

Amphitheatres

Roman audiences enjoyed watching public games which were held in amphitheatres across the Empire. The games were originally part of religious festivals, but then developed into entertainments in their own right on public holidays.

Roman audiences had bloodthirsty tastes and many of the contests were dangerous and cruel. The Roman leaders who organised the games did so to make themselves popular, believing that if people were allowed to watch cruel spectacles, they would be less likely to rebel.

Amphitheatres were huge, open-centred, round or oval buildings, rather like football stadiums, holding vast numbers of spectators.

Entertainments such as gladiatorial contests and chariot racing took place in the central arenas, while the audiences sat around on tiered stone or wooden seats. Tunnels and caged cells were built underneath the arenas to hold the wild animals used in the gladiatorial contests.

The games went on all day. They began with wild animals fighting a gladiator or each other, or even just killing defenceless criminals. At midday, the bodies were removed and fresh sand was spread ready for the main event of the day, in which two gladiators fought each other to the death.

The games also included chariot races. People bet on the outcome, as light two-wheeled chariots pulled by up to four horses sped around the track, the charioteer standing up to keep the chariot balanced. There were numerous accidents and deaths, which was, of course, the main appeal as far as Roman audiences were concerned.

1. How did the purpose of the games change over time?

2. Why did Roman leaders organise the games for their citizens?

3. What would the gladiators have seen?

4. What was built underneath the arena and why were they built there?

5. What might you have heard on the day of the games?
