

Most of us know quite a lot about the Roman 'spectacles'. We have often heard or read about the chariot-races and the gladiatorial combats, the beast-fights and the mock sea-battles which were funded by the emperor or by rich politicians to amuse the common people of Rome or the provincial cities. Less well-known, perhaps, than the physical facts are the opinions of contemporary writers about the races and games. I have selected some anecdotes and comments from writers who lived and wrote in the seventy years or so from the mid-1st century to the early 2nd century A.D. Pliny and Seneca wrote essays in the form of letters, Martial and Juvenal poems, while Petronius wrote what we might call a satiric novel. All five of these authors have left us interesting accounts of their own or their characters' reactions to the Roman spectacles.

Seneca's seventh letter to Lucilius, a young friend from Pompeii who was working as a civil servant in Sicily, contains this condemnation of the shows:

But nothing is as ruinous to the character as sitting away one's time at a show -- for it is then, through the medium of entertainment, that vices creep into one with more than usual ease... 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.

(Translation by Robin Campbell for Penguin in Letters from a Stoic)

The Younger Pliny (nephew to the Pliny who died during the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D.) was equally repelled by the chariot-races:

I am not the slightest bit interested in that sort of entertainment. There's nothing new, nothing different, nothing you'd want to see twice. So I am all the more amazed at the thousands of people who, like children, over and over again are happy to watch the galloping horses and the men riding the chariots. If the appeal lay in the horses' speed or the racers' skill, I could see some point in it, but as it is, they just care about the jockeys' coloured silks... . When I watch these people so endlessly excited over something so silly and pointless and boring, I am at least pleased that I'm not pleased by the races!
(Book IX.6. My translation)

Juvenal invites his old friend Persicus to a pleasant holiday dinner-party. The two of them will enjoy eating a milk-fed kid from his farm, says Juvenal, some asparagus, eggs and chicken, with grapes, pears and apples all carefully stored to preserve their freshness over the winter and allow them to ripen thoroughly. A bottle of local wine and some readings from Homer and Vergil will tempt them both to make a day of it, relaxing and forgetting their everyday worries. The spring sun shines down, and Juvenal enjoys his holiday in peace and quiet, for the rest of Rome is in the Circus Maximus, shouting and clapping and betting with their girl-friends on the races. No business, no wearing the toga, no crowds and bustle to contend with at the baths today for Persicus and Juvenal -- they alone of all Rome have stayed away from the races. "Let the youngsters watch", says the poet, "I prefer sitting in the sun at my age". (Satire XI)

Juvenal's friend Martial, on the other hand, seems to have enjoyed the spectacles, as he wrote a collection of elaborate epigrams about them, which we know as On the Spectacles. In one of these poems he tells us how the animal-trainers were one day forced to goad a lazy rhinoceros into fury in the arena, whereupon it attacked and defeated a bear, two bulls, a buffalo, a bison and a lion! The last line of the poem urges the crowd to grumble at any delays in their entertainment: "I nunc et lentas corripere, turba, moras!" (Poem 22). In another epigram (Poem 29) Martial writes about two well-matched gladiators, Priscus and Verus. In spite of the 'law' of the day that each fight should be to the death, in the end the emperor bestows on each man the wooden sword, symbol of an honourable discharge from the gladiatorial profession:

Contigit hoc ('this has happened') nullo nisi te sub principe, Caesar,
Cum duo pugnarent, victor uterque fuit.

One of the characters in Petronius' novel, the Satiricon, is an old clothes dealer named Echion. He is relaxing with his friends at the rich freedman Trimalchio's house. During the dinner-party we listen to their conversation. Echion, it seems, loves the gladiatorial games: he announces that there is soon going to be a three-day spectacle sponsored by Titus (no doubt an influential local rich man or magistrate). "He'll give us the greatest show of cold steel, no running away allowed, a real bloodbath right out in the middle of the arena where everyone can watch! He's got some clowns already and a woman charioteer and Glyco's steward who was caught redhanded 'entertaining' Glyco's wife!" Echion has plenty of admiration for Titus, who is really hot-blooded and has plenty of imagination, but very little for Norbanus (another sponsor) who recently supplied the arena with some two-bit gladiators who were already so wornout they would have fallen over if you breathed on them, and several who were not much better than corpses to start with. "There was one of them, a Thracian", concedes Echion "who had a bit of stuffing, but even he only fought by the rule-book. In the end the whole lot got a thrashing, while the crowd kept howling 'Beat them, beat them!' They were nothing but a bunch of chickens!" (Satiricon 45)

It's quite clear, then, that while there were some people who found the spectacles bloody or boring, there were plenty who enjoyed them. Martial tells us that the audiences came from the remotest corners of the Roman Empire to see the sights at the games, and to applaud the emperor who sponsored them:

Quae tam seposita est ('so far off the beaten track'), quae gens tam
barbara, Caesar,
Ex qua spectator non sit in urbe tua?...
Vox diversa sonat populorum, tum tamen una est
Cum verus patriae diceris esse pater. (Poem 3)

Definitely, as Martial comments in Poem 18, "Res nova, non ullis cognita temporibus".

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Announcement of Games at Pompeii
(ca.50-60 A.D.)-----

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