HISTORY OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION HONORS

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Bread and Circuses:

The Task of Controlling the Masses

The number one concern of the Roman emperors was maintaining their great power over the state and the people. The army’s backing was essential to this task, and each emperor made sure he had the soldiers’ allegiance. But controlling the military was not enough. Appeasing the “mob,” as many Roman leaders arrogantly called the people, was also important. Rome and other cities had large populations, including many poor and unemployed people who could not adequately support themselves. And because slaves did most of the everyday medial tasks for the middle and upper classes, large numbers of people had a great deal of free time on their hands. There was always the danger that the people, if hungry or idle, might riot or even rebel. Using the army to quell such uprisings was an option. But even corrupt emperors like Nero knew that controlling the populace at the point of a sword was expensive and would only lead to more discontent and rebellion.

The emperors found that it was far easier, cheaper, and safer to keep the masses fed, busy, and reasonably happy. Every emperor sponsored regular large-scale distributions of bread and other foodstuffs to the poor. And most of these rulers also spent huge sums on public festivals, and games. Historian Jerome Carcopino explains:

The Caesars had in fact shouldered the dual task of feeding and amusing Rome. Their monthly [food] distributions…assured the populace its daily bread. By the shows and spectacles, they provided in various public places, religious and secular [nonreligious], in the Forum, at the theaters, in the Stadium [also called the arena or the circus]…they occupied and disciplined its [the city’s] leisure hours.

The strategy worked. Many Romans eventually came to care about little but being fed and entertained. This prompted the Roman writer Juvenal to remark with contempt that the mob “limits its anxious longings to two things only – bread, and the games of the circus!”

**A Dirty, Noisy City**

Nearly every city in Italy and many in the provinces had generous facilities for public gatherings, relaxation, and entertainment. Pompeii, for example, with a population of only 20,000, had a forum, public baths, a theater, and an arena, all of them large. Not surprisingly, Rome, a much more populous city, had many dozens of public areas and buildings. These facilities offered people a diversion from the rat race of city life.

In the middle of the first century C.E., Rome was a sprawling, dirty, noisy metropolis of about 1.2 million people. Even at night, the city did not sleep. Juvenal complained: “What sleep is possible in a lodging [house]? The crossing of wagons in the narrow, winding streets, the swearing of drovers [drivers] brought to a standstill would snatch sleep from a sea-calf or the emperor Claudius himself.” Most streets were also choked with filth and foul odors. Adding to everyday dirt and litter, many Romans emptied their chamber pots directly into the streets. The problem was especially bad in the poorer sections of the city, where tens of thousands lived in crowded, multistoried, badly constructed apartment buildings called *insulae*.

Like many modern cities, ancient Rome was often a dangerous place to live. The police force Augustus had installed had helped to reduce the crime rate, but muggings, thefts, and murders still occurred frequently at night. And there were other dangers. “Think,” wrote Juvenal, “of the number of times cracked or broken [flower[ pots fall out of windows…Anyone who goes out to dinner without making a will, is a fool…you can suffer as many deaths as there are open windows to pass under.”

People of all ages and social status looked forward to escaping, at least temporarily, from the sober realities of city life. They regularly flocked to such public diversions as plays, chariot races, and religious celebrations. Rich and poor and young and old attended. It is important to note that women and often even slaves attended, too. This was possible because the status of women and slaves had improved considerably since the days of the republic.

**Women and Slaves**

In early Roman times, women had no rights. They could not inherit property or take part in politics and, in general, had to do the bidding of their husbands. This situation gradually changed, however. During the last two centuries of the republic, women won the right to divorce their husbands, and they became increasingly independent. Women also received better educations, as evidenced by the ancient writer Plutarch’s description of Pompey’s second wife, Cornelia: “She was highly educated, played well upon the lute [ a stringed instrument like a guitar], and understood geometry, and had been accustomed to listen…to lectures on philosophy.”

By the mid-first century A.D., Roman women, rich and poor, were, socially speaking, nearly equal to men. The philosophy Musonius Rufus, who wrote during Flavian times, spoke to many when he argued that women were intellectually and morally equal to men. Women not only attended public baths, festivals, and games whenever they wanted, but also engaged in “manly” pursuits such as discussing and writing about politics. A few women even competed in men’s sports such as hunting, fencing, and wrestling.

Slaves also fared better during the empire. In republican days, most slaves had been captives taken in Rome’s many aggressive foreign wars. Many were treated as objects, beaten, and even killed by their owners. But in the early empire, though some slaves still faced cruelties, most owners treated their slaves more humanely. Some slaves lived and worked on farms, especially the *latifundia*, large plantations in the countryside. Many more dwelled in the cities, where they performed numerous jobs and often enjoyed relatively comfortable lives. As historian R.H. Barrow pointed out:

It was discovered that, the nearer the lot of a slave approached to that of a free man, the more useful he was. The Romans disliked retail trade and the routine of business, and slaves performed these tasks for them; the slaves themselves were often more skilled than their masters. Slaves had always been allowed to have property of their own, and in the early Empire this property was often considerable…Slaves owned land, property, ships, interest in business concerns, even slaves of their own, and…their rights were protected by law…Many a slave was the trusted friend of his master. Indeed, slavery comes nearest to its justification in the early Roman Empire.

The slaves who sometimes went to the public games and festivals were among the few working Romans in attendance. A large proportion of free Romans, rich and poor, did not have full-time jobs in the modern sense. Ironically, the institution of slavery itself was one of the chief causes of the mob’s idleness. Because slaves took care of most of their business and chores, most slave owners worked only a few hours a day or did no work at all. But while slavery was a convenience for some, it was a hindrance to many others. Slaves did so many jobs on farms, in homes, and in the cities that hundreds of thousands of free Romans could not find work. Having neither opportunity nor reason to learn a trade, whole generations found themselves locked permanently into a state of poverty. Without government handouts of bread, many would have staved. Thus, slavery weakened Roman society by perpetuating poverty and helping to create large numbers of idles persons of all classes.

**Holidays and Feasts**

The many and various public games, plays, and festivals the people attended to fill their leisure time were collectively referred to as *ludi*. Some ludi were religious celebrations honoring specific gods. For instance, the *Vestalia*, celebrated on June 9, honored Vesta, goddess of the hearth. In early republican times, Rome’s traditional gods were the only deities so honored. Eventually, however, the influence of foreign gods worshipped in some of Rome’s distant provinces began to be felt in Italy. In the early empire, cults of foreign gods were quite popular in Rome. Some of the more important of these were the goddess Isis, from Egypt, seen as ruler of heaven and earth; Cybele, from Asia Minor, a goddess of nature and healing; and Mithras, a Persian god whose followers advocated treating everyone with kindness and respect. A few of these deities had their own public festivals – for example, the *Ludi Megalenses*, honoring Cybele from April 4 to 10.

The Romans had many other ludi. Some were secular, such as Parentalia, celebrated from February 12 to 21 to honor the memory of deceased parents. Still other ludi began as religious ceremonies but later became more secular. The most notable example was the *Ludi Romani*. In earlier centuries, this fifteen-day festival, observed from September 5 to 19, honored Rome’s head god Jupiter in his own temple. By the first century A.D., however, much of the religious significance of this celebration had disappeared. Senators and other public officials met in the temple for a party and banquet, and other people had feasts in their homes. Thus, the *Ludi Romani* became just another holiday among many others. During Augustus’ reign, the Romans had some 115 separate holidays. By the end of the first century A.D. that number had risen to 132, and some later emperors recognized as many as 200 holidays. Nearly all these occasions were accompanied by feasts and often races, contests, and dramatic presentations.

Roman feasts differed in size and extravagance according to social status. Not surprisingly, the wealthy classes enjoyed the most varied and elaborate menus, usually accompanied by entertainment. Describing one of his own feasts in a letter to an invited guest who did not show up, Pliny the Younger wrote good-naturedly:

Who are you to accept my invitation to dinner and never come?...It was all laid out, one lettuce each, three snails, two eggs, wheat-cake, and wine with honey chilled with snow…besides olives, beetroots, gherkins, onions, and any number of similar delicacies. You would have heard a comic play, a reader or singer, or all three if I felt generous. Instead you chose to go where you could have oysters, sow’s innards, sea-urchins, and Spanish dancing-girls. You will suffer for this – I won’t say how.

Members of the middle and lower classes at more humbly but still managed to put together appetizing holiday dinners. Typical was the following simple feast Juvenal proposed to a friend:

And now hear my feast, which no meat market shall provide. From my…farm there will come a plump kid [young goat]… that has… more milk in him than blood; some wild asparagus… and some lordly eggs warm in their wisps of hay together with the hens that laid them. There will be grapes too… pears… and in the same basket fresh-smelling apples.

**“We who are about to die salute you!”**

Rome’s public games were as varied as its feasts. Chariot races took place in the city’s circuses, long rectangular structures that could accommodate many thousands of spectators. The oldest and largest of these was the Circus Maximus, first erected in early republican times. Over the centuries, various rulers, including Julius Caesar, Augustus, Claudius, and Nero, enlarged and improved it until it became one of he marvels of the ancient world. By the early second century A.D., the “great Circus,” as many called it, was more than 2,000 feet long and 700 feet wide, seating more than 250,000 people. In Augustan days, the crowds watched as many as twelve races a day, each race averaging about five miles. Caligula increased the number of race to twenty-four a day, which then became standard. The chariots were usually drawn by four horses, although teams of two, three, six, and even ten were sometimes used. Sitting on cushions and eating snacks sold to them by vendors, the crowds loudly cheered and applauded their favorites, creating a din that often could be heard from one end of the city to the other…

Equally exciting for the crowds were the gladiatorial combats, fights between men or between men and animals. The gladiators were variously convicts, slaves, or paid volunteers. Prisoners and slaves who fought well sometimes earned their freedom. The gladiators entered the arena accompanied by musicians, dancers, and jugglers, then raised their weapons in salute to the emperor or whatever important official was present. After reciting the phrase, “*Morituri te salutamus!”* or “We who are about to die salute you!” the gladiators usually fought to the death. Also common were fights between wild animals, most often bears, panthers, and bulls. In a single day in Titus’ reign, more than 5,000 animals died. In all these fights, the arena sand was often dyed dark orange to conceal the blood stains. The Roman writer Seneca penned the following description of the games, which he found needlessly brutal:

I’ve happened to drop in upon the midday entertainment of the arena in hope of…a touch of relief in which men’s eyes may find rest after a glut of human blood. No, no: far from it…Now for butchery plain and simple! The combatants have nothing to protect them: their bodies are utterly open to every blow: never a thrust but finds its mark…What good is armor? What good is swordsmanship? All these things only put off death a little. In the morning men are matched with lions and bears…Death is the fighter’s only exit.

At first these games took place in the circuses or in temporary wooden enclosures set up in town squares. The first permanent stone stadium for gladiatorial events was erected in 29 B.C. south of the *Campus Martius*. After the great fire in A.D. 64 destroyed the structure, Vespasian and Titus built the Colosseum to replace it. The well-preserved ruins of the famous stadium, some 1,800 feet in circumference and seating 50,000 spectators, still stand in modern Rome.

**Theaters and Baths**

Visits to the theaters and baths were relaxing and popular pastimes. The first stone theaters in Rome, designed after Greek models, appeared in late republican times. The Theater of Pompey, built in 55 B.C., sat about 27,000 people, while the Theater of Marcellus, completed by Augustus, could accommodate about 14,000. Like their Greek counterparts, Roman actors usually wore brilliantly decorated masks so that spectators in the back rows could better recognize the characters. At first, the plays had complicated plots and dialogue, also in the Greek tradition. But beginning in the first century A.D. many theatrical presentations evolved into more visual spectacles with little dialogue. These resembled elaborate ballets or pantomimes, complete with dancing, musical accompaniment, and striking special effects such as simulated battles and rainstorms…

Roman theatergoers were boisterous, often applauding and cheering their favorite characters and booing and jeering at performers they did not like.

The Roman baths, or *thermae*, began in the second century B.C. as small, simple washing facilities for men. But in time these structures grew in size, complexity, and beauty and admitted women, too. Not until the second century A.D. did rules forbidding mixed bathing take effect. It became common for many Romans to visit the baths at least once a day, and increasingly fewer people bathed at home. In Augustus’ reign, to meet public demand, the city of Rome alone had about 170 privately owned *thermae*. Shortly afterward, in A.D. 20, the first large state-run baths appeared. Almost every subsequent emperor built a public bath complex, usually trying to outdo in size and splendor those erected by his predecessors. Some of the largest *thermae* bore the names of the emperors Nero, Titus, Trajan, and Caracalla. These structures had both hot and cold pools, steam rooms, and exercise areas where people could do calisthenics, play ball, and even wrestle. The larger baths were also equipped with massage parlors, hair-cutting salons, libraries, reading rooms, various shops, and fast-food vendors. Combining many features of modern malls and social clubs, the *thermae* were places in which Romans of all walks of life could spend a pleasant hour or an entire day.

The baths, the theaters, the games, the races, the festivals, and the food handouts – all these kept the Roman populace busy and content. The emperors learned that government sponsorship of these diversions was essential in maintaining control of the mob. But the social system of bread and circuses was more than a political and managerial too. It became an integral part of everyday Roman life, as important and natural to people as institutions like family and religion. And so it reflected the new Roman character. The early Romans had been conservative and austere, with a dislike for luxury. In stark contrast, the inhabitants of the empire lived by the words expressed by an unknown author of the second century A.D. Into the pavement in the forum of the Roman town of Thamugadi in northern Africa he carved: “To hunt, bathe, play, and laugh, this is to live.”