

We Are Not Far from Romans

Anastasija Cumika

HST 110-02

Jeff Hoerl

3 March 2017

The book that was chosen for analysis is *The Gladiators: History's Most Deadly Sport*. The book was written by a Dutch historian and author Fik Meijer who was born on 12 August, 1942 in Germany. Meijer got his education at Leiden University where he studied classics and ancient history and graduated in 1973. Meijer was a professor of ancient history at the University of Amsterdam from 1992 to 2007 and now he is an emeritus professor there. *The Gladiators: History's Most Deadly Sport* was first published in 2007 and it is the most popular of Meijer's books. This book was translated to no fewer than ten languages. The book itself consists of an introduction, epilogue, nine chapters and reference pages. In the introduction of the book, the author explains the reason why he decided to write this book: people were looking at the gladiator games from the wrong perspective and nobody did a real deep research on what was going on there.¹ Also in the introduction Meijer says that other historians see gladiator fights as something terrible, irrational, bloody, and scandalous but it's their personal disapproval. Meijer thinks that these historians put emotions over rationalism, but we should judge Romans from their perspective, not our social norms. Even nowadays violence is everywhere, just in different forms – films, computer games and contact sports.² Meijer decided to do all the research to support his main argument. The main goal for the author is to show the reader that we are much closer to the gladiator games than we think we are.³ To reach his goal Meijer goes in depth and shows the reality of the Gladiator games.

The Introduction and epilogue are the only places in the book where the author actually talks about his argument. The rest of the content, which is about 95% of the book, is the research that supports the argument. The author starts with the question: "How the Gladiator Games Evolved".⁴ Already in the introduction Meijer says that many historians

¹ Fik Meijer, *The Gladiators: History's Most Deadly Sport* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 2.

² Meijer, *The Gladiators*, 9.

³ Meijer, *The Gladiators*, 12.

⁴ Meijer, *The Gladiators* 13.

failed to answer this question. Through his research and using primary sources, Meijer proves that “the earliest Roman gladiator fights were part of elaborate funeral rites for important people.”⁵ Meijer also suggests that “gladiators were meant to illustrate the virtues that had made Rome great.”⁶ Rome was always super proud of their power, so that is why eventually gladiator games became more popular as games, not just funeral rites. In this chapter, the author also introduces the reader to the chariot races, as well as plays, as an early entertainment for Romans before gladiator games. He then takes the reader down the path of how fights became so popular.

The next chapter is simply called “The Gladiators”, where Meijer talks about their prestige, background, training, life expectancy, love life and different types of gladiators. From this chapter the readers get a very good representation about how gladiators lived. On one side gladiator life was terrible as they had to risk their lives just to entertain the public, but on the other side they had prestige and a chance to win good money. Also, gladiators were popular among women because of their masculinity, bravery, sexuality and strength.⁷ All gladiators lived in the gladiator schools where they were trained for their fights. Training was hard but gladiators always had good nutrition and treatment, this was worth noticing because it was hard to get good food for Romans in those days.⁸ Mostly gladiators were prisoners but later some people volunteered to be a gladiator. Because of their prestige and chance to earn money volunteers were ready to risk their lives. The author mentioned female gladiators as well but they were not as popular as males. Another part of this chapter shows how expensive the gladiator games were, which is ridiculous because of how much money Rome would spend for the entertainment while people did not have enough food to eat.

⁵ Meijer, *The Gladiators* 16.

⁶ Meijer, *The Gladiators* 18.

⁷ Meijer, *The Gladiators* 70.

⁸ Meijer, *The Gladiators* 56.

While gladiators are the main figures of the games, there is also the main scene of action and this is what the next chapter is about. In the beginning, the games were held in open forums or amphitheaters. However, later Emperor Vespasian ordered a special amphitheater which is known as the Colosseum.⁹ This was a huge building which was very functional and well-structured. Meijer brings the reader behind the scenes to show how the futures of the Colosseum were being used. For example, under the arena there were passageways where animals were waiting and they were being lifted by the special lifts when it was their time to perform.¹⁰ The seats (galleries) were also structured in the way so everyone would have a good view and could find their seat quickly.¹¹ In the next chapter Meijer throws in a quick overview of what kinds of animals were performing on the stage and how they came there. Most of the animals were brought from conquered lands, representing the power of the Rome over these lands, for example, leopards, hippopotamus, crocodiles and others.¹²

At this point the reader has a good representation of who performed and at what locations, but Meijer's next chapter "A day at the Colosseum" puts everything together. Meijer brings the reader throughout the whole day and all the events at the Colosseum. The author starts with the description of the city prior to the games – a lot of posters and people trying to get their tickets. The standard program was: "In the morning there were animal fights, immediately followed by the wild animal hunts. Criminals and absconding slaves were executed at lunchtime, sometimes with light-hearted interludes, such as comic turns and competitive athletics. The main feature was saved for the afternoon: the gladiator fights."¹³

⁹ Meijer, *The Gladiators*, 99.

¹⁰ Meijer, *The Gladiators*, 102.

¹¹ Meijer, *The Gladiators*, 105.

¹² Meijer, *The Gladiators*, 121.

¹³ Meijer, *The Gladiators*, 136.

In the last four chapters the author provides some additional information that the regular reader would never think of. For example, there were held sea battles as part of the entertainment for Romans. The battles were held on the lakes, or some emperors even filled up the Colosseum with water.¹⁴ Another interesting fact was what happened with all the dead meat after the battles. Most of the gladiators were buried while some of the executed prisoners were disposed together with dead animals.¹⁵ The rest of the animal meat that was good to eat was distributed among the people.¹⁶ Many people would be interested why the gladiator games stopped even if they were so popular. Meijer has this kind of discussion in his chapter “The End of the Gladiator Shows” where one of the main reasons is Christianity becoming the main religion of Rome. Such violence is not in the norms of Christianity so the gladiator games declined and eventually stopped. Still, the gladiator games were one of the most exiting ways of entertaining the public. Gladiators games are even popular nowadays and making films on the gladiators is a very profitable idea. Meijer analyzed two major films on the gladiators in his last chapter – *Spartacus* and *Gladiator*. The author finds those films not historically accurate, for example, in terms of different types of the gladiators and what they looked like.¹⁷ On the other hand, Meijer finds those films a good representative of the gladiators for the regular public, even though the dramatic story is way more important there than the history behind the gladiators. These films are important support for the author’s argument because they are super popular nowadays with all the violence in it, which shows that we are still supportive of the violence as well.

The gladiator games were not only the entertainment for Romans, they were also the representation of power. Throughout the whole book there was a lot of references on how the games represented the power of Rome. For the emperors, that was a chance to show how

¹⁴ Meijer, *The Gladiators*, 178.

¹⁵ Meijer, *The Gladiators*, 185.

¹⁶ Meijer, *The Gladiators*, 191.

¹⁷ Meijer, *The Gladiators*, 224-229.

much power they had above everyone. That is why they did not bother with putting so much money in the games because by showing their power they kept people under control. It is more important to keep people in control than feed them and lose control. For the regular citizens that was an illusion that they had some power over lower class people by voting if they wanted to kill the gladiator that lost. In the epilogue, the author gives a good wrap up for the whole book saying that Rome was soaked in violence because of enormous wars. Romans needed violence for themselves because this was their lifestyle. Meijer concludes with a very accurate statement: “the arena became an extension of the battlefield.”¹⁸

Along with a great content this book has many other advantages. The structure of the book is very well made. Every chapter is dedicated to a specific topic, so it is clear what the author is talking about. Because of the good structure, along with the well-written text, the book is easy to read for the regular reader. The only complexity is that the author uses a lot of names and terms that are not familiar for the regular reader. However, Meijer adds a chronology, glossary and list of amphitheaters, so it would be easier for the reader to follow. Because of the well done and in-depth research this book may be helpful to the more advanced reader such as different historians.

Another great advantage of the book is the use of the primary and secondary sources of different types. The author refers to the many different works about the gladiators to support his research and does a very good job with citations. One of the most often used of the primary sources are the citations of the Roman poets like Martial, Statius and Juvenal. The author always places these citations in the right spot, so they are a good support for his research. The pictures make the book even more interesting because seeing depictions is always better than describing it. Most of the pictures are different paintings or photos of the sculptures and mosaics depicting different kind of gladiators' actions. The book is mostly a

¹⁸ Meijer, *The Gladiators*, 233-234.

research for the support of the main argument, so the use of the different sources is sufficient there. The only weakness might be how pictures and reference to them in the text was often on the different pages, but that is more a printing issue, not the author's.

Meijer did awesome research on the gladiator games and it is very well written, but at some point, it may seem that he goes away from his main argument and just analyzes.

Actually, the author represents the reality of the gladiator games for the reader. The author shows the games as not disgusting and violent even but throughout the analysis the reader gets the impression of the power and even some respect for these incredible games. Before reading this book, the reader may have thought of the games as just fighting with a lot of death and blood, but the book changes that impression. After reading this book, the reader may acknowledge that the gladiator games were the smart idea to represent the Roman power to everyone.

To strengthen the review of the book, the primary and secondary source on the same topic were analyzed as well. The primary source that was chosen was the Martial Epigrams. Martial is the Roman poet who lived in the 1st century. Meijer used a lot of Martial's epigrams in his book, because Martial's epigrams are a great primary source. In his epigrams, Martial tells what was happening at these games, so through studying his epigrams alone the reader can get a very clear representation of the Roman life and the gladiator games. For example, Martial described what happened during the program at the Colosseum: "Just as Prometheus, chained to his rock, / feeds a bird with the plentiful flesh of his breast, / So did Laureolus nailed to a cross, no longer mere décor but the living truth, / Offer a Scottish bear his stomach."¹⁹ Another advantage of the Martials' epigrams is that the reader can get a real attitude towards the gladiator games from the regular Roman. For example, Martial was

¹⁹ Martial, "Martial Epigrams", A.D. 63-85, *Internet Achieve*, E. Capps, ed., T.E. Page, ed., Rouse, ed., accessed 15 April 2017, https://archive.org/stream/martialepigrams01martiala/martialepigrams01martiala_djvu.txt

praising the building of the Colosseum: “one single house taking possession of the entire city”.²⁰ One can conclude that Martial was passionate about the games since he wrote so much on them. So, the primary source gives the reader the proof that Romans were very interested in the gladiator games and super positive about them. The wise use of this primary source in the book gives a great support for the Meijer’s research.

The secondary source that was analyzed was the book *Dying to be man*. Specifically, the chapter, “Noble Athlete: Gladiatorial, Athletic, and Martial Imaginary in the Martyr Acts.” The book was written by the professor of Bible studies, L. Stephanie Cobb. This source was not used by Meijer, so this is great to compare to different works that have a similar topic. The Two authors have a lot in common about gladiators: both stated that the gladiator games emerged from the funeral rites, provided the same program for the day when the gladiators games were held, emphasized the idea that games were made to show the power of Rome, showed gladiators in the same way and many other similarities. However, Cobb gave some new aspects that Meijer did not talk about. For example, she introduces the idea that eventually gladiators were trained because Rome’s lack of soldiers and for Christians, amphitheater constructions were useful for their social identities.²¹ She had some other new ideas that are a great addition to Meijer’s research and helps to look at the gladiator games from the other person’s perspective. Overall Meijer and Cobb have a lot in common, she just brings a couple new aspects in her research. Even though both authors have different argument and purpose, their analysis is super close and they even used the same facts. For example, both authors talked about “Galen, one of the best know ancient physicians – Marcus Aurelius’s personal physician, in fact – worked for a gladiator school.”²² Even though this chapter does not support Meijer’s argument itself, it does support Meijer’s research and

²⁰ Martial, “Martial Epigrams.”

²¹ L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 42-44.

²² Cobb, *Dying to Be Man*, 47.

analysis of the gladiator games. All these correlations give the reader a confidence in the accuracy of the Meijer's book.

I would recommend this book to everyone who is interested in knowing in depth about gladiator games. This book has great in-depth research, with the strong use of the sources, on the gladiator games and everything that relates to them. The book brings the reader back to the Roman world and lets the reader judge the games from the perspective of those times. This book also puts a good emphasis on the fact that gladiator games were meant to show the power of Rome. Even more, Meijer's research shows that we are not that far from Romans and we still have a lot of similar violence around us, just in a different form. So, Meijer leaves the reader with an awesome open question at the end of the book: "Who I am to say that, no matter what the circumstances, I would not have been capable of resisting the appeal of the Colosseum."²³

²³ Meijer, *The Gladiators*, 235.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Martial, "Martial Epigrams", A.D. 63-85, Internet Archive, E. Capps, ed., T.E. Page, ed., Rouse, ed., accessed 15 April 2017, https://archive.org/stream/martialepigrams01martiala/martialepigrams01martiala_djvu.txt

Secondary Sources

Cobb, L. Stephanie. *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. Accessed 15 April 2017.

Meijer, Fik. *The Gladiators: History's Most Deadly Sport*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005.