

UW Madison
Department of History
Instructor: Prof. M. Kleijwegt
Syllabus: HI 223: Roman Gladiators
Summer 2023

Nothing associated with the ancient Romans has attracted more attention from a modern audience than the figure of the gladiator. Gladiators have entertained us in movies such as *Spartacus* (1960), *Gladiator* (2000), and (not so much) in *Pompeii* (2014; labelled as a romantic historical disaster film on Wikipedia), and in TV-series (*Spartacus* on Starz; 2010-2013).



Mosaic depicting a fight between the *secutor* Astyanax (on the left) and the *retiarius* Kalendio (on the right).

Astyanax is victorious; Kalendio dies.
Museo Arqueologico Nacional, Madrid.

Apart from a media presence, gladiators are also the subject of scholarly and non-scholarly (fiction and non-fiction) books, websites (ranging from visual evidence on Pinterest to blogs), documentaries, and video clips on YouTube of performances by re-enactment companies. Although well-intentioned, not everything is historically accurate (to put it mildly) or supported with hard evidence (another sizeable portion).

In this online summer course you will learn how to establish the most convincing interpretation based on the primary sources. In addition, you will discover some interesting facts that do not receive much attention in the popular coverage of gladiators: some gladiators were married and had children, two gladiators in a training-school owned by the emperor Caligula were thought to be invincible because they never blinked, and the sweat of gladiators was used in beauty products for women, and much more.

Course Requisites: Sophomore Standing

Course Designation, and Mode of Instruction

Level – Intermediate

Breadth – Humanities

L&S Credit – counts as Liberal Arts and Science Credit in L&S

Mode – Online; asynchronous

Explanation of credit hours

This course is a three-credit course and it runs for four weeks (from Monday 19 June to Sunday 16 July). The credit standard for this course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course learning activities (at least 45 hours per credit). The total number of hours is met by studying the required readings from the textbook, the primary sources (when required) and the units for the course for each week plus work done on the four short exercises, the two long exercises and the two essays.

This is an asynchronous online course which means that a good performance in the course depends on the amount of quality time and focus that you invest in it. Material will be released on Canvas in advance, with the material for a week being placed on the website of the course. This means that you have ample time to organize your engagement with the course in advance. You do not need to engage with the course material every day, but I encourage you to adopt a study regime which allows you to master the material in a focused way. How you do this is your responsibility, but it is important to realize what kind of student you are.

A total of 135 credit hours raises the expectation that you spend about 30-40 hours on the course for each week. This is not an exact science, but I encourage you to study in manageable chunks, so that you become immersed in the material and gain a deeper understanding of what the material is about. The exercises and essays require additional time (keep in mind that the submission date is always on a Sunday). If you cannot work on them over the weekend because you have other commitments I suggest that you start working on them earlier during the week.

Communication:

Email: marc.kleijwegt@wisc.edu

It is important to realize that while you are taking this course your instructor is in Europe. There is a seven hour difference between Europe and Wisconsin (Europe is seven hours ahead). I will respond to emails promptly and will make time to answer your questions in great detail. I have scheduled 4 'office hours' on Canvas. They take place on a Sunday at 11 AM, Madison time. I realize that this may not work for everybody. If you have urgent questions that need to be addressed, do not hesitate to contact me as soon as possible by email. In any case: it is better to contact me fast and get a solution than to try to solve the problem yourself.

The final grade for this course is made up of the following components:

- There are four short exercises which you can submit at any time as long as you do so before Sunday 16 July, no later than 11:59 PM. Each exercise has 5 items. If your score is lower than 3 out of 5, regardless of how many you get correct, you get a score of 50%. If you get 3 out of the 5 items correct (or more) you automatically score 100% for each exercise. The four exercises count for 20% of your final grade. If you do not submit one or more of the exercises you lose 5% or more of your final grade to a maximum of 20%. The four exercises are: **Identify all amphitheatres; Identify all gladiators; Correct or Not; Five Questions.**
- There are two long exercises which are graded for correctness of facts, interpretation and argument. This means that your score will likely be lower than 100%, based on how many mistakes you make. The first exercise on **Spartacus** has to be submitted no later than 11:59 PM on (or before) Sunday 25 June. The second one is on **female gladiators** and it has to be submitted no later than 11:59 PM on (or before) Sunday 2 July. Your score for each exercise counts for 15% towards your final grade.

- There are two graded essays, a short essay and a long essay. The first essay is on **the funding of the Colosseum** and it needs to be submitted no later than 11:59 PM on or before Sunday 9 July. Your score for this essay counts for 20% towards your final grade. The second essay is on **the end of the gladiatorial games**. It is a long essay (10+ pages) and it needs to be submitted no later than 11:59 PM on (or before) Sunday 16 July. Your score for this long essay counts for 30% towards your final grade.

NB You will receive model answers for the two exercises on Spartacus and female gladiators and for the essay on the funding of the Colosseum. I encourage you to study these with great attention so that you can see where you can improve.

I use the following grades:

93-100: A
88-92: AB
83-87: B
78-82: BC
70-77: C
60-69: D
0-59: F

In order to get an 'A' in this course you will have to do well in the more challenging parts of the course, especially in the short and long essay. This is where you need the basic information on gladiators to tackle problems.

Learning Outcomes

Students completing this course will be able to:

- ⊗ Understand the role played by the gladiatorial games in Roman society and the background and personal circumstances of gladiators.
- ⊗ Read and interpret primary sources on the gladiatorial games.
- ⊗ Read and interpret scholarship on the gladiatorial games.

These three outcomes can be found on a fairly basic level of understanding. The true challenge of this course can be found on a somewhat elevated level of understanding. Here you are being challenged in terms of your quick thinking,

your ability to make associations (using one piece of evidence to understand another), your talent for analysis. The more time you spend on the units, the better you will be able to tackle the more challenging aspects of this course.

- ◎ Analyze, discuss, and produce an argument on a variety of problems in the history of the gladiatorial games. Examples of such problems are: what were the origins of the gladiatorial games? What motivated Roman citizens to give up their citizenship rights in order to enter the arena as gladiators? Why did women of all social classes feel attracted to gladiators, even though most of them did not qualify as handsome? What were the reasons why the gladiatorial games disappeared in the fifth century?

Mind you, these are all questions to which it is not easy to give an answer, and even when a textbook (or a website) provides an answer, that answer is not necessarily a good or the best answer. Based on the evidence for each problem, you have to develop a hypothesis and test whether it is convincing. The course will prepare you for this.

Course Materials

Fik Meijer, *The Gladiators: History's Most Deadly Sport*, New York 2005 (or any reprint published after 2005).

Alison Futrell, *The Roman Games: Historical Sources in Translation*, Malden, MA, and Oxford 2008 (the book is available online through MadCat).

Meijer's book is a narrative history of the gladiatorial games and of gladiators. It is a very accessible book, written in an easy style and not too challenging. Meijer uses primary sources, some of which are referred to in passing (without the text being provided), while others are reproduced (in translation) in full. The correct interpretation of these primary sources is essential for an understanding of the development of the games. The course notes that I place on Canvas accompany the readings from Meijer and explain in more detail what he is arguing. In many cases I also supply a long(er) version of the primary source to which he refers only briefly or I refer to the text in the book by Alison Futrell.

No book is completely free of mistakes or has a correct interpretation of all the sources and events. Whenever it is necessary to do so I will provide alternative interpretations and/or corrections of/to Meijer's arguments. This is done so as to make you aware of the fact that scholarship on the gladiatorial games and on gladiators is not a done deal. The

scholarship consists of a variety of different arguments and conclusions, and even though I cannot expose you to all of them, I can at least do so with some important ones.

For example: Meijer is much more convinced than I am that several emperors fought as gladiators in the arena before an audience (pp. 47-50). When the material on this phenomenon is discussed in the module on Canvas I will give you insight into the primary sources and show you why I draw a conclusion that is different from that of Meijer.

Futrell's book is a collection of primary sources in translation with lengthy notes and discussions as to how to interpret these sources. Her work will especially feature in week 2 and week 4.



How the learning objectives are met

The writing of history is based on an understanding of the primary sources together with an assessment of how other scholars have interpreted and understood those primary sources. Primary sources consist of inscriptions (inscribed texts to commemorate someone or to honor him or her), literary texts in prose and poetry, artifacts (kitchen utensils; swords; helmets; knives), and visual material (paintings; reliefs). The course will coach you how to interpret types of primary sources and individual examples. Modern

scholars usually do not agree with one another about how to interpret these primary sources and for this reason an event or a development may have different interpretations. The course will coach you how to deal with an issue where multiple interpretations exist.

I have divided the units into ones that supply basic information (material that is meant to inform you of how the games developed and who the gladiators were and what they did without raising any specific problems) and problems. I have clearly marked units to indicate whether they supply basic information or discuss problems. It is no surprise that units that discuss particular problems (revolving on questions such as: why did this happen?; how can this be explained?; why did the Romans look down on gladiators?) also contain basic information.

Week 1: Monday 19 June-Friday 23 June

1. The origins of the games (basic information).
2. Chariot races and plays (basic information).
3. Early gladiator fights (basic information).
4. Spartacus (basic information).
5. Gladiator games under the early emperors (basic information).

Exercise 1: Spartacus; submission date: Sunday 25 June, no later than 11:59 PM.

Week 2: Monday 26 June-Friday 30 June

1. Prestige (basic information).
2. Background (basic information; problem).
3. Training (basic information).
4. Life expectancy (basic information).
5. Love life (basic information; problem).
6. Female gladiators (basic information; problem).

Exercise 2: female gladiators; submission date: Sunday 2 July, no later than 11:59 PM.

Week 3: Wednesday 5 July-Saturday 8 July

1. Types of gladiators (basic information).
2. The scene of action (basic information).
3. The animals (basic information).

Essay 1: short essay (no more than 500 words) on the funding of the Colosseum; submission date: Monday 10 July, no later than 11:59 PM.

Week 4: Monday 10 July-Friday 14 July

1. The morning program (basic information).
2. The interval: the lunch program (basic information).
3. The afternoon program (basic information).
4. The end of the gladiatorial games (basic information; problem).

Essay 2: long essay (10 pages; between 2,750 and 3,000 words) on the end of the gladiatorial games; submission date: 16 July, no later than 11:59 PM.

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