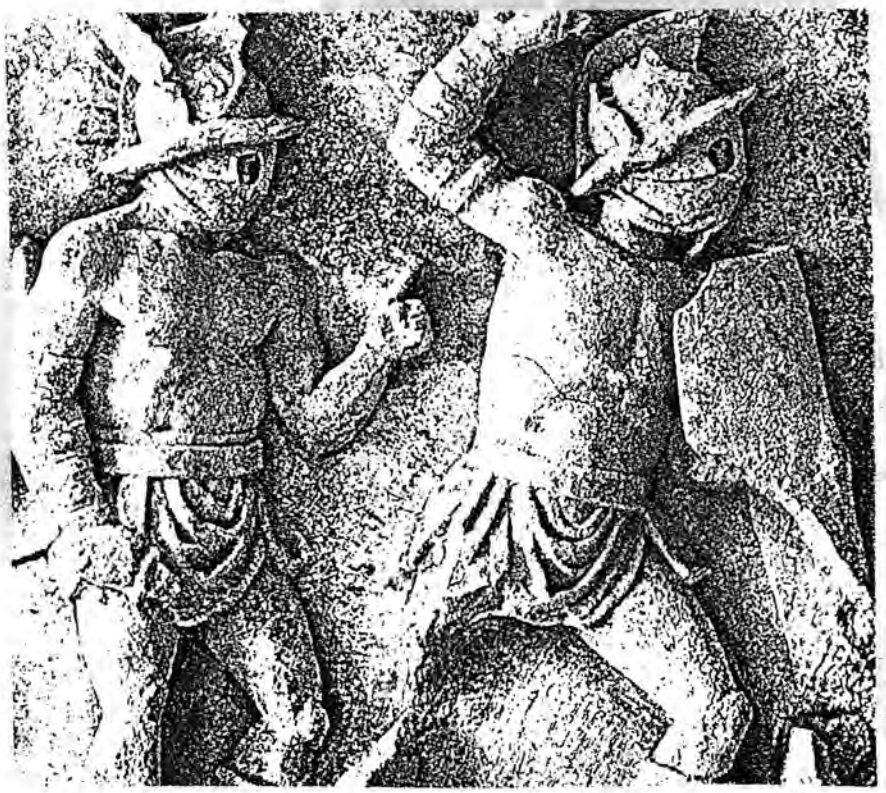
12 ANCIENT HISTORY

ASPECTS OF ROMAN CULTURE:

GLADIATORIAL GAMES



Lucas Wyte

12 ANCIENT HISTORY

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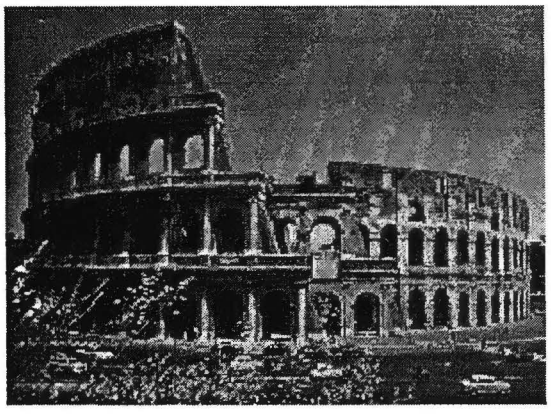
GLADIATORIAL GAMES

The gladiatorial games of ancient Rome gave rise to a sadistic streak in the Roman character that has been echoed throughout the societies of both the ancient and modern worlds.

The gladiatorial games of ancient Rome gave rise to a sadistic streak in the Roman character; a trait that has been echoed in various societies throughout time. From similarities in ancient Etruscan religious ceremonies to the blood-thirsty sports and visual entertainment of today, it can be clearly seen that the enjoyment found in viewing the infliction of pain upon another human being is typical of the societies of many ancient and modern worlds.

The favourite public festivals of Rome in the first century BC were those which exhibited gladiatorial competitions. Arranged and financed by private individuals, politicians or military leaders, the fight for life between two human gladiators was "an excellent opportunity to win favour by generous outlay"[1] and "were used to win popularity"[2]. The spectacle began with a ceremonial procession, in which the gladiators addressed the Emperor with the words: *"Ave, imperator, morituri te salutant!"* ("Hail, emperor, men soon to die salute thee!"). They would then embark on mock-duels until military fanfares signalled the start of the real fights.

The gladiators fought with weapons of their national origin; the Thracian with a *parma* (round shield) and a *sica* (curved sword or dagger), the heavily armoured Samnite with a *scutum* (large shield) and straight sword, adapted from that of the formidable Samnite warriors encountered by Rome in the early days of the republic, and the Briton in his war chariot. The lightly armoured *retiarii* were particularly popular among the spectators, wearing only a light tunic and carrying a net, in which to catch the enemy and then to kill him with his trident or dagger.



During the fight, inspectors were on hand with whips, staves and red-hot irons to urge a gladiator forward should he seem too lazy or cautious. Meanwhile, the crowd usually in excess of 45,000, would add their own instructions with cries of *"Iugula!"* ("Kill!"), *"Verbera!"* ("Strike!") and *"Ure!"* ("Burn the fellow up!"). Whenever a gladiator fell to his opponent, he would appeal for mercy by throwing away his shield and raising his index finger. Unless the emperor was present, it was his victorious adversary who either spared or condemned him In the emperor's presence, the spectators advised their ruler. Saint Augustine found that "the whole mass of fiercely attentive spectators gave utterance to a

[1] Sinnigen, W.G. et. al. (1977). *A History of Rome to AD 565.* (6th edn). New York: Macmillan Publishing, 161.
[2] Kelly, M. (1969). *View from the Forum - A History of Rome to AD 410.* Melbourne: Cheshire Publishing, 105.

Fresco of popularity of gladiatorial games in A.D. 59 (Quennell, P.).

general roar"[3], waving cloths and displaying upturned thumbs, they shouted *"Mitte!"* ("Let him go free!"); or by turning down their thumbs towards the fallen fighter, they called *"Iugula!"* - the recommendation that the gladiator pay his penalty. An emperor was a fool not to listen to his people.

Yet, such "senseless amusement of the fanatical crowd"[4] did have somewhat nobler origins. Tertullian, one of the great Western theologians and writers of Christian antiquity, reveals in *On the Shows* that, "Once upon a time, men believed that the souls of the dead were propitiated by human blood, and so at funerals they sacrificed prisoners of war or slaves of poor quality bought for the purpose"[5].

The Etruscans, an ancient people who flourished from about the eighth to the first century BC in central Italy,

> "... had funeral games, where the combatants fought to the death as a sacrifice to the gods, a concept which led to the Roman gladiatorial shows, either directly, or through the Campanians, who themselves learnt the art from Etruria"[6].

However, once the Etruscan funeral traditions were transferred to Rome, "... they soon lost, like many of the other elements of Roman festivals, all traces of religious usage, and survived as an all too familiar blood sport"[7]. Pliny, a Roman senator and later consul, provides in *Panegyric* that the intellectual justification for the gladiatorial games was that they "inspired a glory in wounds and contempt of death, since the love of praise and desire for victory could be seen, even in the bodies of slaves and criminals"[8]. However, it is obvious that the games provided no other purpose than "the gratification of an enormous urban proletariat, which demanded that it should be richly amused as well as sheltered, bathed, and fed"[9]. Thus, the gladiatorial games became nothing more than entertainment for the masses - a popular blood-sport. Tertullian in *On Spectacles* deplores the games, not out of sympathy for the gladiators, but for the blood thirsting effect they had on the spectators,

> "... the same man who stops street-brawlers from coming to blows, or at least cries shame on the combatants, will applaud more deadly fights in the stadium; the same man who shudders at the corpse of the departed, gone the way we all must go, will gaze down from his seat in the amphitheatre on bodies mangled, torn, and fouled with their own blood, and never blink an eye; yes, and the same man who attends the shows to signify his approval that murder must be punished will have a reluctant gladiator whipped and flogged into doing murder himself"[10].

Obviously, "humane ideas were foreign to the Roman culture of the time"[11].

Rome, the founder of modern Western civilisation, "had reached such a state of corruption that it was henceforth impossible to be shocked at anything"[12] and hence transformed the role of many sports into simple gratification of their sadistic blood-lust; the gladiatorial games soon becoming "the most popular of all"[13]. The enjoyment in viewing the infliction of pain upon another human being was typical of the Roman people, its "popularity was rooted in the ... traditions of Roman culture"[14]. Seneca, one of the most broadly influential

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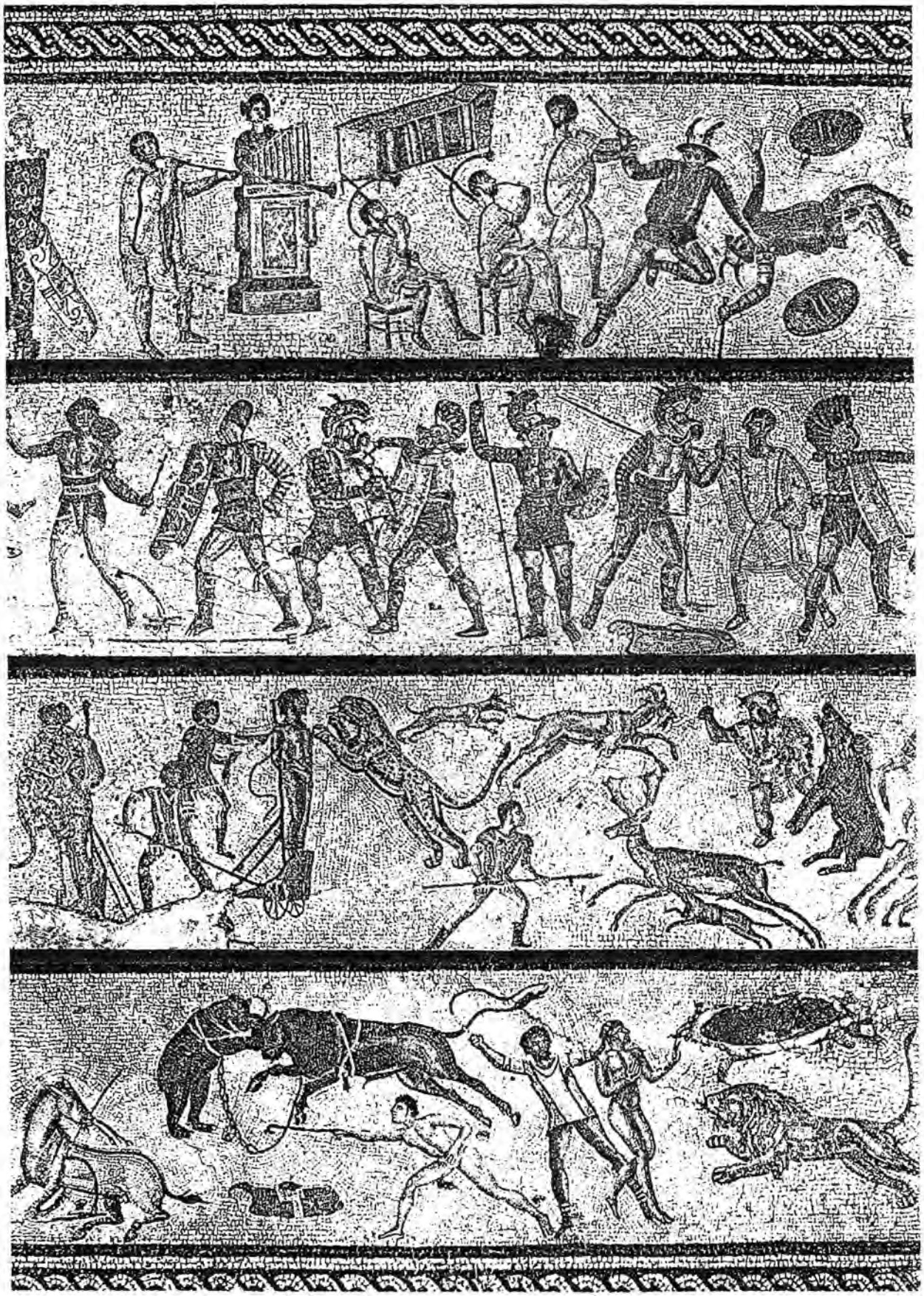
[3] Quennell, P. (1981). *The Colosseum.* New York: Newsweek, 47.
[4] Olivova, V. (1984). *Sports and Games in the Ancient World.* London: Bloomsbury Books, 182.
[5] Wells, C. (1992). *The Roman Empire.* (2nd edn). London: Fontana Press, 250.
[6] Kelly, M. op. cit., 16.
[7] Arnott, P.D. (1970). *An Introduction to the Roman World.* London: Macmillan Publishing, 109.
[8] Wells, C. op. cit., 250.
[9] Quennell, P. op. cit., 44.
[10] Arnott, P.D. op. cit., 294.
[11] Olivova, V. op. cit., 182.
[12] Werner, P. (1978). *Life in Rome in Ancient Times.* Geneve: Minerva, 111.
[13] Sinnigen, W.G. et. al. op. cit., 161.
[14] Olivova, V. op. cit., 182.



Scenes from the amphitheatre, mosaic, 2nd century A.D. (Leptis Magna)

philosophical writers in the Stoic tradition, was disgusted at the sadistic streak in the Roman character, especially when "he found himself starting to enjoy the killing"[15]. In *Letters*, he tries to shock the audience for whom gladiatorial competition was daily fare, commenting,

> "Nothing is so ruinous to the character as time wasted at the public games ... I come home more greedy, more discontented with my lot, more self-indulgent - more of a beast, in fact - from being with my fellow-men. I happened to drop in at the lunch-time show, expecting to see some comic turns, a little light relief from the spectacle of human blood. Quite the contrary. The previous combats were merciful by comparison ... It was pure, unadulterated murder ... Every fight is to the death"[16].

Yet, Roman sports' spectators are typical of those of the ancient and modern worlds. The sadistic pleasure in viewing such barbaric sports is echoed throughout time.

Like the Roman gladiatorial games, the origin of the most famous and popular competition in ancient Greece, the Olympic Games "may be found in funeral games held in honour of some deceased hero"[17]. Held in honour of Zeus, the most important god in the ancient Greek pantheon, the Olympic Games were held every four years at Olympia in Elis. Before multitudes from all the Hellenic world, strong men matched their strengths in skill and speed in many athletic contests, including wrestling. Wrestling today, while not as brutal as the gladiatorial games of ancient Rome, is a popular body-contact sport, with millions of wrestling fans around the world, enjoying the infliction of pain upon another human being. Many wrestling holds were derived from the sport as it was practised in ancient Egypt and China. Tomb carvings in Beni Hasan in Upper Egypt depict more than 200 wrestling figures in positions similar to those of modern competitors and wrestling is mentioned by Homer in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Yet, like the religious significance of the gladiatorial games, "the Olympic ideals waned as royalty began to compete for personal gain ... human beings were being glorified as well as the gods; many winners erected statues to deify themselves"[18].

The Nemean Games, staged every two years in July in the Nemean Valley, was another of the great athletic festivals of ancient Greece. Similar again to the gladiatorial games of ancient Rome, "they were originally mourning ceremonies"[19]. The Nemean Games saw the introduction of boxing, "the manly art of self-defense"[20], to the arena; the ancient Greeks believing fistfighting was one of the games played by the gods on Olympus. During Roman times, boxing thrived with spectators enjoying the beating of one human being by another. Boxers fought with leather bands around their fists for protection and sometimes wore metal-filled, leather hand coverings called *cesti*, resulting in bloody, often duel-to-death, battles, like those of the gladiatorial combats. Today, the sadistic popularity of boxing remains intact. On television screens in most of the world, millions of men, women and children delight in the gore of the brutish competition.

Unlike ancient Rome and Greece, Spartan cities did not celebrate the funeral ceremony. Hence, apart from their competition in the games of ancient Greece, Sparta's similarities with the gladiatorial games of ancient

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[15] Clare, J.D. (1992). *I Was There - Roman Empire*. London: The Bodley Head, 44.
[16] Arnott, P.D. op. cit., 220.
[17] Caldwell, W.E. et. al. (1966). *The Ancient World*. (3rd edn). Illinois: Dryden Press, 230-231.
[18] Benagh, J. (1996). "Olympic Games". *The 1996 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia* (CD-ROM). New York: Grolier Electronic Publishing.
[19] Olivova, V. op. cit., 116.
[20] Katz, M. (1996). "Boxing". *The 1996 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia* (CD-ROM). New York: Grolier Electronic Publishing.

Two gladiators in battle gear (Tomisch).

Gladiators in action (Tomsich/Ricciarini).

Rome is limited to their war-training and physical education of young men. Pausanias, an ancient Greek geographer found that in the boys' educational games "... they use their hands, kick with their feet, bite, and gouge out the eyes of their opponents"[21]. The older boys played a game where two opposing teams struggled to get hold of a ball. This game, similar to last century's Gaelic football, where wrestling, tripping and punch-ups were a major part of the game, was most popular in Spartan society, "with a universal appeal like that of football today"[22]. In today's times, Spartan training games can only be compared to American football, which boasts a professional league that attracts millions of spectators both through television and the stadium. Some even say that the sadistic nature of "American football reflects the American way of life"[23]. Clearly, the sadistic pleasure in viewing such fierce sports is echoed throughout societies of the ancient and modern worlds.

In his novel *Justine*, the eighteenth century French writer Count Donatien Alphonse Francois de Sade, better known simply as Marquis de Sade, illustrates his belief "that self-restraint is not in accord with human nature, which has a fundamental need to inflict pain"[24]. De Sade, who lent his name to the aberrant behaviour called sadism, has inspired a collection of publications about the sadistic streak in the human character. Edward Franklin Albee, one of the most important American playwrights of the 1960s, attained popular and critical success with his first full-length Broadway play in 1962, *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?,* a revealing story of the blood-lusting trait in the human character. Likewise, Bram Stoker created the magnificent Gothic romance *Dracula*, based on Vlad the Impaler, prince of Walachia (1456-62), due to the prince's sadistic cruelty towards his subjects. Hence, sadistic pleasures have been a source for reflection on the character of societies in the modern world.

However, modern societies' enjoyment in viewing the infliction of pain upon another human being can most clearly be seen in the films and television programs of today. Children's' cartoons, including the *Bugs Bunny* classics to the more recent additions, such as *The Simpson's* Krusty the Clown and his sadistic cartoon cohorts Itchy & Scratchy, offer clear evidence that the delight found in viewing the infliction of pain still exists in society today. Modern films such as *The Running Man* and *The Boys from Brazil* also reflect this trait in modern society. These mediums reflect that "there is in the heart of individuals and, thus, of society, a malice that seems malign, without motive"[25].

The greatest evidence of a sadistic steak in the character of today's societies can, however, be found in the top ranking television game show called *Gladiators*. "A wacky hybrid of sporting event, game show and Roman circus"[26], *Gladiators* has developed a strong cult following among both adults and children, rather like the gladiatorial games of ancient Rome where "a victorious gladiator was much admired by women, and ... the graffiti that covers the walls of Roman and Pompeian [sic] buildings ... speak of the romantic passions he inspired"[27]. The "gladiators" themselves are much like those of ancient times also, leading "... a brutalised existence though with a chance of huge profits ..."[28] from merchandise and show royalties, in addition to their acting salaries.

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[21] Olivova, V. op. cit., 99.
[22] Wells, C. op. cit., 201.
[23] Wade, P. (ed). (1981). *ABC Sportswatcher's Guide*. London: Collins, 8.
[24] Reiter, J.A. (1996). "Justine". *The 1996 Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia* (CD-ROM). New York: Grolier Electronic Publishing.
[25] Malone, P. (1988). *Movie Christs and Antichrists*. Sydney: Parish Ministry Publications, 153.
[26] Simspon, J.C. (1994). "Real-Life Davids vs. Goliaths". *Time Almanac 1990's* (CD-ROM). New York: Time Magazine.
[27] Quennell, P. op. cit., 48.
[28] Kelly, M. op. cit., 158.

The show, designed in 1983 by Johnny Ferraro as "the workingman's Olympics"[29], has an "overall style ... uncomfortably close to the campiness of pro wrestling" and features "gladiators" with backgrounds in professional football and the Olympic Games. To recreate the brutality of the original gladiatorial games of ancient Rome, "both gladiators and contenders were directed to play for real"[30] and for the spectators at home, "The authenticity of the competition is driven home by the injuries among gladiators as well as contenders."[31] With a "mass-appeal"[32] reaching the millions, Saint Augustine today could only compare the fans of the show *Gladiators* to those of the gladiatorial games, where, "He himself watched; he shouted; he rose to fever and heat."[33]. In a couch-potato generation, *Gladiators* seeks to echo and nurture in today's society the sadistic trait in the human character for viewing the infliction of pain on other human beings.

The gladiatorial games of ancient Rome, which gave rise to a sadistic streak in the Roman character, are clearly similar to the funeral ceremonies, sports and visual entertainments of many ancient and modern worlds. Like the public slaughter which became for the Romans a fundamental institution, so too has the pleasure found in the infliction of pain upon other human beings been echoed throughout many ancient and modern societies as all too familiar trait in the human character.

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[29] Simspon, J.C. op. cit.
[30] Simspon, J.C. op. cit.
[31] Simspon, J.C. op. cit.
[32] Simpson, J.C. op. cit.
[33] Quennell, P. op. cit., 60.

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