of smiles, and eventually negotiations began for marriage. **Plutarch, Sulla 35***

*No, indeed, in every kind of spectacle he will meet with no greater temptation than that over careful attire of women and men. That sharing of feelings and that agreement or disagreement over favourites fan the sparks of lust. **Tertullian, On the Spectacles 25.2***

Pre-Christian criticism of the games is rare as they were clearly very popular with the masses. The next passage is a rare example of a pre-Christian writer condemning the games.

*Do you ask me what you should regard as especially to be avoided? I say, crowds; for as yet you cannot trust yourself to them with safety. I shall admit my own weakness, at any rate; for I never bring back home the same character that I took abroad with me. Something of that which I have forced to be calm within me is disturbed; some of the foes that I have routed return again. Just as the sick man, who has been weak for a long time, is in such a condition that he cannot be taken out of the house without suffering a relapse, so we ourselves are affected when our souls are recovering from a lingering disease. To consort with the crowd is harmful; there is no person who does not make some vice attractive to us, or stamp it upon us, or taint us unconsciously. Certainly, the greater the mob with which we mingle, the greater the danger.*

*But nothing is so damaging to good character as the habit of lounging at the games; By chance I attended a mid-day exhibition, expecting some fun, wit, and relaxation, – an exhibition at which men's eyes have respite from the slaughter of their fellow-men. But it was quite the reverse. The previous combats were the essence of compassion; but now all the trifling is put aside and it is pure murder. The men have no defensive armour. They are exposed to blows at all points, and no one ever strikes in vain. Many persons prefer this programme to the usual pairs . . . Of course they do; there is no helmet or shield to deflect the weapon. What is the need of defensive armour, or of skill? All these mean delaying death. In the morning they throw men to the lions and the bears; at noon, they throw them to the spectators. The spectators demand that the slayer shall face the man who is to slay him in his turn; and they always reserve the last conqueror for butchering. The outcome of every fight is death, and the means are fire and sword. This sort of thing goes on while the arena is empty.*

*You may retort: "But he was a highway robber; he killed a man!" And what of it? Granted that, as a murderer, he deserved this punishment, what crime have you committed, poor fellow, that you should deserve to sit and see this show? In the morning they cried "Kill him! Lash him! Burn him! Why does he meet the sword in so cowardly a way? Why does he strike so feebly? Why doesn't he die willingly? Whip him to meet his wounds! . . ." And when the games stop for the intermission, they announce: 'A little throat-cutting in the meantime, so that there may still be something going on!'"*

*Come now; do you not understand even this truth, that a bad example reacts on the agent? Thank the immortal gods that the men to whom you are giving a lesson in cruelty are not in a position to profit from it. **Seneca, Letters from a Stoic 7***

### The Circus Maximus

The Circus Maximus was the largest chariot racing stadium in ancient Rome and was much older than the Colosseum. The first version of the Circus Maximus was built in the sixth century BC, but many changes and additions were made over time, and the later, imperial version of the stadium was very different. The imperial circus was approximately 550 metres long, with the starting boxes (*carceres*) at the short, straight end. These boxes could all be opened at the same time by a single mechanism, just like modern horse and greyhound racing. The track was divided lengthwise by the *spina* (the ancient sources often call it the *euripus*), around which the chariots raced. There were two sets of lap-counters on the *spina* – one set shaped like eggs, the other like dolphins. A counter would be lowered after each lap was completed. Augustus added a huge Egyptian obelisk to the *spina* after his defeat of Marc Antony and Cleopatra.

The track had white lines painted on it to designate lanes. The chariots had to stay in their lanes at the start of the race but could ignore the lanes after they reached a certain point. The key to winning was to hug the inside of the track as this meant you could get round the corners much faster than those in the outside lanes. The track also had *metae* (turning posts) at both ends. The circus also had an imperial box (*pulvinar*) and multi-tiered stone seating. The estimated capacity is up to 150,000 spectators. The exterior had a series of arcades which functioned as shops. Because the circus substantially pre-dated Rome's first amphitheatres, it served as a venue for gladiatorial combat as well as chariot racing.

Just like gladiatorial games, circus games began with a *pompa* (parade). The *editor* would ride at the front of the procession in a chariot. Behind him came the relevant elected officials either in chariots or on horseback, then the drivers racing that day in their chariots followed by musicians and priests carrying sacred objects.

The drivers raced for one of four different, colour-coded teams; the colours were blue, white, green and red. Typically, fans would always support the same colour, a bit like someone today supporting the same football team their whole life. Some chariot drivers were slaves, but many were not. They usually began their careers in their teens but would continue well into adulthood. The drivers did not own the horses they raced, but their cut of the prize money after a victory could be substantial. Also, the drivers could (and did) bet on themselves. The most successful drivers became very, very wealthy.

The two most common types of chariots used for racing were the *biga* (two-horse chariot) and the *quadriga* (four-horse chariot), although they did use other sizes, right up to a ten-horse chariot. At the start of a race, the drivers would take up position in the *carceres* and the *editor* would drop a cloth as a sign that the *carceres* were to be opened. Which individual stall in the *carceres* a driver got was determined by lot. Members of the same team would work together during a race to block opponents, etc. Racing was highly dangerous for the drivers, and a crash could result in serious injury or death. The drivers wore helmets and padded clothing and carried a knife to cut themselves free of the reins if they crashed.

A Roman mosaic from the third century AD depicting drivers wearing the colours of the four teams.



The next passage is taken from the *Punica* of Silius Italicus. The *Punica* is an account of the Second Punic War between Rome and Carthage, written in verse. In this particular extract Silius Italicus describes a chariot race held by the Roman general Scipio to celebrate his victory in Spain in 206 BC.

*Then he [Scipio] turned to the race-course, designed to test  
the speed of the horses, and began the first contest  
of the games. With the starting-gates still barred,  
the eager crowd surged to and fro with a roar like  
the ocean and, in furious partisanship, fixed their  
eye on the barrier behind which the chariots waited.  
Now, the signal given, the bolts shot back noisily,*

*and the first hooves had scarcely flashed in sight when a wild storm of cries rose to the sky. Leaning forward like the charioteers, each man studied that team he favoured, shouting at the swift lead horse. The ground shook with the spectators' enthusiasm, and the intensity robbed every man of his senses. They pushed forward, driving the teams on with their cries. A cloud of yellow dust rose from that sandy soil, veiling the charioteers' valiant efforts, and the horses' progress, in darkness. One man will back his favourite charioteer, another some noted lead horse, some trusting in that from their own country, others the fame of an ancient stud; one man is full of joyous hope for some novice, another the experience of a well-tried veteran. Lampon led from the start, a lead-horse bred in Galicia; the rest behind, he raced through the air, the chariot flying, as he galloped the course with huge stride, setting a breeze blowing in his wake. The crowd roared, thinking that after such a start the race was won, but those with more experience of the course, and deeper knowledge, criticised the charioteer for setting too fast a pace initially, protesting vainly, from afar, that he had tired his team with his efforts and held nothing in reserve: "Why so fast then, Cynus (he being the charioteer), less whip and a tighter rein!" But he was deaf, alas, to their cries and flew on, unsparing of his horses, forgetting how much ground was yet to be covered. Next came Panchates, a lead-horse bred in Asturia, a chariot-length behind, no more. Conspicuous for*

*the four white feet and white forehead of his sires,  
 he was not very tall or handsome but full of fire,  
 and now his fierce spirit lent him wings, as he sped  
 over the plain, straining at the reins, seeming to grow  
 in stature and fly faster as he ran. His charioteer was  
 Hiberus, dressed in scarlet tunic of a Cinyphian dye.  
 Third, but neck and neck, ran Pelorus and Caucasus,  
 the latter a fractious beast that shunned the hand that  
 patted its flank, but loved to bite and champ the iron  
 in its mouth till the blood foamed; while the former,  
 more submissive and obedient to the rein, never swerved  
 aside taking the chariot with him, but held to the inside  
 grazing the turning-post. He was noted for the strength  
 of his neck and his dense rippling mane . . .*

*His chariot was manned by noble Durius . . .*

*Atlas was last, though with Durius  
 alongside, racing no faster, so one might have thought  
 the two were driving peaceably together, keeping level.*

*With half the distance covered they quickened pace,  
 and the spirited Panchates, straining to catch the team  
 ahead, seemed to rear high, about to mount Lampon's  
 chariot, striking and rattling it, with out-flung forefeet.  
 Hiberus, his charioteer, seeing Cynus and his Galician  
 team tiring, and their chariot no longer leaping forward,  
 while the sweating horses were driven on by frequent  
 harsh blows of the whip, leaned out above his horses'  
 heads, and hanging there flicked Panchates, who chafed  
 at racing behind, calling out to him: "On, on, Asturian,  
 who dare snatch the prize if you are here? Up, fly, glide  
 over the ground now with all your speed, as if on wings!  
 Lampon is breathing hard, his strength is gone, he has*

*nothing left within him to carry to the winning post.”*  
*At this, Panchates leapt onward, as if he were once more starting from the gate, and Cynus, though swerving to thwart him, and straining to catch him, was left behind. The earth and sky echoed to the cries of the spectators, while Panchates ran on in triumph, lifting his head high, drawing on the other three horses completing the team.*

*The trailing charioteers, Atlas and Durius, swerved about, resorting to cunning; first the one trying to pass his rival on the left, then the other striving to overtake on the right, but both failing in their efforts.*

*Finally, Durius, young and confident, leant forward and, jerking the reins, drove straight across his rival’s path, so striking Atlas’ chariot, then overturning it.*

*Atlas, his age telling, cried out in rightful protest: “What now? What wild manner of racing is this? You’ll kill me and my horses.” As he shouted, he fell headfirst from his shattered chariot, while the poor horses too fell sprawling to the ground, as the victor shook his reins and Pelorus surged up the centre of the track, leaving Atlas struggling to rise. Cynus and his weary team were soon caught, passed at a quickening pace, Cynus learning too late the merit of controlling one’s speed at the start. Shouts of applause from his supporters now drove Durius on. Pelorus’ head was at the anxious Hiberus’ shoulders, the charioteer feeling hot foaming breath on his neck.*

*Durius pressed harder, whipping his team on over the ground, and not in vain, as, coming on the right, he was, or seemed to be, neck and neck with his rival.*

*Full of the prospect of imminent glory he cried out:*

*“Now, now is the time, Pelorus, to show you are  
born of the west wind . . .”*

*And had he not been deceived, by thoughts of success  
and premature delight, into dropping his whip, even  
as he spoke, Durius perhaps would have consecrated  
the altar so vowed to the west wind. Now, as wretched  
as if the victor’s garland had fallen from his head, he  
vented his rage against himself, ripping the clothes,  
the gold-embroidered garments, from his breast, in  
tears, pouring out his complaints to the sky above.  
With his whip gone, the horses no longer obeyed,  
as he lashed at their backs, in vain, with the reins.  
Meanwhile Panchates sped on to certain victory,  
taking the first prize with head aloft, as a light  
breeze rippled the mane at his neck and shoulders,  
steeping out proudly he displayed his noble limbs,  
and a mighty shout greeted his win. Each charioteer  
received a battle-axe with inlaid work in pure silver,  
while the respective prizes differed greatly in value.  
Hiberus received a swift steed, a not unworthy gift  
from the Numidian king; Durius, second in merit,  
two goblets gilded with gold of the Tagus, taken  
from a vast heap of Carthaginian plunder; while  
the third prize, granted to Cynus, was the shaggy  
hide of a savage lion, and a Carthaginian helmet  
with bristling crest; while, Scipio, summoned  
Atlas finally to receive a prize, acknowledging  
his age, and ill-fortune in having fallen when  
his chariot was wrecked. This was a handsome  
slave to serve him, and a cap of Spanish leather.*

**Silius Italicus, *Punica* 16.303–456**

The next passage also describes a chariot race and is also written in verse, but it is much later than the previous passage, dating to the fifth century AD. Interestingly, very little seems to have changed over the 700 years in the way chariot races were conducted.

. . . you chose one of the  
*four chariots by lot and mounted it, laying a tight grip on the hanging reins.  
 Your partner did the same, so did the opposing side. Brightly gleam the colors,  
 white and blue, green and red, your several badges. Servants' hands hold mouth  
 and reins and with knotted cords force the twisted manes to hide themselves,  
 and all the while they incite the steeds, eagerly cheering them with encouraging  
 pats and instilling a rapturous frenzy. There behind the barriers chafe those  
 beasts, pressing against the fastenings, while a vapoury blast comes forth between  
 the wooden bars and even before the race, the arena they have not yet entered  
 is filled with their panting breath. They push, they bustle, they drag, they  
 struggle, they rage, they jump, they fear and are feared; never are their feet still,  
 but restlessly they last the hardened timber. At last the herald with loud blare of  
 trumpet calls forth the impatient teams and launches the fleet chariots into the  
 field. The swoop of forked lightning, the arrow sped by Scythian string, the trail  
 of the swiftly-falling star, the leaden hurricane of bullets whirled from Balearic  
 slings has never so rapidly split the airy paths of the sky. The ground gives way  
 under the wheels and the air is filled with the dust that rises in their track.  
 The drivers, while they wield the reins, ply the lash; now they stretch forward  
 over the chariots with stooping breasts, and so they sweep along, striking the  
 horses' withers [shoulders] and leaving their backs untouched. With charioteers so prone it  
 would puzzle you to pronounce whether they were more supported by the pole  
 or by the wheels. Now as if flying out of sight on wings, you had traversed the  
 more open part and you were hemmed in by the space that is cramped by  
 design, amid which the central barrier has extended its long low double-walled  
 structure. When the farther metae freed you all from restraint once more, your  
 partner went ahead of the two others who had passed you; so then, according  
 to the law of the circling course, you had to take the fourth track. The drivers in*

*the middle were intent that if perhaps the first man, embarrassed by a dash of his steeds too much to the right, should leave a space open on the left by heading for the surrounding seats, he would be passed by a chariot driven in on the near side. As for you, bending double with the very force of the effort, you keep a tight rein on your team and with consummate skill wisely reserve them for the seventh [last] lap. The others are busy with hand and voice, and everywhere the sweat of the drivers and flying steeds falls in drops onto the field. The hoarse roar from applauding fans stirs the heart, and the contestants, both horses and men, are warmed by the race and chilled by fear. Thus they go once round, then a second time; thus goes the third lap, thus the fourth; but in the fifth turn the foremost man, unable to bear the pressure of his pursuers, swerved his vehicle aside, for he had found, as he gave command to his fleet team, that their strength was exhausted. Now the return half of the sixth lap was completed and the crowd was already clamoring for the award of the prizes; your competitors, with no fear of any effort from you, were scouring the track in front with no concern, when suddenly you drew taut the reins all together, tensed up your chest, planted your feet firmly before you, and chafed the mouths of your swift steeds . . . then one of the others, clinging to the shortest route round the turning post, was pressed forward by you and his team, carried away beyond control by their onward rush, could no longer be wheeled around in a harmonious course . . . The other adversary, exulting in the public plaudits, ran too far to the right, close to the spectators; then as he turned aside and all too late after long indifference urged his horses with the whip, you sped straight past your swerving rival. Then the enemy in reckless haste overtook you and, foolishly thinking that his first man had already gone ahead, shamelessly made for your wheel with a sideways rush. His horses were brought down, a multitude of intruding legs entered the wheels, and the twelve spokes were crowded until a crack came from those crammed spaces and the turning rim shattered the entangled feet; then he, a fifth victim, was flung from his chariot, which fell upon him, caused a mountain of manifold havoc, and blood disfigured his prostrate brow. Sidonius Apollinaris, *To Consentius* 23.320–425*

The inscription below is taken from the funeral monument of a second-century AD chariot driver called Diocles. It is a wonderful primary source filled with all sorts of revealing information about the life of a chariot driver at the time.

*Gaius Appuleius Diocles, charioteer of the Red faction, from the Spanish Lusitanian people, aged 42 years, 7 months, 23 days. He drove his first chariot in the White faction, in the consulship of Acilius Aviola and Corellius Pansa. He won his first victory in the same faction, in the consulship of Manius Acilius Glabrio and Gaius Bellicius Torquatus. He drove for the first time in the Green faction in the consulship of Torquatus Asprenas and Annius Libo. He won his first victory in the Red faction in the consulship of Laenas Pontianus and Antonius Rufinus. Totals: he drove chariots for 24 years, emerged from the starting gate 4,257 times and won 1,462 victories, 110 in opening races. In single-entry races he won 1,064 victories, winning 92 major prizes, 32 of them, including three with six-horse teams, at 30,000 sesterces, 28, including two with six-horse teams, at 40,000 sesterces, 29 (including 1 with a seven-horse team) at 50,000 sesterces, and 3 at 60,000 sesterces; in two entry races he won 347 victories, including four with three-horse teams at 15,000 sesterces; in three-entry races he won 51 victories. He won or placed 2,900 times, taking 861 second places, 576 third places, and one fourth place at 1,000 sesterces; he failed to place 1,351 times. He tied a Blue for first place ten times and a White 91 times, twice for 30,000 sesterces. He won a total of 35,863,120 sesterces. In addition, in races with two-horse teams for 1,000 he won three times and tied a White once and a Green twice. He took the lead and won 815 times, came from behind to win 67 times, and won in a final dash 502 times (216 over the Greens, 205 over the Blues, 81 over the Whites). He made nine horses 100-time winners and one a 200-time winner. **CIL 14.2884***

The Roman satirists Martial and Juvenal both commented in their poems on how much money a charioteer could make.

*Spare at length the weary congratulator, Rome, the weary client. How long shall I be a caller, earning a hundred coppers in a whole day, among escorts and petty clients, when Scorpus in a single hour carries off as winner fifteen heavy bags of gold hot from the mint? **Martial, Epigrams 10.50***

*How about advocates then? Tell me the sum they extract from their work in court, those bulging bundles of briefs. They talk big enough . . . yet if you check their incomes (real, not declared), you'll find that a hundred lawyers make only as much as Lacerta of the Reds. **Juvenal, Satires 7.105–114***

Some of the chariot-racing fans in ancient Rome were fanatical about their own team (colour) and would even go as far as asking the gods to curse individual drivers and/or horses from the other teams. The next two extracts are taken from inscriptions on Roman curse tablets. These were (normally) small, thin sheets of lead, although other materials were used as well, which would be buried in the ground.

*. . . tie up, bind the feet, the hands, the nerves, the eyes, the knees, the courage, the leaps, the whip, the victory and the crowning of Porphyras and Hapsicrates, who are in the middle-left, as well as his co-drivers of the Blue-colors in the stable of Eugenius . . . in the circus at the moment when they are about to compete may they not squeeze over, may they not collide, may they not extend, may they not force [us] out, may they not overtake, may they not break off [in a new direction] for the entire day when they are about to race. May they be broken, may they be dragged, may they be destroyed.*

**SEG, 34 (1984) #1437:25**

I invoke you, spirit of one untimely dead, whoever you are . . . Bind the horses whose names and images/likeness on this tablet I entrust to you; of the Red [team]: Silvanus, Servator, Lues, Zephyrus, Blandus, Imbraius, Dives, Mariscus, Rapidus, Oriens, Arbustus; of the Blues: Imminens, Dignus, Linon, Paezon, Chrysaspis, Argutus, Diresor, Frugiferus, Euphrates, Sanctus, Aethiops, Praeclarus . . . Bind their running, their power, their soul, their onrush, their speed. Take away their victory, entangle their feet, hinder them, hobble them, so that tomorrow morning in the circus they are not able to run or walk about, or win, or go out of the starting gates, or advance either on the racecourse, or circle around the turning point; but may they fall with their drivers, Euprepes, son of Telesphoros, and Gentius and Felix, and Dionysius “the biter” and Lamuros. Bind their hands, take away their victory, their exit, their sight, so that they are unable to see their rival charioteers, but rather snatch them up from their chariots and twist them to the ground so that they alone fall, dragged along all over the hippodrome, especially at the turning points, with damage to their body, with the horses whom they drive. Now, quickly. **Defixionum Tabellae 237:28**

**A mosaic showing the famous third-century AD charioteer Polydus.**



The best horses were also revered, almost as much as the best drivers. The emperor Caligula went to great lengths to care for his favourite chariot team horse, Incitatus. It is even claimed that he had the drivers and horses from rival teams poisoned.

*To prevent Incitatus, his favourite horse, from being disturbed [Caligula] always picketed the neighborhood with troops on the day before the races, ordering them to enforce absolute silence. Incitatus owned a marble stable, an ivory stall, purple blankets, and a jeweled collar; also a house, a team of slaves, and furniture – to provide suitable entertainment for guests whom Gaius invited in [the horse's] name. Suetonius, Caligula 55*

*Yet after doing all this he later put the best and most famous of these out of the way by poison. He did the same also with the horses and charioteers of the rival factions; for he was strongly attached to the faction that wore green . . . Dio Cassius 59.14:48*

The emperor Nero was also an avid fan of the circus.

*Horses had been Nero's main interest since childhood; despite all efforts to the contrary, his chatter about the chariot races at the Circus could not be stopped . . . [He] came up from the country to*

*attend all the races, even minor ones, at first in secret and then without the least embarrassment . . . He frankly admitted that he wished the number of prizes increased, which meant that more contests were included and that they lasted until a late hour, and the team managers no longer thought it worth while to bring out their teams except for a full day's racing. Suetonius, Nero 22*

Some of the surviving written sources about the circus criticise the fanaticism of the more hardcore fans of racing.

*Why are you so violently disturbed? What is the contest? For it is not . . . a question of a kingship or a wife or a death that hangs in the balance, nay, it is only a contest of slaves for a paltry bit of silver, slaves who sometimes are defeated and sometimes victorious, but slaves in any case. Dio Chrysostom, Discourse 32.75:44*

*Let us now turn to the idle and slothful commons . . . These spend all their life with wine and dice, in low haunts, pleasures, and the games. Their temple, their dwelling, their assembly, and the height of all their hopes is the Circus Maximus. You may see many groups of them gathered in the fora, the cross-roads, the streets, and their other meeting-places, engaged in quarrelsome arguments with one another, some defending this, others that. Among them those who . . . often swear by their hoary hair and wrinkles that the state cannot exist if in the coming race the charioteer whom each favours is not first to rush forth from the barriers, and fails to round the turning-point closely with his ill-omened horses. And when there is such a dry rot of thoughtlessness, as soon as the longed-for day of the chariot-races begins to dawn, before the sun is yet shining clearly they all hasten in crowds to the spot at top speed, as if they would outstrip the very chariots that are to take part in the contest; and torn by their conflicting hopes about the result of the race, the greater number of them in their anxiety pass sleepless nights. Ammianus Marcellinus 28.4.28–31:50*





