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978-0-521-19616-1 - The Lure of the Arena: Social Psychology and the Crowd at the Roman Games

Garrett G. Fagan

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Alypius in the stands*

I wondered, and still wonder what it was like to be there.

K. Hopkins, *Death and Renewal* (1983)<sup>1</sup>

During a visit to Rome from his native North Africa, Augustine's friend Alypius was reluctantly dragged along to a spectacle in the Colosseum by some fellow law students. Protesting that such things were beneath him, Alypius first kept his eyes firmly shut. But the roars of the crowd piqued his curiosity, and he sneaked a glimpse at the proceedings. Instantly he was, as Augustine puts it,

... struck with a more serious wound in his soul than was he, whom he wanted to see, in his body... For when he saw the blood, he drank in the savagery and did not turn away but fixed his gaze on it. Unaware of what he was doing, he devoured the mayhem and was delighted by the wicked contest and drunk on its cruel pleasure... He looked, he shouted, he was fired up, and he carried away with him the madness that would goad him to return.<sup>2</sup>

The strikingly immediate nature of this account raises justifiable suspicions that Augustine is here describing his own experiences rather than someone else's. He admits elsewhere in his writings that he had once entertained a passion for spectacles, although he is vague about the details.<sup>3</sup> If Augustine is

<sup>1</sup> K. Hopkins, *Death and Renewal: Sociological Studies in Roman History II* (Cambridge, 1983), 203.

<sup>2</sup> August. *Conf.* 6.13 = T.3 (in Appendix). To avoid needless repetition, pertinent *testimonia* that merit repeated analysis are assembled in the Appendix and are hereafter designated by the appropriate entry numbers for ease of reference. "T" denotes a literary text (Appendix, Section A) and "I" an inscription (Appendix, Section B).

<sup>3</sup> On Augustine's passion for spectacles, see August. *De civ. D.* 2.4 and *En. Ps.* 147.7 = PL 36–7, 1918–19: "Watching closely the spectacles that please them, let them look at themselves from time to time and be displeased. For I take pleasure in doing just this in the midst of the crowd – I myself once sat there too, and raged. How many future Christians or even bishops do I think sit there now?" (*et multum intenti in illa spectacula, quae illis placent, aliquando et se spectent, sibi que displiceant. in multis enim iam factum gaudemus, et aliquando nos quoque ibi sedimus, et insanivimus: et quam multos putamus ibi nunc sedere, futuros non solum christianos sed etiam episcopos?*). Augustine spent time in Rome in

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indeed here speaking from personal experience, even if dimly remembered, then he provides a uniquely first-hand account of the effect that watching the games had on a Roman spectator's mental state.

The passage challenges us to confront a very basic question about the arena: what drew the Romans, in their thousands, to watch brutal gladiatorial spectacles? How and why did they derive pleasure from watching people and animals pitted against each other and slaughtered?<sup>4</sup> What, in short, was the lure of the arena? The argument of this book is that, to be convincing, any answer to this question requires due consideration of human psychology, once it is properly set against the Romans' historical context.

Arena spectacles have been much studied in recent years and many theories promulgated to explain their popularity. These explanations have overwhelmingly employed symbolic, religious, political, sociological, or anthropological lines of argument (see below, chapter 1). All such approaches are culture-specific, in that their analysis fixes the games firmly in the cultural and historical space the Romans inhabited. This is an entirely valid approach: watching violent spectacles obviously has powerful socio-cultural components, and the arena, as a peculiarly Roman phenomenon, was not reproduced elsewhere as such. Yet a corollary of such culturally rooted analyses is an overemphasis on the historical specificity of the Roman fascination with violent spectacle. The historical record makes it depressingly clear that the Romans were by no means alone in finding the sight of people and animals tormented and killed both intriguing and appealing (see below, chapter 2). The central contentions of this book are, on the one hand, that an explanation for the transcultural and transhistorical appeal of violent spectacle must be sought in human psychology and, on the other, that appreciation of the psychology in turn deepens our understanding of the Roman experience.

While it is hardly to be doubted that spectatorship at the arena had powerful psychological components, scholars to date have treated those components only in the most perfunctory manner, if at all. "The human psyche appears susceptible to the thrill of vicarious pain," suggests Kathleen Coleman, while Keith Hopkins proposes that

the summer of AD 383 before moving on to Milan the following year; see P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, 2nd edn. (Berkeley, 2000), 57–61. Alypius' experience in the arena is not unlike Augustine's own, when, as an adolescent, he participated in robbing a pear-tree under pressure from his friends; see *Conf.* 2.15.

<sup>4</sup> That the Romans enjoyed watching the games is perhaps so glaringly obvious as to require no documentation, but do note esp. Livy 41.20.11–13 = T.9, *Salv. Gub. Dei* 6.10 = T.18, Tert. *Spect.* 1 and other sources discussed in C. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome* (New Haven, 2007), 63–8.

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Part of the answer [for the spectators' enjoyment of the games] may lie in the social psychology of the crowd, which helps relieve the individual of responsibility, and in the psychological mechanisms by which some spectators identify more readily with the victory of the aggressor than with the sufferings of the vanquished . . . At the psychological level, the gladiatorial shows provided a stage (as television news does for modern viewers) for shared violence and tragedy.<sup>5</sup>

The elucidation of these and other psychological processes, and how they were manifested at the Roman arena, is the central focus of this book.

Social psychology offers the most promising tool for the inquiry that follows, since it stands at the intersection of consciousness and context, where situation meets behavior. Given that any sociocultural environment is a product of particular sets of historical conditions, the question arises as to whether social-psychological analyses can legitimately cut across historical boundaries.<sup>6</sup> It was argued over thirty years ago that social psychology, as currently practiced, is firmly presentist. At the same time, the possibility of psychological continuity with the past was left open as a potentially productive line of inquiry.<sup>7</sup> While this potential has not been enthusiastically exploited by social psychologists, at least one study has taken up the challenge and demonstrated historical continuity in the sphere of interpersonal relationships.<sup>8</sup> More recently, the leading crowd

<sup>5</sup> See K. M. Coleman, "The Contagion of the Throng: Absorbing Violence in the Roman World," *European Review* 5 (1997), 401–17 = *Hermathena* 164 (1998), 65–88 (quote at 80); and Hopkins, *Death and Renewal*, 1–30 (quotes at 27 and 30 respectively). For comparable (and comparably vague) observations, see, e.g., K. M. Coleman, "Entertaining Rome," in J. Coulston and H. Dodge (eds.), *Ancient Rome: Archaeology of the Eternal City* (Oxford, 2000), 216; A. Hönle and A. Henze, *Römische Amphitheater und Stadien: Gladiatorenkämpfe und Circusspiele* (Zurich, 1981), 75; D. Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World* (Oxford, 2007), 126; R. Lane Fox, *The Classical World: An Epic History from Homer to Hadrian* (New York, 2006), 442; K. Nossow, *Gladiator: Rome's Bloody Spectacle* (Oxford, 2009), 168–9; B. D. Shaw, "Among the Believers," *EchCl* 28 (1984), 453–79, esp. 472–9; G. Ville, *La gladiature en Occident des origines à la mort de Domitien*, BEFAR 245 (Rome, 1981), 457–72. David Potter puts it this way – "it was precisely in order to become lost in the emotions of the moment that they went"; see D. S. Potter, "Spectacle," in D. S. Potter (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Roman World* (Oxford, 2006), 385–408 (quote at 386).

<sup>6</sup> Social psychologists are acutely aware of this issue; see M. H. Bond (ed.), *The Cross-Cultural Challenge to Social Psychology* (Newbury Park, 1988); P. B. Smith and M. H. Bond, *Social Psychology across Cultures: Analysis and Perspectives*, 2nd edn. (Boston, MA, 1999). An entire periodical, the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, is devoted to this line of analysis.

<sup>7</sup> K. J. Gergen, "Social Psychology as History," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 26 (1973), 309–20, esp. 318 on the historical durability of at least some psychological processes. Social-psychological insights, especially about prejudice and stereotyping, have been applied to real-world conflict situations, and such analysis can include a historical dimension; see, e.g., D. Bar-Tal and Y. Teichman, *Stereotypes and Prejudice in Conflict: Representations of Arabs in Israeli Jewish Society* (Cambridge, 2005); J. L. Chin (ed.), *The Psychology of Prejudice and Discrimination*, 4 vols. (Westport, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> J. Adamopoulos and R. Bontempo, "Diachronic Universals in Interpersonal Structures: Evidence from Literary Sources," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 17 (1986), 169–89.

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psychologist Stephen Reicher stresses “the necessity of developing a historical and interactive set of methods and of concepts if we are to understand social understanding and social action.”<sup>9</sup> These trends within the discipline of social-psychology dovetail with the historical questions addressed in this book. On the broadest perspective, our shared humanity with the people of the past means that any insistence that populations divided by culture and history do *not* share basic mental processes requires detailed demonstration, rather than the more reasonable assumption that they do (as argued in more detail below, chapter 1).

Is it possible that people are somehow inherently inclined – by fear of death, or morbid fascination – to watch unpleasantness? Certainly, enough distressing comparanda are at hand from the annals of history (see below, chapter 2), and some students of the arena have taken it as a given that basic elements in human psychology were at work among the spectators.<sup>10</sup> Even if this is so, it is also the case that cultural context governs spectators’ attitudes about what is acceptable for any given spectacle. Divergent historical circumstances account for the marked variations in form, intent, degree, and scale of spectacular brutality, from Aztec human sacrifice to American Ultimate Fighting. So the contention here is not that all spectacular and violent rituals are essentially alike. Procedures vary widely, as do the historical circumstances that give rise to them.

What remains incontestable, however, is that whenever violence of whatever brand is staged in public, people can be found who are more than willing to turn up and watch, often in large numbers. They will watch violent events that vary considerably in their nature, their form, and the objectives of their organizers. Similar variety characterizes the manner in which the political, symbolic, or religious timbres of such spectacles synchronize with the cultural rhythms of a specific context. In this sense, spectatorship at

<sup>9</sup> S. Reicher, “The Psychology of Crowd Dynamics,” in M. A. Hogg and R. S. Tindale (eds.), *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Processes* (Oxford, 2001), 202–3 (quote at 203); see also the similar comments of R. Brown, *Group Processes: Dynamics Within and Between Groups*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 2000), 357–8. Reicher’s recent work makes ample use of historical evidence to elucidate the psychological processes that are his primary interest; see S. D. Reicher et al., “Saving Bulgaria’s Jews: An Analysis of Social Identity and the Mobilisation of Social Solidarity,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 36 (2006), 49–72; S. Reicher et al., “Making a Virtue of Evil: A Five-Step Social Identity Model of the Development of Collective Hate,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2/3 (2008), 1313–44; S. Reicher, *The Crowd* (Cambridge, forthcoming), ch. 1. (My thanks to Professor Reicher for providing me with pre-publication manuscripts of the latter two items.) Social psychology has also been profitably applied in Biblical Studies; see, e.g., P. A. Holloway, *Coping with Prejudice: 1 Peter in Social Psychological Perspective* (Tübingen, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> See Coleman, “Contagion.” See also her comments in “They, Too, Enjoyed Watching Violence And Death,” *New York Times* (July 7, 2001), B9.

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any given spectacle can be conceived as a symbiosis between intertwined contextual and psychological factors. While the latter are the focus of this study, context shapes spectator expectations and lends spectacular violence its cultural meaning(s), and those meaning(s) in turn shape the psychological experience of the spectator. Psychology and culture are not readily separable categories. They are in fact flipsides of the same coin. Therefore, in what follows, both cultural and psychological analysis go hand-in-hand to elucidate as fully as possible the experience of watching at the Roman arena.

Violent spectacles can be divided, broadly speaking, into three categories: agonistic/ludic (e.g., boxing, wrestling, cudgeling, animal baiting); punitive/retributive (e.g., public executions, corporal punishment, lynchings); and religious (e.g., human sacrifice, ritual mutilation). These categories are not mutually exclusive and can overlap, as when criminals were condemned to fight as gladiators (which conflated the ludic and punitive categories), or when in later ages religious heretics were burned at the stake as punishment for their thought-crimes. The “conglomerate spectacles” of the Roman arena managed to combine the ludic and punitive categories into a single, complex event suffused with religious symbolism, and thus fashioned an unholy trinity that merged all three forms into one.<sup>11</sup>

Charting the course of a “typical” day at the arena (if there was such a thing as a “typical” arena spectacle) is a difficult task, since the primary sources are scattered and patchy. The format that emerges as common, however, is roughly as follows.<sup>12</sup> The morning show featured exhibitions of animals, the more exotic the better. This phase usually ended in the slaughter of the beasts (*venatio*).<sup>13</sup> The hunt could overlap with the next

<sup>11</sup> The religious significance of arena spectacles is a matter we are poorly informed about, but the dressing up of some attendants in religious garb (Tert. *Apol.* 15.4–5) makes the religious aspect self-evident. See also A. Futrell, *Blood in the Arena: The Spectacle of Roman Power* (Austin, 1997); M. B. Hornum, *Nemesis, the Roman State, and the Games* (Leiden, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> The daily format is suggested by Commodus’ appearances in the arena, described by Dio from personal observation at 73(72).19.1–2 (hunts, lunch, and then gladiators). Lucian (*Tox.* 59) delineates the same format (hunts, executions, gladiators). Suetonius (*Claud.* 21.1) distinguishes gladiatorial games put on “without the hunt and stage equipment” (*sine venatione apparatusque*) from the more “regular and usual kind” (*iustum atque legitimum*), which presumably means the full, tripartite spectacle. For summaries of proceedings with ample citation of pertinent ancient evidence, see A. Futrell, *The Roman Games: A Sourcebook*, Historical Sources in Translation (Oxford, 2006), 84–119; D. G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London, 1998), 34–127; M. G. Mosci Sassi, *Il linguaggio gladiatorio* (Bologna, 1992), 55–62; T. Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators* (London, 1992), 55–101; Ville, *Gladiature*, 345–445. For the phases of spectacle traced through inscriptions, see M. Fora, *I Munera Gladiatoria in Italia: Considerazioni sulla loro documentazione epigrafica* (Naples, 1996), 41–53.

<sup>13</sup> Note, e.g., *CIL* 9.2350 = *ILS* 5059 = *EAOR* 3.26 (Allifae; second half of first century AD) for mention of a “hunt of African beasts” (*venationem | bestiarum Africana(um)*), where their African origin is clearly a matter of pride for the sponsor. Animal displays were not always violent; see

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stage, the public execution of criminals at midday (*summa supplicia*), since one of the more common modes of execution was exposure to wild beasts (*damnatio ad bestias*). One inscription from Italy includes notice of the execution victims among the categories of animals displayed, which suggests they could be classed as part and parcel of the animal displays.<sup>14</sup> A terracotta plaque from Rome shows man-and-beast hunts in progress in the Circus Maximus, and just below a lunging lion lies a prostrate naked figure – likely a person who had been condemned to the beasts. The two events (hunt and execution) are here represented simultaneously.<sup>15</sup> The lunch break and early afternoon could be occupied with more executions, including exposure to beasts, burning alive, forced combats, or straight butchery of unarmed prisoners. In a bizarre twist, some executions were staged as enactments of myths: a convict garbed as “Icarus” pushed off a tower, or an “Orpheus” failing disastrously to charm wild bears. After these preliminaries, the gladiators made their appearance as the headline event (*gladiatorum paria*). Highly trained and skilled, variously equipped, they fought in pairs announced in advance.<sup>16</sup>

below, ch. 7, pp. 247–8. For the ancient terminology of the arena, see C. Mann, “Gladiators in the Greek East: A Case Study in Romanization,” *International Journal of the History of Sport* 26 (2009), 272–97, esp. 281–3; Mosci Sassi, *Linguaggio gladiatorio*. Note the existence of the “Morning Training School” (*Ludus Marulinus*) near the Colosseum in Rome, reserved for the performers in this phase of the spectacle; see *LTUR*, vol. III, 195–8, s.v. “Ludus” (D. Palombi and C. Pavolini). See also M. MacKinnon, “Supplying Exotic Animals for the Roman Amphitheatre Games: New Reconstructions Combining Archaeological, Ancient Textual, Historical, and Ethnographic Data,” *Museion* 6 (2006), 137–61.

<sup>14</sup> See *AE* 1899.207 = *ILS* 5063a = *EAOR* 3.42 (Beneventum; second century AD): “He produced as an embellishment for Beneventum a four-day show that featured four wild animals, sixteen bears, four convicts, and the rest herbivores” (*edente Be]neventi exornato | munere diebus IIII | feris n. IIII, ursis XVI | noxeis IIII et ceteris herbariis*). Were the convicts disposed of one per day (although it is possible that *noxii* here means “dangerous/harmful animals”)? Note also *CIL* 9.3437 = *ILS* 5063 = *EAOR* 3.35 (Caporciano, near L’Aquila; mid-second century AD) which mentions a three-day spectacle featuring four *noxii* and *CIL* 4.9983a = P. Sabbatini Tumolesi, *Gladiatorum Paria: Annunci di spettacoli gladiatorii a Pompeii* (Rome, 1980), 107 (no. 79) for mention of *cruciarii* (“crucifixion victims”), hunts, and the awning in an advertisement for games. A relief from Apri in Asia Minor, as well as the Zliten mosaic from Libya, appear to show executions occurring concurrently with beast hunts, although the possibility that a series of events is being depicted in the same image cannot be ruled out; see S. Aurigemma, *I mosaici di Zliten*, *Africa italiana* 2 (Rome, 1926), 129–201, esp. 178–94; L. Robert, *Les gladiateurs dans l’Orient grec* (Paris, 1940; repr. Amsterdam, 1971), 90–1 (no. 27) and plate 24. For the term *meridiani* (“midday performers”), see *Sen. Ep.* 7.3 = T.20; *Suet. Claud.* 34.2 = T.23; *Tert. Spect.* 19.2 = T.28 and *Apol.* 15.4.

<sup>15</sup> D. Augenti, *Spettacoli del Colosseo nelle cronache degli antichi* (Rome, 2001), 68–9. When the mob at Smyrna demanded that a lion be loosed on the martyr Polycarp, they were told it was not allowed, since the days of the animal shows were over; see *Pass. Polyc.* 12.3 = H. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs: Introduction, Texts and Translations* (Oxford, 1972), 10–12. In all likelihood, considerable variation characterized the phasing of spectacles in different parts of the empire.

<sup>16</sup> An advertisement for games at Pompeii (*CIL* 4.2508 = Sabbatini Tumolesi, *Gladiatorum Paria*, 71–4 [no. 32] = *Fora, Munera Gladiatoria*, 128 [no. 57] = I.3) includes the names of the combatants

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Each phase of the spectacle had its own prior history. The *venatio*, first held at Rome in 186 BC, could trace its ancestry back through the Greek world to the traditions of royal zoos and *paradeisoi* (safari parks that doubled as hunting estates) of the ancient Near East.<sup>17</sup> Public executions long predated arena events and had been conducted outside cities or in town squares for centuries, and these venues continued to be used even during the era of the arena's popularity.<sup>18</sup> The origins of gladiators are not entirely clear, but they were likely an Italic development, and the closest antecedents have been identified among the funerary rites of the Lucanians in south-central Italy in the fourth century BC. But it remains far from certain whether these combats were the sole ancestors of gladiatorial *munera* and whether other sources of influence remain as yet undetected. Whatever the case, gladiators first appeared at Rome in 264 BC, in a funerary context.<sup>19</sup> The fully developed, conglomerate arena spectacle was thus a

along with their fight records up to that point (see below, ch. 6, pp. 209–13, for discussion). Later, the results were noted by a different hand; see J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome* (London, 1969), 337–8.

<sup>17</sup> Livy 39.22.2 (186 BC). On the precursors to the *venatio*, see J. K. Anderson, *Hunting in the Ancient World* (Berkeley, 1985); J. Aymard, *Les chasses romaines des origines à la fin du siècle des Antonins* (Paris, 1951), 25–85; J. M. Barringer, *The Hunt in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore, 2001); K. M. Coleman, "Ptolemy Philadelphus and the Roman Amphitheater," in W. J. Slater (ed.), *Roman Theater and Society* (Ann Arbor, 1996), 49–68; M. Giebel, *Tiere in der Antike: Von Fabelwesen, Opfertieren, und treuen Begleitern* (Darmstadt, 2003), esp. 184–97.

<sup>18</sup> Plato (*Rep.* 439e–440a) locates an execution ground somewhere outside Athens on the way to the Piraeus, and the Tarpeian Rock in Rome or the hill of Calvary outside Jerusalem need no introduction. The Forum (for convicts of status), outside the Colline Gate (for lapsed Vestal Virgins), and the Campus Martius and the Esquiline hill (for commoners) are all attested as places of execution in Rome; see F. Hinard, "Spectacle des exécutions et espace urbain," in *L'urbis: espace urbain et histoire* (Paris, 1984), 111–25, esp. 113–17; and several essays in *Du bâtiment dans la cité: supplices corporels et peine de mort dans le monde antique*, CEFR 79 (Paris, 1984). Cicero describes a flogging and searing with hot plates in the marketplace of Messana (Cic. *Verr.* 2.5.162–4) and notes that crucifixions were usually staged on the Pompeian Road behind the town (ibid. 2.5.169). In the *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* vague phrases like "place of martyrdom" or "place of execution" or "the usual place" appear frequently. The martyrdom of Marian and James in the third century AD took place in a river valley near the Numidian town of Circa. The valley had high banks that functioned as a sort of natural theater; see *Pass. Mar. et Iacob.* 9–12 (= Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 206–11). Similarly, Potamiaena was martyred in some public place in Alexandria where the crowd had direct access to her persona and had to be beaten back by the soldier Basilides; see *Pass. Pot. et Basil.* 3–4 (= Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 132–3). Cyprian was beheaded before witnesses on the grounds of a private citizen's estate; see *Pass. Cypr.* 5 (= Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 174–5). Conon was killed in the streets and agora of Magydos; see *Pass. Con.* 6 (= Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 192–3). Seven female martyrs at Saloniki in Macedonia were burned alive at "a high place"; see *Pass. Agap. et al.* 7 (= Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 292–3). Irenaeus was beheaded on a bridge at Sirmium; see *Pass. Iren.* 5 (= Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 298–9).

<sup>19</sup> Livy, *Per.* 16 (264 BC). Much has been written on the origins of gladiators. For contrasting propositions, see, e.g., Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 9–51 (favors Etruria); J. Mouratidis, "On the Origin of the Gladiatorial Games," *Nikephoros* 9 (1996), 111–34 (suggests a Greek connection); Ville, *Gladiature*,

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hybrid, a synthesis of several originally distinct types of event combined into a single show, often spread over several days.<sup>20</sup> The very complexity of the games ensures that any social-psychological analysis of spectatorship there will have to be multifaceted.

#### THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Social psychology studies the mental mechanics of social interaction and the influence of situation on behavior. As such, it combines the insights of individual psychology (how a person thinks) with an appreciation of the sorts of issues that normally occupy the attention of the sociologist or cultural anthropologist (patterns of behavior). What might be termed “external” contextual concerns are united with “internal” psychological considerations in formulating explanations. The chief advantage of this approach is that it raises fundamental and important questions about Roman arena spectators: why did they watch? What were they thinking or feeling as they made their way to the arena and took their seats? In what ways did the brutal games give them pleasure? What were the attractions of the arena?

Prior explanations infer the popularity of the games by theorizing their cultural function. Therefore, their explanations are both subliminal and historically localized. These were lures not consciously experienced by the spectators. Nobody argues, for example, that Romans en route to the arena actively thought they were setting out to neutralize socially threatening forces by witnessing them staged under controlled conditions, or fulfilling a conscious need to be reminded of their martial heritage, or thinking it was about time the emperor’s power over nature was reiterated in their presence.<sup>21</sup> Appreciation of the crowd’s psychological state(s) may alert us to the more immediate attractions of the arena, to the consciously experienced feelings, emotions, and attitudes that stemmed from (and

1–56 (argues for an Oscan origin). Kyle (*Spectacles of Death*, 34–75; reiterated in his *Sport and Spectacle*, 270–3) adopts a sensible attitude toward the question of origins: blood rituals in the form of sports, combats, and sacrifices were so prevalent in Iron Age Italy that a simple linear transmission to Rome from any single source seems unlikely. Analogous agnosticism is expressed by K. E. Welch, *The Roman Amphitheatre from its Origins to the Colosseum* (Cambridge, 2007), 11–18.

<sup>20</sup> Kyle (*Spectacles of Death*, 34–127) charts this process clearly.

<sup>21</sup> Histories of collective *mentalités* posit behavior driven precisely from unconscious cultural flotsam such as this, embedded in rituals and collective memories that were not willfully recognized by those sharing in them; “[their] object is that which escapes historical individuals because it reveals the impersonal content of their thought”; see J. Le Goff, “Mentalities: A History of Ambiguities,” in J. Le Goff and P. Nora (eds.), *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology* (Cambridge, 1985), 166–80 (quote at 169).



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drove) attendance. Indeed, the mental processes charted in what follows offer a bridge between the unconsciously appreciated meanings of the games in Roman culture and the lived experience of the spectator in the stands.

For this reason, the psychological analysis adopted here does not supersede or disqualify the culture-specific approaches that have dominated arena scholarship to date. The psychological processes at the heart of this study must be understood as operating in close conjunction with the historical and cultural environment the Romans had created, even if the precise valence of this interaction cannot be charted in a linear fashion. So there is no claim here to uncover the ultimate, let alone the only explanation for the Roman attachment to spectacular violence. Rather, an appreciation of the mental processes operative among arena spectators enriches and complements the other explanatory models (though it may question or clash with some of them). It adds another tessera to our mosaic of understanding.

What follows is therefore an interdisciplinary study that draws heavily on comparative history and social psychology. As with any vibrant modern social science, propositions in social psychology undergo revision with a rapidity that, from the perspective of the humanist, is nothing short of harrowing. Work considered groundbreaking in one decade can be deemed passé in the next (though there are seminal “classics” that continue to earn the respect, even the allegiance, of current researchers). This disconcerting situation can leave the neophyte with a sense of groundlessness. It also presents a serious methodological trap. It becomes all too easy to cherry-pick from among those ideas that best fit one’s argument and ignore the rest. I have sought to avoid this pitfall by reading as widely as I could among the most up-to-date, pertinent research I could find. I have also consulted and corresponded with social psychologists, and several kindly agreed to read those chapters relevant to their own research interests.

I have noted that while psychologists often present their propositions as being in competition with other ideas, many psychological models display a greater degree of complementarity than their champions appear willing to concede. Much current work builds on prior insights rather than in opposition to them.<sup>22</sup> Some researchers, indeed, are actively working to transcend boundaries within the discipline, as they seek a more generalized understanding than that offered by focused studies of particular phenomena. As noted above, the social psychologist Stephen Reicher has

<sup>22</sup> For the example of group processes, see J. Szymanski et al., *The Growth of Social Knowledge: Theory, Simulation, and Empirical Research in Group Processes* (Westport, 2002).

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Excerpt

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called for a historical perspective within the discipline. While the vector of this book runs in the opposite direction to what Reicher has in mind – in that it explores what social psychology can tell us about a particular set of historical circumstances, rather than vice versa – it is very much consonant with his overall approach. It is therefore to be hoped that even if in ten years' time the psychological propositions outlined in what follows are viewed as fossils of bygone models, the methods employed and the historical data assembled here will be of use in the search for a deeper understanding of the issues addressed.

Unlike today's social scientists, ancient historians cannot poll or survey their subjects, bring them into laboratories and conduct experiments on them, or directly observe their behavior to deduce their frames of mind. We rely instead on the scattered and biased testimony of the extant sources, composed mostly by members of the elite and bounded by circumstances of time, geography, gender, and class. This immediately poses a problem, since our interest here is in mass behavior and motivation, and the ancient elite authors rarely reflect the masses' point of view. What little they do say is colored by their social (or religious) prejudices, so that in both pagan and Christian treatises the arena crowd is portrayed as a cruel, uneducated rabble, impressed by the flashy and the frivolous, and incapable of worthwhile pastimes.<sup>23</sup> Such attitudes were wholly typical of the Roman elite's snobbery when confronted by the *plebs* and what it considered their mindless pursuits.<sup>24</sup> That said, it is clear that the sources do not cut their portraits of arena spectators' behavior from whole cloth; rather, they are putting a negative spin on it. Members of the privileged classes attended the games themselves (indeed, they were expected to) and, in their more candid moments, even admitted to enjoying them; some were so enthralled as to participate in the spectacles as performers. Elite descriptions of spectator behavior therefore often stem from autopsy.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, we must be alert to the biases of our sources as we advance the analysis.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Sen. *Ep.* 7.2–5 = T.20; Salv. *Gub. Dei* 6.10 = T.18, Tert. *Spect.* 21.2–22 = T.29.

<sup>24</sup> See R. MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations, 50 BC – AD 284* (New Haven, 1974), esp. 138–41 (the “Lexicon of Snobbery”). On Christian depictions of the arena crowd, see below, ch. 7, pp. 254–7. Note Polycarp's contempt for the crowd at Smyrna: they were below hearing his defense; see *Pass. Polyc.* 10 (= Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 10–11).

<sup>25</sup> Aside from Augustine on Alypius, most commentators on arena crowd behavior (such as Cicero, Pliny, Seneca, Martial, or Tertullian) had clearly seen it with their own eyes. This will emerge clearly from the specific references in the analysis to follow. For elite enjoyment of the games, see, e.g., Cic. *Mur.* 39–40; Tac. *Ann.* 14.21; Dio 75.8.3. Fronto distinguishes between the rabble kept happy with the grain dole, and the whole populace with shows; his comment is explicitly class-based and assumes the attendance of the elite as spectators; see Fronto *Princ. Hist.* 17 = T.8. Some appreciation for the situation with the ancient sources may be gauged by a comparison with negative modern faculty attitudes toward intercollegiate athletics in American colleges and universities; while many