

The Cost of Gladiatorial Events in the Black Sea

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Gladiatorial shows were complex events, requiring elaborate preparations and costs that could bankrupt the publishers.¹ A good example, in this case, is Caesar, exaggerated so much in the organization of the shows that he accumulated huge debts.²

No documents are preserved that relate to the cost of organizing *philotimia* in the Roman Pontic provinces, Moesia Inferior, Thrace, Bithynia et Pontus, and Cappadocia. The inscriptions that do tell us about the gladiator fights do not specify any amount of money invested, but describe the event, noting that the performances were magnificent. This leads us to think that they required significant budgets. Such an event consists of a series of organizational aspects, each demanding substantial expenses and raising the cost of *philotimia* to considerable sums, being comparable to a fortune.³

In order to arrange a spectacle of gladiators, the organizer had to pass through certain stages. The first concern of an organizer was the acquisition of the μονομάχοι. In the second half of the 2nd century AD, the lowest contract of a gladiator for participation in fights was between 1,000 and 3,000 sesterces. At the same time, a 1st Class gladiator who participated in a show, whose budget ranged between 30,000 and 60,000 sesterces, could not be contracted with more than 5,000 sesterces. However, the price could increase to 15,000 sesterces if the show had a budget of 200,000 sesterces or more.⁴

There are instances in which the organizer of *philotimia*, in this case the great priests of the Imperial cult, pontarchs (magistrate and leader of the Pontic community, the Federation of Greek cities on the west coast of the Black Sea) and *philotimoi*, hired a φαμίλια μονομάχων from a *lanista*. The high priest of the Imperial cult, Marcus Antonius Rufus, pontarch in Neocaesarea⁵ in Bithynia et Pontus did the same thing. During the exercise of the priesthood, some had a φαμίλια, which they later sold to their successors in office.⁶ The cost of owning and maintaining a φαμίλια μονομάχων, including accommodation, food, auxiliary staff and many other needs of the gladiators, must have been quite large. On the other hand, renting one would have required much lower costs.

Not all priests, especially those of small communities, could afford to rent a φαμίλια of gladiators and they certainly could not keep one during their term in the priesthood.⁷ In this case, the organizer uses the services of independent gladiators who went to fight wherever needed, such as the gladiator Flammeatis,⁸ a *retiarius* born in Pergamon who died in Philippopolis and Phylokynegos,⁹ or another *retiarius*, a native of Macedonia who died in Claudiopolis.

No *philotimia* could consist only of gladiator fights. An equally important element in the economy of such an event was the hunting of wild animals, *venationes*, as well as the fights staged between animals and the display of exotic beasts. If the procurement of gladiators was affordable, especially if the pecuniary aspect of the *philotimoi* was not a problem, purchasing animals was a major problem. It required considerable effort, not necessarily financially, but depended on the relations to buy or capture the animals.

The more exotic and rare the animals were, the more prestigious the event became and raised the status of its organizer; this also exponentially increased the costs.¹⁰

Well known are the letters of Caelius Rufus to Cicero, *proconsul* of Cilicia, who asked for help in capturing panthers.¹¹ While the writings of Cicero indicate that those who captured wild animals in Cilicia specialized in such endeavours, two inscriptions discovered in Montana, in Moesia Inferior, tell us that this task fell to the soldiers stationed there.¹² The famous edict of Diocletian set the price of lions and leopards brought for the arena from Libya between 75,000 and 150,000 sesterces.¹³ However, we must take into account the costs of both the capture and transport of the animal, as well as its storage and maintenance in specially arranged spaces (*vivarium*) until the moment of entry into the arena. Altogether, this involved a high financial cost that was not feasible for everyone.¹⁴ In fact, an unpleasant aspect of the capture and trade of wild animals for their display in the arena is that it led to faunal imbalances in certain geographical areas. During Emperor Augustus' reign, lions in the Atlas Mountains and the panthers of Asia Minor disappeared altogether; four centuries later the hippopotami of Nubia, the Mesopotamian lions, the tigers of Hyrcania, and the elephants of North Africa disappeared completely and forever from these territories.¹⁵

Apart from these aspects, a *philotimos* had to add to the general expenses also the charges entailed by hiring a referee (*summa rudis*) and an assistant (*secunda rudis*), the distribution of food¹⁶ and prizes during breaks between battles (*sparsio missilium*),¹⁷ setting up an amphitheatre or another place to host such an event, as well as an auxiliary staff. Last but not least was the Imperial tax for *munera*, which was between 25 and 33% of the amount paid for organizing the event.¹⁸

It seems that a defining element in the cost of organizing such an event was the competitiveness, the need to surpass and having no comparison.¹⁹ With this ambition, the costs also increased. But what the *philotimos* – whether it was a priest, a high priest of the Imperial cult, a pontarch, or just a private person – really desired was to increase his status in the local political scene. This ambition caused the prices for contracting gladiators to explode. Up to the 2nd century AD the cost of organizing a *philotimia* was ruinous, but a *senatus consultum* dating from the days of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, 177 AD (more precisely, *S. C. de pretiis gladiatorum minuendis vel de sumptibus ludorum gladiatoriorum minuendis, lex gladiatoria, Aes Italicense, Lex Italicensis*, also known as *Aes Italicense*), regulated the costs of organizing *munera* in the Empire.²⁰ This document divides the gladiators into *classes* and gives the maximum costs that could be paid for a gladiator. The document aimed to relax the financial strain on the priests of the imperial cult who had the obligation to organize *munera* during the exercise of the office.²¹ This *senatus consultum* abolished the tax on *munera*, which brought an income to the empire's treasury of between 60 and 120 million *sesterces* per year.²²

Fiscus non sibi sed qui lanienae aliorum praetexeretur tertia vel quarta parte ad licentiam foedae rapinae invi-

*tatus. Itaque fiscum removerunt a tota harena. Quid enim Marci Antonini et Luci Commodi cavendum fisco cum harena? Omnis pecunia horum principum <p>ura est, null [a] cruoris humani adspersine contaminata, nullis sordibus foedi quae {s}-stus inquinata, et quae tam sanct{a}e paratur quam insumitur. Itaque facessat sive illud ducentiens annum seu trecenties est.*²³

This document determined that an independent gladiator cannot be paid more than 12,000 sesterces.

*- - s[il]iberatus discrimen instauraverit, aestimatio eius posthac HS XII non excedat.*²⁴

In addition, the acquisition of death sentences to be executed in the arena could be carried out by the Roman authorities with a maximum of 6 *aureus* – equivalent to 600 *sesterces*, while from a *lanista* this could not be purchased for more than 2,000 *sesterces*.²⁵

*Ad Gallias sed et <t>rin<quo>s qui in civitatibus splendidissimarum Galliarum veteri more et sacro ritu expectantur ne ampliore pretio lanistae praebeant quam binis milibus, cum maximi pr[in]cipes oratione sua praedixerint fore ut damnatum a<d> gladium procurator eorum non plure quam sex aureis lanistis pra[e]beat vacat.*²⁶

This *senatus consultum* is an exceptional document helping us to get an idea of the expenses incurred by an organizer of the *munera* in the Pontic Roman provinces. The document regulates the minimum and maximum costs a *philotimos* had to make to or for a gladiator depending on the budget of the show, both for the performances themselves and the payment. The minimum amount, according to *Aes Italicense*, for the organization of *munera* was a maximum 30,000 sesterces and was called *assiforana* (the one at which an entry fee was charged).²⁷ It is still unclear how the tickets were distributed, but the entry was most likely done with the sponsor's agreement.²⁸ In his speech in defence of Murena, Cicero suggests that it has become a habit for the elite to control access to games by sharing tickets with clients.²⁹ In fact, Murena is accused of distributing tickets at random and not only to friends and associates, to boast that he can provide such places: of course, his purpose was political.³⁰

According to the *Aes Italicense*, *munera* can be classified into five categories:

- 1st Category, known as *munera assiforana* (small-scale, local entrepreneurial spectacles for profit), < 30,000 *sesterces*;
- 2nd Category: shows whose cost ranges between 30,000 and 60,000 *sesterces*;
- 3rd Category: shows whose cost ranges between 60,000 and 100,000 *sesterces*;
- 4th Category: shows whose cost ranges between 100,000 and 150,000 *sesterces*;

- 5th Category: shows whose cost ranges between 150,000 and 200,000 *sesterces* and more.

The *Aes Italicense* notes that in each of these categories of performances, no less than half of the gladiators should have never fought in inexperienced pairs, known as *gregari*. They were paid between 1,000 *sesterces* (least experienced) and 2,000 *sesterces* (most experienced).³¹

As for the sums allocated to gladiators, this depended on the category they were part of and according to the category of the show, and was divided into four categories:

- 1st Category: 5,000 *sesterces* for the first class, 4,000 *sesterces* for the second class and 3,000 *sesterces* for the third class;
- 2nd Category: 8,000 *sesterces* for the first class, 6,000 *sesterces* for the second class and 5,000 *sesterces* for the third class;
- 3rd Category: 12,000 *sesterces* for the first class, 10,000 *sesterces* for the second class, 8,000 *sesterces* for the third class, 6,000 *sesterces* for the fourth class, and 5,000 *sesterces* for the fifth class;
- 4th Category: 15,000 *sesterces* for the first class, 12,000 *sesterces* for the second class, 9,000 *sesterces* for the third class, 7,000 *sesterces* for the fourth class, and 6,000 *sesterces* for the fifth class.

To advance a hypothesis about the average cost of a *philotimia* in the Roman provinces of the Pontic region, we must take into account the fact that a *munerarius* or, in our case, an ἀρχιερεὺς δι' ὀπλων, φιλότιμος δι' ὀπλων, or a pontarch had to have a fortune exceeding 400,000 *sesterces*, as the Senate decided by a decree adopted during the reign of Emperor Tiberius.³² This being established by law, we can assume that any of the *philotimia* organizers in the Roman Pontic provinces, whether public or private persons, had a wealth of at least 400,000 *sesterces*. Going further and analysing the costs attributed to each category of performances we notice that the first category would be the cheapest.

Bomgardner has calculated the cost of organizing gladiator fights in this category, assuming that such an event would have been attended by 12 gladiators, two from each class, and half of them were part of the *gregarii*; the total expenditure would range between 30,000 to 36,000 *sesterces*.³³ His calculations are ideal and do not cover all the expenses for a *philotimos*, who needed to pay a substantial amount for the wild animals that most likely were included in all spectacles of this kind.

In the Roman Pontic provinces, the inscriptions do not mention any event that would have lasted less than two days: two days at Nicopolis ad Istrum³⁴ and Serdica,³⁵ three days at Claudiopolis,³⁶ and six days at Tomis.³⁷ Therefore, we will attempt to estimate the cost of a *philotimia* here, which would have taken place over two days.

In the province of Thrace, at Philippopolis, a *token* that was used as an entry ticket to a gladiator fight was discovered.³⁸ This small lead object indicates the existence of a local *munera assiforana*, an entrepreneurial spectacle for profit, which cannot exceed 30,000 *sesterces*. Such objects are scarce finds because after the performances ended, they were most likely collected and melted to be reuse for other purposes.

At Claudiopolis, in Bithynia et Pontus, the priest Secundus organized a *philotimia* of three days, which was attended by 12 gladiators. Strictly speaking, it is a small number of fighters involved in a *philotimia* extended over so many days. But, due to the large number of victories attributed to each gladiator (35, 58, 65 and so on), we can only believe that the fights between these gladiators were a *simulacrum* and that they had fought on all three days. We will assume that the six pairs of gladiators were enough for two days of spectacles, and we take into consideration Bomgardner's calculations and the simulation status of the show.

The price paid by *philotimos* for purchasing wild animals for a *venatio* is hard to establish for the space we refer to, because there is no text detailing the amount paid for animals in this part of the Empire. However, we can compare it with epigraphic sources found in other provinces of the Empire. The price edict of Emperor Diocletian, dated in 301 AD, mentioned that a first class African lion costs a maximum of 600,000 *sesterces*, while a first class African lioness costs 400,000 *sesterces*; ordinary lions cost 125,000 to 150,000 *sesterces*, lionesses cost 100,000 to 125,000 *sesterces*, leopards cost 75,000 to 100,000 *sesterces*, and bears cost 20,000 to 25,000 *sesterces*. Costs for herbivores included ostriches (5,000 *sesterces*), wild boars (4,000 to 6,000 *sesterces*), deer (2,000 to 3,000 *sesterces*), and wild asses (5,000 *sesterces*).³⁹ On the Magerius mosaic from Smirat in Tunisia, Magerius himself is shown spending a total of 4,000 *denarii* (equivalent to 16,000 *sesterces*) for four leopards.⁴⁰ On the other hand, in the provinces with military cantoning units, as is the case in Montana, in Moesia Inferior, two inscriptions have been discovered that describe soldiers dealing with animal captures, at the *cohors I Cilicum* and *legio XI Claudia*. They are called *venatores immunes*, and it is most likely that the animals purchased from them were at much lower prices than if the organizer called for a specialized team to capture them. They may have even been free, depending of the position or the office the organizer had in the province or in the wider Empire.⁴¹ From the reliefs discovered in this region we notice that wild animals in these provinces were used in the arena – bears, deer/stags, lions, panthers – but also domestic animals such as bulls and horses. So, we can assume that the two days of the show included the display in the arena of some exotic animals, perhaps four panthers, which would have cost the organizer 16,000 *sesterces*. It is a possibility that the bears, stags, and other wild animals that were native to the territories of the Roman Pontic provinces could have been procured at affordable prices, or for free, but we do not know for sure. The relief depicting *venationes* and *damnatio ad bestias* discovered in Serdica displays eight bears and three deer or stags.⁴² There could have been more, but the relief is broken on the top. For our assumption, we will take into consideration a smaller number of animals than those displayed on the Serdica relief. Two bears and two deer or stags would cost 44,000 *sesterces*. The necessity of keeping and feeding the animals, of at least one referee, musicians, *damnati ad bestias* (who were available at the price of 600 *sesterces* per person) prizes, and other matters related to the organization of such an event could raise the cost of a two-day *philotimia* to more than 90,000/96,000 *sesterces*.

As a final remark, it is almost impossible at this point to find out the exact cost of organizing *philotimia* and any estimation is difficult due to the lack of written information about the sums involved, as is the case in other parts of the empire. However, considering the two laws, the *Aes Italicense* and Diocletian's Edict on maximal prices, and the corroboration of archaeological evidence, we believe an estimate can be made. Starting from the descriptions of fights and *venationes* from reliefs and inscriptions from the Pontic provinces, a two-day event that included both gladiators and wild animals would fall within the third category, with the cost ranging between 60,000 and 100,000 *sesterces*. On the other hand, the *token* discovered at Philippopolis indicates that *munera assiforana* were organized in the Pontic area, indicating that we can identify another category of spectacles that cannot exceed the amount of 30,000 *sesterces*.

Notes

¹ Futrell 2006, 14.

² Appian II, 13; Futrell 2006, 15.

³ Futrell 2006, 14–18.

⁴ Carter 1999, 108, 133; Carter 2004, 61; Nossov 2009, 131; Uzunaslán 2010, 129–130 f.

⁵ Robert 1940, 128–129 f. no. 75; Carter 1999, 194, no. 182.

⁶ Carter 1999, 225.

⁷ Carter 1999, 228; Carter 2004, 43–44.

⁸ IGBulg III, 1018.

⁹ Mann 2011, no. 161.

¹⁰ Carter 1999, 232–233.

¹¹ Cicero *Epist. ad Famil.*, 2; Futrell 2006, 17 f.

¹² Velcov, Alexandrov 1988, 272–275.

¹³ Carter 1999, 233.

¹⁴ Carter 1999, 233; Nossov 2009, 140.

¹⁵ Nossov 2009, 140; Bernet 2014, 250.

¹⁶ Futrell 2006, 111.

¹⁷ Such a moment occurred at the inauguration of the Colosseum amphitheater, described by Cassius Dio (LXVI, 25).

¹⁸ Carter 1999, 223; Bomgardner 2000, 209; Mann 2011, 72–73.

¹⁹ Carter 1999, 234.

²⁰ Oliver, Palmer 1955, 330–334; Bomgardner 2000, 208–210; Pantoja, Garrido 2009, 46–48 no. 3.

²¹ Carter 1999, 222.

²² Carter 1999, 223; Mann 2011, 273.

²³ *Aes Italicense*, lines 5–9, *apud* Oliver – Palmer 1955.

²⁴ *Aes Italicense*, lines 62–63, *apud* Oliver – Palmer 1955.

²⁵ Carter 2009, 232; Bomgardner 2000, 210.

- ²⁶ *Aes Italicense*, lines 56–58, *apud* Oliver – Palmer 1955.
- ²⁷ Oliver, Palmer 1955, 341; Bomgardner 2000, 208.
- ²⁸ Holleran 2003, 50.
- ²⁹ Cicero *For Murena*, 35; Holleran 2003, 50.
- ³⁰ Cicero *For Murena*, 35.
- ³¹ *Aes Italicense*, lines 29–37, *apud* Oliver, Palmer 1955; Kyle 1998, 84; Bomgardner 2000, 208.
- ³² Bomgardner 2000, 208–209; Nossov 2009, 132.
- ³³ Bomgardner 2000, 230.
- ³⁴ IGBulg II, 660.
- ³⁵ IGBulg IV, 1918.
- ³⁶ SEG 39, 1339.
- ³⁷ ISM II, 96 (62).
- ³⁸ Vagalinski 2009, 208, no. 134.
- ³⁹ SEG 14, 386; CIL III, Suppl. 2, 1925, PP, col. I; Bingen 1954, 349–352; Bomgardner 2000, 211.
- ⁴⁰ Bomgardner 2000, 211.
- ⁴¹ Velcov, Alexandrov 1988, 272–275.
- ⁴² IGBulg IV, 1921.

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