

GLADIATORS

PANEL TEXTS - EXTRACT

INTRODUCTION

ID 0.2

GLADIATORS. HEROES OF THE COLOSSEUM (1310)

Gladiators! We know them from films, comic strips and books and we are fascinated by them. They are portrayed as fierce men who had no choice in life but to fight, who lived to fight, with many of them meeting a quick and cruel end in Roman amphitheatres. But does that image ring true? In the exhibition we take a look behind the scenes and we discover a multifaceted but thoroughly Roman phenomenon!

On show in this exhibition are reproductions of finds from the largest Roman amphitheatre ever: the Colosseum in Rome. Thousands of gladiators appeared there; thousands of animals were hounded to their death there. We tell their story by means of some objects, but also by realistic backgrounds, life size reconstructions and interactive media, including videos, projections and touch screens.

Our story is more nuanced than the stock image of the film hero fighting to the death. Gladiators led a life of iron discipline. They trained like top sportsmen and they lived torn between fear and the hope of fame, wealth and freedom. To the Roman citizen they represented important values: courage, self-sacrifice and fighting spirit. Perhaps that explains the great success of the gladiators and their spectacles. Or were the Romans just sensation-seekers with a taste for blood and gore?

Welcome to the arena!

2_ROME AND THE EMPIRE

ID 2.

Rome, *caput mundi* (1209)

It all started with a village. According to legend, Rome was founded in the 8th century BC. Some centuries later, a magnificent city on seven hills had developed on the banks of the Tiber. This is the stuff of myth, but the truth is more complicated. It is however a fact that a long time ago, a world power had its beginnings on the banks of the Tiber; a world power that would conquer and culturally shape large parts of the world as it was known at the time – the *Imperium Romanum*.

Domestically, Rome underwent many changes over the centuries. Kings were overthrown, aristocratic families took over the helm, then the era of the Republic began in the 3rd century BC. Following the murder of Julius Caesar in 44 BC and the end of the civil wars (44-30 BC),

the era of the Principate - the Roman imperial period - began with Augustus. The gladiatorial games, which up to that time had been privately organised by the upper class, were thoroughly reformed by Augustus and became a privilege of the emperor. While privately organised gladiator fights continued to be held, these became rare and were modest compared to the official events that acquired their definitive and glorious form exactly in this period.

ID 2.7

The Expansion of the Roman Empire (1489)

The Roman Empire developed in the European-Mediterranean area between the end of the 1st century BC and the 5th century AD, reaching its greatest expansion in the 2nd century AD. It was distinguished by its management of the territory, the social and political organisation and the spread of culture. In the lands they conquered, the Romans built cities and infrastructures, exporting their civilisation while assimilating other people and cultures. This process was so profound that it laid the foundations of current western civilisation.

The official religion was the polytheism of Greek tradition, although there were also monotheistic cults such as Judaism and to an even greater extent Christianity. There was freedom of worship within the Empire, as long as it did not threaten the unity and legitimacy of the state. The fall of the Western Empire had both internal and external causes. An economic crisis caused by fiscal pressure due to the growth of public spending, with the consequent drop in trade and inflation, undermined the economic and productive structure and accentuated social differences. In the 5th century the Barbarian invasions led to the progressive disintegration of the Roman West; the Germanic peoples conquered vast swathes of the Empire, which was reduced to Italy and Dalmatia. The loss of the territories poleaxed tax revenue and the entire system collapsed. However, the Roman legacy lived on in the East for another millennium, in the Byzantine Empire.

ID 2.8

The Roman Army and the Legions (1586)

The Roman Empire was divided into imperial provinces, governed by the emperor through the presence of legions, and senatorial provinces, governed by the Senate without military support in view of the low risk of rebellion.

In this context the terrestrial and sea forces made up the Roman army which was represented by the legions of Roman citizens, the allies or auxiliary troops and the fleet.

The legions were the most significant part of the army: they were the basic military unit consisting of infantry soldiers that usually stood in line to form a dense wall to crush the enemy and force them into intense, hand-to-hand combat. For this reason, they were equipped with a convex rectangular shield and a short sword known as *gladius*, which was ideal for close combat. They were considered a great model for the gladiators themselves who owe their name to the legionaries' sword and whose armaments were influenced by the Roman military. Like legionaries, gladiators were housed in barracks where they lived, trained, ate and slept, and their discipline and training methods were mainly based on the military model. Besides,

gladiators who were discharged with honour sometimes joined the army, where they trained legionaries for close combat. Ultimately, legionaries and gladiators shared a common fate: bravery, the will to win and death-defying courage, which represented central values of the Roman society.

ID 2.14

From All Over the World (886)

The Roman army was the most efficacious and long-standing military institution in history. It was the backbone of the Roman Empire. Its development from a *militia* group to a voluntary citizens' force and finally to a standing professional army was the factor that made Rome's rise as antiquity's military superpower possible.

The world got to know the Romans, but the Romans also got to know the world. Through conquests and wars, Rome's sphere of control became progressively wider reaching a greatest expansion in the European and North African Mediterranean area. The wars of conquest brought thousands of prisoners of war into the Empire, most of whom ended up as slaves or gladiators. With their sometimes-foreign looks, they brought an exotic touch to the gladiatorial contests. But above all, they demonstrated the Roman Empire's enormous power, size and extent to the spectators.

ID 2.15

The Gladiators' Journey (1453)

The majority of the gladiators were slaves, many of whom changed their original names for a warrior name, sometimes derived from their birthplace, as in the case of the *Retiarius* Baeticus found in a graffito on a wall in Ostia who came from Beotia, a region of Central Greece.

The progressive territorial expansion of Rome over the centuries led to a continual inflow of prisoners who were captured and enslaved as part of the war booty. Rome was already multi-ethnic even at the end of the Republican Age, and it became even more so with the expansion of the Empire. For example, the conquest of Judea in 70 AD brought in numerous slaves, as did the defeat of the Dacians, celebrated by Trajan in 107. Moreover, extraordinary mobility was made possible within the Roman Empire as a result of the extensive road network. An inscription dating to the 3rd century AD testifies how a fireman originating from Moesia, an ancient region situated in the Balkans, was enrolled in Rome and then served in Ostia, in the East and in Sardinia, and finally in Luni and in Pisa. The gladiators too travelled in the retinue of the *lanista*, responsible for training them: in a public notice in Pompeii the *lanista* Numerius Festus Ampliatus announced the date on which his recruits would be performing there, and in another when they would be in Formia. In one of the Pompeii graffiti the gladiator Florus tells of his victories at Nocera and in the area of Herculaneum.