



Gladiatorial Combat

Everyday Life in Athens and Rome (HPHP4020)

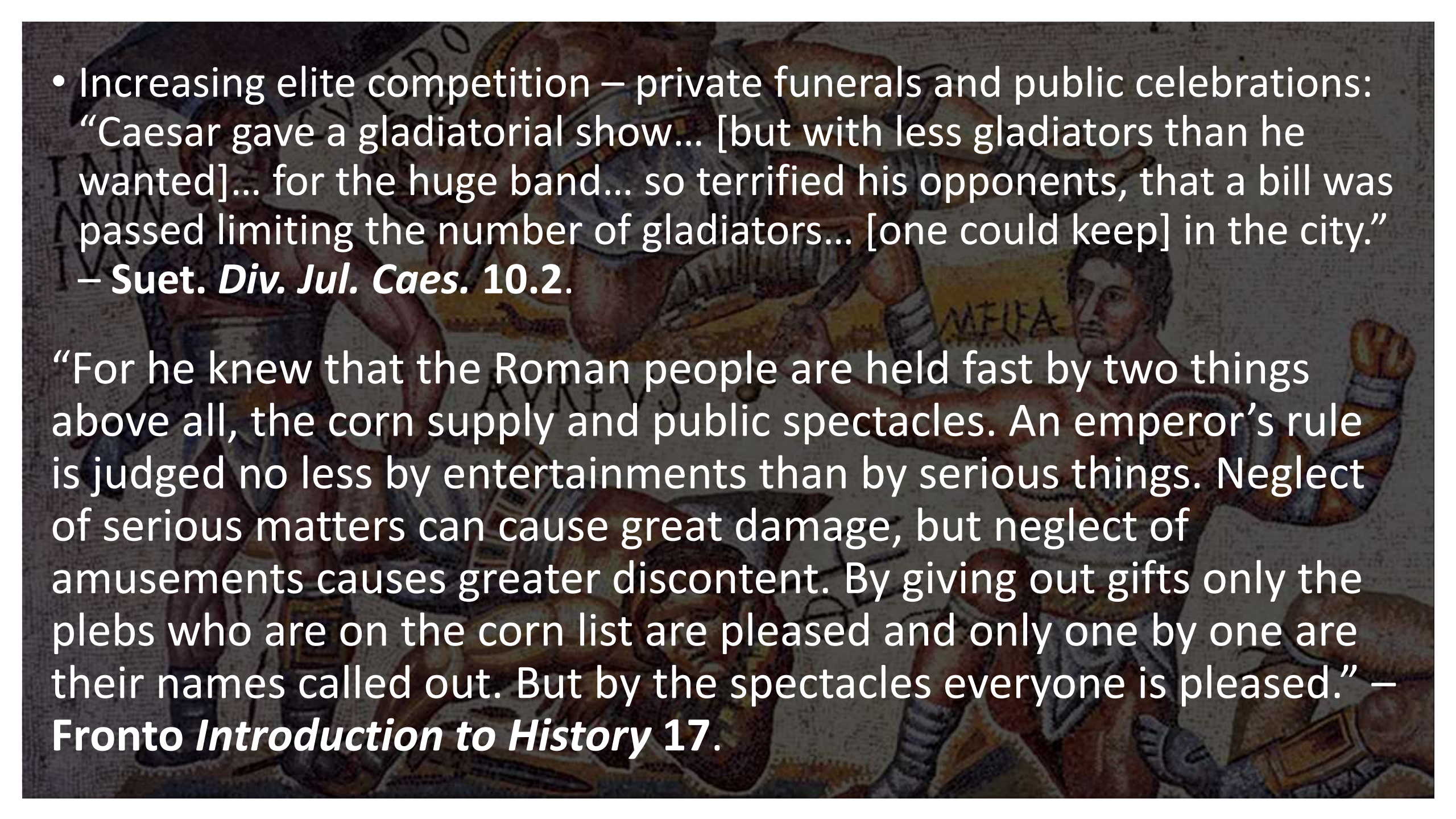
Origins

- First recorded in 264 BC – funerary games in honour of D. Junius Brutus Pera.

“...men believed that the souls of the dead were appeased by human blood, and so at funerals they sacrificed prisoners of war or inferior slaves brought for the purpose.” – **Tertullian *On the Public Shows* 12.**



Possibly funerary duel in a 4th Century BC tomb painting at Paestum

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- Increasing elite competition – private funerals and public celebrations:
“Caesar gave a gladiatorial show... [but with less gladiators than he wanted]... for the huge band... so terrified his opponents, that a bill was passed limiting the number of gladiators... [one could keep] in the city.”
– **Suet. *Div. Jul. Caes.* 10.2.**

“For he knew that the Roman people are held fast by two things above all, the corn supply and public spectacles. An emperor’s rule is judged no less by entertainments than by serious things. Neglect of serious matters can cause great damage, but neglect of amusements causes greater discontent. By giving out gifts only the plebs who are on the corn list are pleased and only one by one are their names called out. But by the spectacles everyone is pleased.” –
Fronto *Introduction to History* 17.

Amphitheatre – theatre on all sides

- Often elliptical rather than circular in plan.
- Early amphitheatres were temporary wooden constructions.
 - Mechanical theatres becoming amphitheatres; commissioned by Gaius Curio (Pliny *HN* 36.24.116-117).
- First permanent amphitheatre in Rome built by T. Statilius Taurus, dedicated ca. 30-29 BC.



Pompeii – earliest
amphitheatre in
Italy ca. 70 BC



“... in light of the customs set up by our ancestors of holding gladiatorial displays in the forum... the space between the columns should be widened for better viewing.” - Vitruvius 5.1.1.

Roman Forum
reconstruction

Timetable for combat:

- Morning: parade through the amphitheatre.
- Beast hunts and beast against beast.
- Lunchtime: execution of condemned criminals.
- **Gladiatorial displays for rest of the day.**



Colchester vase, ca. 2nd century AD. The *retiarius*, Valentinus, who has lost his trident holds up his finger.

Zliten Mosaic – Leptis Magna



Retiarius - trident and net.

Secutor – helmet that covers face and, rectangular shield and *gladius*.

Thraex – broad-rimmed helmet, greaves and small shield + Thracian curved sword.

Murmillo – armguard, loincloth, oblong shield + *gladius*.

Hoplomachus – armguard, small round shield, spear, helmet and *gladius*.

“But what pleasure can a man of refinement get out of seeing a powerless human being torn to pieces by the mightiest beast, or a splendid beast being transfixed by a hunting spear? – **Cicero *Letters to his Friends* 7.1** (To M. Marcus, August 55 BC).



- Gladiators, like actors, subject to *infamia* (*Digest* 3.1.1.6 (Ulpian)).
 - But could be famous, wealthy and had sex appeal.
- Some members of senatorial and equestrian elite desired to fight as gladiators and take on role of actors and charioteers (e.g., Suet. *Div. Jul.* 39).
- Senatorial decree later discourages such practices (Suet. *Div. Aug.* 43).
- “Tyrants” compel members of elite to fight in arena:
 - Nero “forces” 400 senators and 600 equestrians (Suet. *Nero* 12).