

= Ave Imperator , morituri te salutant =

" Ave , Imperator , morituri te salutant " (" Hail , Emperor , those who are about to die salute you ") is a well @-@ known Latin phrase quoted in Suetonius , De Vita Caesarum (" The Life of the Caesars " , or " The Twelve Caesars ") . It was reportedly used during an event in AD 52 on Lake Fucinus by naumachiarii ? captives and criminals fated to die fighting during mock naval encounters ? in the presence of the emperor Claudius . Suetonius reports that Claudius replied " Aut non " (" or not ") .

Variant wordings include " Ave Caesar " and " Nos morituri te salutamus " ? the latter in the 1st person (" We who are about to die salute you ") ? and a response in 15th century texts of " Avete vos " (" Fare you well ") .

Despite its popularization in later times , the phrase is not recorded elsewhere in Roman history . Historians question whether it was ever used as a customary salute . It was more likely an isolated appeal by desperate captives and criminals condemned to die , and noted by Roman historians in part for the unusual mass reprieve granted by Claudius to the survivors .

= = Historical source material = =

The source material comes from the works of three Roman historians , who were all born after the events of 52 AD . Suetonius (c . 69 ? 75 to after 130 , probably writing around AD 121) , and Cassius Dio (around 155 ? 164 to after 229 , probably writing 200 ? 22) both wrote about the event and quoted the phrase . Tacitus (c . 56 ? 117 , writing from around 98 to 117) mentions the event but does not quote the phrase .

The first known record of the phrase is in the writings of Suetonius :

Even when he [Claudius] was on the point of letting out the water from Lake Fucinus he gave a sham sea @-@ fight first . But when the combatants cried out : " Hail , emperor , they who are about to die salute thee , " he replied , " Or not " [Sed cum proclamantibus naumachiariis : " Ave Imperator , Morituri te salutant ! " respondisset : " Aut non " .] , and after that all of them refused to fight , maintaining that they had been pardoned . Upon this he hesitated for some time about destroying them all with fire and sword , but at last leaping from his throne and running along the edge of the lake with his ridiculous tottering gait , he induced them to fight , partly by threats and partly by promises . At this performance a Sicilian and a Rhodian fleet engaged , each numbering twelve triremes ...

The same incident is described in the writings of Cassius Dio , a Roman consul and historian who wrote in Greek . In Book 60 of his Roman History he states :

Claudius conceived the desire to exhibit a naval battle on a certain lake ; so , after building a wooden wall around it and erecting stands , he assembled an enormous multitude . Claudius and Nero were arrayed in military garb , while Agrippina wore a beautiful chlamys woven with threads of gold , and the rest of the spectators whatever pleased their fancy . Those who were to take part in the sea @-@ fight were condemned criminals , and each side had fifty ships , one part being styled " Rhodians " and the other " Sicilians " . First they assembled in a single body and all together addressed Claudius in this fashion : " Hail , Emperor ! We who are about to die salute thee [????? , ??????????? . ?? ??????????????? ??????????????] . " And when this in no wise availed to save them and they were ordered to fight just the same , they simply sailed through their opponents ' lines , injuring each other as little as possible . This continued until they were forced to destroy one another .

= = Source variations and interpretation = =

The person of the main verb differs in the two sources . Suetonius quotes it with a third @-@ person plural verb (salutant , meaning " they / those salute / greet ") , and Cassius quotes it with a first @-@ person plural verb (??????????? , meaning " we salute / greet ") . Apart from this , the Latin and Greek expressions have the same meaning .

Claudius' response is stated in several sources as "Avete vos !" (" Fare you well ! ") , suggesting an act of favor . The earliest editions of *De Vita Caesarum* published in Rome in 1470 and Venice in 1471 used " Avete vos , " but this version was still accepted in the nineteenth century , as can be seen in the Baumgarten @-@ Crusius edition of 1816 . Karl Ludwig Roth returned to the better quality manuscripts for his 1857 edition ? chiefly the ninth @-@ century Codex Memmianus , the oldest known extant version of Suetonius' work ? and corrected Claudius' reported response to " Aut non " . John C. Rolfe notes both responses , describing them as " one of Claudius' feeble jokes , which the combatants pretended to understand as meaning that they need not risk their lives in battle " . Donald Kyle describes it as a possible attempt at a witticism . Joseph Pike states in his notes on Roth's text :

The reading ' Avete vos ' is from the fifteenth century manuscripts and editions . In this case the emperor is simply returning the salutation . The literal meaning is , however , ' be well ' , ' be safe ' , or ' be sound ' , and the gladiators understood it as dismissing them .

Basil Kennett , writing in 1820 , describes the " Avete vos " response as a cruel jest : " [W] hen they would gladly have interpreted it as an act of favour , and a grant of their lives , he soon gave them to understand that it proceeded from the contrary principle of barbarous cruelty , and insensibility . "

= = = Cultural background = = =

Claudius , the fourth Roman Emperor of the Julio @-@ Claudian dynasty , ruled the Roman Empire following Caligula's death in AD 41 until his death in AD 54 . According to Suetonius , Claudius was extraordinarily fond of the games . He is said to have risen with the crowd after gladiatorial matches and given unrestrained praise to the fighters , and he was criticized for not leaving the arena during the executions as was the custom among the noble classes .

Claudius also presided over many new and original events . Soon after coming into power , Claudius instituted games to be held in honor of his father , Nero Claudius Drusus , on the latter's birthday . Annual games were also held in honor of his accession , and took place at the Praetorian camp where Claudius had first been proclaimed emperor .

Claudius celebrated the Secular games ? a religious festival that had been revived by Augustus ? to mark the 800th anniversary of the founding of Rome . He also on at least one occasion participated in a wild animal hunt himself according to Pliny the Elder , setting out with the Praetorian cohorts to fight a killer whale which was trapped in the harbor of Ostia .

Public entertainments varied from combat between just two gladiators , to large @-@ scale events with potentially thousands of deaths . The naumachia (also called *navalia proelia* by the Romans) was one of the latter , a large @-@ scale and bloody spectacular combative event taking place on many ships and held in large lakes or flooded arenas . Prisoners of war and criminals condemned to die were tasked with enacting naval battles to the death for public entertainment . Those selected were known as *naumachiarii* .

Unlike gladiatorial combats , *naumachiae* were infrequently held ? they were usually only called to celebrate notable events . Julius Caesar held an event with 6 @,@ 000 *naumachiarii* in the lesser Codeta , a marshy area by the Tiber , to celebrate his fourth victory to be honored by triumph . Cassius Dio writes of two *naumachiae* that Titus held during the inaugural games of the Flavian Amphitheater , including an event of 3 @,@ 000 men enacting a battle between the Athenians and the Syracusans ; and Domitian held a *naumachia* in which Dio reports " practically all the combatants and many of the spectators as well perished " .

The *naumachia* called by Claudius celebrated the completion of a drainage work and agricultural land reclamation project at Italy's largest inland lake , Lake Fucino , an 11 mile (19 km) long crater lake in the Central Apennine mountain range located around 50 miles (80 km) from Rome . The project , which took eleven years to complete and employed 30 @,@ 000 men , included the leveling of a hill top and the construction of a 3 @-@ mile (4 @.@ 8 km) tunnel between the lake and the river Liri (Lat . Liris) . The tunnel has been described as " the greatest Roman tunnel " (*Encyclopedia Americana*) despite initially only achieving partial success , and was the longest such

tunnel until the construction of that of Mont Cenis in 1876 . According to the Annals of Tacitus :
in order that the impressive character of the work might be viewed by a larger number of visitants ,
a naval battle was arranged upon the lake itself , on the model of an earlier spectacle given by
Augustus ? though with light vessels and a smaller force [...] "

In a footnote to a 2008 publication of Tacitus ' Annals , it is noted that " such an amount of criminals
[19 @, @ 000 according to Tacitus and other sources] may probably represent the sweepings of
the provinces as well as of Rome and Italy ; but even on this supposition the number , as
Friedländer remarks (ii , 324) , is suggestive of iniquitous condemnations " .

= = = Description of the event by Tacitus = = =

According to Tacitus (writing around 50 years after the event) :

Claudius equipped triremes , quadriremes , and nineteen thousand combatants : the lists he
surrounded with rafts , so as to leave no unauthorized points of escape , but reserved space enough
in the centre to display the vigour of the rowing , the arts of the helmsmen , the impetus of the
galleys , and the usual incidents of an engagement . On the rafts were stationed companies and
squadrons of the praetorian cohorts , covered by a breastwork from which to operate their catapults
and ballistae : the rest of the lake was occupied by marines with decked vessels . The shores , the
hills , the mountain @-@ crests , formed a kind of theatre , soon filled by an untold multitude ,
attracted from the neighbouring towns , and in part from the capital itself , by curiosity or by respect
for the sovereign . He and Agrippina presided , the one in a gorgeous military cloak , the other ? not
far distant ? in a Greek mantle of cloth of gold . The battle , though one of criminals [sontes] , was
contested with the spirit and courage of freemen ; and , after much blood had flowed , the
combatants were exempted from destruction [occidioni] .

= = Usage in Roman times = =

H. J. Leon of the University of Texas considered this salutation in the Transactions of the American
Philological Association in 1939 . He observed that the salute had become widely represented and
embellished in " numerous works dealing with Roman antiquities , so that it has become one of the
best known and most often cited of Roman customs " . It was recognized in lay and academic
writings as a customary salute of gladiators to the emperor . And yet " there is no other ancient
reference to a salute of the gladiators , and in this case it was uttered not by gladiators at all , but by
naumachiarum . " A striking example of this pervasive belief even in academia can be found in
historian Jérôme Carcopino 's 1940 book *La vie Quotidienne à Rome à l'Apogée de l'Empire* (*Daily Life in Ancient Rome : The People and the City at the Height of the Empire*) . In this book the
author , a member of the Académie française , professor at Le Havre and the Sorbonne , and
Director of the French Academy in Rome , cites the phrase and writes in vivid and poetic detail of
the gladiators ' " melancholy salutation " as they parade past the emperor prior to entering the
Colosseum .

Following a review of the source material related to the AD 52 naumachia , Leon observes that the
fighters were not gladiators but were convicted criminals sentenced to death . Their intended fate
was occidioni (massacre , or slaughter) . The lake had been surrounded with " rafts " to prevent a
mass breakout and was surrounded by " the crack soldiers of the praetorian guard , both infantry
and cavalry , who were protected by ramparts and equipped with catapults and ballistae , and
further reinforced by ships bearing marines ready for action " . He concludes that this was not a
formal salute , but in all likelihood an isolated incident of a mass plea for sympathy or mercy by
desperate convicted men sentenced to death on a specific occasion , and that

[c] ombining the three accounts , we can reasonably assume that , condemned as they were to die
 , these convicts invoked Claudius with their " Morituri te salutant " , which was not a regular and
formal salute , but an appeal used only on that occasion in the hope of winning the Emperor 's
sympathy . When he replied " Aut non " , they took his words as meaning " aut non morituri " [or not
die] and indicating pardon ? Suetonius says " quasi venia data " ? and refused to fight , but finally

yielded either to the entreaties of the Emperor or to force , and fought bravely until the survivors were excused from further slaughter .

My conclusion is , accordingly , that there is no evidence whatever for the much @-@ quoted salute of the gladiators . The only two ancient references , those in Suetonius and in Dio , refer not to gladiators but to *naumachiarum* , men condemned to die , and even these references are to one specific episode , the circumstances of which indicate that the supposed salute was not even a regular salute of the *naumachiarum* .

Alan Baker broadly agrees , stating , " There is no evidence that this was common practice among gladiators . As far as we know , the only time this phrase was used was at an event staged by Claudius . " Plass notes that " it is hard to see why or how the phrase came to be used on this occasion if it was not a regular formula . On the other hand , if it was something that Claudius might expect to hear it would more naturally serve in its role as a feed line for his repartee portraying his invincible *gaucherie* . " He comments on the distancing effect of the Latin source and the first person of the Greek source and notes that the interpretation and response by the fighters " seems to be a maneuver within rules governing clemency in the arena " .

Kyle concurs that no other sources record the " supposed gladiator salute " in any other context " and it did not come here from true gladiators " . Treated as a commodity , they were not elite gladiators but captives and criminals doomed to die , who usually fought until all were killed . When the salute or appeal failed , and they were forced to kill one another in earnest ,

[a] cting with some initiative and inventing a pseudo @-@ gladiatorial salute , and then fighting well , these men , despite their criminal and non @-@ professional status and their intended extermination , atypically turned themselves into proper gladiators for a day . Hence some survived .

He concludes that " [t] he sources remark on the incident , in part , because it was an anomaly in arena practice ? a mass *Androcleian* reprieve . "

= = Usage in modern times = =

As well as taking root in modern conceptions of Roman customs , the phrase has passed into contemporary culture , including use by air force pilots such as John Lerew (his biography is titled " *We Who Are About to Die* ") , a World War II film entitled *Morituri* , a Marvel comic of the 1980s called *Strikeforce : Morituri* that focused on superheroes who were inevitably going to die , the *Adventure Time* episode " *Morituri Te Salutamus* " , ' a set of one @-@ act plays of the 1890s by Hermann Sudermann , Joseph Conrad 's canonical 1902 novel *Heart of Darkness* , James Joyce 's novel *Ulysses* , in the epilogue of an Agatha Christie 's book named ' *A Caribbean Mystery* ' , in popular music of the 1980s , as well as music in video games , in the paper title of peer @-@ reviewed medical research , in a political maiden speech , market commentary during 2008 global financial crisis and in modern art , fiction , non @-@ fiction and poetry related to the Roman period . The 1985 sci @-@ fi / comedy motion picture *My Science Project* had two of its main protagonists @-@ Vince and Sherman @-@ encounter a gladiatorial sentry . They were greeted the customary phrase ; which , before subduing him , translated by the affluent Sherman as simply , " He 's going to kick our ass ! "

= = Writing and pronunciation = =

Written with optional macrons : *Av? Imper?tor* (*Cæsar*) , *morit?r? t? sal?tant* .

Classical Latin pronunciation : [?awe? ?mp??ra?t?r (?kajsar) m?r??tu?ri? te? sa?lu?tant]