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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

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THE LURE OF THE ARENA

Why did the Romans turn out in their tens of thousands to watch brutal gladiatorial games? Previous studies have tried to explain the attraction of the arena by theorizing its cultural function in Roman society. The games have been seen as celebrations of the violence of empire or of Rome's martial heritage, or as manifestations of the emperor's power. The desire to watch has therefore been limited to the Roman context and rendered alien to modern sensibilities. Yet the historical record reveals that people living in quite different times and circumstances (including our own) have regularly come out in large numbers to watch public rituals of violence such as executions, floggings, animal-baiting, cudgeling, pugilism, and so on. Appreciating the social-psychological dynamics at work in attracting people to watch such events not only deepens our understanding of the spectator at the Roman games but also suggests something important about ourselves.

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To George and Emmet, gladiators in the making

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Preface

Large trees start as small seeds. Such is the case in this instance. The central contention of this book – that psychological matters played a key role in luring spectators to Roman arena spectacles – was presented as a twenty minute paper at the AIA/APA Joint Annual Meeting in 2001. I had intended to write it up as an article but when I found that the article had become irredeemably long, I decided it was necessary to extend the treatment to book length. Here is that book, born of the simplest question “Why did they go and watch?”

My first debt of gratitude goes to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for its generous support during a Research Fellowship at the Institut für Altertumskunde in the University of Cologne in 2003–4. The bulk of the manuscript was produced during a wonderful year there. Prof. Werner Eck was a model sponsor in Cologne – warmly welcoming and always ready to help. He also offered many useful comments about my project as it progressed. Conversations with other colleagues in Cologne and elsewhere were also very useful: Peter Eich, Rudolf Haensch, and Luke Lavan all contributed ideas and comments. As the book was nearing completion, further financial support was provided by the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Penn State. I thank the director and my colleagues there for their help and support.

Other colleagues have read parts or all of the manuscript: David Potter, Paul Friedland, Phil Baldi, Christopher Francese, C. W. Marshall, and two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press. I thank all of them for their input. Erin O’Brien kindly reviewed my notes and caught errors and inconsistencies there. Andrea Gatzke helped in checking the proofs.

Given my social-psychological approach, and the fact that I am untrained in that discipline, it was essential for me not to risk dilettantism and have the appropriate parts of the work vetted by professionals. Several very kindly answered my requests for assistance: Steve Reicher (on crowds), John Duckitt (on prejudice), and Dolf Zillmann (on the attraction of

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violence as entertainment). I thank them all for putting me straight on various social-psychological matters and advising me in other ways.

The book has been some ten years in the making, and I have presented various parts of it at professional meetings and as invited lectures at different times and places. Audience input has been uniformly useful and thoughtful on those occasions, and while I cannot remember everyone who commented or critiqued, I thank them all here for their feedback. In the end, of course, I take full responsibility for what is presented here and none of the above ought to be tarnished by the stains of errors and infelicities that remain.

Throughout the book, abbreviations for ancient sources follow those laid out in the *OCD*³, while abbreviations for modern journals follow the format of the *AJA*, available at the journal's website (www.ajaonline.org/index.php). Where an *AJA* format was not available, the abbreviations are those used in *L'Année Philologique*.