

## BREAD AND CIRCUSES THE ROMAN WELFARE SYSTEM

Beginning with Augustus Caesar, the city of Rome provided bread, oil and wine to its urban population. What this meant, is that almost 250,000 inhabitants of Rome consumed about 6 million sacks of grain per year, free. Rome provided citizens with food -- it also provided them with entertainment. Of the poor, the poet Juvenal could write:

*with no vote to sell, their motto is "couldn't care less," there was a time when the plebeians elected generals, heads of state, commanders of legions: but now they've pulled in their horns, there's only two things that concern them: BREAD and CIRCUSES.*

For instance, at the *Venatio*, animals were led into an amphitheater where heavily armed men fought and killed them. This was a popular pastime which was provided to the urban poor and aristocracy by the benevolence of the emperor. These events were held in a structure called the Circus Maximus which was built during the second century B.C.E. between the Capitoline and Aventine Hills in Rome. After being destroyed by fire, it was reconstructed in C.E. 200 and had a capacity for 250,000 spectators. Races were held there until 549C.E..

The Romans were fascinated with wild animals -- they like looking at them, seeing them perform tricks, or watching them being hunted and killed. Wolves, bears, bores, deer, and goats were indigenous to Rome and other animals were brought to Rome by imperial conquest. Elephants, ostriches, leopards and lions were imported in the first century B.C.E., followed by hippopotamus, rhinoceros, camels and giraffes. There were no zoos in Rome and most animals were privately owned as status symbols. Monkeys were dressed as soldiers and rode atop goats harnessed to a small chariot. The elephant was the most popular show animal and was initially used to transport wealthy men and women to dinner. However, animals were not only used for show but for what we can only call blood sports. Artificial lakes were often created and ships conducted a mock battle (called the *Naumachia*). These "sea" battles were often recreations of past victories.

During the reign of Augustus Caesar, 3500 animals died during the days devoted to twenty-six festivals. 9000 were killed at the games celebrating the completion of the Coliseum in C.E. 80. Finally, 11,000 were killed at the celebration of a military victory in C.E. 107, a celebration lasting 123 days.

There were three kinds of blood sports: armed men fighting animals, animals fighting animals, or armed men and women exposed to starving vicious beasts, the latter usually reserved for criminals. The victim was tied to a stake, wheeled out into the arena, and exposed to a starving lion. The Romans also engaged in public hunting in which animals were simply killed in front of an audience. Before any sort of public display the animals were usually starved and perhaps beaten with a whip. The Romans also had public events called the *Ludi*, or the Games of Rome. By the 4th century C.E., nearly 177 days per year were devoted to the Games, held at the circus.

Gladiatorial contests were originally an Etruscan practice and so date back to the days before the Roman Republic was founded. For the Etruscans, armed combat between individuals was connected to religious practice. Men fought to the death beside the tomb of their chief in order to strengthen their spirits as well as the spirits of others. The first Roman practice of these contests took place in 264 B.C.E. By the reign of Augustus Caesar, however, the gladiatorial contests were made public and although gladiatorial contests were a source of entertainment for everyone, there were those like Seneca who thought differently. The gladiators were usually criminals, slaves or prisoners of war. The Romans, as is well-known, forced the gladiators to attend combat schools where they would learn the necessary skills of killing. At these schools, there were three groups of gladiators, based on defense: those who were heavily armed and wore helmets; those who carried a light shield and sword; and those who carried a net, trident and dagger.

The chariot races were the passion of all social classes and bound wealthy and poor together. There were keen rivalries between teams -- Reds, Whites, Blues and Greens. Each team had its own faction who would find the best horses and riders. Carried out in the Hippodrome, there were 12 starting boxes, six on either side of the gate above which sat the starter. The drivers cast lots for their starting position. The races were usually seven laps in length, counted by the lowering of an egg or figure of a dolphin, and lasted about 20 minutes. Each race was run for a sum of money and prizes

## DID THE BREAD AND CIRCUSES CONTRIBUTE TO ROME'S GREATNESS?

were given for second, third, and fourth place. When two or three chariots from one faction raced, they did so as a team and not individually. There is evidence, as in all sports, of cheating, bribery, throwing an event, and even the doping of horses. The chariot races occupied an entire day of festivities, and there were usually about 24 races. The Romans were not that much fascinated with the skill of either driver or horse, but rather, which color crossed the finish line first. In other words, allegiance was to color and not to skill. Obviously, the major attraction of the races was to place bets and people bet both at the course and off. In fact, the Romans are known for betting on the outcome of just about anything.

.....

### ***“The Reign of Domitian” by Suetonius***

He constantly gave grand costly entertainments, both in the amphitheatre and in the Circus, where in addition to the usual races between two-horse and four-horse chariots, he also exhibited two battles, one between forces of infantry and the other by horsemen; and he even gave a naval battle in the amphitheatre. Besides he gave hunts of wild beasts, gladiatorial shows at night by the light of torches, and not only combats between men but between women as well. He often gave sea-fights almost with regular fleets, having dug a pool near the Tiber and surrounded it with seats; and he continued to witness the contests amid heavy rains.

He made a present to the people of three hundred shows each on three occasions, and in the course of one of his shows in celebration of the feast of the Seven Hills gave a plentiful banquet, distributing large baskets of food to the senate and knights, and smaller one to the commons; and he himself was the first to begin to eat. On the following day he scattered gifts of all sorts of things to be scrambled for.

He made many innovations also in common customs. He did away with the distribution of food to the people and revived that of formal dinners.

From the earliest times the supply of corn was considered one of the duties of the government. Not only was it expected that the government should take care that the corn-market was properly supplied, but likewise that in all seasons of scarcity, they should purchase corn in the surrounding countries, and sell it to the people at a moderate price. This price could not rise much, without exciting formidable discontent; and the administration was in all such cases considered to have neglected one of its most important duties. The superintendence of the corn-market belonged in ordinary times to the aediles, but when great scarcity prevailed, an extraordinary officer was appointed for the purpose under the title of Praefectus Annonae. In addition to this, an indigent population gradually increased at Rome, which could not even purchase corn at the moderate price at which it was usually sold, and who demanded to be fed at the expense of the state. Even in early times it had been usual for the state on certain occasions, and for wealthy individuals who wished to obtain popularity and influence, to make occasional donations of corn to the people. But such donations were only casual; and it was not till the year B.C. 123, that the first legal provision was made for supplying the poor of Rome with corn at a price much below its market value.

