

Jewish Opposition to the Ancient Gladiatorial Games

By: STEWART RUBIN

Introduction

In the modern world, there is (hopefully) no one who would condone human gladiatorial fights and few who would approve of animal baiting spectacles. Gladiatorial games do not take place anywhere in the world and that has been the case for over 1,500 years. Indeed, matches between animals (cockfighting, dogfighting) are illegal in almost all countries and in all 50 American states. In the ancient Pre-Christian Roman world, there was almost no known opposition to gladiatorial games on moral grounds. There has been much written about Christian opposition to the games, but the earlier Jewish dissent is less well known. This paper explores the unique Jewish opposition in light of the widespread acceptance in the Pre-Christian Roman world.¹

Description, History and Scope of Gladiatorial Games

Gladiatorial games were public entertainment featuring fights to the death, matching man against man, man against beast, and beast against beast.² The games took several forms, which included evenly matched pairs, one-sided execution-style matches involving a wild animal or seasoned gladiator vs. a defenseless captive or criminal, and “mythological re-enactments” resulting in actual killings.³ The mythological re-enactments often involved fiendish and sadistic forms of death.⁴

¹ Christians were opposed to and were often the victims of the games. They were ultimately responsible for ending the games about 100 years after Christianity was adopted as the Roman state religion. This paper, however, focuses on Jewish opposition, which manifested itself earlier than the advent of Christianity.

² Eckart Kohne and Cornelia Ewigleben, *Gladiators and Caesars*, translated by Ralph Jackson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 66–74.

³ Kohne and Ewigleben, 73.

⁴ “The Roman poet Martial describes in *de Spectaculis* VII how a criminal dressed as Laureolus was skinned alive, his entrails, muscles and limbs ripped apart by the bear, until human form was no longer recognizable. The death of Hercules

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Gladiatorial fighting took place in amphitheaters throughout Rome and its provinces. Historians Keith Hopkins and Mary Beard estimate a total of 400 arenas throughout the Roman Empire at its greatest extent, with a combined total of 8,000 deaths per annum from all causes, including combat, execution, and accidents. Their estimate is based on several factors including the number of known amphitheaters and the frequency of festivals.⁵ The number of deaths varied over the years. For example, over 10,000 combatants fought in eight special games under Augustus,⁶ in addition to uncounted regularly scheduled games.

Romans regularly organized fights to the death between hundreds of gladiators, the mass execution of unarmed insurgents, captives, or criminals and the indiscriminate slaughter of domestic and wild animals. Some Romans also employed these types of games as dinner amusement. “At private dinner-parties, rich Romans regularly presented two or three pairs of gladiators: ‘when they have finished dining and are filled with drink,’ wrote a critic in the time of Augustus, ‘they call in the gladiators. As soon as one has his throat cut, the diners applaud with delight.’”⁷

Roman Attitude towards Gladiatorial Games

As far as is known, the general attitude of Roman society to the gladiatorial games was mostly favorable and almost uniformly non-humanitarian.⁸ Acceptance and lack of moral outrage was prevalent among individuals in all strata of Roman society. The provision of gladiatorial games for the

by fire was also popular (Shelton in Harrison, 2000: 95” as quoted by Paul Monaghan, Double Dialogues, Issue Four, Winter 2003, Art and Pain Bloody Roman Narratives: Gladiators, “Fatal Charades” & Senecan Theatre).

⁵ Keith Hopkins and Mary Beard, *The Colosseum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 92–94.

⁶ Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (Deeds of the Divine Augustus), No. 22.

⁷ Keith Hopkins, “Murderous Games: Gladiatorial Contests in Ancient Rome,” *History Today*. Volume: 33, Issue: 6 1983 <http://www.historytoday.com/keith-hopkins/murderous-games-gladiatorial-contests-ancient-rome>. Probably based on Ausonius ECL. 23.33-7 = Athenaeus, 4.153f-154a, Loeb trans [quoting Nicolaus of Damascus, FGrH 90, F78 = FHG (Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum) iii.265]

⁸ Naturally there is no way to know what individuals thought of the games and presumably there were those who were opposed. However, except as detailed, there is hardly any written, oral, or archaeological record of such sentiments. There were slave gladiators themselves who were opposed as evidenced by the Spartacus revolt.