

The Roman Gladiator

Classic Technology Center

History & Origin

Like sporting events in many ancient cultures, Roman gladiatorial combat originated as a religious event. The Romans claimed that their tradition of gladiatorial games was adopted from the Etruscans, but there is little evidence to support this. The Greeks, in Homer's *Iliad*, held funeral games in honor of the fallen Patroclus. The games ended not in the literal death of the participants, but in their symbolic death as defeated athletes, unlike succeeding Roman gladiatorial combat.

The Roman historian Livy wrote about the first known gladiatorial games, held in 310 BC by the Campanians. These games symbolized the re-enactment of the Campanians' military success over the Samnites, in which they were aided by the Romans. The first Roman gladiatorial games were held in 246 BC by Marcus and Decimus Brutus in honor of their father, Junius Brutus, as a *munus* or funeral gift for the dead. It was a relatively small affair that included the combat of three pairs of slaves in the Forum Boarium (a cattle market). From their religious origins, gladiatorial games evolved into defining symbols of Roman culture and became an integral part of that culture for nearly seven centuries. Eventually gladiatorial games reached spectacular heights in the number of combatants and their monumental venues.



For instance, in 183 BC it was traditional to hold gladiatorial games in which sixty duels took place. By 65 BC, Julius Caesar had upped-the-ante by pitting 320 *ludi*, or pairs of gladiators, against one another in a wooden amphitheater constructed specifically for the event. At this point, gladiatorial games expanded beyond religious events, taking on both political and ludic elements in Rome.

Who were the Gladiators?

In general, gladiators were condemned criminals, prisoners of war, or slaves bought for the purpose of gladiatorial combat by a *lanista*, or owner of gladiators. Professional gladiators were free men who volunteered to participate in the games. In *The Satyricon*, Petronius suggested that Roman crowds preferred combat by free men over that of slaves. For example, the character of Echion is excited about games in which free men, "not a slave in the batch," will fight. Though low on the social scale, free men often found popularity and patronage of wealthy Roman

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citizens by becoming gladiators. The emperor Augustus sought to preserve the *pietas* and *virtus* of the knight class and Roman senate by forbidding them to participate in gladiatorial combat. Later, Caligula and Nero would order both groups to participate in the games.

Roman citizens legally belittled as *infamus* sold themselves to *lanistae* and were known as *auctorati*. Their social status was neither that of volunteers nor condemned criminals, or slaves. Condemned criminals, the *damnati ad mortem* who committed a capital crime, entered the gladiatorial arena weaponless. Those criminals who did not commit a capital crime were trained in private gladiator schools, *ludi*. At these private and imperial schools, gladiators became specialist in combat techniques that disabled and captured their opponents rather than killed them quickly. Criminals trained in gladiator schools fought with the weapons and armor of their choice and could earn their freedom if they survived three to five years of combat. Though a gladiator was only required to fight two or three times a year, few survived the three to five years.



As a gladiator, a man gained immediate status even though the gladiatorial oath forced him to act as a slave to his master and "to endure branding, chains, flogging, or death by the sword". Gladiators were required to do what their *lanista* ordered and therefore were revered for their loyalty, courage and discipline.

Gladiatorial Training & Combat – Types of Gladiators

Gladiators were trained at special schools originally owned by private citizens, but later taken over by the imperial state to prevent the build-up of a private army. Gladiators trained like true athletes, much like professional athletes do today. They received medical attention and three meals a day. Their training included learning how to use various weapons, including the war chain, net, trident, dagger, and lasso. Below is a picture of the Gladiatorial Barracks at Pompeii.



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For more images from Pompeii, see *Maecenas: Images of Ancient Greece and Rome* on CTCWeb.

Each gladiator was allowed to fight in the armor and with the weapons that best suited him. They wore armor, though not Roman military armor as this would send the wrong political signal to the populous. Instead, gladiators wore the armor and used the weaponry of non-Roman people, playing the role of Rome's enemies. For instance, a gladiator might dress as a Samnite in Samnite garb that included a large oblong shield (*scutum*), a metal or boiled leather grieve (*ocrea*) on the left leg, a visored helmet (*galea*) with a large crest and plume, and a sword (*gladius*). The gladiatorial garb for other rolls were:

- A *Thracian* - wore *ocrea* on both legs, carried a small square shield, wore either a full visored helmet or an open-faced helmet with a wide brim, and carried a curved Thracian sword with an angled bend in the blade.
- A *Secutor* - took his name from the term for "pursuer" and fought virtually naked and bald, carrying a large oval or rectangular shield and a sword or dagger, wearing an *ocrea* on the left leg, leather bands at the elbow and wrists (*manicae*), and a round or high-visored helmet.
- A *Retiarius* - symbolized the fisherman and wore only a loin cloth (*subligaculum*) and a metal shoulder-piece (*galerus*) on the left arm, and carried a net (*iaculum*), a dagger, and a trident or tunny-fish harpoon (*fascina*). One variation on the Retiarius was the Laquearii who carried a lasso instead of a net.

Gladiators were paid each time they fought. If a gladiator survived three to five years of combat they were freed. Gladiators fought in arenas, the most famous of which was the Colosseum built by the Flavians. When one of the opponents in a contest was wounded, the crowd would typically shout "*habet, hoc habet,*" which means "he has had it." An opponent who felt he was defeated would raise his left hand with one finger extended as a request for mercy. It is not clear how the vote of life or death for the defeated opponent was decided though it may have involved the thumb.

If the decision was for death, the defeated opponent would ceremoniously grasp the thigh of his conqueror who would slay the loser by stabbing his sword into his neck. The dead body was removed by costumed attendants, one dressed as the ferryman Charon, and the other as Mercury. Charon struck the dead body with a hammer and Mercury poked the body with a hot iron disguised as his wand to assure the loser was dead. The winner would receive a symbol of their victory—such as a golden bowl, crown, or gold coin—along with a palm leaf symbolizing victory.

Public Perception of Gladiators

In ancient Rome, gladiators could earn the idolized status of a hero, like many modern athletes. Even though a gladiator's social status was barely better than a slave, many Roman citizens, knights, and even Roman emperors fought in the gladiatorial arena because of their love of the bellicose sport and their desire for adoration. The emperor Commodus boasted that he himself had fought in over one thousand gladiatorial duels.

The *munerarius* of gladiatorial games gained popularity among Roman citizens and generated political momentum in doing so. For instance, Julius Caesar pitted 320 *ludi* of gladiators against one another in a wooden amphitheater constructed specifically for the event. Though done under the auspices that the games were a *munus* for his dead father, Caesar was more than likely seeking political favor to assure his election as praetor.

The Romans seemed ambivalent to the violent nature of the gladiatorial games and, though we may condemn them, the games are not unlike modern professional sports like hockey, rugby, and football. The gladiators were the heroes of their time, especially during the years of peace under the Augustans in the first and second centuries. Without war heroes, Roman needed someone to idolize and this role fell to the gladiators.

There is evidence that Roman women especially idolized gladiators, sometimes to the dismay of their husbands. The mother of Commodus, Faustina, is said to have preferred the gladiator Martianus over her husband, Marcus Aurelius. Juvenal wrote about Eppia, a senator's wife, who is said to have thought so highly of gladiators that she preferred them to her children, country, sister, and husband. There is an inscription on a wall in Pompeii that says the Thracian gladiator Celadus was "suspirum et decus puellarum," literally "the sigh and glory of the girls." In other words, he was a heartthrob.

Female Gladiators

The rise of female professional sports is not a new phenomenon. Women once competed in the gladiatorial arena though not without controversy. It is known that the Roman emperor Septimius Severus, who ruled from 193 to 211 AD, allowed women to fight as gladiators but banned the tradition in 200 AD. Recently, the remains of a young woman, approximately twenty years old, were found in Britain. Discovered in a Roman cemetery in the area of London known as Southwark and excavated in 1996, archaeologists uncovered the remains of the young woman buried with several items that may identify her as a female gladiator.

According to the curator of early London history at the London Museum, the items buried with the woman were a dish decorated with a fallen gladiator and other ceramic pieces decorated with similar scenes and gladiatorial symbols. Notably three of the eight lamps found in the grave are decorated with the Egyptian god Anubis, who was associated with the Roman messenger god Mercury. This association is important because in Roman times slaves dressed as Mercury removed the dead bodies from the arena. Mercury, and his Greek counterpart Hermes, traditionally led human souls to the underworld.

If the young woman found in the Roman cemetery was a gladiator, the wealth of materials found with her indicate that she was popular. The young woman's remains, the items buried with her, and a relief of two women with short swords and shields fighting are on display at the London Museum. The relief's inscription reads, "an honorable release from the arena." The women in the relief are identified as Amazonia and Achillea.

Despite the existence of archaeological evidence that supports the existence of female gladiators, no one is sure that the remains uncovered in London are actually those of a female gladiator.

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