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Gladiators



Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome

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Gladiator (dir. Scott, 2000)

Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* seemed poised to redeem the historical inaccuracies of previous gladiator films. The digital re-creation of the Colosseum in fact is a great success, showing the result of careful research and presentation. The makers of the film initially showed such concern for historical correctness that they hired one of the best available consultants, Kathleen Coleman of Harvard University. Unfortunately, they did not take advantage of her expert services.²⁵ The result is numerous errors that could easily have easily been avoided with Coleman's help. One prominent mistake is the claim by one of the characters in the film that Marcus Aurelius had banned gladiatorial combat. As we have seen, when Aurelius served as *editor*, he did require that gladiators fight with blunted weapons, but any objection that Aurelius had to this kind of spectacle did not prevent his making sure that *munera* would be given at Rome during his absence on the Danube frontier.²⁶

There are five arena scenes in *Gladiator*, two in Zucchabar, a non-existent Roman 'province' in North Africa, and three in the Colosseum in Rome.²⁷ From the beginning the film reveals itself incapable of avoiding the traditional cinematic preference for group fighting, dating back to the *Sign of the Cross*. The first three combat scenes in *Gladiator* involve *gregatim* fighting. We do not see a gladiatorial duel until the last two events. In the first North African episode, things seem to get off to a good start. We see three gladiators warming up, an historical practice of gladiators before combat (*prolusio*), but the film's problems with historical accuracy quickly come to the fore. Junkelmann's characterization of the armour in *Gladiator* as 'pure fantasy à la Conan the Barbarian' is blatantly evident in this scene.²⁸ The first gladiator, wearing a steer's head instead of a helmet, waves a sword while the two other helmeted gladiators brandish medieval weapons: one wields a mace and the other a flail.²⁹ These three are part of a group of gladiators who will take on the hero Maximus (Russell Crowe) and his comrades, who are given weapons but not gladiatorial armour. They are chained together, which suggests that they are *damnati*, but they do not fight each other as *damnati* normally do. Instead they find themselves required to fight a group of professional gladiators, including the three mentioned above and a *retiarius*, who wrongly wears a helmet. Professional gladiators would have never been required to fight a group of untrained *damnati*.

The second combat in Zucchabar is even odder. Maximus, outfitted not as a gladiator but as a soldier with a corselet, is matched against five gladiators, who do not attack as a group, but one at a time. Their good manners allow Maximus to kill all five. This fight is a familiar staple of many a martial arts movie, and utterly alien to the Roman arena.³⁰ This scene is reminiscent of the one discussed earlier in *Demetrius*, in which the hero kills five opponents one after the other. The important difference is that *Gladiator* offers this scene without comment, giving the false impression that a contest of one gladiator against multiple opponents is a normal practice in the arena.³¹

The next arena event is the re-creation of the battle of Zama, the decisive contest in the second Punic War, which takes place in the Colosseum. Battle re-creations were popular as the film suggests, but, as mentioned earlier, trained gladiators did not take part in them. The film at least recognizes the problem. When Proximo (Oliver Reed), Maximus' *lanista*, comments on this misuse of his men, the film attempts a plausible explanation.³² A representative of the emperor points out to Proximo that they are needed because of a scarcity of convicts. The substitution of gladiators for convicts in this case is not that objectionable because the actual battle is not on the scale of the massed infantry skirmishes given by Julius Caesar, Augustus and Claudius, but a relatively small fight on the dimensions of the typical gladiator *gregatim* contest.

Another problem is the involvement of the Roman army in this spectacle. Generally, staged battle enactments were between armies about whom the Roman audience could be neutral, probably because spectators undoubtedly would be displeased to see fighters representing the Romans lose a battle to an enemy. There is a comment from Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix) on this second oddity, when the 'Romans' lose the battle to the Carthaginians. Could the makers of this film be indulging in an in-joke, anticipating pedantic concerns about historical accuracy? Among all recorded battle re-creations, there was only one that involved the Roman army: Claudius' troops storming a British town. On that occasion, history was repeated with a Roman victory. No emperor, not even Commodus, would have tolerated even the possibility of a Roman loss. The film descends into complete nonsense when 'the Roman legionnaires' come into the arena to face Maximus and his men portraying 'the barbarian horde' (i.e., the Carthaginians). The Roman army turns out to be what appears to be female chariot fighters (*essedariae*) using bow and arrows and spears), a form of

warfare that was used by the Britons against the Romans in Caesar's day but never employed by the Romans. The armament of the Maximus' comrades with their pointed helmets and chain mail seems acceptable as a generic representation of the Cartagians, but Maximus' armor vaguely suggests that of a Roman soldier.

Another problem in this scene is the apparent confusion of the amphitheatre with the Roman circus (racetrack). For this skirmish, the arena is set up almost as a racetrack outlined by bullet-shaped pillars on which chariots run circling Maximus and his men who are located in the 'infield'. These pillars resemble *metae* or 'goals', which did not outline the ancient racetrack as here, but in groups of three marked both ends of the infield of a Roman racetrack. Of course, the biggest mistake is placing the *metae* in the amphitheatre at all.³³ Chariot racing took place in a structure called a *circus* (for example, the Circus Maximus), not in an amphitheatre. This confusion perhaps can be traced back to the arena scene in Mervyn Leroy's *Quo Vadis?* (1951), which, for some unfathomable reason, merges the amphitheatre and the Circus Maximus into one structure. In that film, Nero has Christians thrown to the lions in the arena of a huge stone amphitheatre that has a vast built-up infield, suggesting a racetrack. The viewer can see only one end of the infield, on which are clearly visible three conical pillars topped with egg-like objects, an excellent representation of the *metae*. Presumably, three more *metae* would have been located at the other (unseen) end of the infield.

The final two gladiatorial events in the Colosseum at last present Maximus in a duel, but even these two contests are marred by historical inaccuracy. The first duel is between Maximus and Tigris of Gaul, who is announced as 'the only undefeated champion in Roman history', returning after five years in retirement. The return from retirement has a solid historical basis: *rudarii* often went back to the arena, lured by substantial cash payments. I have already discussed the anachronism of the 'champion gladiator', which also appears in *Quo Vadis?* *Gladiator* wanders even further from history when the match turns into a combination of gladiatorial combat with the *venatio*, obviously inspired by the same scene in *Demetrius and the Gladiators*. As Tigris and Maximus fight, arena attendants release tigers on chains through trapdoors. One tiger attacks Maximus, who kills it. Another problem with this contest is the weapon that eventually determines victory. Tigris has a second weapon, a battleaxe in his left hand.³⁴ When

he drops it, Maximus (on the ground) picks it up and drives it into Tigris' foot. The Roman army on occasion did use battleaxes, but there is no evidence of gladiators using them in the arena. The quality of the fighting in this duel (and throughout the film) reveals nothing of the gladiator art, but is blatantly, to borrow Allen Ward's appropriate phrase, of the 'flail and hack' school.³⁵ The second duel is the climactic event in the film in which Maximus kills Commodus and then dies of a wound inflicted by a dagger which Commodus had treacherously concealed in his corselet. There is nothing wrong with screenwriters concocting a gladiatorial match between an historical character (Commodus) and a fictional character (Maximus) as long as it has historical plausibility. This quality is sorely missed, however, in this scene. First, the idea that the Romans would tolerate the determination of who would rule the empire by victory in a gladiator match is patently ridiculous. Moreover, although Commodus loved gladiatorial combat and performed as a gladiator both in private and in public, the likelihood that he would have voluntarily faced a 'champion' gladiator in a match with real weapons is non-existent. As we have seen, when Commodus used real weapons, he fought servants in his palace, wounding some and killing some of these easy victims. When he appeared in public as a gladiator and fought real gladiators, he used a wooden sword while his professional opponents were limited to some kind of wooden stick. This mistake is due to the fact that *Gladiator*, which is practically a remake of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (dir. Mann, 1964), adopts portions of the plot of that film almost as if it were a real historical source. The climax of *The Fall* is a duel (with spears and not swords) between Commodus (Christopher Plummer) and Livius (Stephen Boyd), Marcus Aurelius' adopted son (like Maximus, a fictional character) and his preference as successor. Both Livius and Maximus kill Commodus in their respective duels, but do not succeed him.³⁶ Both films wisely stop short of revising history that drastically.

In all fairness, however, it should be pointed out that *Gladiator* did capture the big picture in its representation of the life of a gladiator. Perhaps the most significant success is the film's emphasis on the redemption that was available to the gladiator as illustrated in the fictional story of Maximus.³⁷ After Marcus Aurelius designated Maximus as his successor, the jealousy of Commodus, who had naturally expected to succeed his father, led him to have Maximus' wife and son murdered and condemn Maximus to a life of slavery.³⁸ Maximus, however, takes advantage of the opportunity

to redeem himself through his courageous performances as a gladiator and reaches a point where he can again challenge Commodus for the throne. To be sure, such an extreme reversal of fortune would have been unlikely in real life, but it is only an exaggeration of a basic truth about the life of a gladiator, which offers, however remote, the possibility of redemption. Maximus, with his death, falls tragically short of complete success, but distinguishes himself as a courageous hero, willing to risk his life, no matter what the odds, to fulfil the demands of martial virtue.

Notes



Preface

- 1 Donald Kyle in his *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London and New York) ix reports that he took a similar path to this topic.
- 2 The *Interactive Ancient Mediterranean* website provides useful information about the format of references to ancient authors and lists of abbreviations: <http://iam.classics.unc.edu/main/help/A.html>.

Chapter 1 Cultural Context and Origins of Gladiatorial Combat

- 1 This dream, like her two other dreams, are found in a work of anonymous authorship called the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (*Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*) 4; 7; 10. Most scholars agree that the accounts of these three dreams were written by Perpetua herself. See Robert Rousselle, 'The Dreams of Vibia Perpetua: An Analysis of a Female Christian Martyr', *The Journal of Psychobiology* 14 (1987) 194. Although Thomas Heffernan (*Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1988) 200; 202) places the *Passion* 'within a sphere of textual/historical indeterminacy', he nonetheless says that Perpetua's dreams are probably genuine. For introduction, Latin text and English translation of the *Passion*, see Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford, 1972) xxv-xxvii and 116-19 (10).
- 2 See Georges Ville, *La Gladiature en occident des origines à la mort de Domitien* (Paris, 1981) 276, n. 107. Perpetua calls this figure a *lanista* ('owner-trainer of gladiator troupe'), which Ville says is an incorrect use of the word, although he does point out that *lanista* may have had the metaphorical meaning of 'referee' as seems to be the case in a passage from Cicero's thirteenth *Philippic* (40). Peter Dronke's identification (following von Franz) of this figure as an African priest of Saturn and his rod as the wand of Hermes is much less convincing. See his *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (+203) to Marguerite Perete (+1310)* (Cambridge, 1984) 14. The outfit of the