

For training and entertainment

Gladiators and military amphitheaters

WHO THINKS OF AMPHITHEATERS, THINKS OF MONUMENTAL STRUCTURES SUCH AS THE COLOSSEUM IN ROME, THE ARENA IN VERONA OR THE AMPHITHEATERS IN ARLES AND TRIER. THESE FEW EXAMPLES ALL SERVED TO ENTERTAIN THE CIVILIANS OF LARGE CITIES AND THEIR ENVIRONMENTS; IN THEIR GRANDFUR THEY SHOW THE MIGHT AND POWER OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE NOT JUST IN THE CAPITAL, BUT EVEN IN THE PROVINCES.

By Svenja Grosser

Both the amphitheater itself and the events taking place in it were something uniquely Roman. The latter, the *munera* (spectacles held in the amphitheater commemorating a special occasion) were never a part of the religious festival calendar and hence were staged irregularly. Since the reform of Augustus they consisted of *venationes* (beast hunts) in the morning, public executions around noon, the so called *meridiani*, and as the highlight of the day the gladiator fights in the afternoon.

"A bored soldier is a dangerous soldier", the Romans were already aware of the truth behind this age-old phrase, so commanders made sure that their soldiers were always occupied even in peaceful times. Apart from their immediate military tasks, soldiers were kept busy with the construction and maintenance of roads and public buildings. They were also provided with entertainment of a kind with which soldiers from the Romanized areas of the empire would be very familiar.

The Roman army brought civilization to the provinces by providing for itself. Bathhouses, amphitheaters and the accompanying *munera* were



© Svenja Grosser

Griffon head found at the amphitheater close to the fort Zugmantel, which presumably belonged to a gladiator helmet of a Thraex type gladiator.

typically Roman, something everybody in the empire could identify. Despite the different origins of the legions, such familiar structures from cities near where they grew up made them feel Roman, even on the fringes of the *Imperium*.

It was also recommended for soldiers to watch gladiatorial displays at the amphitheater. Seeing gladiators perform bravely and without fear would encourage the soldiers (see Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricum* 33). A gladi-

ator represented moral qualities which were also required from a good soldier, represented by the container term *virtus* (manliness). It consisted of the following: *fortitudo* (strength), *disciplina* (training), *constantia* (steadiness), *patientia* (endurance), *contemptus mortis* (contempt of death), *amor laudis* (love of glory and praise), *cupido victoriae* (desire to win). Gladiators were trained to give good examples of *virtus* even when facing death and therefore set an example for soldiers.

Amphitheaters in archaeology

Archaeological evidence shows that many legionary fortresses had an amphitheater nearby. Recent finds prove the existence close to auxiliary forts, especially along the Limes, of amphitheaters as well. Very likely the military was in many cases responsible for the construction of these buildings, as is attested by an inscription from the amphitheater in Caerleon, Roman Isca Silurum, where *Legio II Augusta* was stationed. The inscription proudly indicated the cohort involved in erecting the arena wall.

In some cases two amphitheaters existed, a military one for the legionary fortress and one for the civilian settlement. These were the sites of main legionary camps with a large settlement nearby. The latter were often important civic centers with the legal status of *colonia* or *municipium* such as Carnuntum in modern Austria or Aquincum (Budapest).

It is most likely that the capitals of Germania Inferior, Claudia Colonia Ara Agrippinensis (modern Cologne, Germany) – and that of Germania Superior, Mogontiacum (Mainz, Germany) – both important military sites as well – had at least one amphitheater as well. Unfortunately as yet no trace of such a building has been found. However, other indications are plentiful. The collection of the Römisch-Germanisches Museum in Cologne contains many oil lamps with gladiatorial motives as well as the gravestone of Aquilos, who most probably was *lanista* (manager) of a gladiatorial troupe. His gravestone shows the bout between a *thraex* and *murmillio*. In Mainz, we have the inscription of a gladiator named

Messor. As provincial capitals Cologne and Mainz housed large garrisons but were also the cultural centers of the provinces and therefore provided the people with typically Roman amenities and entertainment.

A good example of an amphitheater belonging to a legionary fortress is that of Deva (today's Chester in North-West England). After the departure of *Legio II Adiutrix*, long thought to have erected the building, *Legio XX Valeria Victrix* was stationed here and built the first amphitheater around AD 95-96, dated by a recent find of a coin. It consisted of a timber framework for the seats with an outer stone wall, made out of sandstone blocks with a rubble core and bonded with red clay. It remained in use for approximately 30 years and fell in disrepair quickly afterwards. It was rebuilt in the late 3rd century, possibly in connection with the reconquest of Britain. Its style was now reminiscent of Imperial amphitheaters such as the Colosseum, only on a much smaller scale. Unfortunately not much of the amphitheater remains and archaeologists can only excavate half the area: the other half is occupied by other protected historical buildings.

Two auxiliary amphitheaters

The auxiliary fort of Zugmantel (near Taunusstein-Orlen, southern Germany) was located close to the Limes. Off the Bundesstraße 417, a Limes watchtower has been reconstructed together with the palisade wall with ditches; the fort lies underneath today's parking lot and the woods stretching behind it. The wooden fort was built at the end of the 1st century and replaced by a stone structure in the mid 2nd century AD, possibly by *Cohors I Treverorum equitata* which attested as its garrison in this period.

North of the fort near the Hühnerstraße ("chicken road"), halfway to the Limes watchtower, lies one of the

Curved wooden practice sword (*rudis*) of a Thraex type gladiator found at the Augustan era legionary base of Oberaden, Germany. Now at the Westfälisches Römermuseum, Haltern, Germany.

two circular structures which are thought to be amphitheaters. It has two entrances, one each on the North and South side. A similar building was located towards the East of the fort at the *Galgenköppel* ("gallows place"). Both were earthen structures with timber seating though no remains of timber were found. This has led to the conclusion that the bleachers had been dismantled after the amphitheater fell out of use.

Both amphitheaters may have been in use at the same time providing entertainment for the auxiliaries at the fort and the inhabitants of the surrounding *vici*. Upon personal inspection of the site, I found that the remains of the first amphitheater could only be detected with the help of informational signposts. A closer look into the wood reveals traces of the mound that was raised to support the seats, covered by trees today. The amphitheater at the "Galgenköppel" was found with help of a map because unfortunately there is no sign indicating this place of interest. When you know what to look for,

Military amphitheaters

Two attested amphitheaters

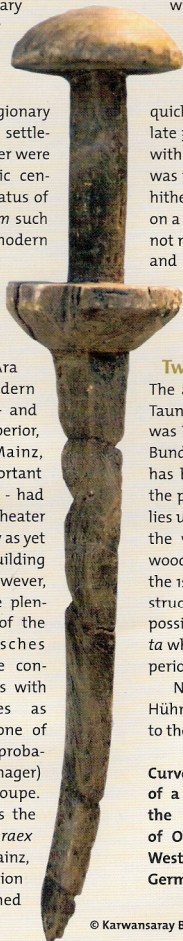
Aquincum (Budapest, Hungary)
Carnuntum (Petronell/Bad Deutsch-Altenburg, Austria)
Legionary Camp Castra Vetera I and the civilian town Colonia Ulpia Traiana (Xanten, Germany)

Legionary amphitheaters

Charterhouse-on-Mendip, UK
Isca Silurum (Caerleon, UK)
Deva (Chester, UK)
Cataractonium (Catterick, UK)
Noviomagus (Nijmegen, Netherlands)

Auxiliary amphitheaters

Tomen-y-Mur, UK
Forden Gaer, UK
Arnsburg, Germany
Zugmantel, Germany (two structures)
Dambach, Germany
Quintana (Künzing, Germany)
Micia and Porolissum, Romania
Gemellae and Mesafalta, Algeria
Dura Europos, Syria



© Karwansaray BV

you can make out the round structure, which is also overgrown.

That these structures indeed were amphitheaters is confirmed by the bronze griffin head found at the amphitheater at the "Hühnerstraße". It is believed to be from a *thraex* helmet and is now on display at the Saalburg museum, a reconstructed 2nd century auxiliary fort near Bad Homburg, Germany.

Purpose

Most of the legionary amphitheaters were built out of stone – probably by the legionaries themselves as mentioned above – and were made for long-term use. Having erected such a costly building it surely would not be used only once a year for gladiatorial shows. In his *Epitoma rei militaris* Vegetius suggests that all troops should have regular training which could take place either on the parade-ground (*campus*) or in the drill-hall (*basilica*) or the legionary amphitheater which he called *ludus*. This term should not be confused with the same word meaning gladiator school.

The amphitheaters were certainly used for military purposes such as training grounds for horses and as exercise areas and parade grounds. But taking the rather small size of the arenas into consideration it was impossible for a complete legion or complete *cohors equitata* to drill there. Specialized circular horse training grounds, the *gyrus*, have been found various sites, e.g. at The Lunt, Baginton, GB and Unterkirchberg, Germany. These did not have seating areas surrounding the arena, hence they can be considered purely training locations for horse riding and not as an amphitheater. For larger numbers of horses and troops the space between the outer ditch of the forts and the *vici/canabae* was big enough to serve as exercise grounds. But small units could have used the amphitheaters as training grounds.

The obvious question is of course did gladiators actually fight at the military



© Karwansaray BV

Oil lamp shaped like the helmet of a Thraex, showing the griffin on the tip of the helmet crest. Now at the Valkhof museum, Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

amphitheaters? It is most likely that large amphitheaters, such as Chester, regularly hosted gladiatorial combats and perhaps even *venationes* for the entertainment of the soldiers of the nearby and also the inhabitants of the considerable settlement surrounding the fort. This is corroborated by a find at Chester, a relief of a *retiarius*, with a rarely seen posture: he is depicted

still holding the net. It is known that at legionary headquarters, there were gladiator troupes which actually went on tour to perform in the province. The aforementioned inscription of the gladiator Messor from Mainz is a good example – he could have belonged to an itinerant *familia gladiatoria*.

What about the amphitheaters of auxiliary forts? The amphitheater in

Künzing (Germany) seems to have been erected very hastily, if uneven distances between the post holes are any indication. Hence it can be assumed that it was built for a special occasion only and might have been in use for a short while afterwards. It has been proposed that the amphitheater in Künzing may have been built when the emperor Hadrian was visiting the frontiers in Noricum, Raetia and the Germanic provinces in the Spring of 122. He could have held a parade there – as he did at Lambaesis from which a famous (fragmented) speech survives – and gladiatorial games may have been given in his honor. There may have been similar occasions at other places as well. This is suggested by the presence of an amphitheater on a scene on Trajan's column. It appears in the background next to a fortified town with the Emperor and a delegation of barbarians in front.

The aforementioned griffin head of a *thraex* helmet found at the amphitheater near the fort Zugmantel is also a very strong indication that gladiatorial combats were staged at those small venues to entertain the occupying forces at the forts and the inhabitants of the nearby *vici* and *canabae*.

Conclusion

The fact is that amphitheaters attached to legionary forts were generally built for a longer duration than we have seen on the aforementioned example of the amphitheater of Chester. Close to legionary forts were also larger civilian settlements than near auxiliary forts so these amphitheaters provided entertainment for a larger mass of people. Amphitheaters near auxiliary forts were probably erected for a specific reason only, e.g. the visit of an Emperor or some other dignitary albeit they remained in short use afterwards, an estimated 20-30 years in the case of Künzing.

That gladiators were popular among legionaries and auxiliary soldiers is proven by a host of gladiator-themed artifacts throughout the empire, some of which are shown here. The soldiers definitely had some form of entertainment available to them even at the fringes of the empire, even though they were not the posh shows of the Colosseum. ■



Provocator relief from Ephesos, Turkey, one of the urban centers of the empire. The relief clearly shows the victory wreaths with which this gladiator was awarded for his *virtus*. Now in the Antikensammlung, Berlin.

Svenja Grosser hails from Hamburg, Germany and has her own gladiator group, the LVDVS NEMESIS. She has done extensive research on anything related to gladiators and especially gladiators and the Roman army. She prepares for her gladiatura (gladiator performance) and practises Wing Tsun and Escrima.

Further Reading

- D.L. Bomgardner, *The Story of the Roman Amphitheatre*. London 2000
- A. Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*. Austin 1997
- C.S. Sommer, 'Amphitheatres of Auxiliary Forts on Frontiers', paper of the Amphitheater Conference in Chester, February 2007, publication forthcoming
- R. Wilding, *Roman Amphitheatres in England and Wales*. Chester 2005.