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# On War and Games in the Ancient World

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That there is a connection between warfare and sport is evident enough. Competitive games, in the form of contests between individuals or teams, imitate war in a more or less conscious manner. This fact is most obviously reflected in the language of sport. When sports writers use terms like catastrophe, tragedy, massacre, or annihilation, people sometimes complain that such metaphors are exaggerated or even in poor taste, since what is happening is "only" a game, and should not be taken too seriously.

Those who are closely involved in sport, whether as players, managers or fans, tend to differ, however, and many familiar anecdotes illustrate this tendency among professionals. The most famous saying of Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, was: "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing." Bill Shankly, the equally legendary manager of Liverpool FC, is supposed to have said: "Football is not a matter of life and death; it's much more serious than that." The idea that sport is not a matter for play is famously summed up in the comment of an anonymous Yorkshireman: "Come on lad, this is cricket -- it's not a game you know." But on any view, even those who admit a playful element in sport, and are prepared to concede that it is not actually war, talk of victory and defeat, triumph and surrender, offence and defence, strategy and tactics. Such language is not metaphorical at all, but a literal description of what actually happens. That competitive sport represents a form of combat can hardly be denied.

Some of the resemblances between war and sport can be briefly enumerated. Both entail contests of physical strength and skill. Both tend to reinforce group solidarity and identity ("us" against "them"). Both arouse strong emotions among participants and interested non-participants (spectators or fans in a sporting context, non-combatant civilians on the "home front" in war). The qualities that are admired in both are similar (e.g. courage, loyalty, stamina, and discipline), and both confer honour and prestige on their heroes. In almost all cultures, the conduct of war resembles that of sport in being to some extent artificial, regulated, and ritualised. Indeed, as will be argued below, the more ritualised and artificial it is, the more war comes to resemble a form of play. Finally, note should be taken of the important fact that war and sport are essentially male activities. Until very recently women were excluded entirely from both, with only a few marginal exceptions. Historically speaking, both war and sport have had an important social function as mechanisms for male bonding, for the social construction of masculinity, and in reinforcing and perpetuating male domination.<sup>1</sup>

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In the explanation and interpretation of the link between war and sports, there are essentially two theories. The first is that sports are complementary to war, that they stimulate and encourage warlike attitudes and behaviour, and that they have an educative function in training men for combat. The second theory is that sport represents an alternative to war; on this view, sport is a surrogate or substitute for war, an idea that can be understood in different ways. On the one hand sport can be seen as a "safety valve," which has the effect of diverting aggressive tendencies away from warlike violence and towards less harmful activities; on the other hand sport and war can be viewed as parallel manifestations of the same aggressive and competitive tendencies, and as alternative expressions of the same general phenomenon. On this view, aggressive sports might be expected to flourish in warlike societies, rather than to be a diversionary channel for aggressive behaviour in pacific ones.<sup>2</sup>

Let us examine these theories in more detail, with specific reference to the evidence from Greek and Roman antiquity. We may begin with the suggestion that the purpose of sport is to prepare men for war. But there is little serious evidence to support the idea

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of a direct functional link of this kind. While athletics can obviously serve to develop the physical fitness needed by soldiers, this is equally clearly an incidental feature rather than a primary function of sports as such. More efficient and more direct forms of military exercise and training can easily be imagined (and are indeed engaged in as a matter of course by modern professional armies - and see also the views of Epaminondas, discussed below), and the particular forms of sport that were practised in antiquity were partly or wholly unsuitable for military training.<sup>3</sup>

Explicit comments on this matter by ancient authors are mostly rhetorical and ideological, amounting as they do to *ex post facto* justifications of sport. The clearest statements to this effect occur in late Greek sources such as Plutarch (*Moralia* 639a-640a), Lucian (*Anacharsis* 24-34), and Philostratus (*On Gymnastics* 9.11.43), all of whom were writing in the Roman period, centuries after the Greek states had ceased to engage in warfare. Their statements can be compared to the Victorian idea that sports had an important educative function in "character-building" and preparing boys for war (the "Playing Fields of Eton" theory). This too was a rhetorical and ideological justification of public-school sports. It is one thing to say that games helped to develop the manly virtues needed in war:

The voice of the schoolboy rallies the ranks:  
"Play up! play up! And play the game!"

but it is quite another to suggest that cricket (the sport in question in Newbolt's famous poem) is a form of military training. No one in his right mind would accept that as an explanation of why people play cricket, or even, in a functionalist sense, of what cricket is "for."

It is significant, moreover, that one can find, both in antiquity and in modern times, dissenting voices expressing precisely the opposite point of view. A passage of Euripides is the most explicit: "What outstanding wrestler, what swift-footed man, or discus hurler, or expert at punching the jaw has done his ancestral homeland a service by winning a crown? Do they fight with enemies holding discuses in their hands, or by kicking through shields with their feet expel their country's enemies? No one standing next to steel indulges in this stupidity" (Euripides *Autolykos* fr. 282 Nauck, quoted by Poliakoff 1987, 99).

Although the Spartan general Agesilaus is said to have staged athletic contests for his troops in order to keep them fit during the winter (Xenophon, *Agesilaus* 1.25-8; *Hellenica* 3.4.16-19), other commanders were more sceptical. Alexander the Great is said to have disparaged athletics, especially boxing and the pankration (Plutarch, *Alexander* 4.6; on the pankration see below), and the Achaean general Philopoemen actually forbade his soldiers to take part in sports (Plut. *Philopoemen* 3.2-4).<sup>4</sup> The most interesting evidence concerns the fourth-century BC Theban leader Epaminondas, who, although himself an accomplished athlete, thought that weapon training was more useful than athletics, and told his fellow citizens to practise in the war camps, not in the palaestra (Nepos, *Epam.* 15.2 and 5; Plut. *Mor.* 192 c-d; 788 a). This seems to me to be a clear recognition of the idea that physical fitness may be an incidental product of sporting activity, but that dedicated military exercises are a more effective way of training armies.

For their part the Romans went so far as to suggest that the Greeks' devotion to athletics was a cause of their eventual military failure. According to Plutarch, the Romans "believe that nothing has been so much to blame for the enslavement and effeminacy of the Greeks as their gymnasia and palaestras, which engender much listless idleness and waste of time in their cities, as well as pederasty and the ruin of the bodies of the young men with regulated sleeping, walking, rhythmical movements, and strict diet; by these practices they have unconsciously lapsed from the practice of arms ..." etc. Tacitus believed that the introduction of Greek practices would encourage Roman youths to strip naked and take up boxing rather than follow the profession of arms (*Annals* 14.20). Among modern writers Michael Poliakoff quotes Thorstein Veblen, who wrote that a well-trained athlete would not know how to defend himself against an enemy, and that "the relation of football to physical culture is much the same as that of the bull-fight to agriculture." (Veblen 1899; Poliakoff 1987, 178 n.48).

Before we conclude this discussion, two general points need to be made. First, note should be taken of a difference between ancient discussions of the military usefulness of athletics and the Victorian attitudes referred to above. Whereas the ancients stressed (or denied) the practical utility of sports in the development of fighting skills, strength, and physical fitness, the Victorians thought in terms of character-building, and the encouragement of abstract virtues such as loyalty, selflessness, group solidarity, and team discipline. These were supposedly produced by the sports advocated by the public-school reformers, namely cricket, football, and rugby. But curiously in antiquity ball games were little known and seem to have been of marginal social significance; more to the point, team games (which are mostly ball games in any case) were virtually unknown.

Moreover there was no equivalent in antiquity to our "contact sports" -- that is, team games like football, rugby, American football, and ice hockey -- in which violent physical contact between players is an integral part of the game.<sup>5</sup> In such sports, violent aggression and selfless physical commitment are highly valued, and it is these that are most frequently cited in modern discussions of violence in sport, and the question of whether there is any correlation between aggressive sports and violence, aggression and belligerence in society at large. Contact sports come closest to representations of war, especially those where the object is to gain territory, and to prevent opponents from advancing, by physical force -- that is, American football, rugby, and related games (Gutt-

mann 1978, 121 ff.; Hoch 1972; Sipes 1973).

It is highly significant for our present discussions that virtually no games of this type are known from antiquity. There is an exception, however, and it is an extremely significant one. In Sparta, the most militarised of all the Greek states, there were team sports in which groups of young men fought in unarmed combat for possession of a piece of territory, and others which involved fighting over a ball (Pausanias 3.14.8; Lucian, *Anacharsis* 38; Michell 1951, 190-2; Poliakoff 1987, 101-2; Hodgkinson 1999, 148-9). On the other hand, the Spartans seem to have disapproved of conventional sports; a ban on boxing and the *pankration* (see below) was attributed to Lycurgus, the legendary founder of Spartan institutions (Plut. *Lyc.* 19.4; *Mor.* 189e; 228d), and while the authenticity of this information may be doubted, it seems certain that these sports at least were not encouraged in Sparta.<sup>6</sup>

The second general point concerns Rome, where the major public sporting events involved Roman citizens not as participants but as spectators. More will be said about this presently, but for the present it is sufficient to note that Roman citizens, from whom the legions were exclusively recruited, rarely took part in the games, and those who did were strongly disapproved of. Any suggestion therefore that the Roman games were a way of preparing the citizens for war is absolutely out of the question.

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From the foregoing discussion it would seem that there is no good reason to postulate any causal, purposive, or functional relationship between athletic activities and warfare. We may now turn to the second possibility, that war and sport are in some sense alternatives, or different aspects of the same thing. There is undoubtedly a good deal of overlap between the two categories, not only in the sense that at least some games can be understood as forms of war, but, more interestingly, that in certain conditions war can properly be described as a form of sport. Moreover, distinguishing between the two is not always as easy as it might appear. These points will be explored in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Some sports involve warlike activities, such as archery or javelin throwing; at the ancient Greek Olympic Games, an event was introduced at the end of the sixth century BC which required competitors to race over a distance wearing the full armour of an infantry soldier. Other sports entail combat in a more direct way, whether unarmed (wrestling) or armed (fencing, jousting, etc.). The traditional way of distinguishing these combat sports from "true" combat is to say that they are "for fun," whereas warlike combat is in earnest,<sup>7</sup> or, in the modern colloquialism, "for real."

But a moment's reflection is enough to show that matters are not so simple. Such sports *can* be reduced to mock combats, as in the case of modern fencing, where protective gear and the guards on the foil make physical injury a virtual impossibility. But fencing has its origins in duelling, which, like jousting, could end in the death of the loser. Boxing is a particularly interesting (and controversial) case, since the aim of the contestants is to inflict physical injury on each other. Modern rules and other devices (medical check-ups, the attendance of doctors at the ringside, the referee's power to stop the fight, etc) are designed to prevent serious or permanent injury, but are not necessarily very effective and are applied only in officially regulated fights. The introduction of boxing gloves is sometimes held to have been a safety measure to protect boxers from the effects of blows to their head and body; but it is arguable that their purpose is equally to protect the hitter against the (very real) possibility of injury to his fists.

For all its skill and athleticism, boxing has always been a brutal activity (ask anyone who has been to a live fight; the reality is not evident on television), and in earlier ages bouts were fought to a finish -- that is, until one of the fighters gave in, or was reduced to complete exhaustion or knocked senseless. Such was the character of boxing in Greek and Roman antiquity, when boxers wore "gloves" in the form of leather thongs which had the "knuckleduster" function of both protecting the fist of the hitter and increasing the damage caused to his victim.

Not surprisingly, at the Olympic Games and other such festivals, boxing matches sometimes ended with the death of the defeated opponent. Other Olympic sports were almost as brutal; they included the *pankration*, a form of unarmed combat in which anything was allowed other than biting and gouging (a rule that was not always strictly observed). The *pankration* could also end in death -- on one celebrated occasion, at the Olympic Games of 564 BC, a *pankратиast* named Arrichion died in the final, but won the prize posthumously because his opponent submitted before he (Arrichion) breathed his last. But boxing was always recognised as the most dangerous of sports; an athlete who entered both events asked for the *pankration* to be staged first, in the belief that he was more likely to be seriously injured in the boxing (Pausanias 6.15.5). An epitaph for a boxer who died at Olympia in (probably) the third century AD tells us that, like a soldier, he had "prayed to Zeus for victory or death" (S.E.G. 22.354).

Boxing was extremely popular in Rome. It was the favourite sport of the emperor Augustus, who not only enjoyed professional bouts, in which he used to pit Italians against Greeks, but also liked to watch brawls in the streets (Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 45). Professional boxing was one of the Greek sports that was taken up by the Romans; notice that Tacitus (14.20, cited above) still regarded it as a Greek activity. But the Romans also introduced a heavier type of glove, so that boxing and Greek-style boxing became separate events; both were put on at the games in Pompeii staged by A. Clodius Flaccus, a local magistrate (ILS 5053.4).

The heavier Roman gloves (*caestus*) were strapped to the boxer's arms and were reinforced at the fist with pieces of metal. In the boxing match in Virgil's *Aeneid* (V.404-84), Entellus enters with a pair of gigantic gloves, made of seven ox-hides and "hard-

ened with in-sewn lead and iron," these weapons (*arma*) had formerly been worn by his brother Eryx, for which pedigree there was a grisly proof: "thou seest them even now stained with blood and spattered brains" (*sanguine cernis adhuc sparsoque infecta cerebro*). In the event his opponent refuses to fight until lighter and more equal gloves are produced. Entellus nevertheless wins when Aeneas stops the fight and awards him a bull as his prize. Entellus, still presumably wearing the lighter gloves, then fells the bull with a single blow from his right hand, crushing its skull and scattering its brains (V.479-81).

In Virgil's Rome boxing had become a form of armed combat similar to the more famous gladiatorial contests. No one would venture to suggest that these, or indeed the now lethal boxing matches, were mock duels; on the other hand it is arbitrary to deny that they were a form of sport. The suggestion that the gladiators were engaged in an activity that does not deserve to be called sport is a value judgement based on modern cultural prejudice.<sup>8</sup>

Warfare cannot be distinguished from sport and games on the easy assumption that the former is serious and for real, while the latter are unserious and for fun. The best illustration of the inadequacy of this distinction is the contrasting pair of medieval examples quoted by Allen Guttman: three men were killed at the Battle of Brémule in 1119, whereas at the tournament at Neuss in 1240 the dead numbered sixty (Guttman 1978, 7). For a Roman example, one is bound to ask whether the casualties suffered in the First and Second Dacian Wars (AD 101-2 and 105-6) were as numerous as in the games that were put on in Rome to celebrate the victory, which lasted for 123 days and in which over 10,000 gladiators fought. (The answer is probably yes, but you get the point).

A more fruitful distinction might be that sports and games are essentially non-utilitarian and "autotelic," that is to say, they are ends in themselves, engaged in for no ulterior purpose. Warfare, on the other hand, is usually seen as a means to an end, as a way of achieving a political goal. But any such definition immediately betrays another cultural prejudice, namely the modern western view of war as defined by Clausewitz and his followers. Even in Clausewitz's own time it would have been theoretically possible to take a broader view; but, as John Keegan has pointed out, "Clausewitz allowed the two institutions -- the state and the regiment -- that circumscribed his own perception of the world to dominate his thinking so narrowly that he denied himself the room to observe how different war might be in societies where both state and regiment were alien concepts ... His decision to ignore [e.g.] Ottoman military institutions flawed the integrity of his theory at its roots. To look beyond military slavery into the even stranger military cultures of the Polynesians, the Zulus and the samurai, whose forms of warfare defied altogether the rationality of politics as it is understood by Westerners, is to perceive how incomplete, parochial and ultimately misleading is the idea that war is the continuation of politics" (Keegan 1993, 23-4).

As countless anthropological studies and cross-cultural comparisons have demonstrated, war is often conducted with no recognisable political aim, and in many societies is autotelic in precisely the same way as sports and games are assumed to be. The commonplace that "war is a game" is more than just a figure of speech; it is often literally true. This is most clearly evident in aristocratic warrior societies that practise what is conventionally described as "primitive war."<sup>9</sup> One recent study has argued that the general category of "war" can be reduced to two basic types: "primitive war" and "civilized war," which can be distinguished precisely on the grounds that the former is a ritual practised for its own sake, while the latter is an instrument of state policy.<sup>10</sup>

The principal characteristics of primitive warfare are that its conduct is highly ritualised, that it is occasioned by the need to exact vengeance for a perceived insult or wrong (often involving women), that men engage in war for personal and private motives rather than public and political ones, and that the aim of the exercise is to obtain prestige and honour, rather than any political or material advantage. Even if movable booty is an important product of successful war, in the form of precious objects, cattle and women, these gains nevertheless function as part of the honour system because they are expended in conspicuous displays of rewards to followers, feasting and gift-giving, and therefore serve to reinforce the prestige and standing of successful warriors (Van Wees 1992, 218 ff., 299 ff.).

In ancient times this kind of warfare is most clearly exemplified in the world of the Homeric poems, in which the heroes are engaged in an incessant competition for honour and prestige both on and off the battlefield. In Homer war is reduced to a series of personal duels between aristocratic heroes, and clearly has the character of a competitive game.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile athletic sports have a parallel function. The Homeric hero is not only a supreme fighter but also an accomplished athlete. The stock epithet for Achilles, the greatest of the Achaean heroes, is "swift of foot." The heroes in the Iliad compete with one another in war and at the games which Achilles organises at the funeral of Patroclus in Iliad 23. The events include chariot racing, boxing, wrestling, a foot race, an armed duel, weight throwing, archery, and spear throwing.

The Homeric poems represent the heroic values of the aristocratic society of archaic Greece -- the world in which the Olympic Games originated. At this period both war and athletic competition were confined exclusively to the aristocracy;<sup>12</sup> these were, therefore, like hospitality and gift-giving, mechanisms by which warriors could display their privileged status as members of a wealthy and leisured elite.

Later Greek society inherited its social and cultural ideals from the world of the Homeric heroes. But Homeric values were transformed and adapted to a changing society, and in the city-states of the archaic and classical periods the competitive spirit was extended to all areas of life within a wider citizen body. The intensely competitive character of classical Greek society led J. Burck-

hardt to identify the *agon*, the "contest", as the key to understanding Greek culture (Burckhardt 1898-1902, 82 ff.; 200 ff.; cf. Brelich 1961). The agonistic spirit expressed itself not only in athletics, but in competitions in art, drama and music, and in the constant striving to outdo one's rivals in all areas of life -- public speaking, law, politics, and philosophical argument.

The curious nature of traditional Greek warfare can be understood in terms of the agonistic spirit. Wars took the form of contests between opposing armies of "hoplites," heavily armed infantrymen who formed themselves into tightly knit phalanxes and engaged in fearful hand-to-hand battles.<sup>13</sup> The hoplites themselves were landed citizens who were sufficiently well-off to equip themselves with the necessary bronze armour; they were a privileged group whose service in the army was a mark of status.

A hoplite battle was a highly regulated affair, often called an *agon*, fought on a piece of level ground that the two sides had tacitly agreed upon. The two opposing phalanxes faced each other, then advanced, first at walking pace, and finally at a run. The clash was followed by pushing and hand-to-hand fighting until one side gave way and thereby conceded the victory to their opponents. The battle could be extremely bloody while it lasted (Krentz 1985; Lazenby 1991), but it was over fairly quickly and produced a decisive result; the victors were left in control of the field, where they set up a trophy, while the losers were obliged to ask for a truce in order to recover their dead. In spite of the horrific nature of the battle itself, the ultimate effect was to limit the action in time and space. "For one of the few times in history," writes Hanson, "bloodletting served in the long run to spare, rather than to expend, lives. In short, Greek warfare for over two centuries was a wonderful, absurd conspiracy" (Hanson 1991, 6).

The ferocity of the battles should not be allowed to conceal the ludic character of hoplite warfare. In effect they were ritual wars (Garlan 1972, 26) staged in artificial conditions which ensured that a fair fight would take place between equals. Missile weapons were little used, and indeed were formally banned by agreement in the semi-legendary Lelantine War of the late eighth century BC (Strabo 10.1.12, and cf. below, n.12). Similarly the use of light-armed troops and cavalry was artificially restricted, largely for social reasons: the aim was to protect the privileged status of the hoplites, by limiting the importance of poorer citizens, who fought as light-armed skirmishers, and of the aristocracy, who served in the cavalry (Spence 1993, 165 ff.). In a hoplite battle there was no place for strategy, tactics, or generalship (Hanson 1989, 19 ff.), and ambushes and surprise attacks were against the rules.<sup>14</sup>

It should be stressed, however, that the traditional hoplite battle was always something of an ideal type, rarely if ever reproduced in reality. By the time of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) war had been subordinated to politics, its conduct had become more professional, and the ritual hoplite encounter had become an anachronism. Nevertheless, pitched battles between hoplites remained the predominant mode of war, and many of the old values persisted, often contrary to all military logic. At the battle of Mantinea (418 BC), a famous encounter in the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides tells us that the Spartans were taken by surprise when they came upon the enemy (a coalition organised by Argos) already drawn up for battle, and were themselves thrown into confusion (5.66.1-2). They rapidly formed themselves into battle array, and the contest began. Modern historians have been unwilling to believe that, if the Argives and their allies had really been presented with such an opportunity, they would not have taken advantage of it and attacked the Spartans before they had time to form up; the modern response has been to discount Thucydides' version of the event on that account. But Pritchett (1974, 156-76) rightly defends Thucydides, who knew what he was talking about, and explains the action (or inaction) of the Argives in terms of the conventions of Greek warfare.

A similar story is told of Alexander the Great before the battle of Gaugamela. When his Chief of Staff Parmenion suggested surprising the Persians with a night attack, Alexander rejected the plan as the action of a robber or thief. "I am determined to attack openly by daylight; I prefer to regret my fortune rather than be ashamed of my victory" (Curt. 4.13). Whether the story is true or not hardly matters; its purpose is to present Alexander as a heroic figure.

The general point is that the observation of these conventions makes little sense if war is viewed as a means to an end -- as an instrument of politics, as an evil necessity undertaken for a just cause, or as a crusade in pursuit of a transcendent religious or ideological aim. Chairman Mao once referred to the Battle of the River Hung, in 638 BC, in which the Sung leader, Duke Hsiang, refused to attack the opposing the Ch'u forces while they were crossing the river. He waited until they had crossed and were properly marshalled before starting the battle, which his troops duly lost. "We are not the Duke of Sung," said Mao, "and we have no use for his asinine ethics" (quoted in Walzer 1977, 225-6). The chivalrous behaviour of Duke Hsiang or Alexander, for which the ideal word is "sporting," only makes sense in terms of an agonistic concept of war in which artificial rules ensure a fair fight. The aim is to stage a true moral contest, in which victory, prestige and honour will go to the side which shows superiority in moral and physical courage, group loyalty and discipline.

Battle is thus assimilated to a competitive game. The clearest examples of a battle as pure *agon* are those cases of wholly artificial and prearranged encounters in which selected warriors fight a duel against an equal number from the other side. The most famous instance in Greek history is the battle between Sparta and Argos in 546 BC, in which 300 hoplites from each side fought one another on behalf of their respective cities (Herodotus 1.82). At this point the distinction between a battle and a game vanishes to nothing. Their essential identity is most clearly illustrated by a story from the Old Testament, in which the armies of Abner and Joab meet at Gibeon (2 Samuel 2.14-16):

And Abner said to Joab, Let the young men now arise, and play before us. And Joab said, Let them arise. Then there arose and went over by number twelve of Benjamin, which pertained to Ish-bosheth the son of Saul, and twelve of the servants of David. And they caught every one his fellow by the head, and thrust his sword in his fellow's side, so they fell down together.

The Authorised Version thus correctly translates the Hebrew word for "play," an extremely significant usage which precisely demonstrates the point.<sup>15</sup> The story is used by Huizinga (1970, 61) to illustrate the identity of play and battle in archaic culture, and then to introduce his important discussion of "Play and War" in the fifth chapter of *Homo Ludens*. In spite of criticisms, the arguments outlined in this chapter, to the effect that an agonistic and ludic element is inherent in war in all pre-modern cultures, remains compelling.<sup>16</sup>

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Turning now to the Romans, we may note two things at the outset. First, the Romans remain, among civilised societies, one of the most warlike known to history. Roman society was organised for war, and practised it continuously and intensively (Cornell 1992, 132 ff., with further references). Secondly, no society before modern times has been more obsessed with sport and games than that of ancient Rome (Morris 1982, 240 ff). These two facts are best exemplified by the surviving remains. Medieval Europe has its cathedrals and castles, ancient Egypt its pyramids and tombs, Greece its theatres and temples. But Rome is represented above all by two kinds of structure: its military monuments, triumphal arches, and columns, and its sports stadiums, arenas, and circuses. The material remains stand as eloquent testimony to the fact that Roman society valued two things above all: war and games.

How these two pillars of Roman culture are related to each other, and indeed whether they are related at all, are not simple questions. On the standard view the relationship is certainly different from that which we have postulated for Greek society. Roman culture, so it is argued, was not agonistic in the manner of classical Greece; the Romans had no interest in art, drama, or athletics. Rather it was a brutal, militaristic society whose character was most clearly reflected in the bloodthirsty spectacles of the arena. This contrast is illustrated by an anecdote concerning the playwright Terence (early second century BC). The second production of his play *Hecyra* ("The Mother-in-Law", a Greek-style comedy) in 160 BC was ruined when a rumour went around the city that a gladiatorial show was about to begin; the performance ended in confusion when an uncouth mob burst into the theatre (Terence, *Hec.* prologue 33-42).

The gladiatorial games are not usually classified as sport at all, but as a form of warlike entertainment. This point is made most strongly in an influential paper by Keith Hopkins (Hopkins 1983). Hopkins makes a direct connection between the brutality of the arena and the cruel practices of Roman warmaking. The arena helped maintain an atmosphere of violence. "Bloodshed and slaughter joined military glory and conquest as central elements in Roman culture. They persisted as central elements, even when the Roman peace was established under the emperors ... Then, in memory of their warrior traditions, the Romans set up artificial battlefields in their cities and towns. They recreated battlefield conditions for public amusement."

No argument or evidence is offered in support of these sweeping statements, which are merely asserted as if the facts were self evident. But the central idea, that the spectacles were representations of warfare, is questionable, as we shall see. Before dealing with that issue, however, let us return to the idea that Rome was not an agonistic society. This notion can also be questioned, on two counts. First, Roman warfare may have been cruel, but it was not devoid of chivalry. Polybius, who witnessed the Roman army in action at first hand, maintained that "some slight traces ... of the ancient principles of warfare survive among the Romans. For they make declaration of war, they very seldom use ambushes, and they fight hand-to-hand at close quarters" (13.3.7, continuing the passage quoted above in n.12). A number of traditional Roman stories confirm Polybius. Livy tells the story of the schoolmaster of Falerii, who, while his city was being besieged by the Romans, delivered the aristocratic boys under his charge to the Roman commander Camillus. Camillus had him bound and ordered the boys to drive him back to Falerii with canes. "I shall conquer," said Camillus, "... in the Roman way, by dint of courage, toil and arms" (Livy 5.27). A similar story is told about Fabricius Luscinus, who told king Pyrrhus that his personal physician had secretly approached the Romans and offered to poison his master. "We send you this information not out of affection for you, but because we do not wish your misfortune to bring disgrace upon us nor to be thought to have ended the war by treachery because we could not do so by our own merits" (Plutarch, *Pyrrhus* 20.3).

The Romans were also very conscious of the need to confront an equal opponent in a fair fight. A victory over unworthy opponents such as slaves or pirates did not merit a triumph (Barton 1993, 182 ff.). Finally, the Romans were devoted to the practice of heroic single combats. Examples can be drawn not only from the legendary age of early Rome, where the fight between the Horatii and Curiatii is the most famous (Livy 1.24-5), but well into the historical period. One of the consuls of 202 BC, M.Servilius Pulex Geminus, claimed that he had challenged and fought against individual enemies on no fewer than twenty-three occasions (Livy, 45.39.16). The Roman aristocracy seems to have maintained its attachment to heroic values (on single combats see Harris 1979, 38-9; Oakley 1985).

On the other hand it is misleading to suggest that Roman society had no attachment to drama or athletics. The earliest and most popular public entertainments were the *ludi* -- the games properly so called (the gladiatorial combats and wild beast shows were a later development and were not part of the games). The games went back to the time of the kings and developed into regular annual performances. Their number slowly increased during the Republic, many of them originating as victory celebrations after a military triumph. There were 57 days of games per year at the beginning of the first century BC, 77 in the time of Augustus, and 177 in the third century AD (in general, see Friedländer 1907-13, ii.1-130; iv.148-270; Balsdon 1969, 244-339).

The games included horse and chariot racing (*ludi circenses*) and contests in music and drama (*ludi scaenici*) on the Greek model. Greek-style athletics (wrestling, boxing, discus and foot racing) were also staged, and as far as we can judge remained popular. They were especially favoured by emperors of philhellenic persuasion such as Nero and Domitian. These activities receive less attention from our sources than the spectacular goings on in the arena, but that fact should not be allowed to obscure their popularity.

The main difference between these Roman contests and their Greek counterparts is that whereas in Greek festivals free citizens took part as athletes or performers, and were honoured as a result, Roman citizens took part only as spectators; the performers themselves, athletes and actors (and gladiators too, for that matter), were low-class professionals, often foreigners and sometimes slaves. When our upper-class sources make disapproving comments about various kinds of sports and entertainments, it is important to note that they are often directed not at the activities as such but at those who take part in them. Tacitus' contemptuous remarks about Greek athletics, for instance, occur in the context of Nero's attempt to make Roman aristocrats to take part, and of the emperor's own desire to perform in public as an athlete, singer, or actor (*Annals* 14.20).

The competitive element in the Roman games, apart from the vicarious engagement of the spectators, lies in the conspicuous expenditure of those who paid for them. Generals who staged victory games, and the aediles, the magistrates responsible for the annual performances, strove to outdo their rivals, including their predecessors and successors, in the extravagance of their shows, and thereby to obtain prestige and popular favour. Under the Principate, the emperors had to follow suit; their perceived munificence served to emphasise their command over the empire's resources, to ensure the loyalty and favour of their subjects, and thereby to legitimise their position (Veyne 1990, *passim*). In all this there is little direct connection between the games and warfare, apart from the fact that the resources of the empire, and indeed the empire itself, were ultimately the products of successful war; the people's entertainments could to that extent be seen as a reward for the people's victories. But this link had become very remote by the time of the Principate, although the emperors took care that military victories should continue to be celebrated by conspicuous games. But it is hard to see how the Romans' love of games could have had any bearing on their attitude to war, or how their belligerence might have affected their attitude to games.

The spectacles of the arena, however, are a different matter. These, as has been pointed out, are to be distinguished from the games properly so-called. The correct term for a gladiatorial show is *munus* ("gift"), reflecting the fact that they were put on by individual citizens as acts of private munificence (a word derived from *munus*). The earliest manifestations of gladiatorial contests occurred in central Italy in the fourth century BC.<sup>17</sup> The first known instance in Rome was in 264 BC, when D. Junius Brutus Pera, an ex-consul, together with his brother Marcus, staged a contest between three pairs of gladiators in the Forum Boarium in honour of their dead father (Livy, *Epit.* 16). Further cases are recorded at the end of the third century, and with increasing frequency thereafter. By the second century gladiatorial shows were a familiar event, and came to involve increasing numbers of gladiators. In 65 BC Julius Caesar exhibited 320 pairs of gladiators, clad in silver armour (Plutarch, *Caes.* 5; Pliny, *N.H.* 33.53). By this date gladiatorial schools were established throughout Italy, and the first purpose-built arenas were beginning to appear.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout this period the shows were always linked to funerals, and were produced and paid for by private individuals. Only under the Principate was the funerary connection finally severed, and gladiatorial games became a regular feature of the Roman public calendar; and in Rome the production of the shows became a monopoly of the emperors, who also took over the gladiatorial schools. By this time the spectacles in the arena had come to include displays of exotic animals, public executions of criminals, who were either dispatched by gladiators or torn to pieces by wild beasts, and staged animal hunts. But the most popular events were the man-to-man combats, and fights between men and animals which the men usually won but at considerable risk to themselves. These contests were exhibitions of the highly developed combat skills of gladiators who were willing to risk everything and fight to the death. To this extent the gladiators resembled warriors, but whether it goes much further than that is open to question.

Those who have advocated a close link between war and games in ancient Rome have used two main arguments. First, in studies of the development of amphitheatres, Welch has suggested that the earliest examples of these structures in Italy are attested in veteran colonies, and that subsequently in the western provinces amphitheatres were built predominantly at military centres -- legionary fortresses and colonies (Welch 1991; 1994). Her explanation of this is that the *munera* were 'military-style entertainment', and would have reminded the soldiers of their own training and techniques of combat (Welch 1994: 64-5). The introduction of gladiatorial games into conquered provinces was also a symbol of Roman military dominance, and evidence of the assertion by the veterans of their *romanitas*. The construction of amphitheatres was an essential element of imperialism and romanisation (this point is made also by Futrell 1997, 53-76). Secondly Coulston has argued that gladiators resembled soldiers in training, technique,



and equipment, and were organised along paramilitary lines (Coulston 1998).

There is undoubtedly some truth in both propositions, but some qualification is also necessary. That amphitheatres were a symbol of romanisation is beyond doubt, but the link with the military seems to me to be tenuous at best. In Italy, where amphitheatres proliferated, virtually every major town had one by the end of the first century AD. But since almost all Italian cities received veteran colonies after the civil wars of the late Republic, it is inevitable that the two categories should frequently coincide. And it is difficult to maintain that gladiatorial games were a romanised novelty in areas such as Campania in the first century BC, when all the evidence suggests that they were a widespread Italic custom, and had been practised in some areas (especially Campania) for centuries. As for the provinces, the evidence currently available does not support the idea of a close correlation between amphitheatres and military centres. According to Golvin, who has studied the location of distribution of amphitheatres throughout the Roman Empire, they are found at major centres of population in peaceful provinces: southern and central Gaul, southern Spain, north Africa, and southern England. There are also examples at major military centres, such as Vetera (Xanten) and Colonia Agrippinensis (Cologne) on the Rhine, and at Carnuntum (Petronell) and Aquincum (Budapest) on the Danube, but these too were major cities in their own right. Golvin's distribution map is quite clearly not a map of major military deployments in the Empire (Golvin 1988, plate LXXI).

As for training and technique, there is actually very little evidence comparing soldiers to gladiators. Both Welch and Coulston make a great deal of an anecdote in Valerius Maximus (2.3.2) who tells us that in 105 BC the consul Rutilius Rufus brought in gladiatorial trainers to prepare new recruits for combat at a time of crisis after a Roman defeat. But the whole point of the story, if true (and Valerius Maximus is not necessarily to be trusted implicitly), is that the episode was exceptional; the use of gladiatorial trainers was unheard of at the time, and is meant to indicate the scale of the crisis. It is exactly parallel to the actual recruitment of gladiators into the army – that is, something that was not done except in cases of extreme crisis, as during the plague under Marcus Aurelius (*HA Marcus* 21.7). The same source (not renowned, incidentally, for its reliability) also records that Marcus recruited slaves and brigands, which illustrates the point. In the matter of equipment and technique, Coulston stresses elements that, in a reductive sense, soldiers and gladiators were bound to share in common. Both had the task of engaging in hand-to-hand combat, armed with swords and shields. To this extent warfare and gladiatorial combat were essentially the same thing.

It may be that "for *some* Romans, there must have been associations with battlefields" (Hopkins 1983, 5; my italics), but this does not seem to have been the intended effect and it may be doubted if it was a widespread reaction. As Coulston himself notes, in a thorough study that does not overlook difficulties in the evidence, there were in fact marked differences between the gladiatorial combats and real battles, and between gladiators and soldiers; these differences seem to have been deliberate attempts to keep the two categories apart. In an important paper published over thirty years ago, Georges Ville concluded that the similarities between warfare and *munera* were only marginal, and should not be allowed to obscure 'la permanente spécificité non-militaire et non-guerrière de la gladiature.' One cannot even say (he continues) that the gladiators were 'playing at war': one should not confuse the *munus* with an institution that represents a mock battle – namely the tournament (Ville 1969, 194-5).

The gladiators were not dressed or equipped as soldiers, but in an exotic and barbarous manner that was if anything a caricature of military garb (for this and what follows, cf. Dupont 1992, 88-9). Essentially there were two types of gladiator: the heavily armed fighters, covered from head to foot in armour, and known as Samnites, Gauls, Hoplomachi, Myrmillones, or Secutores, and light armed men known as Thracians, equipped only with a small shield and a sickle. The other type of light armed gladiator was the *retiarius*, who had no armour at all and was armed with a net and a trident. Contests always pitted one type against another, rather than similarly armed combatants of the same type.<sup>19</sup> The result was a caricature because every fighter was either too heavily or too lightly equipped. When a *retiarius* fought a *myrmillo*, spectators saw a man with a net trying to ensnare a creature clad in iron scales; in case there should be any doubt about the symbolism, the *myrmillo's* helmet had a crest in the form of a fish.

The fact that some categories of gladiator bore the ethnic names (Samnite, Gaul, Thracian) of peoples who were once enemies of Rome has been taken to imply that the earliest gladiators were prisoners of war who were made to fight one another in their national styles. But there is no real evidence to support the idea that the earliest gladiators were prisoners, and we do not know of a time when contests featured equally matched pairs. It should also be noted that the arms and armour of the various types of gladiator bore little or no relation to those actually used by warriors of the peoples in question (Salmon 1967, 102 ff.).

The most telling argument against the idea that the arena was an artificially recreated battlefield is the fact that, with one or two significant exceptions, no attempt was made to represent or reconstruct a real battle. The gladiators never fought *en masse*, like armies, but always individually and in pairs; and, as has been pointed out, they were not dressed and equipped as soldiers. The exceptions include the famous sea-battles (*naumachiae*) which were staged in great artificial lakes specially constructed for the purpose, or even, by miracles of technology, in the arena. Nero's amphitheatre, and its successor, the Colosseum, were built in such a way that the arena could be flooded for the staging of naval battles (Balsdon 1969, 328-9).

Two important points need to be made about these extraordinary spectacles. First, the battles were taken from Greek history, rather than representing contemporary warfare. Battles were staged between Greeks and Persians, Rhodians and Sicilians, Corinthians and Corcyreans, and Athenians and Syracusans. In this sense it could be argued that the *naumachiae* had more in common



with the public executions that were staged as enactments of mythology (Coleman 1990) than with real battles. Secondly, Roman fleets were manned by non-citizen provincials of low status, including some slaves and freedmen. It follows that there could be no objection in principle to the idea of gladiators playing the part of sailors and fighting in a naval battle. Things were very different, however, when it came to land battles and infantry soldiers.

As far as we know, no gladiator ever appeared in the arena wearing the uniform of a Roman legionary, and the amphitheatres never witnessed an attempt to reenact a Roman infantry battle. In one way this is quite surprising. Victorious generals (and especially victorious emperors) were keen to parade their achievements before the people. The most obvious expression of this need was the triumph, in which the captured spoils were exhibited and prisoners were led in chains behind the general's chariot. We also know that representations of the victory were carried in the procession, in the form of paintings of decisive episodes in the campaign. Sometimes the events were represented in stone and used to decorate triumphal monuments; Trajan's column is the ultimate masterpiece of this genre. In similar vein, M. Fulvius Nobilior took the poet Ennius with him on his campaign in Ambracia in 189 BC, so that his achievements could be celebrated in epic verse; Pompey had a tame historian, Theophanes of Mytilene, for the same purpose.

In the light of this evidence one might have thought that someone would have tried to stage living reenactments of a victorious campaign. As far as we know, however, this was hardly ever done. In 46 BC Julius Caesar staged combats of infantry and cavalry, with 1000 and 200 men on each side respectively (Appian *B.C.* 2.102; Dio 43.23); according to Dio the fighters were condemned criminals, prisoners of war and gladiators. This was a unique event, as far as our knowledge goes, and Dio specifically points out the contrast with normal gladiatorial contests which entailed individual duels. We are not told how the "armies" were dressed and equipped -- whether as legionaries, or as barbarians, or even whether they were dressed up as soldiers at all (rather than in exotic gladiatorial garb). In any case there is no suggestion that these mass combats were meant to represent real events. The only such reconstruction we know about occurred in connection with Claudius' triumph after his conquest of Britain in AD 43. On this occasion the emperor staged the siege and capture of a British town, and himself received the surrender of a British king (Suetonius, *Claudius* 21.6). It is unclear how far this performance involved real fights to the death with gladiators and prisoners, and how far it was a mock engagement using real soldiers. However that may be, both these instances were unusual "one-off" events, and stand in marked contrast to the normal gladiatorial shows.

One might ask why representations of victorious Roman battles were not staged in the arena as a matter of routine. The answer is probably not that it would have been difficult to ensure that the right side won, although that would admittedly have been a problem (Balsdon 1969, 329), but rather the fact that it would not have been acceptable for Roman soldiers, who were citizens of privileged status, to be represented by gladiators. The officially sanctioned contempt in which gladiators were held surely accounts for the deliberate separation of the murderous games from the equally murderous realities of the battlefield.

It is an interesting paradox that the gladiatorial shows developed at a time when the army was becoming a professional body, permanently stationed in the provinces and increasingly remote from the civilian population, particularly in the city of Rome. When the gladiatorial games were at their height, the Roman world was largely at peace and the spectators in the arena had no direct experience of war or military service. It is true that the spectacles gave them a vicarious experience of fighting and bloodshed, and it may be that their enthusiasm stemmed from what Norbert Elias memorably called the search for excitement in an unexciting society (Elias 1970). However that may be, it seems highly unlikely that the function of the gladiatorial games was to recall the warlike spirit of the Roman people or to perpetuate their ancient military tradition.

As for the question of the effect of the shows -- whether they made Rome a more violent society or served to stimulate a belligerent foreign policy -- the only answer is that we cannot know. One might as well ask whether pornography makes people commit rape, or whether screen violence encourages offences against the person. Even with the most modern and sophisticated research techniques, no one has ever come near to offering a definite and convincing answer to these questions.

## Endnotes

- 1 This issue has been much studied in recent sociological and feminist literature. See for example Dunning 1986; 1990; Hargreaves 1986; and the essays in Messner and Sabo 1990.
- 2 For interesting discussion of this issue see Sipes 1973.
- 3 The evidence, such as it is, is discussed in detail by Pritchett 1974, 208-31. Among other studies notice Humphreys 1974, 90-1, demolishing the idea (Delorme 1960) that the gymnasium was instituted for the purpose of military training.
- 4 The passage is worth quoting: "When some of his friends and advisers urged him to take up athletics, he asked them if athletics would not be injurious to his military training. They told him (and it was the truth) that the habit of body and mode of life for athlete and soldier were totally different, and particularly that their diet and training were not the same, since the one required

much sleep, continuous surfeit of food, and fixed periods of activity and repose, in order to preserve or improve their condition, which the slightest influence or the least departure from routine is apt to change for the worse; whereas the soldier ought to be conversant with all sorts of irregularity and all sorts of inequality, and above all should accustom himself to endure lack of food easily, and as easily lack of sleep. On hearing this, Philopoemen ... shunned athletics" etc. (Loeb translation).

- 5 I would distinguish firmly between contact sports, where violent contact between players is part of the game but where pain and injury are suffered only as an incidental consequence of actions undertaken for other reasons, and combat sports such as boxing, where inflicting pain and physical damage on the opponent is a legitimate part of the contest, and indeed is the whole point.
- 6 See the important discussion of Hodkinson 1999, 158-9. Hodkinson also demolishes the idea that Spartan citizens were forbidden to take part in the Olympics and other inter-state festivals (Philostratus, *Gymn.* 9; Michell, *ibid.*).
- 7 Following the language of Huizinga (or rather of his translator), who suggested that the opposite of "play" was "earnest" (Huizinga 1970, 64-5).
- 8 Harris (1972), 50. Gladiatorial combats are excluded altogether from his treatment of "Sport in Greece and Rome". The book is a curiosity because of its parade of cultural prejudices; the author cannot conceal his dislike of mass spectator sports, professionalism, and many other features of modern sport. On the 'amateur' ideology of such books see Young 1984, 7-88.
- 9 The classic accounts are those of Wright 1944 and Turney-High 1949.
- 10 Dawson 1996, esp. 13-16. I agree with this formulation in broad terms, although in my opinion a more elaborate typology of warfare is certainly possible. But Dawson comes close to saying the same thing, when he qualifies his twofold division as one between "two pure types, with many gradations in between" (p.13).
- 11 For a recent account of Homeric warfare see Van Wees 1996, who aims to prove that Homeric war is "neither particularly heroic nor particularly primitive" (p.58). In this he goes too far, in my view, although he is certainly right that Homeric warfare does not conform precisely to the ideal type of "primitive war".
- 12 Note that this view has been challenged by David Young in a number of studies (see e.g. Young 1984); but the evidence is poor, and the issue remains a matter of debate. For a brief discussion see Golden 1998, 141-5.
- 13 There is a huge literature on Greek infantry warfare. The following is a selection of publications that I have found most useful: Adcock 1957; Detienne 1968; Vernant 1974; Pritchett 1985; Connor 1988; Hanson 1989; 1991, 1995; Keegan 1993, 244 ff.; Garland 1995; Mitchell 1996.
- 14 The Hellenistic historian Polybius (2nd cent. BC) offers a succinct statement of the way hoplite warfare was conducted in earlier times: "the ancients, as we know, were far removed from such malpractices. For so far were they from plotting mischief against their friends with the purpose of aggrandizing their own power, that they would not even consent to get the better of their enemies by fraud, regarding no success as brilliant or secure unless they crushed the spirit of their adversaries in open battle. For this reason they entered into a convention among themselves to use against each other neither secret missiles nor those discharged from a distance, and considered that it was only a hand-to-hand battle at close quarters which was truly decisive. Hence they preceded war by declaration, and when they intended to do battle gave notice of the fact and of the spot to which they would proceed and array their army. But at present they say it is a sign of poor generalship to do anything openly in war." (Polyb. 13.3.2-6).
- 15 The New English Bible, with its characteristic habit of attempting to eliminate difficulties from the text, mistranslates as "Let the young men come forward and join in single combat before us", and thus spoils the passage.
- 16 Criticisms in e.g. Caillois 1961, 4-6; Guttmann 1978, 6-7.
- 17 The origins of the gladiatorial combats remain unclear. Many handbooks state (usually without any supporting argument) that they were an Etruscan institution that the Romans adopted, but this idea has no secure foundation in the evidence and is almost certainly false. See especially Ville 1981, 1-8; Wiedemann 1992, 30-33. Futrell 1997, 9-19, tries to return to the Etruscan thesis, unsuccessfully in my view, but she makes good sense in arguing that the *munera* might not have been a non-Roman anomaly at all, but rather the systematization of a common Italic practice.

- 18 There are many general accounts of the origins and development of the gladiatorial shows. Apart from Friedländer, Balsdon and Hopkins, the following may be found useful: Robert 1940; Etienne 1966; Grant 1967; Auguet 1972; Ville 1981; Golvin 1988; Wiedemann 1992; Wistrand 1992; Barton 1993; Plass 1995; Futrell 1997; Kyle 1998; Potter 1999.
- 19 Coulston is right, however, to note that some gladiators, particularly the heavily armed variety, used weaponry that is difficult to distinguish from legionary equipment, and that in some figure representations it is difficult to tell whether the combats are military or gladiatorial (Coulston 1999, 4).

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