

Donald G. Kyle
University of Texas at Arlington

The Socio-Historical Construction of the Roman Gladiator

Recent years have seen increased scholarship on the spectacles of the ancient Romans, including beast fights, mythologized executions, and gladiatorial combats. This paper revisits the controversial questions of the origin(s) and meaning(s) of the latter. While much scholarly attention has been devoted to the possible non-Roman origins of gladiatorial combats, and to the growth of such phenomena in the late Republic and early Empire, this study focuses on the middle Republic (roughly from the 260s to the 130s BC). Understanding this period is crucial to understanding the ideology and dynamics of the gladiatorial games and their enduring features.

The first part of the paper focuses on the historical setting of 308-264 (the latter year marking the first gladiatorial combat in Rome) to explain the introduction of the phenomenon and its subsequent politically motivated expansion. The second part confronts the paradoxical social symbolism of the gladiator – the irony and inconsistency of the adulation, glamour and privileges given to debased men. Although universally scorned, gladiators were also associated with glory, discipline and eroticism. Recent scholarship offers various explanations of how Romans could see glory or military edification in the combats and deaths of men they despised. Some of these explanations seem to amount to a new form of apologetic commentary on the popularity of cruel spectacles within the highly civilized society of Rome. I offer a less theoretical and more historical view here, arguing that the gladiatorial paradox stemmed from both the virtues of the gladiator's performance and the punitive origins and *declassé* social position of early gladiators.

Only over time did gladiators acquire the honors and adulation so inconsistent with their social position. As Tertullian said, Romans loved the art (the growing symbolism of virtue and skill) but continued to hate the artist (the outsider, the guilty killer).

The elements of the symbolism of the gladiator, while most extensively articulated in the late Republic and early Empire, started to emerge in the crucible of the First Punic War and coalesced after the Second Punic War. Using Livy and other sources, I suggest that the symbolic dynamics of the gladiatorial combat were ‘constructed’ over the next few decades after 264 and crystallized as despair forced adaptation in the wake of the defeat at Cannae in 216 BC. Cannae left a legacy of insecurity, a need for reassurance through brutality, and a willingness to see moral exempla beyond the ranks. After 216 the escalation of gladiatorial spectacles at Rome was almost geometrical, and the ambivalent symbolism of the gladiator – the lowly and loathsome killer temporarily and imperfectly ennobled by his actions in the arena-endured to fascinate Roman and modern observers.