

Gladiators and Martyrs

Icons in the Arena

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How did prisoners who were publicly executed in horrifying and degrading ways become icons of Christian heroism as “The Martyrs” celebrated in song and story? While Christian culture now takes the martyrs’ heroic status for granted, their transformation from objects of derision to icons of Christian heroism remains a paradox. For its spring meeting in 2015, the Christianity Seminar of the Westar Institute framed a related paradox: “Why did martyrdom stories explode in popularity even as Roman violence against early Christians subsided?”¹ To understand how the martyrs became a popular image for Christians in the late Roman empire, we need to understand how another despised figure in the Roman arena became an emblem of Roman heroism: the gladiator. The association of Christian martyrs with the popular image of the gladiator, both as failed heroes as proposed primarily in the work of Carlin A. Barton, is a starting point for addressing these questions.² The martyrs became icons for Christian identity in a Christian vision of the empire much as the gladiators functioned as icons for the Roman identity in the Roman empire.

The first part of this article will offer an overview of the Roman arena as both a projection of Roman imperial power and a setting for negotiation of social relations. The second section will focus on the gladiator as a central feature of the spectacle program for which the Roman arenas were constructed and as an icon of Roman identity. The final section will discuss how the presentation of Christian martyrs casts them as gladiators and some of the implications of seeing them in this role.

1. This project has taken a different direction since the topic first occurred to me while reading Perkins, *The Suffering Self*.

2. Barton, “The Scandal of the Arena”; *Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*; “Savage Miracles”; *Roman Honor*; “Honor and Sacredness”; “The Emotional Economy”; McKay with Barton, *Art of Manliness Podcast #74: Ancient Roman Honor with Dr. Carlin Barton* (28 June 2014). This project follows one thread in Barton’s work. I have laid aside discussion of sacrifice and sacredness in particular, as well as other aspects.

The Roman Arena, Spectacles, and Roman Imperial Power³

The gladiators and Christian martyrs made their respective public stands in the Roman arena, one of the most important visible projections of Roman imperial power and Roman identity (*Romanitas*).⁴ To understand how accounts of Christian martyrs associated them with gladiators, we need to understand the importance of the arena and its development in Roman imperial culture.

The Arena: Projecting Imperial Power

In Roman cities the amphitheater was “the most visible single building.”⁵ The Flavian amphitheater (the Colosseum) at Rome was the Roman empire’s largest building, seating 50,000 to 80,000 people.⁶ Amphitheaters for the spectacles that included gladiatorial games were part of the imperial building program over the course of the imperial era, at Rome and in the provinces.⁷ Across the empire arenas were constructed and theaters were adapted with sophisticated infrastructure to stage a distinctly Roman form of spectacle, a spectacle of death.⁸

The transition from the Republic to the Empire saw an expansive imperial building program and an explosive growth of spectacles. Sponsorship and management increasingly came under the control of the emperor. The gladiatorial games, or *munera* (offerings), had been sponsored by private individuals or families in the period of the Republic and the civil wars. Originally they took place in cemeteries as funerary offerings to display the honor and importance of a deceased family member, usually a father who was a public figure.⁹ These were privately sponsored civic events. During the era of the Republic and the civil wars, the *munera* moved to the forum and began to increase in size: from

3. For surveys of some of the recent scholarship on the Roman arena, see Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 8–10; Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 128–32. Castelli’s treatment of the arena focuses entirely on its role in projecting imperial power, reading it only “in terms of the logic of imperial interests.” The reading here will be less monolithic.

4. Gunderson (“The Ideology of the Arena,” 120) mentions that some scholars characterize the arena as a disturbing institution at the fringe of Roman culture. He does not, however, cite works that take this approach except for characterizing Carlin Barton’s approach as viewing the arena as an “exceptional institution.” Most treatments assume the centrality of the arena, including Barton’s. Many recent studies use Foucauldian language and analysis of performance and projection of power, as will I without discussing Foucault.

5. Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 3; Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 53.

6. So claims the recent PBS documentary, at least. Glassman, *Colosseum*. Futrell (*The Roman Games*, 62, 239 n. 19) clarifies that the seating capacity was the largest in the Roman world, although it was not the largest performance space.

7. On resistance to the construction of permanent buildings for the spectacles during the Republican era, see Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 56–57.

8. Coleman, “Fatal Charades,” 49, 51–54.

9. See e.g. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 13.

three pairs of gladiators in the first recorded presentation, to a presentation of 320 pairs in 85 BCE by Julius Caesar to honor his father.¹⁰ They came to be used to promote the political ambitions of the *editor* sponsoring the event and were often held in temporary structures in the forum at the political heart of Rome.¹¹

In the transition to the Principate, the emperor took over sponsorship of the gladiatorial presentations at Rome, and the size of the spectacle saw an explosive increase, with Augustus claiming in 14 CE to have sponsored eight presentations where 10,000 men fought (RG 22.1) and Trajan in 107 CE sponsoring 123 days of gladiatorial presentations, again with 10,000 gladiators.¹² In the provinces, a priest of the imperial cult usually sponsored the event. Not only did the size of the events increase, but the reach of the spectacles spread with the building of arenas and production of spectacles at locations across the empire as part of the Romanization of the provinces. This helped transfer the loyalty of local nobility to Rome.¹³

The spectacles in the arena most obviously projected Roman military power with a program that included wild beasts brought back from military conquests at the frontiers of the empire, elephants taken from opposing forces in Carthage and the east, mock sea battles (*naumachiae*), the display and execution of “barbarian” military opponents, and the skills for individual military combat displayed by gladiators. Yet there were more dimensions to the projection of power than raw military might.

The arena also projected the stratification of social relationships within the empire. Seating arrangements and the dress code enforced in the amphitheaters beginning with the reforms of Augustus also projected power relationships within the arena.¹⁴ The crowd was not seated as an amorphous mob but in

10. Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas,” 69–70; Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 48. See Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 53–57, on the forum as the venue.

11. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 48.

12. Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas,” 70–71.

13. Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 146–48; Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 8–11. The spectacles and gladiatorial games (*munera*) were not the only entertainments that gathered large crowds. The theater and sporting events (*ludi*) were also part of the entertainment and religious calendar. Here I will focus on the arena and the spectacles that included the gladiatorial games, however, because the arena with its spectacles played a central role in defining the Roman empire and because accounts of the martyrs strongly associate them with this venue.

14. See e.g. the *Lex Julia theatralis* described in Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars*, Augustus, 44. For discussions of the seating arrangements, see Gunderson, 123–24, citing Rawson, “*Discrimina Ordinum*.” The *Lex Julia theatralis* specified seating in the theaters, and there is some ambiguity about its precise application for the temporary wooden seating at the gladiatorial presentations in the Augustan era, although Augustus did institute segregation of the audience by gender at this time. The Flavian amphitheater (the Colosseum) inaugurated by Titus in 80 CE instituted social segregation in stone. See Edmondson, “Public Spectacles,” 11–18. Costume details are also included in Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas,” 84–95. See also Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 80–83.

orderly rows according to status. When the population assembled in the amphitheater, the entire ranking system was physically visible.

The spectacles established that those who took their seats anywhere in the stands, however, even in the worst seats, were part of the Roman community, and the spectacles were part of integrating that community into the imperial program. The audience itself was thus part of the spectacle in which spectators (with clear over-representation of the nobility) were able to see themselves and each other arrayed in their respective places and the clothing of their rank, producing what Erik Gunderson terms the “spectacle of the audience” that becomes “an ideological map of the social structure of the Roman state.”¹⁵

The emperor himself took a central position in the audience, and his presence and actions in the arena were part of the entire performance of imperial social relations. Suetonius, for example, characterizes each of the emperors by citing his performance of his role in the arena, and the various descriptions highlight the importance of the arena and the spectacles in the negotiation of power relations at the heart of the empire.¹⁶ The codification of seating arrangements and dress in the transition from the Republic to the Principate simultaneously gave visual prominence to the nobility and undermined their power as the emperor’s presence in the arena gave him more direct access to the common citizenry (*plebs*).¹⁷ As the *editor* (sponsor) of the gladiatorial competitions, the emperor also gave the signal of his decision to spare or to kill the defeated gladiator, often in response to the crowd. In this action, the emperor also displayed his role as *pater patriae* and his power of life and death (*vitae necisque potestas*) as the *paterfamilias* of the family empire,¹⁸ with a microcosm of the entire empire displayed in rank as a Roman family, from *paterfamilias* to the slaves.

The amphitheaters projected Roman imperial power not only by their imposing architecture, both external and internal, but also in the program of spectacles for which they were built. Thomas Wiedemann points out how the usual pattern displayed essential elements of Roman power and defined the Roman identity in which the crowd participated. The morning slaughter of beasts, especially animals brought back from Rome’s military conquests at the frontiers, displayed Roman civilization’s power over wild nature and dangerous animals. The midday executions of criminals and captives assured the crowd of the security of a just order by visibly removing threats to Roman order: the criminals

15. Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 119, 125. On the over-representation of the nobility, see 123. Also Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 53–54.

16. See Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 126–33.

17. Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 132.

18. See Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 53.

and barbarians who defied Rome's laws and rule. Roman laws and Roman rule were by definition "just" in Roman eyes because they were Roman. The afternoon gladiatorial games displayed a means of redemption from the massive exhibition of death in the two earlier spectacles.¹⁹ The program of the arena was to "educate Romans about the contents of their empire," in Erik Gunderson's words, and drew a boundary between what was Roman and therefore civilized and what was un-Roman and un-civilized.²⁰ The spectacle program provided a repeated re-enactment of Roman victory in arenas across the empire.

The spectacles were not the simple competitive sporting events of either the Greco-Roman or modern eras. We may be able to visualize the social stratification in the seating arrangements based on our contemporary experience of football stadiums, baseball fields, or rodeo arenas with the elite in their sky boxes, the respectable middle income families in the covered sections, and the "bums" in the cheap seats exposed to the elements in the baseball bleachers or the "Oh, Shit!" section at a local rodeo.²¹ While the social stratification in the stands has some similarities, the relationship between the audience and the participants in the spectacles on the sands of the Roman arena was quite different. While the spectacles revealed the social stratification of the empire, they also produced a common familial bond among the strata in the audience through the degradation of those dying on the sand, outside of the community. The whole stratified crowd internalized Roman victory by watching the defeat of threats to Roman order.

The arena was also a location for the projection of sacral power as well. The modern division of "religious" and "political," the separation of church and state we assume in the United States, did not apply in the Greco-Roman era. In the Roman empire especially, all forms of performance of state power were "religious." Whether the human deaths in the events were explicitly understood as "sacrifice" is a matter of debate,²² but all of games and theatrical events were part of a religious calendar honoring the deities. The association of the games and the imperial cult was also strong, and the priest of the imperial cult was often the *editor* (sponsor) for the spectacle program and would thus be positioned as the local expression of the imperial *paterfamilias* at the games.²³

19. Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 46–47; Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 8–10.

20. Gunderson, "The Ideology," 133. See also Edmondson, "Dynamic Arenas," 82–83.

21. This section is unique to the rodeo arena at Red Lodge, Montana, but other arenas are similarly stratified.

22. Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, chap. 3. Coleman ("Fatal Charades," 69–70) also discusses how dressing individuals to be executed in luxurious clothing in "fatal charades" corresponds to elements of sacrificial scapegoat rituals.

23. See e.g. Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 44–45.

The Audience in the Arena: Negotiating and Constructing Imperial Power²⁴

We tend to equate “Roman imperial power” with the power of the emperor, but imperial power also included the crowd in the arena. At Rome, where the emperor was expected to be present for spectacles in the arena, and in the provinces, where Roman officials and Romanized provincial leaders acted on his behalf, the arena was a location for a sometimes tricky negotiation between the power of the crowd and the power of the emperor. The power on display was not only the power of the emperor but also the power of the Roman (and Romanized) people, and these powers were not always in concord. Yet the arena projected the imperial power that included both, and it created social cohesion in a location where Romans participated in imperial power.

We need to picture the arena as a location where the push and pull of political interests were part of the spectacle. The crowd was not present as a body of passive observers sitting back to be entertained.²⁵ As the influence of the political institutions of the Republic waned, the arena events and other spectacles like theatrical events and chariot races became political arenas where the crowd was physically and vocally present as part of the power dynamics. The spectacle became the arena for politics²⁶ and “the shaping of Roman social relations.”²⁷ Competition was taking place in the stands as well as on the sand, sometimes including riots.²⁸ The arena was not a static projection of Roman imperial power but a dynamic location for the performance and continual negotiation of power relations, a place where the emperor also promoted his agenda.²⁹

One of the ways that the crowd projected its power was in unified chanting or acclamation. Formulaic acclamations had long been used in cults and formed part of the script in ritual settings across the Greco-Roman era. Wherever crowds gathered, however, non-formulaic acclamations, could be spread to manifest public opinion or manipulate it for political purposes.³⁰ Chants could be started to promote a pro-imperial message or celebrate a victory, but they could also be used on occasion to oppose imperial policy. For example, when

24. For a general description of the activities taking place in the audience, see Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 104–13.

25. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 8–9.

26. Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 119, citing Dupont, *L’acteur-roi*, 30: “la mutation est accomplie, Rome est passé d’une poitique spectacle au spectacle comme lieu de la politique.” Dupont follows Nicolet, *Le métier de citoyen romain*.

27. Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas,” 72, 111. See also Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 24–29, 36–42.

28. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 63.

29. Edmondson (“Dynamic Arenas”) discusses this process at Rome from the Augustan era to Trajan.

30. Potter, “Performance,” 132–41.

Germanicus recovered from an illness in 19 CE, the crowd took up a chant, “*salva Roma, salva patria, salvus est Germanicus*” (“Rome is safe! The fatherland is safe! Germanicus is safe!”)³¹ The crowd’s acclamations could also express protest, as the Roman *plebs* did to express weariness with long wars waged during the reign of Severus.³² At trials, the crowd’s acclamations could advocate a sentence (“X to the lions!”) or sometimes mercy (*eleison/miserere*).³³ Some of the unified chanting was spread by *clagues*, “rent-a-voice” groups hired to applaud and chant favorable slogans for a fee, and private associations (*collegia*) would provide such vocal support for their patrons.³⁴

If we imagine the crowd of 50,000 to 80,000 spectators in the Flavian amphitheater or thousands in provincial amphitheaters, then we need to hear not only the deafening general roar as the crowd cheered but also the rhythmic chanting of slogans. The chants both expressed and formed the will of the crowd into a unified voice or into competing sections of unified voices coming from different sectors of the stands. This sound, even when contentious, was the Romans vocalizing their own united imperial power. They were not just observing the spectacle of imperial power; they were participating in it and creating it.

The spectacles themselves were also a means of social cohesion, a bonding experience in the spectacle of death.³⁵ Such spectacles unified the crowd at each event and promoted social cohesion across the empire as crowds participated in similar spectacles held in similar structures.³⁶ The spectacles and the arenas that housed them not only projected imperial power but also offered a means for imperial subjects across the empire to participate in Rome’s victory. The spectacles also projected the power of the crowd. Emperors and provincial leaders produced the spectacles in order to please the crowds and thus maintain their political power, and these events projected the power of the crowds to demand them.³⁷ This projection of power all centered on the spectacles of blood-drenched and painful death that became emblematic of *Romanitas*.

To understand how witnessing these gory entertainments unified the crowd in the arena, it will be helpful first to know what they saw in the spectacles. Then we can more clearly see the importance of the audience in witnessing the deaths of the performers, particularly the gladiators. We will also see the role

31. Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas”; Potter, “Performance,” 138.

32. Potter, “Performance” 140, citing Dio 75.4.4.

33. Potter, “Performance”; Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas,” 140–41.

34. Potter, “Performance,” 142–43.

35. Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas,” 84.

36. For an extended treatment that emphasizes the incorporation of the provinces, see Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*.

37. See Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 11–21, on the importance of sponsoring games for anyone with political ambitions and the costs involved. In the imperial period this became an expectation of the emperor and provincial officials. See e.g. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 8–9.

of performers, especially the gladiators, as more than passive recipients of the imperial power displayed in the arena.

The Arena Program: Bleeding and Dying for Imperial Power

The program for spectacles at the arena followed a standard format (*munus legitimum*) established by Augustus.³⁸ There were variations and special additions for particular events, of course, and the program could also be extended over several days or even months as well.

A sponsor and producer, known as an *editor*,³⁹ oversaw preparations and publicity for event. Preparations included negotiations with *lanista*, a manager of a gladiatorial school, as well as arrangements for all elements of the performance and the amenities for the audience, from shade to door-prizes. Advertisements would be posted as graffiti, and a program was distributed that included names of gladiators as well as other elements of the show. The *editor* also provided a banquet for the performances the night before the event.⁴⁰ The event itself opened with a *pompa*, a parade that performed the social ordering for the event, prominently featuring the *editor*.⁴¹ In the imperial period at Rome, the *editor* was the emperor, and the *pompa* thus projected his power.

Morning: Venationes, Slaughter of the Beasts

The morning entertainments were the *venationes*, presentations of wild animals collected from Rome's military campaigns at the boundaries of the empire. The entertainments could include animals pitted against each other, as well as human *venatores* fighting the animals.⁴² This event popularized the hunt that was the sport of eastern kings.⁴³ This "grandiose display of exotic animals" emerges with the extension of the empire.⁴⁴

Midday: Ludi Meridiani, Executions

Animals not slaughtered in the morning *venationes* could also be used in midday events (*meridiani*), where executions of condemned criminals and prisoners of war, people considered disposable,⁴⁵ were staged in creative ways for

38. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 84.

39. Coleman ("Fatal Charades," 50–51) uses the term *munerarius* for this role. Other sources refer to the individual as the *editor*.

40. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 84–86.

41. For a description of the *pompa* based on a relief from Pompeii, see Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 87–88.

42. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 89.

43. Edmondson, "Dynamic Arenas," 83.

44. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 7.

45. On the supply of "performers" considered dispensable to provide entertainment by their deaths in the arena, see Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 54.

the crowd's entertainment. In David Potter's words, the forms of execution were "plainly calculated to debase the victim as completely as possible."⁴⁶ This humiliation formed part of the assurance of a just order of law already mentioned by "distancing the onlooker from the criminal and reducing the possibility of a sympathetic attitude towards him on the part of the spectators" and uniting the spectators in a common feeling of "moral superiority as they ridiculed the miscreant," in K. M. Coleman's description.⁴⁷ Members of the elite classes (*honestiores*) who were convicted of capital offenses were not usually subjected to this publicly humiliating form of execution but executed swiftly (e.g., by beheading) at a more secluded location. The "performers" at the midday execution entertainments were defined as disposable "others."⁴⁸

The event began with *bestiarii* ("animal-handlers") or soldiers leading the condemned into the arena.⁴⁹ Evidence from reliefs indicates that they could be yoked in twos or threes or tied to stakes or chariots. They usually had very little clothing, men naked or wearing a loin cloth, women in a light tunic or skirt and brassiere or sometimes naked. They would be presented to the audience and "bound to stakes or placed in stocks on a raised platform in the middle of the arena."⁵⁰ Then they would receive the specific method of execution that had been designated for them at their trial.

Many were condemned to the beasts, perhaps with the crowd's chant of "*ad bestias*" at their trials. The beasts, including lions, leopards, and bears, were goaded by the *bestiarii* to "bite, trample, gore, or . . . to have intercourse with . . . the victim."⁵¹ Reliefs and mosaics depict such scenes, including the fear on the faces of the condemned.⁵²

The condemned could also be sentenced to fight one another to the death without protection, with the last one standing killed by some other means.⁵³ Imaginative sets could be devised to create a fate deemed fitting for the condemned individual's offense. Strabo, for example, describes an execution

46. Potter, "Martyrdom," 66. Potter also offers the convenient summary description followed here. Coleman ("Fatal Charades," 44–49) discusses this humiliation in the context of the aims of the Roman penal system.

47. Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 47.

48. Gunderson, "The Ideology," 133–34.

49. Potter, "Martyrdom," 66, 44–73.

50. Potter, "Martyrdom," 66.

51. Potter, "Martyrdom," 66. Potter indicates that the actual death of and disposal of the victim may have taken place outside of the arena, but his primary evidence is *Perpetua*.

52. Potter, "Martyrdom," 66–67.

53. See Seneca, *Letters* 7, in Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 91. Seneca was compelled to commit suicide under Nero in 65 CE as an accused participant in an assassination attempt, so his critical description of the lunch-hour execution entertainments precedes the construction of the Flavian amphitheater.

scene during a gladiatorial fight program in the Roman forum during the late Republic. Selurus, "son of Etna," the captured leader of an army in the area around Mt. Etna, was placed on top of a structure depicting the mountain, and when the structure was collapsed, he fell into the cages of wild animals below.⁵⁴ Others were forced to dance in luxurious clothing that would randomly explode, the *tunica molesta*.⁵⁵

Some executions were live portrayals of mythic scenes, what Coleman has termed "fatal charades"⁵⁶ and Barton calls "snuff plays."⁵⁷ Lucillus describes the immolation of a condemned man named Meniscus in a scene depicting Heracles being burned alive in Zeus's garden.⁵⁸ Martial's poems for the inauguration of the Flavian amphitheater contain several more descriptions. An "Orpheus," for example, wandered as a minstrel among the stage props of moving cliffs and woods representing the grove of the Hesperides, presumably charming less harmful animals with his music until he is torn apart by an "ungrateful bear" in place of the Thracian women.⁵⁹ In another re-enactment, a "Pasiphae" was "coupled" with the "bull of Dicte."⁶⁰ Suetonius also relates an incident (before the construction of the Flavian amphitheater) in which an "Icarus" in "flight" crashed into Nero's box and splattered the emperor with blood.⁶¹

At this point, if we listen as well as see, we will hear the screams of the victims as well as the roar of the crowd. Our reaction may not be the same as that of the crowd in the arena, however. These spectacles of death were popular, and the crowds in the Roman era reportedly enjoyed them and demanded them. As Coleman points out, enjoyment of such spectacles is evident in the fact that the spectacles lasted for four centuries, as well as in abundant visual representations of the spectacles in household art and in literary descriptions of the crowds' pleasure in these macabre entertainments.⁶² She lists some of the psychological factors in their appeal. In watching the executions, members of the audience could identify themselves with those who implemented justice, concurring in the justice of the fate of the condemned and sharing in the power of condemnation, sometimes exercising their will by unison chanting. The simple fascination of horrific images is another factor. The element of chance produced an antidote to boredom essential to entertainment, with unpredictable wild

54. Strabo 6.2.6. See Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 91; Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 53.

55. Plutarch, *Moral Essays* 554b, in Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 92. See also Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 60, for additional citations.

56. Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 44.

57. Barton, "Savage Miracles," 41.

58. *Anth. Pal.* 11.184, discussed in Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 60.

59. Martial, *Lib. Spect.* 21, discussed in Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 62–63.

60. Martial, *Lib. Spect.* 7, discussed in Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 64.

61. Suetonius, *Nero* 12.2, discussed in Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 68.

62. Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 57–58.

beasts and suspenseful gladiatorial combats. Another factor was "morbid desire to witness the actual moment of death."⁶³

Coleman describes the midday executions as providing the horror needed for an effective deterrent for the enforcement of Roman order, yet she also acknowledges that "horror and aversion" were not the dominant emotions of the crowd: "so effective was the gulf created between the spectacle and the spectators that the dominant reaction among the audience was pleasure rather than revulsion."⁶⁴

Before Christian martyrs are ever reported to have entered the arena, gladiators managed to traverse that great gulf marked by the podium wall and create a human connection with the audience during the afternoon portion of the program.

Afternoon: *Munera*, Gladiatorial Games

Like the executions, the gladiatorial combat reserved as the afternoon entertainment was apparently designed to debase its participants. Yet the gladiators themselves appear to have taken up the performance of their ill fate as a means to achieve honor in a performance of *Romanitas*.

In the afternoon entertainments, gladiators fought in pairs, matched by armaments and skill level, according to rules of combat.⁶⁵ They normally fought to a conclusion, not a tie. If the loser was not killed or mortally wounded in the combat, when he (or she) was disarmed or immobilized, the loser "lowered any remaining weapons and raised one finger in submission."⁶⁶ This was the dramatic and decisive moment the crowd craved. Waiting in a pause as the *editor* decided the loser's fate, the crowd would chant its own decision. To spare his life to fight another day, they would chant "*Missum!*" or wave cloths. To indicate their desire for the final blow that would cut the loser's throat, they would chant "*Iugula!*" or raise down-turned thumbs.⁶⁷ The *editor* would then give the final signal to please the crowd.

The performance of the losing gladiator in this final decisive moment became an opportunity to demonstrate Roman *virtus* and to die in front of a Roman audience in a way that reclaimed the gladiator's honor and status as a subject with whom the audience would want to identify rather than a disposable object for their entertainment. This decisive moment, with the victorious gladiator holding the blade over the defeated one's neck awaiting the signal of the *editor* as the crowd chanted its decision, becomes a focal point in defining Roman culture.

63. Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 58–59.

64. Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 49.

65. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 99–101, 121.

66. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 101.

67. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 101.

This moment, and the figure of the defeated gladiator at the center, are worth more focused attention.

Gladiators: From “Disposables” to Icons of Roman *Virtus*

The gladiators held an ambivalent position in the arena. On the one hand they were forced into mortal combat by their status among the “other” and uncivilized non-Romans like the beasts and criminals of the first two entertainments of the day. On the other, they performed the essential *virtus* that defined Roman identity.⁶⁸ This Roman identity was part of what may be more generally defined as a military culture, and there were strong associations between gladiatorial schools and the military.⁶⁹

Gladiators as Slaves and Captives (Involuntary)

Prisoners of war provided a large supply of gladiators, allowing large numbers to be “used up” in lavish spectacles. Dio Cassius (60.30) reports, for example, that the general Aulus Plautius “took pride” in using up many British captives in gladiatorial combats to celebrate victory over Britannia in 43 CE.⁷⁰ In 70 CE, Titus also used thousands from the capture of Jerusalem in spectacles along his return route to Rome.⁷¹ Rome’s military victories produced a continuing supply of gladiators for the spectacles, and consuming them in large numbers was part of making an impressive display. As fighters in military forces opposing Rome, many of these captives already possessed skills for combat that were part of the training in the gladiatorial schools (*ludi*).

Condemned criminals were another source. While many were sentenced to be executed in the midday spectacles, some received a lesser penalty and were sentenced to the gladiatorial schools. Gladiators who fought well enough to survive might be granted their freedom.⁷²

Whatever their origin, the gladiators’ legal status was that of slaves, and they were considered *infames*, categorized in the occupations of shame with actors, prostitutes, pimps, and the *lanistae* (overseers of the gladiatorial schools).⁷³ As

68. See e.g. Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 136–37. While *virtus* is associated with “manliness,” we should note that women also competed as gladiators in the arena. This is a topic that merits more extended discussion in a continuing examination of the questions raised in this article. See Garraffoni and Lorena, “O feminino adentra a arena”; Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 143–44.

69. Janković, “Violent Ethnicities,” 52–53.

70. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 121–22.

71. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 122. She includes passages from Josephus, *J.W.* 6.418, 7.37–40.

72. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 122–23, citing *Collatio Mosaicarum et Romanarum legume* 11.7 on Hadrian’s rescripts on the punishment of cattle rustlers.

73. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 130–31.

such, they shared aspects of the identity of those executed during the midday entertainments as “disposable” others. Their use as objects forced to kill or be killed as part of the afternoon entertainment made them part of the spectacles’ projection of Roman military might and the rule of Roman law. They were despised, on the one hand, and referring to one’s political enemies as “gladiators” was considered an insult.⁷⁴

Yet they became something more.

Gladiators as Icons of *Virtus* and Nobles as Gladiators (Voluntary)

As early as the end of the era of the Republic, half of the gladiators were volunteers, according to one informed estimate.⁷⁵ Even if this is an overestimate, evidence of free persons, nobles, and even emperors participating in the arena as gladiators is plentiful.⁷⁶ Some apparently entered the arena for a special performance without pay to demonstrate their courage and fighting ability, while others became gladiators as a career choice, fighting for pay.⁷⁷ While some apparently volunteered due to impoverishment, others appear to have become gladiators for reasons associated with the changing identity of the gladiator.

Those who volunteered to be gladiators bound themselves in servitude to a gladiatorial manager, a *lanista*,⁷⁸ by swearing an oath, the *sacramentum gladiatorum*, by which they promised to be “burned, bound, beaten, and slain by the sword.”⁷⁹ Members of the elite, senators and equestrians included, were known to volunteer themselves as gladiators. This was considered a shaming of the traditional elite, and during the early Principate the senate expressed concern about it for the *dignitas* of their social order.⁸⁰

Given the many negative associations with the position of the gladiator, the question Barton poses is apt: “What was it that drew free men to discard community, status, dignity and power to fight in the arena, in the space allotted to the ruined and condemned?”⁸¹ Barton’s answer to this question lies in her ongoing studies of the emotional life of the ancient Romans.

74. See e.g. Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 136, citing Cicero, *Phil.* 6.5.13.

75. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 14, cites Ville, *La Gladiature en Occident*, 255.

76. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 132–35; Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 50–51, 55; Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 136–42.

77. Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas,” 107–9.

78. Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas,” 107.

79. “*uri, vinciri, verberari, ferroque, necari patior*” (Petronius, *Satyricon* 117; Seneca, *Ep.* 71.23); in Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 14; “Savage Miracles,” 52, 66 nn. 66–67. See also Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 132–33, including a translation of Seneca, *Ep.* 37.

80. Edmondson (*Dynamic Arenas*, 108) refers to two instances in 11 and 19 CE. He also cites this as an example of actions in the arena to shape the social order.

81. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 26. Elsewhere: “What . . . motivated men and women of the free and privileged classes to identify with and even assume the role of the gladiator both publicly and privately?” Barton, “Savage Miracles,” 1.

A core aspect of the emotional motivation for becoming a gladiator was the opportunity to make the involuntary voluntary. This started with the oath, as Barton says: "The gladiator, by his oath, transforms what had originally been an involuntary act to a voluntary one, and so, at the very moment that he becomes a slave condemned to death, he becomes a free agent and a man with honor to uphold."⁸² In the same manner, the gladiators sought to gain ultimate freedom and honor by performing their death upon defeat in the arena as a voluntary action, offering their neck to the blade of the victor and waiting for the *editor's* decision at the behest of the crowd.⁸³ The defeated gladiator's performance in this decisive moment could persuade the crowd to chant to save him and the *editor* to comply, thus making a good performance of *virtus* a more immediate survival strategy as well.⁸⁴

In the transition from the Republic to the Principate, when the elite classes were losing out as power was being centralized in the emperor, some sought a gladiatorial "solution" for regaining lost honor. As Barton states this, "The importance of the social and psychological role of the gladiator among the free and privileged classes in Rome developed apace with the notion that with the failure of the aristocratic Republic, *dignitas*, social worth, had become a word whose only content was humiliation."⁸⁵ Rome was in a transition from the warrior culture of the Republican era, when there was something closer to a fair competition between equals, to the triumph of the culture of the rule of the "rogue male" who has become a father figure (the emperor)—a fundamental re-ordering of competition as unequal.⁸⁶ Fighting an equal opponent as a gladiator in the arena allowed aristocrats to seek the glory that was being lost as they were becoming a new form of underling in the restructuring of the social order.⁸⁷

The gladiators themselves appear to have used their position in the arena to create this path for redemption of lost honor by performing what the Roman audience wanted to believe about their identity as Romans. This could have

82. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 15. She says this in the context of a discussion of a satirical tale of two shipwrecked freedmen enslaving themselves to the shady character of Eumolpus; see Petronius, *Satyricon* 117.

83. In this performance the gladiators conform to the Romans' expectation of sacrificial animal victims that they appear to be cooperating in their being offered on the altar. See Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 23.

84. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 61. Another line of inquiry should be acknowledged here. Similar behavior has been studied in animal fights, and particularly in wolves. The signals of deference to the alpha animal are part of preserving the social cohesiveness of the pack.

85. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 27. Barton examines this phenomenon at greater length in her most recent book, *Roman Honor*.

86. Barton, *Roman Honor*.

87. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 28.

benefits for them as individuals. Some were successful enough to have left a record in stone in funerary and honorific inscriptions.⁸⁸ Individual gladiators were also celebrities, and their fame was seen not only in graffiti but also in mosaic portraits and other visual artworks, poetry, and inscriptions.⁸⁹ Their performance of manly *virtus* and their libertine image also gave the gladiators sex appeal, as graffiti about two popular gladiators in Pompeii indicate: “*suspirium puellarum*” and “*puparum dominus*” (“the sigh of the maidens” and “the master of girls.”)⁹⁰ A luxuriously dressed woman’s body found in the gladiators’ barracks in the ashes of Pompeii, where some of the seventeen gladiators were found bound in stocks, also suggests their appeal to women.⁹¹

In a more general way, the path they forged to claim themselves as subjects and restore their own honor also became the path for others, and in the process they became icons of Roman *virtus*.⁹² To illustrate this Roman identity and *virtus*, Barton uses the figure of Mucius Scaevola, a popular hero of the Roman Republic, who had achieved “status as a martyr as a testament of Roman *fides*.”⁹³ As the story goes, Mucius had entered into the enemy camp by stealth and attempted to assassinate King Porsena during his siege of Rome in 508 BCE in the Etruscan wars. He killed the wrong man, however, and was caught. The words Livy puts in his mouth as he is brought before Porsena’s tribunal frame have subsequent actions as defining of Roman identity:

“I am a Roman citizen,” he cried; “men call me Gaius Mucius. I am your enemy, and as an enemy I would have slain you; I can die as resolutely as I could kill: both to do and to endure valiantly is the Roman way.”⁹⁴

He then demonstrates “the Roman way” by thrusting his right hand into the fire prepared to burn him, and holding his hand there to let it burn up, saying: “Look, that you may see how cheap [the Romans] hold their bodies whose eyes are fixed upon renown (*gloriam*)” (2.12.13).⁹⁵ Mucius’ action became emblematic of Roman identity and honor.⁹⁶ This is just one illustration.

88. Carter and Edmondson, “Spectacle in Rome.”

89. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 135–38.

90. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 47–48.

91. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 81. For some suggestive lines of inquiry on sexual dynamics and implications for women in the development of the image of the gladiator as a “cipher for the noble Roman male,” see also Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 142–46.

92. Edwards (*Death in Ancient Rome*, 68–75) also discusses the gladiator’s noble image, mostly in philosophical literature.

93. Barton, “Savage Miracles,” 43. Barton uses this story as a focal point in her other studies as well.

94. Livy, *History of Rome* 2.12.8–10: “*Romanus sum*,” inquit, “*civis*; C. Mucium vocant. hostis hostem occidere volui, nec ad mortem minus animi est quam fuit ad caedem: et facere et pati fortia Romanum est.”

95. “*en tibi*,” inquit, “*ut sentias quam vile corpus sit iis qui magnam gloriam vident*.”

96. See e.g. Livy, *History of Rome* 2.12–13.

Gladiators, who were originally “disposables” forced into the arena to fight for the entertainment of the onlookers, redefined themselves as subjects rather than objects in performing their life and death struggle in the Roman way (illustrated in the stories of Scaevola) by disposing of themselves in a voluntary action. While this took place in performances designed by their Roman masters, for which they were methodically trained in the masters’ schools, we must also recognize their agency in redeeming their own honor on Roman terms. The image of the gladiator was being transformed over the course of centuries as the spectacles emerged as a central focus in Roman culture. Yet an incident during the Republican era demonstrates the agency of the disposable captives in this process.

Diodorus Siculus (36.10) relates an incident that shows a group of prisoners taking initiative in reclaiming their honor by action considered to model Roman *virtus*. In 100 BCE Manius Aquilius defeated a slave rebellion (the second Sicilian slave war) and had planned to execute the captives who had surrendered by having them battle beasts in the arena. Instead, they chose their own deaths in a more honorable display: “they brought their lives to a most glorious end; for they avoided combat with the beasts and cut one another down at the public altars . . . the final survivor died heroically by his own hand.”⁹⁷ Rather than waiting for an ignominious death *ad bestias* or committing a secluded suicide in their place of captivity, they chose to demonstrate their voluntary embrace of death by fighting one another as gladiators in front of an audience, thereby resisting humiliation.

The audience is essential. The Roman eye fixed on *gloriam*, as Livy’s Scaevola puts it, requires an audience to grant the glory, and the gladiators sought their *gloriam* by putting the power of affirmation into the hands of the audience in the arena.⁹⁸ The image of the gladiator is created in a performative intersection in the arena—the gladiator performing his death to redeem his honor in the eyes of a crowd who identifies with him and desires the performance he offers.

What happens to the audience watching this display? Watching the gladiatorial games was considered part of military training, and for those not destined for battle, it was a form of participation in the Roman military ethos, an inspiration to live with Roman *virtus*. In praising the emperor Trajan’s gladiatorial exhibition, for example, Pliny the Younger says he “produced ‘nothing spineless or flabby, nothing that would soften or break the manly spirit [*animos virorum*] of the audience, but a spectacle which inspired the audience to noble wounds and to despise death, since even in the bodies of slaves and criminals the love of praise and desire for victory could be seen.’”⁹⁹ In observing the gladiatorial

97. Futrell, *The Roman Games*, 121.

98. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 34.

99. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 21. She cites Pliny the Younger, *Pan.* 33.1.

display, then, members of the audience would identify with the gladiators and experience their *virtus* vicariously.

We might expect that the audience would identify with the victor in this display, yet this was not simply “sadistic voyeurism,” as Edwards points out in a discussion of the crowd’s pleasure.¹⁰⁰ Philosophers encouraged a focus on the defeated as a learning exercise for facing death. While their encouragement may have been addressed primarily to elites, gladiatorial combat, “like so many other spectator sports, enabled its observers to rehearse for themselves the role of the victor *and* the role of the defeated opponent.”¹⁰¹

When we consider the audience identifying with the gladiators and longing for this vicarious experience of honor courageously snatched from humiliation, a sense of their own empowerment in witnessing a victim dying *invictus* (“unconquered”), we can understand their contempt for the gladiator who showed an unwillingness to die. They felt his shame. A display of weakness would disgust the audience and would be rewarded with chants for his death.¹⁰² A display of courage could lead to chants to spare his life. This vicarious identification with the defeated as well as the victor created the gladiator as an icon.

As the image of the gladiator began to be an emblem of Roman *virtus* as well as one of degradation, the gladiator also began to be used as a compelling metaphor.¹⁰³ Seneca (*On Tranquility* 11.1–6), for example, uses the gladiator as a metaphor for the wise man, who acknowledges that his body is the property of the master/deity and knows that he “must surrender life and limb to his divine master without murmur or hesitation.”¹⁰⁴ The gladiator metaphor is also important in other Stoic philosophers’ accounts of death.¹⁰⁵

We need to see the gladiators, then, as engaged in a performance of death in which they moved themselves from being “othered,” uncivilized objects outside of Roman “civilization,” to being subjects emblematic of *Romanitas* and Roman *virtus* itself, from expendable outsiders to central icons of Roman identity and even Roman citizenship. In the process, they and the crowds for whom they performed were using the arena to shape a workable subjective identity for themselves within an imperial social hierarchy that on some level made all of them humiliated objects. From a status of what Orlando Patterson has aptly termed “social death,”¹⁰⁶ the gladiator, especially the defeated one, provided a Roman audience a momentary glimpse of a live human being, defined in the terms of Roman cultural currency, by fusing defiance and acquiescence. The

100. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 66–67.

101. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 67.

102. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 22–24, 35.

103. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 17.

104. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 18–19.

105. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 144–60.

106. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

crowd vicariously experienced that same moment of freedom in embracing this image of dying *invictus* and thus elevated the gladiator as an icon for their Roman identity. In a revision of Thomas Weidemann's description, "Instead of seeing a gladiatorial combat as a public display of killing, it might be useful to see it as a demonstration of the power to overcome death," we might add *social* as well as physical death.

At the same time, we must recognize that the spectacle of gladiatorial combat and the iconic image of the gladiator played a role in the stability of the empire by making its humiliations emotionally manageable. We must also remember that, in the decisive moment, the gladiators fix their gaze on the *editor* as the central spectator in the audience for whom their combat with death has been performed. As they became icons of Roman identity, however, what had been their departure from the script becomes the script.

Accounts of the Christian martyrs move the martyrs into the arena to take their place in a similar trajectory from "othered" disposables to icons of a new form of Roman identity.

Christian Martyrs in the Arena

The Christian martyrs portrayed in the accounts of their trials and deaths entered the arena as a location where the Roman social order was being defined, and the accounts offer both a challenge to that order and a redefinition that re-inscribes it.

In lieu of a survey of all of the *Acts of the Martyrs*, here I will consider a few illustrations from three accounts of martyrdoms: Polycarp (*Polycarp*), an account sometimes considered paradigmatic for other accounts, although its dating is disputed;¹⁰⁷ Perpetua and Felicitas (*Perpetua*); and the martyrs of Lyons (*Lyons*). This project will not include discussion of secondary literature on these texts.

This final section will examine some general aspects of the accounts of the martyrs in light of the understanding of the arena and the gladiators presented in the first two sections.

Accounts of the Martyrs as Social Critique

Recent decades have produced many fine studies of the accounts of the martyrs as forms of social critique, and the martyrs have traditionally been perceived as a challenge to Roman imperial authority.¹⁰⁸ Without in any way discounting

107. Carbonell, "Roman Spectacle Buildings," 12. For one extended discussion of the dating, see Moss, "On the Dating of Polycarp." Moss argues for a dating of the composition of the text in the first half of the third century.

108. As just two examples, see Perkins, "Fictional Narratives," 27–45; Young, "Martyrdom as Exaltation," 70–94.

such studies or the social critique they demonstrate, we should be careful not to uncritically assume a status of Christian exceptionalism for the martyrs. For example, in a 1998 article on “The Voice of the Victim,” Kate Cooper capsulized the image of the martyr as a social critic:

The spectacle of the arena was centred around a crushing assertion of the right order of society. . . . In such a society, so pointedly aware of the dynamics of authority and representation, for a Christian to subvert humiliation by embracing death with equanimity would have constituted a powerful social gesture.¹⁰⁹

While with Cooper and others we need to recognize the *power* in this social gesture, we should not imagine that it was *original*. The path to subversion of “humiliation by embracing death with equanimity” was already well-worn by the gladiators’ performance of death in the arena and by the tales Romans told themselves about the essence of their identity.

Martyrs as Gladiators Displaying Roman *Virtus*

To associate the martyrs and the gladiators is hardly a stretch given that their performances of death both take place in the Roman arena, and identifying martyrs and gladiators as similar figures is not new. In a 1994 article, Carlin A. Barton proposed that, rather than “operating in mutually exclusive emotional spheres” assumed in conventional interpretations, the gladiator and the martyr both “operated within an ambivalent vocabulary of emotion and gesture—the vocabulary of the condemned, the defeated, the dishonored.”¹¹⁰ In this article and later works, Barton proposes the “dominant heroic model” of the “failed hero” that has been the basis for the discussion of the figure of the gladiator above. More recently, Catharine Edwards indicates the commonalities in her book on death in Roman culture. She also points to a common emphasis on the voluntary acceptance of death, honor, and self-actualization, as well as the importance of the spectacle as the context in the accounts and the direct identification of the martyrs as gladiators in Christian texts.¹¹¹

The Arena as Setting for Martyrdom

The spectacle of the martyrs is most often set in the arena. Spanish archaeologist Jordina Sales Carbonell catalogues the association of the accounts of martyrs’ deaths with spectacle buildings and the Roman spectacle program.¹¹² Her list includes many of the most prominent accounts, as well as late traditions,

109. Cooper, “The Voice of the Victim,” 148.

110. Barton, “Savage Miracles,” 41.

111. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 210.

112. Carbonell, “Roman Spectacle Buildings,” 12–13. Her list is illustrative rather than exhaustive. Carbonell’s archaeological research is investigating the construction of churches in the arenas of spectacle buildings on the sites of martyrdoms.

that indicate that the arena was assumed as the location for martyrdoms.¹¹³ She also points out that the vocabulary for the buildings in late antique accounts is ambiguous.¹¹⁴ In addition to accounts that specifically mention a spectacle building, several mention a form of execution that places it in the spectacle program. Execution by beasts, for example, requires the infrastructure and specialized staff present in the amphitheaters.

In some of the accounts, martyrs were beheaded at a more secluded location. This would generally indicate the social status of the individual being executed, since beheading was the honorable form of execution reserved for members of the elites. As David Potter points out, some accounts relate a specific effort to avoid the spectacle of earlier martyrdoms.¹¹⁵ Even these include some aspect of performance before the crowd, however, and some of the authors of the accounts specifically include some passage through the spectacle building.¹¹⁶

Martyrdom was a spectacle performed in the context of the buildings the Romans constructed for their program of spectacles.

Martyrs Displaying Roman Virtus, Martyrs as Gladiators

No extended search is necessary to find mention in the accounts of the Christian martyrs that extol them for qualities associated with Roman *virtus*.

113. Peter in 67 CE at Rome (Carbonell indicates that "according to the tradition" Peter was martyred in the circus of Caligula and Nero). While Tacitus' account of the executions of Christians (*Ann.* 15.44) indicates that their executions took place in Nero's garden rather than in a spectacle building, we cannot determine that Peter was among them. What is significant is that the tradition appears to require the spectacle context in the circus prior to the construction of the Flavian amphitheater; Ignatius of Antioch in 107 at Rome in the Flavian amphitheater; Polycarp in 155 in the stadium at Smyrna; Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice around 161–180 in the amphitheater at Pergamon; the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne in 177 in the amphitheater at Lugdunum; Perpetua, Felicitas, and others during some *munera castrensia* in the amphitheater at Carthage; Priscus, Malchus, and Alexander during the reign of Valerian (253–260) at Caesarea in Palestine; Fructuosus, Augurius, and Eulogius in 259 in the amphitheater at Tarragona; Germanus (according to tradition) in the amphitheater at Pula (Istria in modern Croatia) in 284; Sebastian (according to a *passio* from the fifth century) in the hippodrome at Rome in the late third or early fourth centuries; Agapius and Thecla in the amphitheater at Gaza c. 304; Maxima, Secunda, and Donatella in the amphitheater in the city of "Turbitanam" in Africa in 304; Tarachus, Probus, and Andronicus, martyred in an amphitheater a mile outside of an unspecified town in Cilicia in 304; Alban in the arena at Verulamium in England during the Diocletian persecutions or perhaps earlier in 287; several Christians, including the priest Asterius, four soldiers of Diocletian's personal guard (Antiochianus, Gaianus, Paulinianus, and Telius) and the bishop Domnius (successor to Venantius) in the amphitheater of Salona (Solin, Croatia) in 304; Agnes (according to tradition) at the stadium of Domitian at Rome in the mid-third century or during the persecutions of Diocletian; Acisclus (according to late tradition and Prudentius) in the amphitheater at Cordoba in the tetrarchic period (293–313); and Almachius/Telemachus (according to tradition) stoned by the crowd in an arena at Rome in the late fourth or early fifth century. Carbonell, "Roman Spectacle Buildings," 12–13.

114. Carbonell, "Roman Spectacle Buildings," 11 n. 34.

115. Potter, "Martyrdom as Spectacle."

116. Carbonell, "Roman Spectacle Buildings," 14–15.

A passage near the beginning of *Polycarp* repeats the adjectives of nobility and courage and describes the endurance of pain associated with Roman *virtus*.¹¹⁷ This image of *virtus*, nobility and courage and withstanding pain, is a general characteristic of the accounts.

Popular traditions also associated the martyrs with athletes and gladiators. Just as people collected oil from the athletes and blood from the gladiators as cures for fever and epilepsy, Christians collected fragments of martyrs' remains and believed in the relics' magical properties.¹¹⁸

Christian writers associate the martyrs with athletes and gladiators in their performance in the arena. As Catharine Edwards summarizes, "martyrs are encouraged to see themselves as performers, rising to a challenge—and with an audience to impress."¹¹⁹ She points, for example, to the writings of Ignatius of Antioch exhorting Polycarp: "It is like a great athlete to take blows and yet win the fight."¹²⁰ Blandina is also described as a "noble athlete."¹²¹ Perpetua envisions herself as an athlete and gladiator in the arena in one of her dreams. At first she enters the arena expecting to meet the beasts, but instead she finds herself confronting "an Egyptian" of "vicious appearance." The description at first indicates a wrestling match, but then a "man of marvelous stature" portrayed as an athletic trainer rises to the top of the amphitheater and announces the consequences of the match as a gladiatorial combat: "If this Egyptian defeats her, he will slay her with the sword. But if she defeats him, she will receive this branch," referring to the branch with golden apples.¹²² What starts as a wrestling match clearly has the consequences of gladiatorial combat.

The presentation of Germanicus in *Polycarp* 3 also corresponds to the essential *Romanitas* of the popular figure of Mucius Scaevola. Rather than waiting for the fate to which he has been sentenced, he seizes hold of it. Like Mucius Scaevola thrusting his right hand into the flame and holding it there to burn, Germanicus seizes the beast presented to kill him in the same language of gesture of Roman identity that the gladiators use by offering their throat upon defeat.

117. *Polycarp* 2; Musurillo, *Acts*, 1–2. Words Musurillo translates as "noble" are variations of γενναῖος. Musurillo's translation (*Polycarp* 3) also describes Germanicus as "fighting manfully" with the beasts, although the adverb in the Greek is ἐπισήμως, more simply "in a distinguished manner." Extensive discussion of the Greek vocabulary merits another project.

118. Carbonell, "Roman Spectacle Buildings," 11.

119. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 211.

120. Edwards cites *Polycarp* 2.3, but the reference is at 3.1. She also mentions Tertullian's (*Ad mart.* 1.2) justification of his address to the martyrs by indicating that amateurs and spectators as well as expert trainers give advice to skilled gladiators. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 211.

121. *Lyons* 19; Musurillo, *Acts*, 66–67.

122. *Perpetua* 10; Musurillo, *Acts*, 116–19.

Christian writers also emphasize martyrdom as a voluntary action, and the martyrs' oaths echo the *sacramentum* of the gladiators.¹²³ For example, Ignatius (*Rom.* 4.1) asserts "I die willingly for God,"¹²⁴ and his oath is patterned after the gladiator's "Come fire, cross, battling with wild bears, wrenching of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body, cruel torture of the devil—only let me get to Jesus Christ."¹²⁵ Tertullian and Cyprian refer to a *sacramentum* that binds the martyr. While modeled on the soldier's oath, the relevant warrior, as Barton points out, was "not the warrior of the field but the warrior of the arena."¹²⁶ The oath not only indicates the importance of their voluntary embrace of torture and death as martyrs but also, as can be seen in the case of Ignatius, transfers the allegiance to a different kind of gladiatorial manager: God and Christ. This transference indicates the reshaping of the arena as the martyrs became central icons for an empire defined as Christian.

Differences in the Setting: An Arena of Narrative and a Christian Empire

The accounts of the martyrs portray an arena where a Christian vision of the empire is being constructed around performances of iconic martyrs. While the accounts portray the martyrs nobly taking their final stand on the sands of the arena, the setting for the martyrs' combat and performance of death differs significantly from that of the gladiators.

Performance of Death in the Noonday Program, Not the Afternoon

The accounts bring the *virtus* and the voluntary choice of the Christian martyrs into a different position in the spectacle program. What the gladiators accomplished in the afternoon program by becoming icons of Roman *virtus* rather than forced participants in a spectacle of combat, the martyrs accomplish in the noonday program by becoming icons of Christian *virtus* rather than the image of dying as *noxii*. As Edwards indicates, it is significant that the martyrs are portrayed as associated with the bravery of the gladiators and "not with the misery of the *noxii*."¹²⁷

From the viewpoint of the Roman crowd, the Christians were part of the "others" executed during the noonday entertainments. Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44)

123. The reference to "voluntary martyrdom" here is in connection with the pattern of making the involuntary voluntary discussed in the first portions of this article. This is not to be confused with the issue of volunteering for martyrdom and status as an "authentic" martyr. On this, see Moss, "The Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom," 531–51.

124. Translation from Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 175.

125. Straw, "A Very Special Death," 45–46, 55 n. 40. She cites Ignatius, *Rom.* 3.3, but the reference is at 5.3. Straw also points to additional examples of vows modeled after military oaths and indicates the "blurred lines between the gladiator and the soldier" (pp. 45–46).

126. Barton, "Savage Miracles," 56.

127. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 211.

describes this “othering” of the Christians under Nero in spectacles that included putting the hides of beasts on them and letting them be torn apart by dogs, spectacles that, as Erik Gunderson points out, “assimilated them unambiguously to the inhuman/uncivilized fictional space generated by the arena.”¹²⁸ In the framework of the spectacle program, the Christians were supposed to be displayed as part of the “other” to be destroyed, among criminals and other threats to Roman legal order. They were the *noxii*, not trained for the fight as the gladiators were. They were outsiders who deserved destruction, not the fair fight of the afternoon entertainment.

Yet the accounts portray a martyr performance that echoes the gladiators’ refusal to accept the “despised other” identity assigned to them. Using the same strategy of voluntarily embracing the death to which they have been sentenced, they reveal themselves in the decisive moment as subjects rather than objects. The narratives make a concerted effort to portray them achieving recognition of their humanity and status as subjects in spite of being in a position designed to debase, humiliate, and de-humanize them.¹²⁹ The martyrs make an identity shift in the noonday program similar to the one the gladiators have made in the afternoon.

Combat by Trial, Not on the Sands of the Arena

The accounts of the martyrs also portray them as gladiators skilled and trained for combat, but the combat takes place at their *trials*. They were not portrayed as the untrained *noxii* thrown into the arena to die in entertainments entirely controlled by the spectacle producers. Like the gladiators, the Christian martyrs are portrayed as trained for their role.¹³⁰ Yet the content of their training does not emphasize technical skills for the performance in the arena so much as training to speak eloquently and stand courageously at their trials before Roman authorities. Their prowess is not military skills for a theatrical battlefield but rhetorical skills and valor to win hearts and minds in a court of opinion beyond the Roman legal system.

128. Gunderson, “The Ideology,” 134. He places this image in the space created by the arena, even though Nero’s gardens were the site of these particular spectacles.

129. Note that this is not necessarily an effort to force the spectator to view *all* of those debased in the midday spectacles as human. The focus in the narratives is on the courage of the exceptional Christian martyrs and their refusal to capitulate to the loyalty demands of Roman imperial worship in order to demonstrate loyalty (and *pietas*) to a different deity, but one who also expects exclusive devotion.

130. Training was an important theme in the accounts of the martyrs and in early Christian writings on martyrdom, as Robin Darling Young has emphasized. She points to differing traditions of training. In North Africa, Asia Minor, and Irenaeus’ Gaul, training for martyrdom had apocalyptic qualities, while in Alexandria, Clement and Origen emphasized detachment from the body; see Young, *In Procession Before the World*, 10–11. She discusses the discourses on training by Clement (pp. 37–47) and Origen (pp. 52–60) at greater length.

Most of the accounts include a trial scene that incorporates some common elements. A normal public trial was structured, as David Potter characterizes it, as “a contest about truth between magistrate and defendant set on a playing field that was designed to give all the advantages to the representative of the imperial government.”¹³¹ The official functioned as both prosecutor and judge. In most of the martyr accounts a crowd is present too, and acclamations of the crowd often decide the verdict. Polycarp’s trial, for example, takes place in a stadium. In this instance the crowds are already roaring as he is led in.¹³² In the account of Perpetua the trial takes place in the forum, but the presence of the crowd is not mentioned, and the official Hilarianus renders the verdict.¹³³ The account of the martyrs of Lyons, however, emphasizes the role of the crowd in bringing them to the forum before the “entire populace” in what appears to be a series of public trials.¹³⁴

The official, according to trial procedure, states the charge and asks basic questions.¹³⁵ He establishes the defendant’s identity (“Are you Polycarp?”) and in many cases in the martyr narratives offers an opportunity for the defendant to recant and swear by or sacrifice to the *genius* of the emperor.¹³⁶ This element may well reflect a standard pattern in the trials of the historical martyrs. Yet as an element in the narrative, it emphasizes the volition of the martyr in embracing an involuntary fate (à la Mucius Scaevola). Most contain the affirmation “I am a Christian.”

Some of the narratives also include more interchange between the official and the martyr and sometimes a longer speech by the martyr. The governor trying Polycarp, for example, engages him in some dialog that includes threats and offers to let him change his mind. The first threat is the beasts, and Polycarp responds “Go and call for them!” Then the governor threatens fire, and Polycarp contrasts the temporary threat with the eternal “fire of everlasting punishment” and again offers a version of “Bring it on!” saying, “Why then do you hesitate? Come, do what you will.” After a dramatic pronouncement by the herald in the center of the arena—“Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian”—the crowd present then shouts denunciations and calls for the lion to be loosed on him.¹³⁷

In the account of Polycarp’s trial, we can see the acquiescence and defiance of the gladiator that embodies the Roman identity expressed in the popular

131. Potter, “Performance,” 147.

132. *Polycarp* 9; Musurillo, 8–9.

133. *Perpetua* 6; Musurillo, *Acts*, 112–15.

134. *Lyons* 7–8, 17; Musurillo, *Acts*, 62–69.

135. Potter, “Performance,” 147.

136. The *genius* was the image of what may be described as the guardian spirit of the *paterfamilias* of a Roman household. The image of the emperor in temples of the imperial cult and elsewhere was this image of the paternal *genius*.

137. *Polycarp* 11–12; Musurillo, *Acts*, 10–11.

stories of Mucius Scaevola. Instead of saying "I am a Roman. . . . Look, that you may see how cheap [the Romans] hold their bodies whose eyes are fixed upon renown (*gloriam*)," Polycarp, like many of the other martyrs portrayed in the accounts, says effectively, "I am a Christian! See how cheaply we hold our bodies whose eyes are fixed upon eternal glory!" In effect he says "See how I am more Roman than the Romans!" This interchange becomes the martyr's combat scene where his or her victory is won by refusing to be intimidated by the threat of torture and death and by making an involuntary fate voluntary. In the narratives the trial scene becomes part of the spectacle.

Torture and execution in the "contest" in the arena then become a continuation of the combat in the trial and another opportunity to provide victorious testimony. Kate Cooper points to the importance of torture in obtaining credible testimony from slaves and people of low rank, people who would be susceptible to pressures exerted by their owners or who would be easy targets for bribery. If such a person did not change his or her testimony under torture, the testimony was true. In the narratives, the tortures and death to which the martyrs are subjected in the arena continue their "witness" and testimony at the trial. However, the martyr has been reframed "as a witness under torture rather than a criminal under investigation," and the question of truth has been shifted from the Christian martyr's guilt to the content of the Christian message.¹³⁸ In effect, the narratives put the interrogators on trial before the audience of the text.¹³⁹

An Arena of Narrative, Not Stone; An Audience in the Text, Not the Stands

The narratives depict the martyrs crossing not only the podium wall but also the usually hostile arena crowd in the stands to perform a death scene that connects them to the audience of the text and to a celestial audience, the audience(s) of decisive consequence for their combat/trial. With a few exceptions they remain "othered" objects in the eyes of the arena audience portrayed in the text. For the audience of the text, however, they become subjects and icons of a Christianized *Romanitas* and *virtus*. They connect to an audience beyond the confines of the amphitheater, and the texts envision a new celestial amphitheater in the pattern of the earthly Roman one.

The spectators in the arenas and the crowds at the trials are generally portrayed as hostile to the Christian martyrs. Polycarp (*Polycarp* 9), for example, refers to "the mob of lawless pagans," and he considers them undeserving of

138. Cooper, "The Voice of the Victim," 152–53. Following the work of Page duBois (*Torture and Truth*) on this legal theory in Athenian democracy, she describes this theory of *basanos*. The same assumption applied in the Roman era. The word used in *Polycarp* 2 to describe the martyrs' "hour of torment" is the same root.

139. Cooper, "The Voice of the Victim," 154.

his speech of defense (10).¹⁴⁰ The crowd chants for his death by the lion, as has been mentioned, and many other crowds chant for the execution of the martyrs in other accounts. The crowd has empathy only in rare instances, such as the crowd described as “horrified” and able to see Perpetua and Felicitas as “a delicate young girl” and “a woman fresh from childbirth with milk still dripping from her breasts,” that is, as human beings for whom they appear to be able to have some form of compassion rather than as objects for their entertainment.¹⁴¹ Most of the crowds portrayed remain hostile.

The audience of the arena in the texts is not the audience of consequence for the martyrs’ performance, however. Within the text the martyr often performs his or her death for a celestial audience. In the general description of the martyrs in *Polycarp* (2), for example, they are praised not only for their nobility and courage but for their “love of the Master,” and they are said to “fix their eyes on the favour of Christ.”¹⁴² Like the gladiator in the decisive moment with eyes fixed on the *editor* who will deliver the decision on his fate, the exemplary martyr fixed his or her eyes on Christ as an *editor* beyond the physical arena, an *editor* with the power to grant “favor.”¹⁴³

A few paragraphs later as Polycarp enters the amphitheater for his trial, a voice from heaven cheers him on (“be strong, Polycarp, and have courage”) even as the hostile crowd in the earthly arena is making a deafening roar. An explanation reveals the significant audience: “No one saw who was speaking, but those of our people who were present heard the voice.”¹⁴⁴ The performance of Polycarp that follows, for which the voice from heaven provides the cheering section, is intended then for “our people” present in the earthly audience represented in the text and in the audience of the text itself. This describes the framework for most of the accounts. The martyr’s performance is for the celestial audience and “our people” as the audience of the text, not for “those people” in the hostile crowd of the earthly arena in the text—and “those people” in the world of the audience of the text.

In the celestial audience and the audience of the text we can see a new arena being constructed, not in stone but in story.¹⁴⁵

140. Musurillo, *Acts*, 9.

141. *Perpetua* 20.2; Musurillo, *Acts*, 128–29.

142. Musurillo, *Acts*, 1–2.

143. Perpetua is also described entering the amphitheater to perform her death as “a wife of Christ” with an “intense gaze” that puts down everyone’s stare. The implication is that she is victorious in the staring contest, but her gaze could also implicitly be fixed on Christ. *Perpetua* 18; Musurillo, *Acts*, 124–27.

144. *Polycarp* 9; Musurillo, *Acts*, 8–9.

145. The story leads to stone constructions as well, as the churches constructed on the sites of martyrdom in abandoned arenas attest. See Carbonell, “Roman Spectacle Buildings.”

The More Things Change, The More They Remain the Same

The new arena in Christian martyr narratives accomplished much of what the Roman stone arenas did. This narrative arena became the edifice for a Christianized Roman empire with the martyrs as its icons.

Still an Arena for the Pleasures of Spectacle

The new arena created in narrative was still constructed for spectacle. While the martyr's performance for the audience of the text was a performance of a victory in the pattern of the gladiator enacting Roman identity, it remained, also in the pattern of the gladiatorial combat, a *spectacle* for Christian audiences still hungry for the pleasures of the arena. Edwards points to evidence in Tertullian and Augustine that the martyr narratives were used as a Christian substitute for the Roman arena as a way for Christians to satisfy the need for the bloody "pleasures" that continued to draw them to the arena in spite of Christian writers' exhortations against attendance. In response to the question of how Christians can cope without such entertainments, Augustine, for example, proposes the passions of the martyrs as better entertainment. God's provision of such entertainments casts him in the role of emperor of the celestial arena.¹⁴⁶ The Christian arena of narrative is still very much an arena for spectacle patterned after the physical Roman arena.

Still an Arena for the Enactment of Victory over the "Other"

In addition to the graphic images of torture and death that could compensate for the pleasures of the arena program, Christian writers offered a spectacle that provided an image of retribution. We can see this stated briefly in Polycarp's response at his trial to the governor's threat of fire, as has been mentioned. To the temporary fire of the arena, Polycarp contrasts the "fire of everlasting punishment and of the judgement that is to come, which awaits the impious."¹⁴⁷ We can see in this brief description the seeds of the image of the fires in the celestial arena.

Tertullian provides a more detailed description of a retributive spectacle at the last judgment. Looking forward to the day of judgment, Tertullian (*Spect.* 30) describes it as a spectacle of consuming fire. He envisions the officials who had persecuted Christians "melting in flames" and a similar fate for philosophers and their pupils who subscribed to a point of view Tertullian deems heretical. He continues to describe in graphic detail the incineration of actors and charioteers as well. He presents this as the "nobler" spectacle.¹⁴⁸

146. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 214. She cites *Enarrationes in psalmos* 39.9.

147. *Polycarp* 11; Musurillo, *Acts*, 10–11.

148. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 207–8.

If we read this retributive spectacle of the last judgment together with the accounts of the martyrs, what emerges is a spectacle program that accomplishes the edifying and unifying purposes of the Roman arena discussed in the first part of this article. The audience in the Roman amphitheater viewed the spectacle of the triumph of Roman order as the wild beasts were slaughtered, then the barbarians and criminals. Viewing these spectacles unified the audience as participants in the Roman empire by “othering” the beasts and opponents of Roman order. The third part of the program provided an image for their identity as Romans in the form of the gladiator, a complex image, as we have seen. The whole program offered an opportunity for spectators to participate in Roman imperial power.

Likewise, the audience of the Christian spectacle texts were united and edified by the spectacle program presented, and they were offered an opportunity to participate in the divine imperial power of the new arena. They became the “real audience” with the celestial observers who could watch as the Roman officials and the hostile arena crowd become the “other.” They could also identify with the martyr who took the role of the gladiator as the edifying icon for a new form of Roman imperial culture. The new icon of the martyr is as complex as the icon of the gladiator, but complex in similar ways, as we have seen. We can also observe that for them, as for the gladiators before them, the departure from the script becomes a new script.

Epilogue: Power Relations in a Christian Arena

Christian writings constructed a new arena around the edifying iconic performance of the Christian martyrs. The new arena thus replaced the Roman arena with the edifying performance of the iconic gladiator at its center. Just as the gladiators asserted their status as subjects by offering their audiences a model of “the Roman way” for imitation, the martyrs offered a model for imitation in what might be described as “an even more Roman way.”

The Christian arena was intended to project imperial power just as much as the Roman amphitheater was. In the Roman amphitheater, however, a human emperor or his representative was physically present in a physical crowd where a dynamic negotiation of power relations was still possible. The Christian narrative amphitheater constructed for the performance of the martyrs, where Christ and ultimately God hold the position of the emperor, presents a more absolute image of power relations. Iconic portrayals of Christian martyrs have a place in an absolutist vision of power relations in a Christianized Roman empire, a place worth examining in relation to the place the image of the gladiator had in the Roman empire.

The iconic image of the martyr takes its place in the context of this Christianized Roman empire and the absolute power of the new emperor as the

celestial God/Christ. Rather than challenging the empire, the martyr image is part of the transformation of the empire in a more virulent form, as expressed in the chorus of a song by Silvio Rodriguez that describes a dream of the great imperial serpent. Like the martyrs of narrative arriving to make their stand in the cultural center of Rome's empire, the dreamer finally arrives into the belly of the beast and plants truth with a verse to defeat the beast, but "I kill it and it appears one greater with much more hell in its digestion."¹⁴⁹

149. "Oh, la mato y aparece una mayor, Oh, con mucho más infierno en digestión." Sylvio Rodriguez, "Sueño con serpientes."

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