10-Minute Talks: Paradoxes of the Roman Arena

By Professor Kathleen Coleman FBA

In this talk, Professor Kathleen Coleman FBA highlights certain paradoxes at the root of Roman civilisation, specifically those related to the staging of violent displays in the arena. Virtually everything that fuelled Roman society can be implicated: ideology, religion, class structure, environment, economy. The Romans, evidently, tolerated these paradoxes. Can we learn anything from them?

This talk is available to watch on YouTube

Image: Colosseum in Rome without people in the morning. © Anna Kurzaeva via Getty Images

The following transcript was developed using speech recognition software and human transcribers. Although all care has been taken to check, proofread and correct the transcript, it may contain errors.

[00:00:06] I have spent my whole life studying the Romans. We can all recite their achievements from engineering to law codes. We know that they composed literature of surpassing power and beauty, including one of the greatest poems ever written, the *Aeneid* of Virgil – an epic of transcendent empathy in conveying the struggles and dilemmas of the human condition. But beauty and empathy are not my subjects in this talk. Far from it.

One hundred years after Virgil, another poet, Martial, composed in the lighter genre of epigram. In preparing an edition of one of his collections, I took a detour through Roman spectacle that has informed my whole subsequent career and made me wonder about certain paradoxes at the root of Roman civilisation. Specifically, those related to the staging of violent spectacles in the arena.

Virtually everything that fuelled Roman society was implicated – ideology, religion, class structure, environment, economy. The Romans evidently tolerated these paradoxes. What can we learn from them? Can we learn anything at all?

Roman spectacle is familiar to all of us from ruined amphitheatres across the Roman world or Hollywood epics featuring heroic gladiators fighting it out on the sands. Gladiators were in fact slaves or if they were of free status, they became assimilated to slaves by swearing to submit to the ultimate control of the owner of their troop. They had no intrinsic worth in the Roman system of elite values.

[00:01:53] They could never possess dignitas, that quintessentially Roman quality of status in one's own eyes and those of one's peers. They were stamped with the legal disability of infamia, literally unspeakableness. The gladiators' tombstones mentioned their profession as openly as those of bakers or cobblers do.

Obviously, gladiators didn't compose their own epitaphs. Their monuments were commissioned by family members or fellow gladiators. If it seems paradoxical for gladiators' tombstones to boast about their infamous profession, slaves' epitaphs commemorated them by acknowledging the role they played in their household. A person's occupation, if any, was a dominant element in his or her identity. The careful tally of victories on gladiators' tombstones suggests not shame, but pride.

Paradox also tends the animal protagonists, I'm not thinking of performing animals, even though the Romans evinced a well-attested interest in such marvels as elephants walking the tightrope. Instead, I'm thinking of animals that are destined to die in an encounter in the arena. I am struck by the paradox that some of them were named. It may seem to us counterintuitive to give a personal name to something that you intend to kill. But there are two considerations.

One is that the Romans may have had a practical reason for this; if the spectators could view the animals in their cages beforehand and lay bets on their performance. We don't know whether they did. The other consideration may be a sentimental attitude that is particularly prevalent in modern Anglophone society but not shared by other cultures in

which, for example, it may be common to give names to one's chickens, even though they're ultimately destined for the pot.

[00:03:52] Still, given the horrors of potentially fatal injury to gladiators and almost certain death for the animals, you may well wonder whether Roman culture is worth studying at all. But stay with me a little longer. When we consider who went to watch these spectacles, we confront our third paradox.

The entire community was evidently expected to be represented, including the upper classes. Elegant seats with comfy armrests were reserved for the local councillors and in sophisticated venues like the Colosseum, inscribed seats were reserved for visiting envoys from as far afield as Cadiz.

The local magnates who were honoured with a statue in their hometown for sponsoring games or building an amphitheatre presumably attended the spectacles too. Yet serious literary texts devote no attention to the arena other than the most cursory of remarks. Mostly, they avoid such a déclassé topic.

In the few surviving instances in which an upper-class Roman mentions arena displays, it is to denigrate them. But we look in vain for moral criticism. The main objection is that the enthusiasm of the spectators is so contagious that the wise man will lose his equanimity and self-control. So paradoxically, while the best accommodation in the amphitheatre was reserved for the elite, they claim to despise the shows or simply ignore them.

[00:05:26] The literary record may be virtually silent about the amphitheatre, but paradoxically, evidence abounds everywhere else. From formal stone inscriptions to casual graffiti. From crude images stamped on cheap clay lamps to exquisitely detailed scenes crafted in mosaic or painted on the wall.

While the topic is elided from dignified discourse by elite snobbery, those same elites probably own some of the houses that were so lavishly decorated with gladiatorial motifs. This limitation in the evidence causes us great difficulty in interpreting the images, which are necessarily static since we have no sequential narratives to provide the necessary context. No account of the day of the games, no reminiscences of a gladiator.

Virtually nothing about the sponsor's failures other than the Younger Pliny commiserating rather patronizingly with an acquaintance whose shipments of beasts failed to arrive from Africa in time for the show commemorating his late wife. Or Symmachus in late antiquity trying to tolerate the disappointment when a consignment of 29 Saxon prisoners committed mutual homicide on the first day of the games in honour of his ten-year-old son. So we're left with a plethora of images and almost no texts to help explain them. The paradox of silence.

[00:06:51] As by far the largest structure in most Roman towns or cities, amphitheatres cost a fortune. Paradoxically, however, as far as we can tell, they were only used a few days a year, even if they hosted the occasional banquet in addition to displays of gladiators and wild beasts.

This seems crazy, a waste of money, not cost-effective. But the Romans didn't think like capitalists. Rather for an amphitheatre to stay empty most of the time was a symbol of the worth invested in it. Multi-purpose was not a Roman concept. Showing that a patron was rich enough to spend vast sums on catering for his community, whether by building an amphitheatre, renting gladiators or importing animals from overseas at a high rate of attrition was a far more natural form of self-expression.

Gladiatorial combat at Rome began as a funerary ritual in honour of elite members of society. Gradually, it developed into a political tool to win popular favour while still retaining its funerary associations. But we know almost nothing about its religious function. When the early church fathers fulminate against arena spectacles as idolatry, they are making a rhetorical point without telling us anything about the religious purpose of the shows.

By the high empire, some pagan priesthoods, especially in the Greek East, entailed the obligation of putting on gladiatorial displays. This meant that candidates for the priesthood either had to own their own troop of gladiators or have the financial means to take over their predecessor's troop.

[00:08:35] Putting oneself forward for one of these priesthoods was therefore extremely expensive unless, as occasionally happened, one's wife owned her own gladiators. Nor did priests have a monopoly on arena displays. Civic benefactions in the Roman world are as various as endowing a fund to provide the equivalent of soap at the baths or commemorating a relative's birthday with a civic feast every year.

Staging gladiatorial combat or a beast display would earn a benefactor considerable credit, so much so that some of the emperors struggled to divert the interests of the wealthy into more urgent projects like the water supply. But limited resources are not aligned with the urgency of need. Another paradox.

The ultimate paradox, although obvious to us, would not have struck most Romans as paradoxical at all. Namely, that the supreme badge of their culture is a form of entertainment so shocking and inhumane. With regard to the human protagonists, this is a post-enlightenment view. As enslaved persons, gladiators were property, human property, they could be disposed of as their owner saw fit.

As for the animals deployed in arena displays. The concept of animal rights is overwhelmingly modern. If gladiators were chattels to be used at their owner's pleasure, wild animals were disposable curiosities. Indeed, getting rid of them was a benefit to the farmers whose crops and flocks they threatened.

We can perhaps enjoy the irony that the most punitive feature of arena displays condemning criminals to be mauled by wild beasts was paradoxically welcomed by aspiring Christian martyrs seeking to die a violent death in emulation of their leader Christ and thereby pulling the rug from under the authorities' feet.

[00:10:41] Does the Romans' glorification of violence mean that their culture should be removed from our syllabi? Or is it worth looking at a cultural practice so distant from us to see how radically different so-called civilised values can be?

When pressed, we might extend this observation to our own society, contemplating how we glorify violence in films or video games or even accept as inevitable the shooting sprees that terrorise our towns and cities. We might pause to ask ourselves what future generations will find paradoxical in modern culture. Although we may be too blinded by the assumptions of our own time to see it, just as the Romans evidently were.

Maybe all our paeans to the beauties of nature will seem paradoxical in the context of our treatment of the planet. If there are any humans surviving to look back on our civilisation a couple of millennia from now. But never mind the future, confronting paradox in a distant civilisation may be a useful exercise in our modern, globalised world anyway. Where others, despite the homogenisation of social media and Hollywood, may ultimately neither share our values nor think the way we do.