

## **Tullia Ritti - Spettacoli anfiteatrali in Oriente e in Occidente: recenti contributi dell'epigrafia.**

The subject of this talk is linked to the overall theme of the conference, namely the analysis of how the inscriptions relating to gladiatorship were integrated with monuments, with the aim of understanding how the language of outward communication related to this field. The observations that follow refer to the Imperial age, with special regard to some materials related to Greek-speaking provinces.

As for communication occurring prior to games, a Hierapolitan document dating to the reign of Antoninus Pius concerns a municipal *archiereus* who had requested the Emperor's consent to offer an exhibition that exceeded regular standards. The Emperor had then sent an epistle granting the request and allowing a three-day *munus*, where 20 pairs of gladiators would fight each day. Moreover, the *archiereus* had to comply with existing rules on importing Lybian wild beasts to Asia. A later honorary decree addressed to the same individual and issued by the *koinon* of the Greeks of Asia, points out that many beasts of all kinds had appeared, in accordance with the laws enacted by the Senate. This persistence in stressing that rules on importing exotic beasts be followed seems to suggest that related norms had been recently issued.

After the public announcements on display in cities, bearing the date and program of the games, the second public communication occurred during the exhibition itself, through the *libellus* distributed to the audience, and with large tablets appearing during the parade in the arena, inscribed with the names of the *editor* and of all the fighters, as well as their victory records. Another tablet accompanied those sentenced to death and disclosed their crimes. In order to reconstruct the points of view of the general public and the gladiators themselves, it is also important to examine the graffiti found either on the walls of buildings where games were held, or near them, or in the gladiator barracks.

All communication following the games was aimed at society as a whole, present and future. It was issued by *editores* on the one hand, and gladiators and *venatores* on the other.

It is well known that the *munus* associated with the Imperial cult was the most prominent expenditure imposed on the *archireus* or *flamen* in provinces. Some *editores*, who had distinguished themselves for their munificence, wished to leave long-lasting testimony of it to the public. To that end, they commissioned monuments of various forms, where the link between the textual and visual components was essential.

Some of them exhibited a memorial of the *ludus* in a public location, bearing a figured summary of the event; others preferred their private homes, where murals and large mosaic floors were placed in boardrooms or banquet halls. In these private contexts, however, knowledge of the *munus* only reached the closer sphere of visitors, while the burial grounds were somehow in-between, as the *munerarius* could display inscriptions and reliefs commemorating the games, and reach a significantly greater audience.

The field of funerary memorials is the largest testimony of communication by the gladiators themselves. Their message could either be solely entrusted to the inscription, or integrate text and imagery. There were certainly entire cemeteries or sets of graves for gladiators and members of the gladiatorial *familia* (in Nîmes, Salona, Patras and Ephesus). However, the creation of these cemeteries was not due to the legal separation of the graves of gladiators from others, or at least not always. It is known that in several places, probably Cibra and certainly Hierapolis, the gravestones of gladiators were in fact mingled with others, thus clearly soliciting appreciation by a large part of

the population.

The social perception of gladiators – who were legally declared as outlaws – showed some contradicting aspects, which are acknowledged by ancient literary sources. The profession of gladiators was ambivalently regarded in Roman society: gladiators were outcasts coming from the fringes or the bottom layers of society. However, some Latin intellectuals even applauded gladiators as examples of the Roman military and philosophical virtues, since they fought with skill and loyalty, and died with stoic courage.

Monuments and epitaphs of gladiators usually follow regional customs in their forms. From the Western Empire to its Eastern provinces, the language of inscriptions and images followed different standards derived from their cultural and historical settings. In Rome, in Italy and in the Western part of the Empire, sober epitaphs with little or no decoration are mostly found on tablets or *stelae*, and are generally devoid of information about the merit and sentiment of the protagonists. On the contrary, many headstones of the Eastern provinces are accompanied by reliefs complementary to the epigraphical message, and therefore reflect the way gladiatorship was interpreted by the people in that part of the Empire.

Exceptions aside, the majority of images vary upon of two basic patterns: the gladiator in combat and the one triumphant, rarely accompanied by other characters. The name of the gladiator and the exact amount of his earned crowns were displayed in the background.

Next to his image, the simplest inscriptions bear only the gladiators' names, which were usually battle- or stage names. More complex inscriptions added further information, such as their armor, their *palos*, i.e. the degree achieved, their victory record, and often the names of who had commissioned the monument, and with what resources. The data reported on the epigraph, together with the reliefs depicting the armor and symbols of victory, made up the core communication channel, and expressed the gladiator's own perception, which he meant to communicate in order to be preserved forever.

Epigrams are the most elaborate and original ways to convey the messages of Eastern gladiators. The mere choice for the poetic means indicates a will to address someone able to comprehend and appreciate the content, and to decipher its references. Moreover, the choice of the epigram associated gladiators with athletes, respected members of the community for whom epigrams were most often made at the time. The symbols of gladiatorial victory, i.e. the palm branch and crown, were the same that athletes were bestowed with, and like them, gladiators were proclaimed *stephanotheris*.

Despite being either individuals at the fringe of society, or outcasts, gladiators went as far as to propose comparison to mythological beings, including heroes known for their physical perfection such as Adon and Narcissus, or for their strength such as Heracles. Others claimed moral superiority over athletes, since gladiators were not fighting for the Olympic crown, but for life.

The essence of communication remains the praise and exaltation of the excellence in their profession. Through discipline and courage, gladiators earned social redemption and honor.