

Cutting through the Ranks: Volunteer Gladiators and Roman Social Disorder

Recent scholarship on the Roman gladiatorial spectacles has thankfully moved us beyond anachronistic moralizing and the fetishization of violence in search of more nuanced methods of understanding their significance in Roman cultural history (Wiedemann 1992, Futrell 1997, Fagan 2011). This paper seeks to continue that pursuit with the reassertion of a third class of fighter into the *ludus*, separate from the slaves and criminals who regularly filled the gladiatorial barracks, who enchanted the mob and confounded the elites. He was the *auctoratus* or ‘contract’ gladiator, a freeborn Roman citizen who willingly consigned his body to the hell of the Roman amphitheater and endangered both his civil rights and very life. He was a reviled *infame* with the same social standing as a prostitute, but also a lauded champion of Roman *virtus* and stoicism. As an *auctoratus* entertained the crowd, he also eroded the rigid social distinctions of class and status upon which Rome was founded. He became a particularly disruptive figure to Roman social order during the transition from republic to empire.

The present study posits the volunteer gladiator as a figure of unique challenge to traditional Roman social order, a popular deviant that the elites failed to suppress even among their own members. It begins by defining key facets of the sociocultural arena in which he performed, including the traditional social hierarchy established in the republic, its preservation through shaming and the legal penalty of *infamia*, and some basic Roman attitudes towards manhood, ordeal, and death that informed their opinions of gladiators. It examines the inverted relationship of his increasing popularity leading to the first century CE and the decay of traditional republican social conventions until even the Roman emperors performed in the arena, the ultimate subversion of traditional social order. Drawing upon literary and inscriptional

evidence, the work concludes with a profile of the *auctoratus* through the lenses of Roman legal tradition (*Dig.* 1.5.21, 3.2.4, 40.12.1), elite attitudes and efforts to suppress him (*Sen. Ep.* 7.2-6, 37.1-2; *Suet. Iul.* 10; *CIL* 2.6278.62-3), and his popular appeal to the masses (*Petron. Sat.* 45; *Juv.* 6.82-113, 11.7-10; *CIL* 4.4342; 4.4345; 4.4353).

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