

## Why were Roman Gladiators so popular?

It is a well-known fact that gladiatorial combats were one of the most popular forms of entertainment in Ancient Rome. Archaeologists have found remains of gladiatorial arenas that could seat up to an incredible 50,000 spectators, yet evidence suggests that these events were often full of violence and bloodshed. Today, all we have left are images and artefacts as proof of their popularity.

So why did so many Roman citizens flock to witness such horrific spectacles? By examining the evidence left behind, it is possible to discover some of the appeal of the Roman gladiators.

### Ancient pop-stars.

It is commonly known that gladiators were required to fight to the death. Because of this, gladiators had to become highly trained athletes and skilful fighters in order to survive. Along with their impressive armour and terrifying weapons, their expertise meant they were very exciting to watch. Evidence shows that those gladiators who won several victories were treated like pop-stars and went on to become rich and famous.

### A life of luxury.

Although gladiators were kept as prisoners, they were given three meals a day, had regular baths and massages and were generally well cared for. Written records tell us that gladiators who won were also well paid. Consequently, some free men chose to become gladiators in order to live a better life or to pay off their debts. Owing to the fact that they were offered freedom should they win enough games, some slaves were eager to risk death in becoming a gladiator.

## Exciting games.

Since the majority of Roman citizens had lots of free time, they were always looking for entertainment. Mosaics of the gladiatorial games show musical parades and wild beasts performing circus tricks, suggesting that it was a day full of excitement and thrills. Like at football matches today, many spectators would choose a gladiator to support and cheer them on. As a result, people were eager to return to see if their favourite performer would survive another day.

## Different skills.

Interestingly, the word gladiator comes from the Latin word 'gladius', so literally means 'swordsmen'. However, surviving artefacts show that swords were not the only weapons used when fighting. The broad range of gladiators – from beast fighters who fought wild animals to net fighters who were dressed like a fisherman – were one of the elements that kept the games entertaining. As different gladiators fought against each other each time, the audience was kept guessing as to who would win.

It therefore becomes clear that, despite being barbaric and cruel, gladiatorial combats were an exciting day out for bored Roman citizens. In addition, becoming a gladiator itself offered the promise of wealth and fame, meaning there were no shortage of men (and women) willing to put on a dramatic fight.

