

Gambling in Ancient Rome

Written in my final year at school for IB Latin HL. Same format as the Greek IA on the site: pick a research question, then translate and analyse a set of primary source passages in the original Latin to answer it. I asked what the status of gambling actually was in Rome between 200 BC and 400 AD, working from a tavern mural in Pompeii through Plautus, Suetonius, Seneca, Cicero and Ammianus Marcellinus.

Originally written: 2024

Context: IB Latin HL Individual Assessment

Sources: Plautus, Suetonius, Seneca, Cicero, Ammianus Marcellinus

Starting point

Sandro Tonali's 10-month ban over betting complicated by Italy rehab trips

- **Tonali punished for breaking Italian gambling regulations**
- **Further eight months' rehabilitation will involve 16 trips to Italy**



📷 Sandro Tonali reflects on Newcastle's defeat by Borussia Dortmund on Wednesday in his final game before the confirmation of his ban. Photograph: Stu Forster/Getty Images

Taylor, Louise. "Sandro Tonali's 10-month ban over betting complicated by Italy rehab trips." *The Guardian*, 26 October 2023.

As a football fan, the news of Sandro Tonali's ban over gambling caught my attention. Despite the legal consequences, many Newcastle fans spoke out in his support. That mix of reactions is what led me to the research question below.

Research question

What was the status of gambling in Rome between 200 BC and 400 AD?

Prediction

Modern restrictions on gambling show that the UK views it as something that can get out of hand, even if plenty of people enjoy it. I predicted that this same ambivalence would show up in ancient Rome: gambling as an inherently controversial topic, with genuinely differing views on it rather than one settled attitude.

Introduction

Gambling in ancient Rome involved betting on various games and spectator sports. It was a part of Roman life, and in this dossier I explore its status across seven sources, from 200 BC to 400 AD. I look first at sources that suggest gambling was a popular part of Roman life, then turn to others that criticise it. Much of the surviving evidence comes from wealthy male Roman elites, such as Cicero and Seneca, who aren't necessarily representative of Roman society as a whole, but who do give a real insight into how their own social class viewed gambling.

Source 1: Mural Found in a Tavern in Pompeii · c. 50 AD



Gambling scene, tavern wall painting, Pompeii, 1st century AD.

Analysis: This mural was found in Pompeii, showing two men gambling at a tabula lusoria (gambling table); the figure on the left exclaims that he has won (*EXSI*). The mural was found in a taberna, a tavern serving the lower classes, which suggests gambling was a common enough recreational activity to be worth painting on the wall. This source supports the idea that gambling was a regular, visible part of civic Roman life, and a popular activity among ordinary citizens.

Source 2: Plautus, *Miles Gloriosus*, Act 2, Scene 2, Lines 1–10 • c. 205 BC

LATIN

Ni hercle diffregeritis talos posthac quemque in tegulis
videritis alienum, ego vostra faciam latera lorea.
mi equidem iam arbitri vicini sunt, meae quid fiat domi,
ita per impluvium intro spectant. nunc adeo edico omnibus:
quemque a milite hoc videritis hominem in nostris tegulis,
extra unum Palaestrionem, huc deturbatote in viam.
quod ille gallinam aut columbam se sectari aut simiam
dicat, disperiistis ni usque ad mortem male mulcassitis.
atque adeo ut ne legi fraudem faciant aleariae,
adcuratote ut sine talis domi agitent convivium.

TRANSLATION

Faith, if you don't in future smash his ankle-bones for any stranger that you see on my tiles, I will cut you so with lashes as to make thongs of your sides. My neighbours, i' faith, are overlookers of what is going on in my own house; so often are they peeping down through the skylight. And now, therefore, I give you all notice, whatever person of this Captain's household you shall see upon our tiles, except Palaestrio only, push him headlong here into the street. Suppose he says that he is following some hen, or pigeon, or monkey; woe be to you, if you don't badly maul the fellow even to death. And so, that they may commit no infringement against the laws of dice, do you take good care that they keep holiday at home without any ankle-bones at all.

Analysis: Plautus' comedy would have been performed at festivals attended by lower-class citizens. Here we see a reference to the *lex talaria* (*legi...aleariae*), which prohibited gambling. The law reflects the Roman state's official view of gambling as a crime, but the fact that it was being broken raises questions about how seriously it was enforced. Either the state didn't consider gambling worth backing with real punishments, or ordinary Romans thought the entertainment was worth the legal risk. Since this was a comedy, it would have exaggerated everyday Roman life to land the joke, and a joke about illegal gambling only works if the audience already recognises it. Despite the roughly 300-year gap, this source agrees with the mural: gambling was popular among ordinary Romans, whatever the law said.

Source 3: Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars, Divus Augustus*, Ch. 71 • c. 121 AD

LATIN

Aleae rumore nullo modo expavit lusitque simpliciter et palam oblectamenti causa etiam senex ac praeterquam Decembri mense aliis quoque festis et profestis diebus. Nec id dubium est. Autographa quadam epistula: “Cenavi,” ait, “mi Tiberi, cum iisdem; accesserunt convivae Vinicius et Silius pater. Inter cenam lusimus geronticos et heri et hodie; talis enim iactatis, ut quisque canem aut senionem miserat, in singulos talos singulos denarios in medium conferebat, quos tollebat universos, qui Venerem iecerat.”

TRANSLATION

He did not in the least shrink from a reputation for gaming, and played frankly and openly for recreation, even when he was well on in years, not only in the month of December, but on other holidays as well, and on working days too. There is no question about this, for in a letter in his own handwriting he says: “I dined, dear Tiberius, with the same company; we had besides as guests Vinicius and the elder Silius. We gambled like old men during the meal both yesterday and today; for when the dice were thrown, whoever turned up the ‘dog’ or the six, put a denarius in the pool for each one of the dice, and the whole was taken by anyone who threw the ‘Venus.’”

Analysis: Suetonius wrote this to document the private, moral side of the emperors’ lives. Here he portrays Augustus as genuinely fond of gambling, evidenced by his reputation for playing even on “working days” (*profestis diebus*). Writing about a century after Augustus, Suetonius had every incentive to add colour and lean on gossip, so this may well be exaggerated. But even allowing for that, an emperor gambling openly, on a law he technically had the power to enforce, says something about how unremarkable the habit actually was.

Source 4: Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis*, Section 14 • c. 54 AD

LATIN

De genere poenae diu disputatum est, quid illum pati oporteret. Erant qui dicerent, Sisyphum satis diu laturam fecisse, Tantalum siti periturum nisi illi succurreretur, aliquando Ixionis miseri rotam sufflaminandam. Non placuit ulli ex veteribus missionem dari, ne vel Claudius unquam simile speraret. Placuit novam poenam constitui debere, excogitandum illi laborem

irritum et alicuius cupiditatis speciem sine effectū. Tum Aeacus iubet illum alea ludere pertuso fritillo. Et iam coeperat fugientes semper tesseras quaerere et nihil proficere.

TRANSLATION

There was a long discussion as to the punishment he ought to endure. Some said that Sisyphus had done his job of portage long enough; Tantalus would be dying of thirst, if he were not relieved; the drag must be put at last on wretched Ixion's wheel. But it was determined not to let off any of the old stagers, lest Claudius should dare to hope for any such relief. It was agreed that some new punishment must be devised: they must devise some new task, something senseless, to suggest some craving without result. Then Aeacus decreed he should rattle dice for ever in a box with no bottom. At once the poor wretch began his fruitless task of hunting for the dice, which for ever slipped from his fingers.

Analysis: This is from Seneca's satire on the recently-dead Emperor Claudius, who is condemned in the afterlife to rattle dice forever in a bottomless box. Seneca had personal reasons to dislike Claudius, who had exiled him in 49 BC, so this reads as much as a settling of scores as a comment on gambling itself. Even so, choosing gambling specifically as Claudius' eternal punishment suggests Seneca saw it as a vice, and his audience of wealthy Roman elites likely shared that view. That doesn't mean every Roman disliked gambling, but among the elite it could clearly be read as an inferior pastime.

Source 5: Cicero, *Against Catiline*, Ch. 10, §22–23 • 63 BC

LATIN

postremum autem genus est non solum numero verum etiam genere ipso atque vita quod proprium Catilinae est, de eius dilectu, immo vero de complexu eius ac sinu; quos pexo capillo, nitidos, aut imberbis aut bene barbato videtis, manicatis et talaribus tunicis, velis amictos, non togis; quorum omnis industria vitae et vigilandi labor in antelucanis cenis expromitur. in his gregibus omnes aleatores, omnes adulteri, omnes impuri impudicique versantur.

TRANSLATION

There is a last class, last not only in number but in the sort of men and in their way of life; the especial body-guard of Catiline, of his levying; yes, the friends of his embraces and of his bosom; whom you see with carefully combed hair, glossy, beardless, or with well-trimmed beards; with tunics with sleeves, or reaching to the ankles; clothed with veils, not with robes; all the industry

of whose life, all the labour of whose watchfulness, is expended in suppers lasting till daybreak. In these bands are all the gamblers, all the adulterers, all the unclean and shameless citizens.

Analysis: From Cicero's speech against Catiline, this places gamblers at the bottom of Catiline's circle, alongside adulterers, as "unclean and shameless" (*impuri impudicique*). This is a persuasive speech, delivered to appeal to the wealthy senatorial elite in front of him, so the language is doing rhetorical work as much as reporting a settled fact. Still, it tells us how that particular elite audience was expected to react to the word 'gambler': as an insult that would land.

Source 6: Cicero, *Philippic II*, Ch. 23, §56 · 44 BC

LATIN

restituēbat multos calamitosos: in eis patrui nulla mentio. si severus, cur non in omnis? si misericors, cur non in suos? sed omitto ceteros: Licinium lenticulam de alea condemnatum, conlusorem suum, restituit, quasi vero ludere cum condemnato non liceret, sed ut quod in alea perdiderat beneficio legis dissolveret.

TRANSLATION

He restored many men who had fallen under misfortune. Among them no mention was made of his uncle. If he was severe, why was he not so to every one? If he was merciful, why was he not merciful to his own relations? But I say nothing of the rest. He restored Licinius Lenticula, a man who had been condemned for gambling, and who was a fellow-gamester of his own. As if he could not play with a condemned man; but in reality, in order to pay by a straining of the law in his favour, what he had lost by the dice.

Analysis: From Cicero's second Philippic, an attack on Mark Antony delivered in the senate, this passage notes Antony's pardon of a man condemned for gambling, his own gambling partner. Combined with Source 5, this is Cicero using gambling to attach the lowest possible class association to Antony in front of the same senatorial audience. That gambling still worked as an insult 19 years after the Catiline speech shows some consistency in elite attitudes, but the fact

that Antony pardoned his own gambling companion also points to a real gap between the elite's public condemnation of gambling and their private practice of it.

Source 7: Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum Gestarum*, Book 14, Ch. 6, §25 · c. 380 AD

LATIN

Ex turba vero imae sortis et paupertinae, in tabernis aliqui pernoctant vinariis, non nulli sub velabris umbraculorum theatralium latent, quae, Campanam imitatus lasciviam, Catulus in aedilitate sua suspendit omnium primus; aut pugnaciter aleis certant, turpi sono fragosis naribus introrsum reducto spiritu concrepantes; aut quod est studiorum omnium maximum ab ortu lucis ad vesperam sole fatiscunt vel pluviis, per minutias aurigarum equorumque praecipua vel delicta scrutantes.

TRANSLATION

But of the multitude of lowest condition and greatest poverty some spend the entire night in wineshops, some lurk in the shade of the awnings of the theatres, which Catulus in his aedileship, imitating Campanian wantonness, was the first to spread, or they quarrel with one another in their games at dice, making a disgusting sound by drawing back the breath into their resounding nostrils; or, which is the favourite among all amusements, from sunrise until evening, in sunshine and in rain, they stand open-mouthed, examining minutely the good points or the defects of charioteers and their horses.

Analysis: Writing a history of the Roman Empire, Marcellinus describes gamblers here as belonging to the "greatest poverty" (*paupertinae*) and "lowest condition" (*imae sortis*), part of a wider chapter blaming the lower classes for Rome's decline. His own noble background likely sharpens that contempt. What this source adds is a timeline: nearly 450 years after Cicero, elite writers are still reaching for gambling as shorthand for the low and disreputable, which strengthens the case that the elite disdain in Sources 5 and 6 wasn't a one-off but a durable attitude.

Conclusion

Across these seven sources, gambling in Rome doesn't settle into one clear status. Tavern-goers and at least one emperor enjoyed it openly, restrictions notwithstanding, while wealthy elites like Cicero, Seneca and Marcellinus treated it as something inferior and worth criticising. Gambling didn't hold a single, agreed status across the Roman population. Different people, largely split along class lines, held genuinely different views of it.

Assessment of prediction

My prediction was largely right, but it missed the socioeconomic split. Sources 1 and 3 show ordinary Romans and at least one emperor enjoying gambling, while those higher up the social scale, Cicero and Marcellinus among them, regarded it as inferior. The *lex talaria* in Source 2 is also a near parallel to the law that got Sandro Tonali suspended in my starting point: a restriction that existed on paper well before it was consistently enforced in practice.

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