

Roman Addiction: The Changing Perception of Problem Gaming in the Roman World

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The Ancient Roman World



The Lure of the Dicing Table

- Roman Youth:
 - deemed to be esp. susceptible
 - concern for protecting family assets, reputation (of elites)
 - fear of “syndrome of vice” (dicing, drinking, illicit sex)
- Senatorial Elites:
 - Excessive, habitual or inappropriate gambling seen as road to ruin
- The Poor:
 - initially viewed as part of the problem, *not* victims
 - lumped in w/criminal element (& presumed guilty)
 - awareness, concern for poor increased in Christian period





Roman Gamblers

- Caligula (Suetonius Gaius 41.3)
- Claudius (Suetonius *Claudius* 33)
- Commodus (HA *Commodus* 3)
- Licinius Lenticula (Cicero *Philippics* 2.23.56)
- Roman “Gamblers Anonymous”:
 - “Young Wastrels”: (Horace Hor. *Odes* 3.24.58 ; cf. Seneca *De Vita Beata* 7)
 - “Betting the Cooffers”: (Juvenal *Satires* 1.88-93)
 - “The Idle Poor”: (Ammianus Marcellinus 6.25)



Understanding of Pathological Gambling: Then & Now

Early Christian Tract*:

- Deceptive speech
- Wild impatience
- Fraternal discord
- Mindless raving/quarrelsome displays
- Continuous gambling (“day and night”)
- Risks large amounts/entire family fortune
- Does not cease after losses/desire to increase wealth
- Shameful crime/false witness

DSM IV Definition:**

- Lying to others
- preoccupied w/gambling
- Restless, irritable when not gambling
- Jeopardizing important relationships
- Risks increasing amounts of money
- “chasing losses” leads to further gambling
- resorts to forgery, fraud, etc.

Points of Comparison: the Ancient Romans on Alcoholism

- Seneca on habitual alcohol consumption (1st C CE)
 - Distinction: *ebrius* vs. *ebriosus**
 - description of long-term effects of habitual drinking**
 - Loss of neuromuscular coordination (tripping, stumbling, etc.) :
 - Pallor
 - Trembling hands
 - Weight loss (thinness)
 - attributed to inability to digest
 - Abdominal bloating
 - Sluggishness/stupefaction
 - Pliny the Elder on effects of habitual drinking (1st C CE)
 - Sores/inflammation in eyes
 - Pallor
 - Trembling hands
 - Insomnia
 - Excitability/aggression
 - Shortened lifespan
- NIAAA Brochure***:
 - Hepatic encephalopathy
 - loss of neuromuscular coordination
 - Shaking or flapping of hands
 - Anxiety
 - Mood/personality changes
 - Coma
 - Conjunctival Injection (eyelids)
 - Gastritis
 - abdominal bloat)
 - Pancreatitis
 - digestive dysfunction
 - sweating,
 - pain
 - Weakened immune system
 - Cancer Risks

Roman Criminal Statutes on Gaming

- General prohibition on gambling, 3rd C BCE
 - *Lex Talaria* (or *lex Alearia*)
 - known only from references in literary sources
 - Little is known of content of prohibition, sanctions
 - evidence suggests a fine on gamblers of 4x amount wagered
 - gambling under general jurisdiction of aediles (city officials)
 - In practice, state enforcement at best sporadic & selective
 - Law of early 1st C BCE created exception to prohibition:
 - for betting on “contests of strength” (running, javelin-throwing, etc.)
 - potentially opened the door to sports-betting (on chariot races, gladiatorial games, etc.)
 - » Likely, however, that sports betting of that type had always gone in Rome on without any state interference
 - » Considered strictly private matter between friends

Adolescent Gambling in Ancient Rome

- Adolescent males thought especially susceptible to lure of gambling by Romans:
 - challenge of defining “youth gambling” in Rome
 - *adulescens* & *iuvenis* used very loosely by Romans
 - Adolescent males: under age and *in potestate*
 - Actual age range: appr. 13-18
 - typically had discretionary funds (*peculium*) from *pater familias*
 - Evidence from literary sources suggests adolescent males engaged mainly in dice games, *not* sports betting
 - *NB*: literary & legal sources take little note of “sports betting”
 - some varieties of dice games involved high levels of skill
 - Very little evidence in sources with respect to gambling by women or girls

Roman Vices: Gambling, Drinking and Prostitution as a Trap for the Unwary



Legal Response to Youth Gambling

- General criminal law prohibition (3rd C BCE)
- Civil Liability/Rights of Action (*Just. Dig.* 11.5):
 - in favor of youth's *pater familias* for his losses
 - against youth's *pater familias* for his winnings
 - against party deemed responsible for “corrupting” a youth by inducing him to gamble:
 - for “insult” (*iniuria*), a type of tort (delict)
 - in favor of his *pater familias*



Justinian's Anti-Gambling Edicts

- Stated Policy Objective: to protect people from their own folly, playing dice “day and night,” then losing substantial sums, leading ultimately to “blasphemy” as they executed promissory notes
- Content of Law: playing dice in public or private for real stakes or not, declared illegal, but not subject to penalty; losses on permitted types of “sports betting” limited to one gold piece (equivalent of \$)
- Effect: to prevent chief evils (loss of wealth & “blasphemy”) associated with gambling by limiting the potential financial losses.
 - Recovery of gambling losses made actionable for gamblers and their heirs;
 - earlier practice (however sporadic) of imposing fourfold fine on gamblers officially abandoned.
- Sanctions for owners/operators of establishments w/gambling
- Special penalties for clergy dicing or watching dice games

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