Contents

PART ONE
THE INSTITUTION OF GLADIATORIAL COMBAT
   Its Origins and Evolution  5
   Types of Gladiators  7
   Female Gladiators  17
SPONSORING AND STAFFING A GLADIATORIAL SPECTACLE  19
   The Spectacle from Start to Finish  22
   The Amphitheaters  27
   The Revolt of Spartacus  28

PART TWO
THE SPECTACLES AT POMPEII  39
   The Documents: Spectacle Programs and Graffiti  39
   The Players: Editores, Agents and familiae gladiatoriae, and Gladiators  42
   The Venues: The Amphitheater, Gladiators' Barracks and Ludus, and the Schola armaturarum  53
   Representations of Gladiators: Paintings and Reliefs  69
   Representations of Gladiators: Lamps, Vases, and Statues  99
   The Riot of a.d. 59  106

FROM THE GLADIATORS TO TIGER MAN
   Knowledge, Confrontation, and Death in the Spectacle of the Duel  107
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BIBLIOGRAPHY  117
ABBREVIATIONS  123
INDEX  125
The many theories concerning the origins of gladiatorial games boil down essentially to two: one dates them back to the Etruscans, the other traces the games to the Oscan-Lucanians. The theory of an Etruscan origin is based essentially on literary sources (Athenaeus Deipnosophistae 4.153; Tertullian Ad nationes 1.10.47, Apologeticum 15.5; Isidore of Seville Origines 10.159), though at present archaeological data to support this thesis is lacking. Given what we know to date, the second theory, placing the origin of the games in the Oscan-Lucanian environment, prevails. Indeed, the very oldest depictions of gladiatorial combat, discovered in painted tombs in Capua and Paestum and dating back to the fourth century B.C., come from this area (Figure 1). They are scenes of duels, boxing, and chariot races—allusions
to the games held during the funerals of prominent local figures. Some vases from the same period, decorated with scenes of duels, also come from this area. Together with the paintings, they establish the most direct antecedents of gladiatorial combat.

Originally, gladiatorial games were linked to funeral rites. They were a kind of tribute made to the deceased, from which derives the name used in antiquity: “munus,” meaning “duty” or “gift.” On the basis of later sources (Tertullian De spectaculis 12), some scholars have hypothesized that the victim’s blood was an offering intended to placate the dead. It has also been seen as a reflection of the ancient rites of human sacrifice presumed to have taken place at funerals.

In Rome, too, the advent of gladiatorial combat was tied to funeral rites. The first gladiatorial spectacle was given in the Forum Boarium in 264 B.C. for the funeral of Giunius Brutus Pera (Valerius Maximus 2.4–7; Livy Periochae 16). From then on, gladiatorial contests became widespread at the funeral rites of the Romans. It was not uncommon for someone to specify his own funeral arrangements in his will, instructing his heir to offer games that would perpetuate his memory and render the ceremony unforgettable (Seneca De brevitate vitae 10.6; Dio Cassius 37.51). But early on, the munera began to change, losing their original ceremonial and funereal character to become, increasingly, spectacles in their own right.

In 105 B.C. the consuls P. Rutilius Rufus and Cn. Manlius Maximus organized, for the very first time, a contest without any link to a specific occasion, thereby inaugurating a series of public entertainments (Valerius Maximus 2.3.2). Thenceforward, the games became an indispensable means for career politicians to gain fame and popularity. The munera gladiatoria were so popular with the spectators—composed in good part of voters—that a magistrate who was particularly generous in offering a spectacle was guaranteed reelection. For this reason, the games became more and more costly and elaborate towards the end of the Republic. These excesses prompted a law (lex Tullia de ambitu) that prohibited public figures from offering gladiatorial spectacles in the two years preceding their election to public office (Cicero In Vatinium 15.37).

On the other hand, by the end of the Augustan reign, it had become obligatory for magistrates to offer a spectacle during their tenure, on a date established by the city council. The expenses fell partly on the magistrate and partly on the city, but sometimes the magistrate, in an act of magnanimity, would refuse public aid and pay for the show entirely out of his own purse.

The gladiatorial entertainments were also an important means of political propaganda for the emperor, who knew that they would both increase his popularity and appease the turbulent populace. It was the poet Juvenal (Saturnae 10.81) who coined the phrase “panem et circenses” (“bread and circuses”) to stigmatize the politics of consensus practiced by the Roman emperors in the face of their subjects. The gladiatorial entertainments lasted until the fifth century A.D., when they were officially abolished. The venationes, or hunts, lasted up until the sixth century.
TYPES OF GLADIATORS

During the Republic, the armor worn by gladiators was very similar to military armor. After the reform enacted by the emperor Augustus, gladiators were divided into various categories based on their type of armor and their style of fighting. No clear iconographic equivalents have been found for all the gladiator types cited in the literary and epigraphic sources. Therefore we can’t give very detailed descriptions of the paraphernalia worn by certain types of fighters or their opponents. Some scholars even express doubt and difference of opinion when it comes to identifying some of the better-known types. What follows are the most recent and widely shared hypotheses on the identity and paraphernalia of the most famous and best-documented categories of gladiators, particularly in Pompeii.

1. The Samnites

The Samnites (Samnes) are the oldest of the gladiatorial types known to us. According to Livy (9.40), in 309 B.C. the Samnites, who originated from present-day Sannio and Molise, experienced a harsh defeat at the hands of the Romans. The Campanians, who were allies of the Romans, were able to get a share of the splendid arms that the Samnites had left behind on the battlefield. With these arms they outfitted the gladiators, who then assumed the name “Samnites” (FIGURE 2).

The Samnite was heavily armed. He had a very large round or rectangular shield (scutum), a leather legging on his left leg, sometimes trimmed with metal, and a short sword with a straight, pointed blade (gladius), or a lance. He was protected by a helmet that had both a visor and a crest and was decorated with feathers (galea). Under Augustus, the Samnite became obsolete as a type of gladiator, because it would have been offensive to the Samnites, now allies of the Romans, to feature him in the arena. He was replaced by two new types: the secutor and the hoplomachus, or as some scholars believe, the secutor and the murmillo.
2. The *Hoplomachus*

This type of gladiator is not easy to identify because his armor was similar to the Thracian’s (see below). He wore high leggings and an impressive helmet decorated with feathers and an upturned brim. As with the Thracian, horizontal bandages over the thighs sometimes appear in the images of the *hoplomachus* (Figure 3). But he is distinguished by his straight sword, his plain helmet, and his rather small, round shield. His opponent was either a Thracian or a *murmillo*.

3. The Thracian

Like the Samnites and the Gauls (on the latter we have very little information), the Thracian (*Thraex*) derives his name from the warriors of Thrace (modern-day Bulgaria), with whom the Romans came into contact at the time of the wars against Mithridates. The Thracian’s armor included a small, strongly convex, squarish shield (*parmula*), a *manica* (armband) on the right arm, and two high leggings, often decorated up to the knee (Figure 4). The weapon most typical of this gladiator was a short sword, either curved or angled, called a *sica* (Figure 5). Even his helmet was unusual: it was generally topped with a tall crest decorated with the relief of...
a griffin’s head, and feathers (FIGURE 6). His opponent was usually the hoplomachus, but he also fought against the murmillo or another Thracian.

4. The Secutor
As he usually fought against the retarius, or net-fighter, the secutor was also called a contraretarius (CIL VI. 631, 10180) (FIGURE 7). He had a sword, a long rectangular shield, and an ocresa (metal legging or greave). His helmet was small, round, and devoid of projecting elements that could become
ensnared in his opponent’s net (FIGURE 8). The helmet was completely closed in front, with small holes for the eyes. This gladiator’s fighting strategy was to get close to his opponent, using his shield for protection. His opponent, on the other hand, tried to avoid fighting up close because his own weapons, the net and the trident, were effective only if deployed from a distance. For his own part, the secutor had everything to gain from moving in as quickly as possible, because with his heavy armor and the limited amount of air in his helmet, he tired out sooner than his opponent.

5. The Retiarius
This gladiator, with his net and trident, is easy to recognize. With a technique that may have been inspired by fishermen, he attempted to wrap his opponent in his net, rendering him powerless. A trident and a short sword were his weapons. If he lost the net, he could use his trident to land a two-handed blow on his opponent (FIGURE 7). The net-fighter’s costume was similar to that of other gladiators, with a few differences. Like others, he wore the subligaculum—a loincloth tied to his belt (balteus). Yet, unlike other gladiators, he wore a manica on his left arm (not his right) to more successfully maneuver the net (FIGURE 9). Completely unique to the net-fighter was the galerus, a rectangular plate of bronze foil tied to his left shoulder, rising up about twelve or thirteen centimeters to protect his bare head. During the excavation of the
FIGURE 10. 
*Galerus* found in the Gladiators' Barracks at Pompeii on January 10, 1767. The decoration in relief includes a rudder, an anchor, a crab, and a trident with a dolphin (1st century AD.). Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale (inv. 5639).

FIGURE II.
Legging of a *mirmillo* from Pompeii, decorated with a victorious gladiator holding a palm branch. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale (inv. 5663).

Quadriporticus of the theaters at Pompeii, three different specimens of *galerus* were found. One was decorated with marine symbols (FIGURE 10); another with a relief of Hercules' head and some cupids; and a third with an engraving of the net-fighter's weapons and the abbreviation "RFT / SECUND" ("Rettarius, second rank") accompanied by a palm and a crown, the symbols of victory. These pieces vary in size from thirty to thirty-five centimeters in width and height and weigh about one kilo. The *retiarius* was also matched against the *mirmillo*. 
6. The Murmillo
The murmillo or myrmillo got his name from the marine fish (morma) whose image was drawn on his helmet. It is hypothesized that he originally fought against the net-fighter, whose net was indeed reminiscent of a fisherman's. Later, however, the murmillo fought mostly against the Thracian and the hoplomachus (Figure 3). Like the other gladiators, he fought bare-chested and wore a subligaculum; his right arm was protected by a manica, and his left leg was probably protected by a short, laced leggings. Some leggings of this type, often mistaken for armbands, have been uncovered in Herculaneum and Pompeii (Figure 11). The murmillo wore a helmet with a visor and an angular crest, adorned with feathers or horsehair (Figure 12). He carried a curved rectangular shield (scutum), about one meter high, made of wood and covered in leather, weighing around six to eight kilos. His only weapon was a short sword (gladius).
FIGURE 13.
Marble relief with two gladiators, probably *provocatores*, in combat on the left. Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano (inv. 126119).

FIGURE 14.
Terra-cotta tile ("lasra Campana") with scene of a *venatio* (1st century A.D.). Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano (inv. 62660).
7. The Provocator
Though the provocator was already known in Cicero’s time (*Pro Sestio* 64), we don’t have much specific information about him. He wore a *subligaculum* and had some protection halfway up his left leg. He wore a helmet with a visor but no crest and bore a curved rectangular shield. He also carried a kind of cuirass to protect his chest (Figure 13). Usually, *provocatores* fought against other *provocatores*. With weapons and armor weighing a total of around fourteen to fifteen kilos, this could be considered a middleweight category.

8. The Eques
The *eques* was a gladiator who fought on horseback. He wore a helmet with a visor, a short tunic, and bands to protect his thighs and his right arm. He was armed with a lance and a small round shield (*parma equestris*), and he fought only against other *equites*. In reliefs, the *eques* was often depicted without his horse, probably because his match ended in hand-to-hand combat with a sword.

9. Other Gladiators
There were other types of gladiators about whom less is known: the *essedarius* fought on top of a cart; the *dimachaerus* was probably armed with two daggers; the *veles* fought with a javelin and a strap (*hasta amenata*).

Finally, there were the *venatores* and the *bestiarii*, who fought against wild beasts in spectacular hunting shows (*venationes*) (Figure 14). They wore short tunics and were armed with *venabuli*, wooden spits or poles with iron tips, and leather whips. Sometimes the *venator* is depicted with a cap-shaped helmet, *ocreae*, and a small straight sword.

**FEMALE GLADIATORS**

Some ancient sources refer to the participation of women in the amphitheater games during the reign of Nero. Tacitus (*Annales* 15.32–33) reports that during a splendid show in A.D. 63, some noblewomen and senators even entered the arena to fight. In A.D. 66, at the *munus* offered in Pozzuoli by Nero in honor of Tiridates, the king of Armenia, Ethiopian women were introduced into the arena (Dio Cassius 62.3.1). The satirical poet Juvenal tells of a certain Mevia, who hunted boars in the arena “with spear in hand and breasts exposed” (*Satyræ* 1.22–23). In his famous sixth satire against women, Juvenal gives an
 ironic view of the mania that many Roman ladies felt for the arena games (Saturae 6.255–58):

What a fine thing for a husband, at an auction of his wife’s effects, to see her belt and armlets and plumes put up for sale, with a gaiter that covers half the left leg; or if she fight another sort of battle, how charmed you will be to see your young wife disposing of her greaves!

In the Satyricon we hear of a munus organized by a certain Titus, who went so far as to present a woman fighting on a cart (Petronius Satyricon 45.7). At the inauguration of the Colosseum, some women participated in the hunts of wild beasts (Martial Liber spectaculorum 6; Dio Cassius 66.25.1). Even under Domitian, probably in A.D. 89, a munus was held at which there were female gladiators (Dio Cassius 67.8.4; Suetonius Domitianus 4.2; Statius Silvae 1.8, 51–56). Although there is not much archaeological evidence of female gladiators, a depiction of two women fighting appears on a marble relief from Halicarnassus (Asia Minor), dating to the second century A.D. (FIGURE 15). Even their obviously fictional names—Amazon and Achilla—are recorded.

In an epigraph at Ostia, from the second century A.D., a member of the local elite is extolled as being the first in the history of that city’s games to “arm women.” Yet it seems that in A.D. 200 the emperor Septimius Severus put an end to contests between women in the arena (Dio Cassius 75.16).
SPONSORING AND STAFFING
A GLADIATORIAL SPECTACLE

The complex organization of the gladiatorial spectacles was regulated by special laws (leges gladiatoriae), which varied from city to city. The one principle common to all was that no munera could be organized without the consent of the emperor or the civil authorities.

Private citizens or magistrates could call a contest for various reasons: to commemorate a deceased member of the family, to celebrate the inauguration of a public monument, on the occasion of a military victory, in honor of the emperor and the imperial family, or to gain favor in the eyes of the people. Furthermore, the local magistrates were expected to offer spectacles, or to carry out public works during their year in office. The sponsor in charge of financing the show was the editor.

To organize a spectacle, the editor had to employ the services of a lanista, who was a professional entrepreneur. The lanista bought, sold, and rented his gladiators to whomever wished to sponsor a munus. Such a profession could make one rich, but it was always regarded publicly as a disgraceful job. The lanista was considered a vendor of human flesh (the word has the same etymological root as the word “lanius,” or “butcher”), and he was compared to a pimp who exploited prostitutes. The lanista kept his troupe of gladiators in special schools (ludi), where they were subjected to very strict discipline. To stay in optimal shape for fighting, they trained daily, followed a diet aimed at increasing their muscle mass and weight, and underwent medical checkups. However, the market price of a gladiator depended on his success in the arena, and the agents charged such high rates for the best fighters that, under the emperor Marcus Aurelius, it became necessary to set a cap on spending for each event, and for each gladiator.

Among the oldest and most renowned schools was the one at Capua, from whence erupted the revolt of Spartacus in 73 B.C. (see page 28). The prominent role played by this city in the training of gladiators continued into the Empire. Caesar owned a ludi with five thousand gladiators at Capua, and this was, perhaps, the nucleus of the famous Ludus Julianus, the imperial school that would be called the Ludus Neronianus under Nero.

Though it was hard, life in the ludi was certainly not the equivalent of life imprisonment. The gladiators could come and go freely, and some, like Spartacus, shared their barracks with a female companion (ludia). It may be that some gladiators lived in private houses, going to the school only to train. In fact, many of them had families, as evidenced by the sepulchral epigraphs paid for by their wives (figure 16). This was the case for the

FIGURE 16.
Funerary epigraph of two net-fighters, Purpurius and Philematius. The latter died at the age of 30 and was grieved by his wife, Aurelia Aphrodites. Benevento, Museo del Sannio (inv. 1777?).
secutor Urbicus, who died at the age of twenty-two after thirteen fights and seven years of marriage (CIL V.5933), or the retiarius lantinus, who died at the age of twenty-four after five fights and five years of marriage (CIL V.4506).

Most of the gladiators were prisoners-of-war and slaves earmarked by their owners for a gladiatorial career. Some were criminals who were condemned to death (nosi ad gladium damnati) or to forced labor; the latter could be compelled to work off their sentences as gladiators. A considerable difference separated the two categories: the slaves destined to become gladiators did not go directly from prison to the amphitheater like those condemned to death, but were sent to a school to learn how to handle weapons. Furthermore, while those with death sentences had no chance of leaving the arena alive, the slaves had the same chance as any regular gladiator.

Contrary to what many believe, the gladiatorial game was not necessarily meant to end in death, especially since the training of a gladiator was so expensive. Death could result either from the wounds a gladiator received in combat, or when the editor or the crowd refused to spare a wounded gladiator. But the latter scenario occurred only when the gladiator failed to carry out his task fully, or to truly engage in the contest. The editor, however, was obliged to pay the lanista the price for the gladiators whom he had refused to spare. This helps to clarify why there were also freedmen (slaves who had obtained their freedom) and free men—some even from good families—who signed up to fight voluntarily. The free men who dedicated themselves to a gladiatorial career (called auctorati) entered into a condition of partial servitude to the lanista, and while this didn't compromise their freedom or their citizenship, it did limit their legal eligibility. More often than not, these men were pushed into the profession out of material need, perhaps because they had completely dissipated all of their means (Horace Epistulae 1.18.36). But there were others who actually aspired to fame and fortune (Tertullian Ad martyras 5). The allure of the gladiatorial profession led even some members of the equestrian and senatorial classes to give up their standing and enter the arena (Tacitus Annales 14.14, 15.32; Juvenal 2.143-48; Suetonius Caesar 39, Tibterius 35, Nero 12; Dio Cassius 47.43.3, 51.22.4, 56.25.7–8, 59.13, 61.17). Some emperors promulgated laws in order to contain this phenomenon, but without much success.

Slaves, freedmen, and free men could all be part of the same familia gladiatoria, but the documents available to us shed no light on the numbers in question. Certainly the majority of the gladiators were slaves. For one particular show at Pompeii, there appear to have been nineteen slaves and six free men (CIL IV.2508); elsewhere, six out of twenty gladiators were free men (CIL IX.466). We don't know how long a slave was expected to serve, nor how many times he had to fight before gaining his freedom. However, at the end of his career, a gladiator would receive a rudis, or wooden sword, to symbolize his service. Often the rudiarii (these "retired" gladiators) would end up as trainers in the gladiatorial schools.

But what kind of a reputation did the gladiators enjoy in civil society? The answer is not simple, and not without contradictions. Gladiators and bestiarii who were free men were considered infames (Calpurnius Flaccus Declamationes
and this condition brought with it a series of prohibitions. They were, of course, excluded from the Senate and the equestrian class. Yet, once in a while, the emperor would exonerate some of the gladiators—from these two classes only—of this infamia, if they had participated in some special munera at his own request.

The gladiator who was formerly a slave, but now a freedman, could not become a Roman citizen, and thus was an infamis. Such infamy was tied primarily to the blemish that attached to any actor who made a living doing public performances. It was compounded by the horror that the gladiators’ blood-thirstiness and brutality inspired, and their constant contact with death.

Even so, the opposite attitude was present as well: the gladiator was the sweetheart of the crowd, exalted by poets (Martial 5.24); immortalized on vases (FIGURE 17), cups, lamps, frescoes, and simple graffiti; and idolized by women. Juvenal recounts the story of Eppia, the wife of a senator, who abandoned her husband, children, and domestic comforts to follow the gladiator Sergio:

*And what were the youthful charms that captivated Eppia? What did she see in him to allow herself to be called a "she-Gladiator"? Her dear Sergius had already begun to shave (meaning he was over forty years old); a wounded arm gave promise of a discharge, and there were sundry deformities in his face: a scar caused by the helmet, a huge bulging nose, and a nasty humor always trickling from his eye. But then he was a gladiator! It is this that transforms these fellows into Hyacinths!* (Juvenal Saturae 6.82–113)

Their high public esteem, as well as the regard of some emperors, derived from the fact that the gladiator was seen, above all, as a man of courage, who was continually challenged by death. Even Cicero, who often denigrated his adversaries by calling them gladiators, could not fail to recognize these talents (Cicero Tusculanae disputationes 2.17.41). And Seneca returns time and again to the courage of the gladiators (Seneca De providentia 3.4, De costantia sapientis 16.2). And so, just as their own image was ambiguous, the arena fighters were met with a marked ambivalence in the social realm. The gladiator was both a hero and a murderer, regarded with admiration in one role and horror in the other.