



Gladiators and Caesars: The Power of Spectacle in Ancient Rome

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Bread and circuses were what the Romans demanded of their emperors, and for more than 500 years spectacular events in amphitheaters, circuses, and theaters were the most important leisure activities of the masses in all parts of the Roman empire. In Rome itself, public holidays featuring magnificent and costly shows occupied more than half the year. Comedies and tragedies, pantomimes and bawdy folk plays were staged in the theaters, while in the arena of the Colosseum, opened in a.d. 80, gladiators fought in pairs or with wild animals to satisfy the blood lust of the crowd, and hundreds of thousands of race-goers packed the stands of the Circus Maximus to enjoy the thrills of chariot racing.

The organization of games came to be part and parcel of electioneering in towns and cities and was increasingly used as a means to consolidate the power of the reigning emperor. Like the sports stars of today, the top gladiators, charioteers, and actors were folk heroes, and the power of their universal appeal was recognized and exploited by politicians and emperors alike.

Two thousand years later, the Roman games may seem remote, but, as this superbly illustrated book shows, they satisfied the same need for excitement and hero-worship that gives rise to the intense media coverage of sports in our own time.

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