

Insiders and Outsiders in the Roman Arena

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In the infamous Roman arenas literally thousands of humans were killed in organized public spectacles (*munera*) including combats involving gladiators and *damnati* or condemned persons. For political reasons, the late Republic and early Empire saw major expansions of these events from private rites into public entertainments. While studies of the Roman games (e.g. R. Auguet, L. Friedlander) have discussed the origins, preparations, and manner of death of the incredible number and variety of victims, little has been written on the procedures and facilities necessary for removing

and disposing of the corpses of those who died in the arenas. Moreover, studies of Roman burial practices (e.g. J.M.C. Toynbee), concentrating on arrangements for individuals, pay little attention to the mass and often anonymous victims of the games. Admittedly a rather morbid topic, the issue of disposal raises significant historical questions about Roman attitudes and the operation of the games. The treatment of the bodies and the methods of disposal can tell us much about the origins and significance of the Roman "blood sports".

Like all aspects of Roman games and festivals, disposal of the dead must have been officially supervised or organized, especially under the Empire. Archaeology, epigraphy, and literary references suggest that methods of disposal may have varied over time. After collection at a mysterious site called the *spoliarium*, corpses of gladiators who had joined burial societies often ended up in mass sepulchers (*columbaria*). Unclaimed corpses (e.g. slaves and criminals) for a time perhaps were dumped into open pits (*putiruli*) outside the city and exposed to carrion animals, or they may have been dumped into the Tiber River. Christian bodies apparently received especially harsh treatment: Eusebius records that martyrs' corpses were thrown to dogs, remnants were burned, and any remains were swept into a river lest any relic remain for burial.

Since the methods, facilities and attitudes related to death and disposal in the spectacles are all of historical significance, this study will contribute to our knowledge of the organization and operation of the games overall. Rome's administration, finance, and the development of facilities for games and burial/disposal must all be considered. Relevant intellectual questions involve Roman attitudes to the death and disposal of these undesirable humans. Since Roman religion believed in ghosts and spirits, especially those of men killed violently, somehow Romans assured themselves that the victims were justly executed criminals, traitors or prisoners of war, or proper human sacrifices. It was a general act of piety to bury even executed criminals: provision, permission and denial of proper burial all reflect Roman attitudes to the games and their victims.