

How Domitian Attempted to Amuse the Populace

Source: Suetonius, *Life of Domitian* IV. From: William Stearns Davis, ed., *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-13), Vol. II: Rome and the West. Scanned by: J. S. Arkenberg, Dept. of History, Cal. State Fullerton.

Despite their control of the army and the subservience of the Senate, the average Emperor quailed before the hoots and ill will of the Roman mob. Thus Domitian (emperor 81–96 CE), tried to win popularity by providing the idle masses of the capital with their favorite games and arena massacres.

He frequently entertained the people with the most magnificent and costly shows, not only in the amphitheater, but in the circus; where, besides the usual chariot races, with two or four horses abreast, he exhibited the imitation of a battle betwixt cavalry and infantry; and in the amphitheater a sea fight. The people too were entertained with wild-beast hunts, and gladiator fights even in the night-time, by torchlight. He constantly attended the games given by the quaestors, which had been disused for some time, but were revived by him; and upon these occasions, he always gave the people the

liberty of demanding two pair of gladiators out of his own private school, who appeared last in court uniforms.

He presented the people with naval fights, performed by fleets almost as numerous as those usually employed in real engagements; making a vast lake near the Tiber, and building seats around it. And he witnessed these fights himself during a heavy rain.

Thrice he bestowed upon the people a bounty of 300 sesterces per man, and at a public show of gladiators a very plentiful feast. At the "Festival of the Seven Hills" he distributed large hampers of provisions to the Senatorial and Equestrian orders, and small baskets to the commonalty, and encouraged them to eat by setting the example. The day after he scattered among the people a variety of cakes and other delicacies to be scrambled after; and on the greater part of them falling amidst the seats of the lower classes, he ordered 500 tickets to be thrown into each range of benches belonging to the Senatorial and Equestrian orders.