

Gladiatorial Shows

Among the most popular entertainments in all parts of the Roman world were shows in which gladiators fought each other. These contests were usually held in an **amphitheātrum** (amphitheater). This was a large oval building, without a roof, in which rising tiers of seats surrounded an **arēna**. Canvas awnings, supported by ropes and pulleys, were spread over part of the seating area to give shelter from the sun. The amphitheater at Pompeii was large enough to contain the whole population as well as many visitors from nearby towns. Spectators paid no admission fee as the shows were given by wealthy individuals at their own expense.



Bird's-eye view of the amphitheater showing the awning. Compare the drawing on page 124. The building held around 20,000 people, and the number of seats was being increased when the city was destroyed.

Among the many advertisements for gladiatorial shows that are to be seen painted on the walls of buildings is this one:

Twenty pairs of gladiators, given by Lucretius Satrius Valens, priest of Nero, and ten pairs of gladiators provided by his son will fight at Pompeii from 8 to 12 April. There will also be an animal hunt. Awnings will be provided.

Soon after dawn on the day of a show, the spectators would begin to take their places. A trumpet (**tuba**) blared and priests came out to perform the religious ceremony with which the games began. Then the gladiators entered in procession, paraded round the arena, and saluted the sponsor of the show. The gladiators were then paired off to fight each other, and the contests began.

The gladiators were slaves, condemned criminals, prisoners of war, or free volunteers; they lived and trained in a school or barracks under the supervision of a professional trainer.

Part of the program of one particular show, together with details of the results, reads as follows:

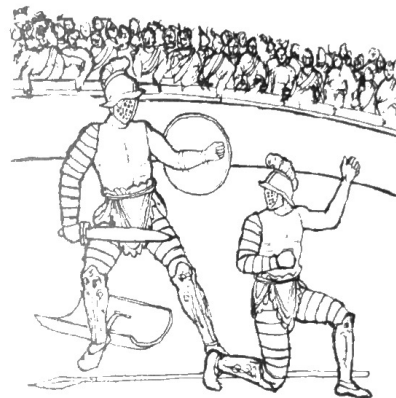
A Thracian versus a Murmillo
Won: Pugnax from Nero's school:
3 times a winner

Died: Murranus from Nero's school:
3 times a winner

A heavily armed gladiator versus a Thracian
Won: Cynus from the school of Julius:
8 times a winner

Allowed to live: Atticus from the school of Julius:
14 times a winner

Chariot Fighters
Won: Scylax from the school of Julius:
26 times a winner
Allowed to live: Publius Ostorius:
51 times a winner



The fight ended with the death or surrender of one of the gladiators. The illustrations above, based on a relief from the tomb of a wealthy Pompeian, show the defeated gladiator appealing to the spectators; the victor stands by ready to kill him if they decide that he deserves to die. Notice the arm raised in appeal. The spectators indicated their wishes by turning their thumbs up or down: probably turning the thumb up towards the chest meant "kill him," while lowering the thumb to the closed fist meant "let him live." The final decision for death or mercy was made by the sponsor of the games. It was not unusual for the life of the loser to be spared, especially if he were a well-known gladiator with a good number of victories to his credit. The most successful gladiators were great favorites with the crowd and received gifts of money from their admirers. One popular Pompeian gladiator was described as *suspīrium puellārum*, "the girls' heartthrob." Eventually, if a gladiator survived long enough or showed great skill and courage, he would be awarded the wooden sword. This was a high honor and meant he would not have to fight again.

Gladiators' Armor

Gladiators were not all armed in the same way. Some, who were known as Samnites, carried an oblong shield and a short sword; others, known as Thracians, had a round shield and a curved sword or dagger. Another type of gladiator armed with sword and shield wore a helmet with a crest shaped like a fish; the Greek name for the fish was "mormillos" and the gladiator was known as a **murmillō**. The murmillones were often matched against the **rētiariī** who were armed with **rētia** (nets) and three-pronged tridents.

Other types of gladiator fought with spears, on horseback, or from chariots. Occasionally women gladiators were used, bringing additional variety to the show.

A great deal of gladiators' armor was discovered at Pompeii with traces of fabrics embroidered with gold thread. The performers must have looked spectacular, like modern circus artists—except for the bloodshed. Here are two sorts of helmet, a retiarius' neck-guard, a greave (leg-protector) and a shield.

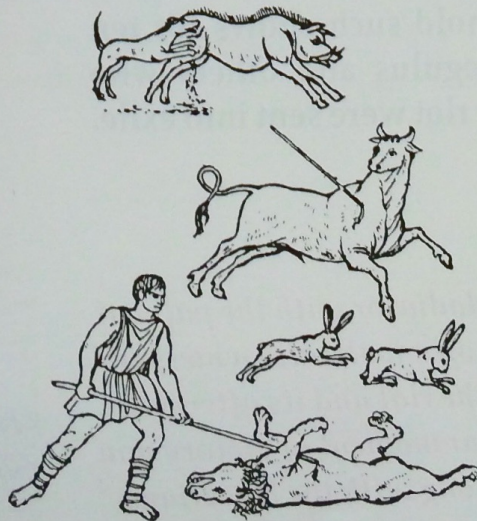


Animal Hunts

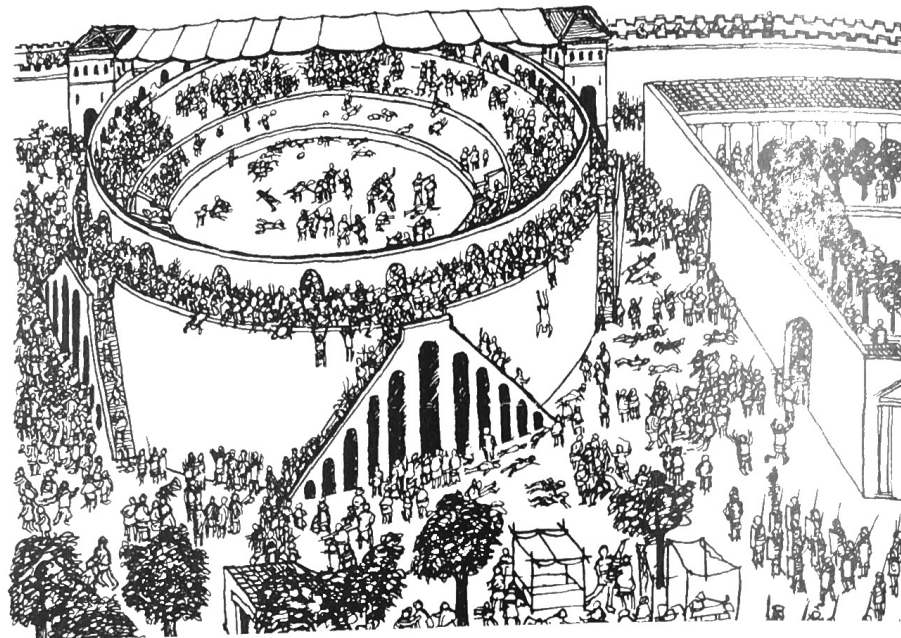


Many shows also offered a **vēnātiō**, a hunt of wild animals. The **bēstiae** (wild beasts) were released from cages into the arena, where they were hunted by specially trained beast-fighters called **bēstiārīi**. In the illustration below, you can see a wolf, hares, a wild boar, a bull, and a lion.

The hunters, who wore light clothing, relied only on a thrusting spear and their agility to avoid injury. By the end of the hunt, all the animals, and occasionally a few hunters, had been killed, and their bodies were dragged out from the sandy floor of the arena to be disposed of.



The Riot at Pompeii



The story told in this Stage is based on an actual event which occurred in A.D. 59. In addition to the evidence given in the wall-painting (*above*), the event is also described by the Roman historian Tacitus in these words:

About this time, a slight incident led to a serious outburst of rioting between the people of Pompeii and Nuceria. It occurred at a show of gladiators, sponsored by Livineius Regulus. While hurling insults at each other, in the usual manner of country people, they suddenly began to throw stones as well. Finally, they drew swords and attacked each other. The men of Pompeii won the fight. As a result, most of the families of Nuceria lost a father or a son. Many of the wounded were taken to Rome, where the Emperor Nero requested the Senate to hold an inquiry. After the investigation, the Senate forbade the Pompeians to hold such shows for ten years. Livineius Regulus and others who had encouraged the riot were sent into exile.

This drawing of a gladiator with the palm of victory was scratched on a wall with a message that may refer to the riot and its aftermath. "Campanians, in your moment of victory you perished along with the Nuceriaans."

