

Jewish Opposition to the Ancient Gladiatorial Games

By: STEWART RUBIN

Introduction

In the modern world, there is (hopefully) no one who would condone human gladiatorial fights and few who would approve of animal baiting spectacles. Gladiatorial games do not take place anywhere in the world and that has been the case for over 1,500 years. Indeed, matches between animals (cockfighting, dogfighting) are illegal in almost all countries and in all 50 American states. In the ancient Pre-Christian Roman world, there was almost no known opposition to gladiatorial games on moral grounds. There has been much written about Christian opposition to the games, but the earlier Jewish dissent is less well known. This paper explores the unique Jewish opposition in light of the widespread acceptance in the Pre-Christian Roman world.¹

Description, History and Scope of Gladiatorial Games

Gladiatorial games were public entertainment featuring fights to the death, matching man against man, man against beast, and beast against beast.² The games took several forms, which included evenly matched pairs, one-sided execution-style matches involving a wild animal or seasoned gladiator vs. a defenseless captive or criminal, and “mythological re-enactments” resulting in actual killings.³ The mythological re-enactments often involved fiendish and sadistic forms of death.⁴

¹ Christians were opposed to and were often the victims of the games. They were ultimately responsible for ending the games about 100 years after Christianity was adopted as the Roman state religion. This paper, however, focuses on Jewish opposition, which manifested itself earlier than the advent of Christianity.

² Eckart Kohne and Cornelia Ewigleben, *Gladiators and Caesars*, translated by Ralph Jackson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 66–74.

³ Kohne and Ewigleben, 73.

⁴ “The Roman poet Martial describes in *de Spectaculis* VII how a criminal dressed as Laureolus was skinned alive, his entrails, muscles and limbs ripped apart by the bear, until human form was no longer recognizable. The death of Hercules

Stewart Rubin is a real estate professional. His hobbies include studying the intersection of anthropology, archaeology, history, sociology and religion.

Gladiatorial fighting took place in amphitheaters throughout Rome and its provinces. Historians Keith Hopkins and Mary Beard estimate a total of 400 arenas throughout the Roman Empire at its greatest extent, with a combined total of 8,000 deaths per annum from all causes, including combat, execution, and accidents. Their estimate is based on several factors including the number of known amphitheaters and the frequency of festivals.⁵ The number of deaths varied over the years. For example, over 10,000 combatants fought in eight special games under Augustus,⁶ in addition to uncounted regularly scheduled games.

Romans regularly organized fights to the death between hundreds of gladiators, the mass execution of unarmed insurgents, captives, or criminals and the indiscriminate slaughter of domestic and wild animals. Some Romans also employed these types of games as dinner amusement. “At private dinner-parties, rich Romans regularly presented two or three pairs of gladiators: ‘when they have finished dining and are filled with drink,’ wrote a critic in the time of Augustus, ‘they call in the gladiators. As soon as one has his throat cut, the diners applaud with delight.’”⁷

Roman Attitude towards Gladiatorial Games

As far as is known, the general attitude of Roman society to the gladiatorial games was mostly favorable and almost uniformly non-humanitarian.⁸ Acceptance and lack of moral outrage was prevalent among individuals in all strata of Roman society. The provision of gladiatorial games for the

by fire was also popular (Shelton in Harrison, 2000: 95” as quoted by Paul Monaghan, Double Dialogues, Issue Four, Winter 2003, Art and Pain Bloody Roman Narratives: Gladiators, “Fatal Charades” & Senecan Theatre).

⁵ Keith Hopkins and Mary Beard, *The Colosseum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 92–94.

⁶ Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (Deeds of the Divine Augustus), No. 22.

⁷ Keith Hopkins, “Murderous Games: Gladiatorial Contests in Ancient Rome,” *History Today*. Volume: 33, Issue: 6 1983 <http://www.historytoday.com/keith-hopkins/murderous-games-gladiatorial-contests-ancient-rome>. Probably based on Ausonius ECL. 23.33-7 = Athenaeus, 4.153f-154a, Loeb trans [quoting Nicolaus of Damascus, FGrH 90, F78 = FHG (Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum) iii.265]

⁸ Naturally there is no way to know what individuals thought of the games and presumably there were those who were opposed. However, except as detailed, there is hardly any written, oral, or archaeological record of such sentiments. There were slave gladiators themselves who were opposed as evidenced by the Spartacus revolt.

masses was a sure way for an emperor to gain and maintain popularity.⁹ With minor exceptions, Roman intellectuals had few moral reservations about the games.¹⁰ Several critics such as cynic philosopher Demonax (70 CE – 170 CE),¹¹ stoic philosopher Seneca the Younger (4 BCE – 65 CE),¹² and possibly stoic philosophers Musonius Rufus (25 CE – 101

⁹ As an example, one of the reasons the Emperor Tiberius was unpopular was his resistance to sponsoring games because he did not want to incur their costs. One of the reasons Caligula was initially popular was his generous sponsorship of the games. See Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 19, Chapter 130 and see Suet. Tib. 47.1: on Tiberius' reluctance to host gladiatorial shows.

¹⁰ Several of this class including Tacitus and Cicero are believed to have exhibited opposition. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that their reservations were not based on humanitarian or moral grounds. Cicero expressed some moral disgust, but his reservations were limited to certain classes of victims and focused on the effect it had on distinguished spectators. Pliny the Younger viewed the games in a positive light, but had reservations concerning its frivolity. Other upper-class Roman historians and intellectuals report on the gladiatorial contests but do not express any moral revulsion. This is true of Cassius Dio, Pliny the Elder, Suetonius, Juvenal, Aelius Spartianus, Ausonius, Velerius Maximus, Vegetius, and Plutarch.

¹¹ See "The Works of Lucian of Samosata" translated by HW Fowler, and FG Fowler (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1905). Lucian, *The Life of Demonax* 57. When the Athenians were thinking, in their rivalry with Corinth, of starting gladiatorial shows, he came forward and said: 'Men of Athens, before you pass this motion, do not forget to destroy the altar of Pity.'

¹² Seneca the Younger (4 BCE – 65 CE) was a stoic philosopher, statesman, and tutor to the emperor Nero. Seneca the Younger expressed criticism of the crowds at gladiatorial games; see Epist. 7.3-5, *On Crowds*, translated by Eric Varner, in G.W.M. Harrison, 2000: 126. (Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales 7.3-5). The text is as follows: "Quite by chance, I went to the noon spectacles, hoping for some light entertainment and something relaxing, where human eyes could relax from bloody slaughter. It was exactly the opposite. However, the games were fought before, there was compassion. Now, with frivolities omitted, the games are outright murder. The men have nothing protecting them. Their entire bodies being exposed to the blows, no shot misses its mark. Many prefer this to the ordinary pairings and request matches. Who wouldn't prefer it? No helmet or shield repels the sword. What need of armor or skill? All these things simply postpone death. In the morning hours men are thrown to lions and bears, at noon to the spectators. They demand that the murderers be thrown to future murderers and that they detain the victor for other slaughter. The only way out of the fights is death, and it is accomplished by fire and the sword. These things all take place even when the arena is empty. 'Some committed robbery, some killed a man.' But what of it? Since he killed a man, he is obliged to suffer his penalty, but what has made you, poor man, obliged to watch it? 'Kill him, whip him, burn him' was the cry: Why does he kill with such lack of enthusiasm? Why

CE)¹³ and Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121 CE – 180 CE)¹⁴ were amongst the few who are known to have expressed moral reservations about this form of entertainment.

Herod's Introduction of the Games in Jerusalem and the Jewish Reaction

Herod and Gladiatorial Games in Jerusalem. Herod (73 BCE – 4 BCE)¹⁵ was the Roman appointed client king of Judea and ruled from 37

does he die with such little pleasure? Let him be forced with lashes to his wounds. Let them receive mutual blows on exposed and bare chests.' When there is an intermission at the spectacles: 'Meanwhile, let men have their throats slashed so there is no lull in the action'.”

Paul Monaghan and others believe that even Seneca was not motivated by humanitarian considerations. “Shelton and others have pointed out; Seneca's negative reaction was not caused by the killing itself or by any sympathy for the victims. In the letter referenced above, the philosopher states that, in the case of convicted homicides at least, the condemned had removed themselves by their crimes from the domain of worthwhile human beings (Epistle 7.5). He was appalled specifically by the emotional involvement of the spectators in the event. In *De Ira* 1.6.1, Seneca advises that the punishment, though necessary, must be carried out in a calm and rational way. In *De Tranquillitate Animi* XV.5, Seneca advised that it is better to accept human vices calmly, ‘for you will be forever in misery if you are caught up in the suffering of others.’ The Stoic sage was to be engaged in human activities, teaching and promoting the good life, but in a dispassionate way (Monaghan, Paul, *Double Dialogues*, Issue Four, Winter 2003, *Art and Pain, Bloody Roman Narratives: Gladiators, “Fatal Charades” & Senecan Theatre*).

¹³ See J.T. Dollin, “Musonius Rufus and Education in the Good Life” (University Press of America, 2004) p. 6. Musonius Rufus attempted to persuade the Athenians to have the gladiatorial games removed from the precinct of Dionysus.

¹⁴ The only Pre-Christian Roman emperor to display apparent moral reservations about the games. Nevertheless, the emperor displayed contradictory attitude and behavior towards the games. He sponsored a large gladiatorial event involving 2,757 gladiators in 175 CE, yet two years later ended the gladiator tax, calling it morally offensive to accept money from the bloodshed. Several excerpts from his *Meditations* exhibit boredom and contempt rather than moral revulsion. Marcus Aurelius permitted condemned men for use as arena victims. He also sponsored gladiatorial games on the occasion of Hadrian's death (*Scriptores Historiae Augustae* (SHA Marcus V.1) translated by David Magie 1921 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921).

¹⁵ Herod was king of Judea (37 BCE – 4 BCE) on behalf of the Romans. He murdered three of his sons and many of his wife's relatives. He also murdered almost all of the rabbis of the Sanhedrin. He is also known for his building projects

BCE to 4 BCE. He initiated gladiatorial games in a plain near Jerusalem. As Josephus¹⁶ “records for, in the first place, he appointed solemn games to be celebrated every fifth year, in honor of Caesar, and built a theater at Jerusalem, and also a very great amphitheater in the plain. Both of them were indeed costly works, but opposite to the Jewish customs, “for we have had no such shows delivered down to us as fit to be used or exhibited by us; yet did he celebrate these games every five years, in the most solemn and splendid manner.”¹⁷

Josephus goes on to describe how Herod gathered men of every neighboring country and called men together out of every nation to compete for prizes. He then goes on to describe the games. “He had also made a great preparation of wild beasts, and of lions themselves in great abundance, and of such other beasts as were either of uncommon strength, or of such a sort as were rarely seen. These were prepared either to fight with one another, or that men who were condemned to death were to fight with them. And truly foreigners were greatly surprised and delighted at the vastness of the expenses here exhibited, and at the great dangers that were here seen; **but to natural Jews, this was no better than a dissolution of those customs for which they had so great a veneration. It appeared also no better than an instance of barefaced impiety, to throw men to wild beasts, for the affording delight to the spectators; and it appeared an instance of no less impiety, to change their own laws for such foreign exercises.**”¹⁸ It is significant to note that there was opposition and outrage expressed by Jewish common people—not just the Torah Scholars. It did not matter that many of those forced to participate were condemned criminals, the games were opposed just the same. We find no such opposition in Caesarea several years later.

Herod’s Games in Caesarea. When Herod completed the building of Caesarea, there was accordingly a great festival and Herod arranged for music and games. Josephus describes the festivities: “He had also gotten ready a great number of those that fight single combats, and of beasts for the like purpose; horse races also, and the most chargeable of such sports and shows as used to be exhibited at Rome, and in other places.” He consecrated this combat to Caesar, and ordered it to be celebrated every fifth

including the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple (Beit HaMikdash) and the building of the new port city of Caesarea Maritima.

¹⁶ Titus Flavius Josephus (37 CE – 100 CE), also called Yosef ben Matityahu, was a 1st-century Roman-Jewish historian

¹⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 15, Chap. 8, William Whiston translation.

¹⁸ Ibid.

year.” ... “Now when a great multitude was come to that city to see the shows, as well as the ambassadors whom other people sent, on account of the benefits they had received from Herod, he entertained them all in the public inns, and at public tables, and with perpetual feasts; this solemnity having in the day time the diversions of the fights, and in the night time such merry meetings as cost vast sums of money.”¹⁹

Notice the difference in attitude in Caesarea. There was no opposition mentioned about these games in the seat of the Roman occupation built by Herod about 25–13 BCE. Both the Caesarea games and the Jerusalem games were conducted during the same general time frame and the cities of Caesarea and Jerusalem are only 110 kilometers distant from each other.

Jan Van Henten maintains that Herod’s games in Jerusalem were a complete failure.²⁰ Herod was forced to move the games to Samaria and later to Caesarea since the Jews expressed opposition to them. Accordingly, the Jerusalem games were never mentioned again anywhere else and there is no archeological evidence for them. After Herod’s death, there was no one to fund the games.

Agrippa I and Games in Berytus and Caesarea. King Agrippa I (10 BCE – 44 CE) was a Roman appointed Judean monarch between 41 CE and 44 CE. Unlike his grandfather Herod, Agrippa was very sensitive to the Jewish religion and observed many of the commandments.²¹ Nevertheless, Agrippa was raised in Rome and was culturally very Roman. Agrippa spent most of his time in Jerusalem; however, he attended gladiatorial games in the two coastal cities of Berytus and Caesarea.²² This reinforces the earlier supposition that there were no longer games near Jerusalem because of Jewish opposition and/or Agrippa’s sensitivity to the Jewish religion. Manfred Lammer²³ maintains that unlike Herod, “Agrippa I held games only in pagan areas.”

¹⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 16 Chapter 5.

²⁰ Jan Van Henten, “The Panegyris in Jerusalem: Responses to Herod’s Initiative” in *Empychoi Logoi—Religious Innovations in Antiquity: Studies in honor of Pieter Willem van der Horst*, ed. Alberdina Houtman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 151–173.

²¹ Babylonian Talmud, *Pesachim* 88b and Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 41a, probably refer to King Agrippa I.

²² Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 19, Chapter 7.

²³ Manfred Lammer “The Attitude of King Agrippa towards Greek Contests and Roman Games,” *Physical Education and Sports in Jewish History and Culture*, proceedings of an international seminar at Wingate institute July 1973, ed, Uriel Simri (Netanya: Wingate institutes 1981) pp. 7–17.

Rabbinic Opposition

The Tannaim and Amoraim were opposed to all public spectacles including theatrical performances and chariot racing, but they reserved particular revulsion for gladiatorial games. The Talmud's most comprehensive treatment of gladiatorial games is in the Babylonian and Jerusalem's Tractate *Avodah Zarah*.

Attendance at Gladiatorial Games. The Talmud has several specific references to gladiatorial games. The Jerusalem Talmud forbids attendance at gladiatorial matches, and refers to one who attends a stadium as a shedder of blood.²⁴ The Jerusalem Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 1:7) seems to imply that one who attends these events is an accessory to murder because his attendance endorses the event. The Talmud states, "One who sits in a stadium is a shedder of blood." The attendee most likely did not pay admission since the Emperor or another high-ranking Roman official usually sponsored the games. Therefore, the Jerusalem Talmud appears to be referring to his mere presence at the games lending endorsement to the murderous events taking place.

In the standard printed version of the Babylonian Talmud, a *Baraisa* is presented in Tractate *Avodah Zarah* (18B)²⁵ that states, "One may not go to stadiums because of "a session of jesters" (*moshav leitzim*).²⁶ Rabbi Joel Sirkis, known as the BACH,²⁷ emends this version (*girsā*) and maintains that the *baraisa* should really be read "because they shed blood" (*mipnei shebein shofchei damim*). This is consistent with the version presented in the Jerusalem Talmud. Rabbi Raphael Nathan Rabinovitch (1835–1888) in *Dikdukei Sofrim*,²⁸ utilizing the Munich manuscript, maintains that the correct version is that it is forbidden (to attend) "because of the spilling of blood." His interpretation of the correct version is consistent with the aforementioned BACH and the Jerusalem Talmud.

²⁴ Jerusalem Talmud, *Avodah Zarah*, 1 Halacha 7.

²⁵ Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 18b.

²⁶ Psalms 1.1. In fact, an earlier reference prohibits attendance even if there is no bloodshed (i.e., an acting show).

²⁷ *Bayit Chadash* was his work and BACH is its Hebrew acronym. He was a prominent Jewish halachik decisor who lived in Central Europe and held several rabbinical positions from 1561–1640.

²⁸ Rabbi Rabinovitch researched the correct version of the Talmud based on the 14th-century manuscript of the entire Talmud found in Munich. He did this in the 1870s and 1880s. The quote is from *Dikdukei Sofrim*, *Avodah Zarah* Daf 18 *Higbos Divrei Sofrim*, note 7. Can be found at Hebrewbooks.org/38522 or page 46 of the version published in 1909.

There is another opinion cited in both the Babylonian Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 18B) and the Jerusalem Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 1:7) by Rabbi Nathan²⁹ who permits attending gladiatorial games for humanitarian reasons. His first reason is because the spectator may shout and rescue. “To go to stadiums is permitted because one can shout and rescue (a gladiator or slave or Jewish captive).”³⁰ So that when the victorious gladiator has his sword on the neck of his victim and is looking to the emperor or other high-ranking Roman official for a “thumbs up or down,” and he is in turn listening to the crowd’s desires, the Jewish spectator can influence the outcome. The Jewish spectator can cheer for life, influence the emperor, and save a life.³¹ The second reason for attendance detailed by Rabbi Nathan is that “if he recognizes the victim, he can testify that he has died so that the victim’s wife can marry again”³² and she will not be an *agunah*.³³

In addition to forbidding attendance, the Rabbis expounded on several biblical verses in condemnation of gladiatorial games. Rabbi Shimon Ben Pazi expounds on the first verse in Psalms, “Happy is the man who has not walked in the counsel of the wicked nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in seat in the seat of the scornful,” as follows: “Happy is the man who has not walked in the counsel of the wicked,” this refers to the theaters and circuses of the idol worshippers; “nor stood in the way of sinners,” this refers to one who has not stood as an observer at bestial contests; “nor sat in the seat of the scornful,” this refers to one who has not sat in bad company of people who engage in scoffing and jeering (BT *Avodah Zarah* 18B, Koren Translation). On this same verse Rabbi Meir expounded as follows: “What is the meaning of the statement “sat in the seat of the scornful” (“*uvimoshav leitzim lo yashav*”)? This refers to the theaters and circuses of the idol worshippers, in which people are sentenced to death (*Avoth DiRav Noson*).

In the Jerusalem Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 1:7) we learn that “One cannot sell them bears or lions” (for use in amphitheatres/stadiums).³⁴ The

²⁹ He was a Tanna (Rabbi from the Mishna) who lived in the second century CE.

³⁰ Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 18b.

³¹ Attendees usually decided whether or not a losing gladiator should live or die. Eckart Kohne and Cornelia Ewigleben tr. Ralph Jackson (2000). *Gladiators and Caesars* (University of California Press, Berkeley) p. 68.

³² Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 18b.

³³ The term refers to the wife of a missing man whose death cannot be established and therefore cannot remarry. She is “*agun*” or chained to her missing husband.

³⁴ Rabbi Moshe Margolus, *Pnei Moshe* commentary on Jerusalem Talmud (Zitomer Edition, 1864).

same Talmudic source also states that one “cannot build a stadium for them.” This is repeated in the Babylonian Talmud,³⁵ which states that “one cannot build a stadium with them” (them being idol worshipers, i.e., Roman idol worshipers): One cannot be a contractor, laborer, investor, etc. working on building a stadium because it is considered putting a stumbling block before a blind person.³⁶ The biblical commandment against putting a stumbling block in front of a blind person is interpreted by the Talmud to mean directly or indirectly causing another to sin. This means that by assisting in the construction of the amphitheater/stadium one is indirectly causing others to sin (i.e., he enables murder).

Concerning the verse “and you shall not walk in their ways” (Leviticus 18:3) the Sifra states this refers to theaters, circuses and stadiums. Rabbi Meir added that “it is considered *the ways of the Amorites*.”³⁷

The Targum Yonatan interprets the verse “cursed are you when you enter and cursed are you when you go out” (Deuteronomy 28:19) as “cursed are you when you enter your theaters and circuses against the law” (Targum, Deuteronomy 28:19).

The Talmud (BT *Bava Kamma* 41a)³⁸ states that a stadium ox, an ox that is trained to kill for gladiatorial contests in the stadium/amphitheater, has special rules. Normally an ox that gores and kills a human is killed and cannot be used for a sacrifice in the holy temple in Jerusalem. However, a stadium ox is not killed if it gores and kills a human and can be brought for a sacrifice in the temple.³⁹ The reason given is that in Exodus 21:28 it states “an ox that gores,” not an ox that was trained to gore. The implication is that a stadium ox is not responsible for the evil for which humans trained it.

Summary of Rabbinic Sources. The Talmud forbids attendance at gladiatorial games and refers to one who attends a stadium as a shedder of blood. It forbids participating in the building of a stadium or selling bears or lions for use in amphitheaters. Tannaim and Amoraim based their opposition to the games on moral and religious grounds including idolatry,

³⁵ Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 16a.

³⁶ Leviticus 19:14.

³⁷ Sifra Leviticus 18:3.

³⁸ Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Kamma* 41a.

³⁹ There is a dispute in the Talmud concerning the second point. Rav maintains that it can be brought for a sacrifice in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and Shmuel maintains that it cannot; although it was forced into the situation, a sin was nonetheless done with it. Rambam in *Avoda, Hilchos Isurei Mizbeach*, Chapter 4, Halacha 3, rules with the opinion of Rav that it may be brought for a sacrifice. Likewise SMaG, Negative Commandments No. 316.

bloodshed, and lewdness. Even when all these factors were not present, the rabbis frowned upon the activity because it was considered a waste of time that could be used for Torah study.

Did the Jews Heed the Admonitions of the Rabbis? With the exception of Rabbi Nathan's view, the Talmud forbids attendance. Did Jews, however, actually attend the games? Nowhere do Talmudic sources state explicitly that Jews were spectators at the games. As a practical matter, most Jews in Eretz Yisroel lived in rural areas and accordingly did not frequent major urban areas in which the games occurred.

Archaeological Evidence

There were three kinds of public entertainment venues: theaters, circuses (hippodromes) and amphitheaters (stadiums). Theaters were used for various performances including plays, mimes, and comedy. Hippodromes were used for chariot races, and amphitheaters (also referred to as stadiums in rabbinic parlance) primarily for gladiatorial events. All three types of entertainment faced rabbinic opposition for a variety of reasons. However, the subject and focus of this report are gladiatorial combat events that took place primarily in amphitheaters and also in repurposed hippodromes and sometimes repurposed theaters. In rabbinic parlance, the terms stadium and circus were used to refer to venues in which gladiatorial games occurred.

Most of the buildings for mass entertainment were built in the Roman cities of Eretz Yisroel. To date not a single amphitheater⁴⁰ has been discovered in Jewish Galilee. No inscriptions were found referencing Jewish attendance in amphitheaters.

Three amphitheaters were found in western Eretz Yisroel and one in Transjordan.⁴¹ The oldest was in Caesarea Maritima and the others were built later in Eleutheropolis and Legio. Caesarea Maritima was the seat of the Roman occupation and government, while the latter two were centers of the Roman military occupation and housed several legions. The fourth was in Botzra in Transjordan. There were several circuses or hippodromes converted for amphitheater-like performances. These venues were found

⁴⁰ As opposed to theaters that *were* found, including at Sephoris and Tiberias. The 7,000-person Tiberian facility is sometimes called an amphitheater because of its size; however, its shape indicates it was used more as a theater. This facility was built in the first-century CE by Herod Antipas, the son of Herod.

⁴¹ Zeev Weiss, *Public Spectacles in Roman and late Antique Palestine* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014) p. 109.

in Scythopolis (Beit Shean), Neapolis (Samaria, in the third or fourth century), Gerasa (early fourth century), Gedara (in the Decapolis, early fourth century), and the hippodrome in Caesarea was converted to be used as a second amphitheater at times. All of the aforementioned locations were colonized by Rome or previously by the Seleucid kingdom. The sparse number of amphitheaters in Eretz Yisroel is in contrast to the proliferation of such facilities in cities in Asia minor.

The absence of amphitheaters outside of Caesarea in the first century indicates that Jews rejected the brutal events that took place in them. Only after the Bar Kochba revolt failed and the Roman population increased did amphitheater/stadium, circus/hippodrome, and theater building become substantial. After 135 CE, there was a permanent settlement of two Roman legions. Many Roman officials and veterans relocated to Eretz Yisroel. Land confiscations that resulted in the transfer of Jewish land to Romans helped fuel the growing Roman presence. The depopulation of Jewish Eretz Yisroel was initiated by Hadrian and accelerated over subsequent years. The Judean depopulation is quantified by Michael Avi-Yonah who estimated that there were 1.5 million Jews in Eretz Yisroel at the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt and about 800,000 after the revolt, and by 614 CE the Jewish population had shrunk to 250,000.⁴² Even after this time period, the number of theaters was much greater than amphitheaters or hippodromes, perhaps reflecting the indigenous population's partial acceptance of the former (despite rabbinical opposition) and rejection of the latter.

Most of the buildings for mass entertainment were constructed in the Roman cities of Eretz Yisroel and primarily after the suppression of the great revolts. Theaters were found in Sepphoris and Tiberius—not amphitheaters—so even Jews who did not adhere to rabbinic admonishments regarding theaters were apparently still repulsed by gladiatorial matches as evidenced by their absence from Jewish majority cities. Amphitheatrical shows (gladiatorial and animal baiting events) were the least common form of Roman entertainment in Eretz Yisroel.⁴³ Attendance at gladiatorial games was rare amongst the Jews of Judea and the Galilee. The majority of Jews found the games to be repulsive due to bloodshed, idolatry, and lewdness.

⁴² Michael Avi-Yonah, "The Holy Land from the Persian to the Arab conquest – A Historical Geography" (Grand Rapids: Bake Book House, 1966) p. 109, based on the number of villages and the work of Cassius Dio.

⁴³ Zeev Weiss, "Public Spectacles in Roman and Late Antique Palestine" (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

Outside Eretz Yisroel. In the Greek-speaking western Jewish diaspora, there was more acceptance of Roman public spectacles. Rabbinic influence in this area was minimal.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, we find certain traces of the same reluctance. For example, Philo watched theater performance, chariot races, and athletic competitions, but there is no mention of attendance at gladiatorial events. There is evidence that there were Jews who had reserved seats in the theater in Miletus, the Odeon in Aphrodisias, and the Hippodrome in Tyre. Philo mentions that Jews did not go to the theater on Sabbath—implying that they may have gone on the other days of the week—but makes no reference to gladiatorial games.

According to Margaret H. Williams,⁴⁵ “evidence for the involvement of real, as opposed to fictional, Jews in Roman culture and religious life is severely limited.”⁴⁶ She goes on to note several pieces of evidence (of participation), which she considers meager. These include references to a Jewish actor (Josephus, *Vita*, 16), and an inscription referring to a Jewish pantomime (Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum 14 supp no. 4624 = D.Noy I, *Jewish Inscriptions of western Europe*, Cambridge, 1993, no. 15 – Ostia:3rd-Century CE). She also references Jewish involvement in Greek entertainment⁴⁷ with examples of Jews attending chariot races in the hippodrome in Alexandria (Philo, *De providenta* 2.58), inscriptions of reserved seating for Jews at theaters, Jews attending theater events (Philo, on drunkenness 177), and Jews being fans of the blue chariot racing faction. There is no reference to Jews attending gladiatorial events. Lack of evidence is obviously not proof of non-attendance; however, it may imply that Jewish attendance was not common.

According to Samuel Krauss, author of “Persia and Rome in the Talmud and Midrashim.” The Jews, following the rabbis, viewed these games as idolatry and stayed away from them. Salo Baron and Gideon Talpaz

⁴⁴ Arye Edrei and Doron Mendels, “A Split Jewish Diaspora: Its Dramatic Consequences,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 16.2 (2007), 91–137 [Sage Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA, and New Delhi)].

⁴⁵ Research associate in Classical Studies at the Open University, England and honorary fellow at the University of Edinburgh.

⁴⁶ Margaret H. Williams, “The Jews among the Greeks & Romans, A Diaspora Sourcebook” (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) p. 148.

⁴⁷ Williams, 114.

maintain that Jews in Eretz Yisroel did not attend public spectacles, but that those residing outside the land did.⁴⁸

Jews as Victims of Gladiatorial Games and the Ludi

Almost all Jews who made their way to the arena did so as victims⁴⁹ forced to participate before certain death. Jews were the fatalities in the murderous games held in Caesarea in the aftermath of the crushed Jewish revolts of 66–70 and 132–135, and in Cyrene in the aftermath of the Jewish revolt in the time of Trajan 116–117 CE.⁵⁰

There were Jews, however, who sold themselves as gladiators during the time of economic crisis in mid-third century. Gladiatorial graffiti were found on a Jewish tomb in Beit Shearim.⁵¹ Within a discussion regarding the biblical obligation to redeem slaves and captives, is a reference to buying the freedom of those who sell themselves to Ludi.⁵² Rashi defines Ludi as those who eat people, or cannibals. Ludi is also a Latin term for public games, and Ludarii is a Latin term for gladiators. Accordingly, there are those⁵³ who offer the possibility that “Ludi” in the Talmud refers to gladiators.⁵⁴ According to this view, the Talmud is mandating the redemption

⁴⁸ Salo Baron, “Social and Religious History of the Jews,” Volume 2: *Ancient Times to the Beginning of the Christian Era: The First Five Centuries Second Edition*, and Gideon Talpaz, “The Theater in Talmudic Literature” *Bamah* 9-10 (1961) 17–26 (Hebrew).

⁴⁹ See Josephus. *The Jewish War*, 6.4-18 and 7.37–40 concerning the aftermath of the First Revolt.

⁵⁰ Cassius Dio, “Historia Romana” 68.32.

⁵¹ Benjamin Mazar, “Beth Shearim report on the excavations during 1936–1940 catacombs 1–4.”


⁵² Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin* 46b and 47a .

⁵³ I.e., Rabbi Adin Even-Israel, Koren, *Bavli, Shabbos* 10a and *Pesachim* 12b.

⁵⁴ This may be supported by the references in the Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbos* 10a and *Pesachim* 12b, which refer to Ludim being ones who eat earlier than anyone else (during the first hour). If referring to gladiators it would be because they don’t know how long they will live and want to take advantage of eating at the earliest opportunity. This is also supported by *Tosephta, Beitzab* at the end of chapter 1, which refers to a kind of a bean, which is considered the food of ludim. “Consuming a lot of simple carbohydrates, such as barley, and legumes, like beans, was designed for survival in the arena.” (See Andrew Curry, “The Gladiator Diet,” *Archaeology*, November/December 2008, Vol. 61, Number 6.) *Gittin* 47 contains a story of Resh Lakish (before he studied Torah and returned to religious observance, according to *Tosaphot*) selling himself to the Ludim. The Ludim would grant any request to the captive before he was killed. Resh Lakish who had earlier put rocks in sacks asked that he be able to tie them up and hit them with (empty) sacks. They agreed and then he hit them with the rock-filled

of slave gladiators who repeatedly sold themselves.⁵⁵ Although ordinarily one who repeatedly sells himself is not redeemed, in this case when their life is in danger, they are redeemed. In a case where a Jew sells himself to a gladiator school—Rabbi Abahu redeemed him (JT *Gittin* 4:9).

Conclusion

With rare exceptions, gladiatorial games were condoned and enjoyed within the echelons of Roman society. Amongst Roman intellectuals there were few who criticized the games on moral grounds. This contrasts with the noteworthy Jewish dissent in the Pre-Christian ancient Roman world.⁵⁶ Torah scholars were not afraid to call the games murder and in fact considered attendance to render one an accessory to the crime.⁵⁷ They prohibited Jews from any ancillary association including participating in any way in the construction of amphitheaters/stadiums or selling bears or lions for that purpose. They mandated that gladiators be saved from the games by being bought out of slavery even if they repeatedly sold themselves. Consideration is shown for the humans victimized at the games as well as for animals, i.e. stadium oxen. Of particular note is the revulsion towards the games, and even to the execution of criminals in this fashion, amongst the general population of Jews in Jerusalem. According to Thomas Wiedemann, *Reader in the History of the Roman Empire* at Bristol University, Bristol, UK: “Instances of objections to gladiatorial combat on the grounds found in Josephus, that it is shocking that men should suffer at Rome to give pleasure to others, are few in the extreme.”⁵⁸ 

sacks and killed them and was able to leave. In my view this story resonates best if interpreted as a gladiatorial match. Even Rashi’s comment referring to Ludim as those who eat people can be interpreted not as those who are using slaves for work but rather those who “eat them,” i.e., consume them as a form of entertainment. Resh Lakish eventually became religiously observant and ultimately a great Torah scholar (Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Metz’ia* 84a).

⁵⁵ Free men also volunteered to be gladiators (*auctorati*) and, by the end of the Republic, comprised half the number who fought. They signed on for a fee and swore a fearful oath of absolute submission to the *lanista* to be burned, flogged, beaten, or killed if so ordered (Petronius, *Satyricon*, CXVII; Seneca, *Moral Epistles*, XXXVII.1).

⁵⁶ Early Christian religious leaders such as Tertullian also warned Christians not to attend the games (“The Shows, or De Spectaculis, Tertullian,” Translated by the Rev. S. Thelwall, http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-09.htm#P890_350630).

⁵⁷ Except for the humanitarian purposes detailed by Rabbi Nathan.

⁵⁸ Thomas Wiedemann, “Emperors and Gladiators,” 150 (Abington, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), referring to Jewish opposition noted in Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 15.8.