

THE  
SPARTACUS  
WAR

Barry Strauss

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# The Spartacus War

BARRY STRAUSS

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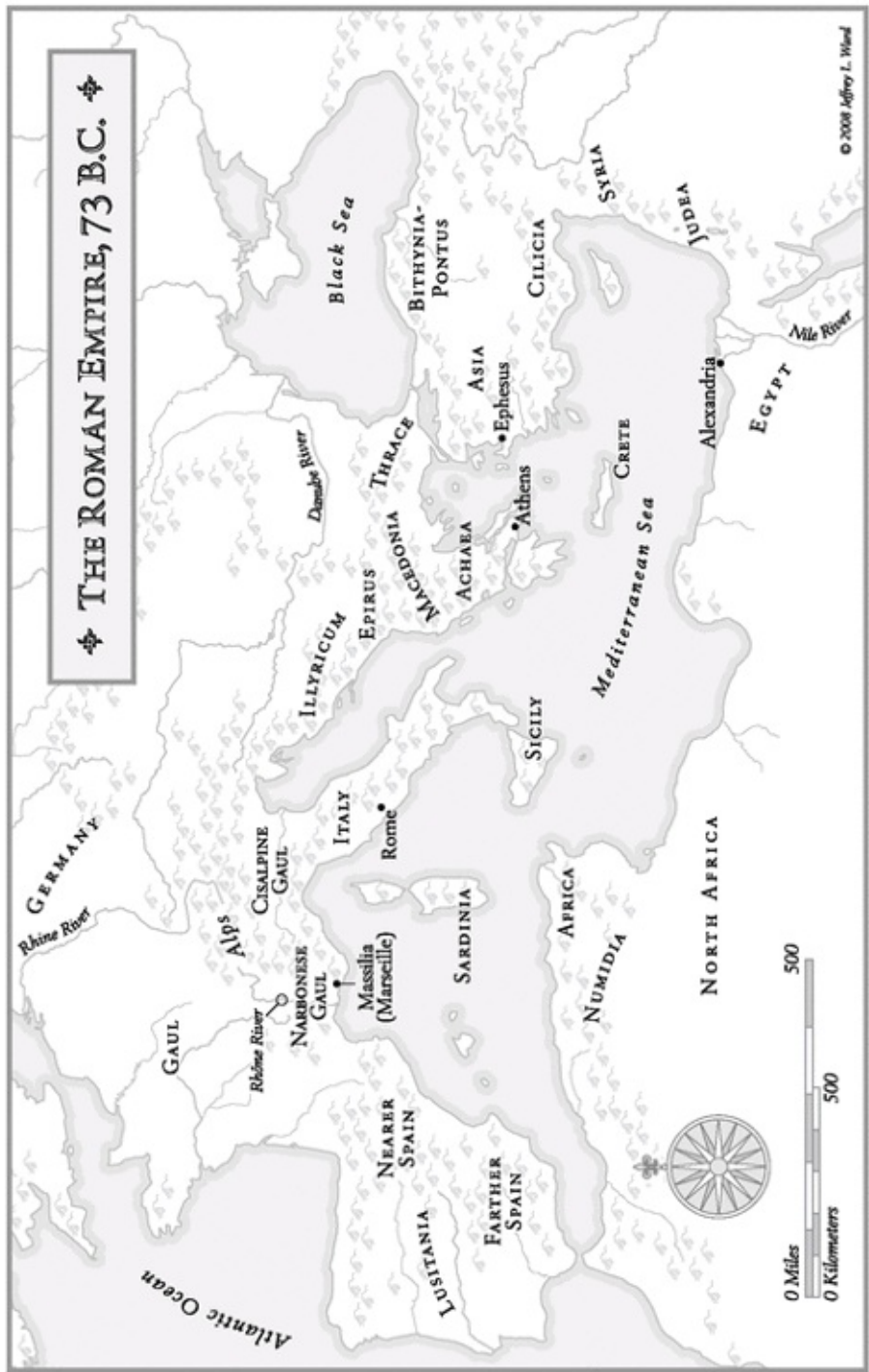
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For Josiah Ober and Adrienne Mayor

# THE ROMAN EMPIRE, 73 B.C.

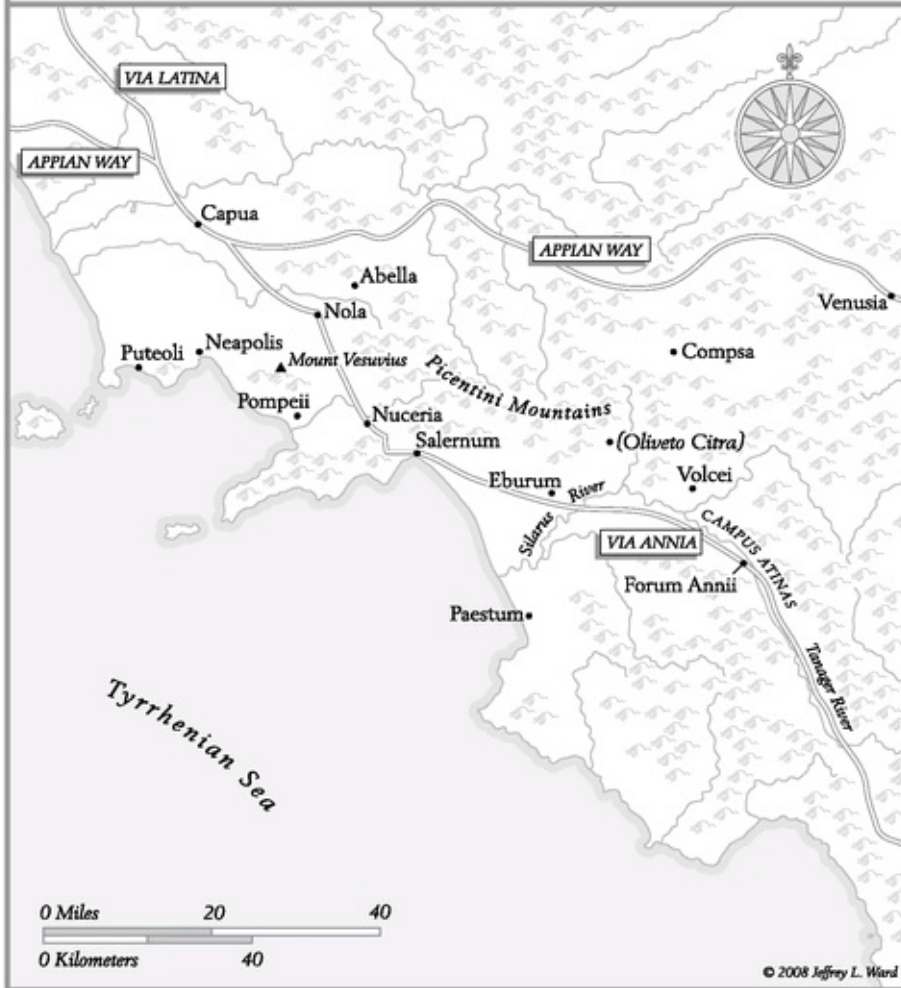


# ROMAN ITALY AT THE TIME OF THE SPARTACUS WAR 73-71 B.C.





# ✦ CAMPANIA AND LUCANIA ✦



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## *Author's Note*

I have used Roman place names wherever possible, with the exception of such common names as Italy and Spain.

I have translated all ancient Greek and Latin quotations myself unless otherwise noted.

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# Chronology

135–132 BC	First Sicilian Slave War
133	Tiberius Gracchus attempts to reform Rome and is assassinated
123–122	Gaius Gracchus attempts to reform Rome and is assassinated
110–104	War with Jugurtha
105	Cimbri and Teutones crush Romans at Arausio (Orange, France)
104–100	Second Sicilian Slave War
104	Vettius' Revolt in Capua
102–101	Marius twice defeats Cimbri and Teutones
91–88	'Social War', i.e. revolt of Rome's Italian allies
88–63	Wars with Mithridates
88	Sulla marches on Rome and restores order
87	Marius and Cinna take Rome and massacre opponents
85	Sulla raids Thrace
82	Battle of the Colline Gate; Sulla massacres opponents and becomes dictator
80–72	Sertorius's Revolt in Spain
79	Death of Sulla
Spring/ summer 73	Gladiators break out of Capua, occupy Vesuvius, defeat Glaber
Summer/ autumn 73	Sertorius assassinated by rival, Perpenna
Autumn 73	Spartacus raids Campania and Lucania, defeats Varinius
Winter 73-72	Rebels occupy Thurii

Winter/ spring 72	Pompey captures Perperna and ends revolt in Spain
Spring 72	Rebels march to Mutina, defeat consuls; Romans defeat Crixus
Summer 72	Rebels return to southern Italy
Autumn 72	Crassus takes command, decimates cohort, drives Spartacus southwards
c. January 71	Spartacus negotiates with pirates, tries to cross Strait of Messina
c. February 71	Spartacus breaks out of Crassus's trap
c. April 71	Spartacus's last battle
c. May 71	Crassus crucifies 6,000 surviving rebels
70	Rebel bands raid Tempa; late December Crassus celebrates <i>ovatio</i>
63	Death of Mithridates
60	Octavius wipes out last remnants of Spartacus's followers
58–51	Julius Caesar conquers Gaul
53	Crassus killed at Carrhae
48	Caesar defeats Pompey at Pharsalus; Pompey later murdered
44	Julius Caesar assassinated
31	Battle of Actium; Octavian Caesar is de facto ruler of Rome
AD 14	Death of Augustus (Octavian Caesar)
46	Thrace becomes Roman province
79	Eruption of Vesuvius

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## Introduction

Lucius Cossinius was naked. Senator, commander and deputy to the general Publius Varinius, Cossinius usually wore a full suit of armour and a red cloak, fastened with a bronze brooch on his right shoulder. But now he was bathing. A bath was a luxury in wartime, but no doubt hard to resist after leading 2,000 men on the march. As he had approached, Cossinius could have seen the pool glistening in the grounds of a villa at Salinae - 'Salt Works' - located on a coastal lagoon near Pompeii. In the distance stood Vesuvius, still a sleeping volcano in those days, its hills green with pine and beech trees, its orchards overflowing with apples and with grapes that made wine good enough for a senator's table; its soil teeming with hares, dormice and moles that the locals favoured in their hors d'oeuvres.

While Cossinius let down his guard, the enemy prepared to strike. Runaway slaves, gladiators and barbarians, they were a rabble in arms, but they had already beaten Rome twice that summer. The leader was as cunning as he was strong, as experienced as he was fresh, and he spoke words to steel the most timid soul. His name was Spartacus.

There was probably only a moment's warning, maybe a centurion sounding the alarm or the shout of the men. Cossinius, we might imagine, moved quickly out of the water and onto his horse before his slave finished rearranging his master's cloak. Even so, Spartacus's men burst into the grounds of the villa so fast that Cossinius barely escaped. Not so his supplies, which the enemy captured, and which would now go to feed the rebel force.

They hounded Cossinius and his men back to their camp. Most of the Romans were new recruits, Children of Italy's abundance, they had nothing but hasty training to prepare them for a savage foe. Some of them giants, red-haired and tattooed, and buoyed by success. In spite of the curses and threats of their centurions, some Romans ran away; the rest stayed and were slaughtered. Everything they had now belonged to the enemy, from their camp down to their arms and armour. Lucius Cossinius was naked again, but this time he was dead.

It was the autumn of 73 BC. After several months of rebellion, the fortunes of the Senate and people of Rome were heading towards a low ebb. A city that had shrugged off Etruscan adventures, weathered a Gallic invasion, stood up to Hannibal's charge, endured civil war, survived annual outbreaks of malaria, and fought its way to such power that it could think of itself as the head of the world, was afraid of a runaway gladiator.

What began as a prison breakout by seventy-four men armed only with cleavers and skewers had turned into a revolt by thousands. And it wasn't over: a year later the force would number roughly 60,000 rebel troops. With an estimated 1-1.5 million slaves in Italy, the rebels amounted to around 10 per cent of the slave population. To put that figure in perspective, the USA in the nineteenth century had about 4 million slaves, and yet Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831 involved only 200 of them.

Rome had seen slave rebellions before but this one was different. Earlier revolts had either been relatively small or, if extensive, far off in Sicily, but this enormous army had come within a week's march of Rome. Not since Hannibal crossed the Alps had foreigners done so much damage to the

Italian countryside. Earlier slave revolts coalesced around mystics and gang leaders, not gladiators and ex-Roman soldiers. Spartacus struck a chord in the Roman psyche. No other leader of rebel slaves was so well remembered or so feared. As a gladiator, Spartacus belonged to a group of men who were licensed to kill - to kill each other, that is: Romans had a lurid fascination with the arena but rebel gladiators aroused first disgust and then dread.

Spartacus came from Thrace (roughly, Bulgaria), an area known to Romans for its fierce fighters and ecstatic religion, and for its alternation between alliance and rebellion. As a one-time allied soldier in Rome's service, Spartacus should have been a Roman success story. Instead, he had become the enemy within. Thracians, Celts and Germans - barbarians all, in Roman eyes - made up most of his followers. Earlier slave rebels came from the civilized Greek East; fairly or not, the Romans scorned their warrior prowess. But they dreaded a fight against barbarians.

Timing made matters worse. When Spartacus began his revolt, Rome faced major wars at both ends of its empire. Mithridates, a king in Asia Minor (today, Turkey), had sparked a substantial war against Rome in 88 BC that had spread to Greece and Thrace and was still going strong after fifteen years. Meanwhile, in Spain, the renegade Roman general Sertorius ran a breakaway government who Roman leaders had the support of a native resistance movement. Finally, at the same time, off the coasts of Crete, the Roman navy struggled to catch pirates who were wrecking the sea lanes. We know that Rome eventually defeated all these challengers. But in 73 BC that outcome was not yet clear.

By exploiting propaganda masterfully Spartacus threatened to widen his base of support. He sounded themes that appealed not only to slaves but also to Italian nationalists and to supporters of Mithridates. Although his message probably attracted few free men to his banner in the end, it was enough to frighten Rome.

Spartacus's was antiquity's most famous slave revolt and arguably its largest. It was a revolt that absorbed southern Italy, caught Rome with its homeland virtually defenceless, led to nine defeats of Roman armies and kept antiquity's greatest military power at bay for two years. How was it possible? Why did the rebels do so well for so long? Why did they fail in the end? And how could the world's only superpower have let such a problem persist in its own back yard?

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It's a story that should have been in pictures, and, of course, it is. In 1960 Spartacus appeared, a Hollywood epic starring Kirk Douglas and directed by Stanley Kubrick. The film was a hit then and remains a classic. It was loosely based on a bestselling 1951 novel by Howard Fast, which he wrote after serving a jail term for contempt of Congress during the McCarthy era. An American Communist who eventually left the party, Fast was not the first Communist to admire Spartacus. Lenin, Stalin and Karl Marx himself saw Spartacus as the very model of the proletarian revolutionary. German Marxist revolutionaries of 1919 called their group the Spartacus League; their failed uprising grew legendary. Soviet composer Aram Khachaturian wrote a ballet about Spartacus that won him the Lenin Prize for 1959.

Non-Communist revolutionaries admired Spartacus as well. Toussaint L'Ouverture, the hero of the Haitian Revolution, history's only successful mass slave revolt, emulated Spartacus. Giuseppe

Garibaldi, who fought to unify Italy, wrote the preface to a novel about Spartacus. Vladimir Jabotinsky, the Zionist revolutionary, translated that novel into Hebrew. Voltaire, the French Enlightenment philosopher, judged Spartacus's rebellion as perhaps the only just war in history. Even anti-Communists approved of Spartacus: Ronald Reagan, for example, cited him as an example of sacrifice and struggle for freedom.

But while Spartacus was the stuff of legend he was no myth. He is, however, an enigma to us. Spartacus left no writings. His followers scratched out no manuscripts. Surviving ancient narratives come from Roman or Greek writers who wrote from the point of view of the victors. To make things worse, few of their writings survive. Still, they leave absolutely no doubt about it: Spartacus was real.

Plutarch (c. AD 40s-120s) and Appian (c. AD 90s-160s) provide the most complete accounts of Spartacus to survive from antiquity but they are short, late (150-200 years after the revolt) and each come with an axe to grind. Even shorter is the discussion by Florus (c. AD 100-150), but his concise remarks are full of significance. These three writers relied on important but now mostly lost earlier works by Sallust (86-35 BC) and Livy (59 BC - AD 12). Almost nothing of Livy's discussion of Spartacus survives, and we have only a precious few pages' worth of selections from Sallust's account of the war.

Three other contemporaries of Spartacus comment briefly on his activities: the great orator Cicero (106-43 BC), the scholar and politician Varro (116-27 BC) and the inimitable Julius Caesar (100-44 BC). Many other ancient writers over the centuries mentioned Spartacus, from the poet Horace (65 BC) to St Augustine (AD 354-430), although they add but little. Even by the standards of ancient history, it represents slim pickings.

However, there are archaeological finds, the results of topographical research, and experiments in historical reconstruction ranging from gladiators' contests - without real weapons, of course - to weaving vines into ropes such as Spartacus's men used to climb down Vesuvius. Coins, frescos, sling balls and fortifications all record the rebels' path through the Italian countryside. The bones of gladiators' cemetery in Turkey reveal training secrets and recall the agony of death. Tombs, shrines and towns; gold and iron; plaques and paintings: all take us beyond the stereotypes of barbarians in Greek and Roman texts. Finally, Roman slavery comes to life through graffiti, chains, auction buildings, slave quarters and slave prisons.

The story of Spartacus is, first of all, a war story: a classic case study of an insurgency, led by a genius at guerrilla tactics, and of a counter-insurgency, led by a conventional power that slowly and painfully learned how to beat the enemy at his own game. The Spartacus War is also a tale of ethnic conflict. Spartacus was Thracian but many of his men were Celts; they were proud, independent and fighting-mad. Tribal divisions turned the rebels into feuding cliques who ignored their chief. The march for freedom degenerated into gang warfare, and, as so often in history, the revolution failed.

In addition, the Spartacus narrative is a love story and a crusade. Spartacus had a wife or mistress; her name is not recorded. A priestess of Dionysus, this unnamed companion preached a rousing message. She drew on the liberation theology that had fired Rome's earlier slave revolts and still fuels the anti-Roman war that had raged for fifteen years in the eastern Mediterranean. Spartacus had a divine mission.

And finally, The Spartacus War is also a story about identity politics. A rebel against Rome, Spartacus was more Roman than he cared to admit and certainly more than the Romans could admit.

He terrified the Romans not just because he was foreign but because he was familiar.

Spartacus was a soldier who had served Rome, and his behaviour might have reminded Romans their heroes. Like Marcellus, perhaps Rome's most red-blooded general, he thirsted to kill the enemy commander with his own hand. Like Cicero, he was an orator. Like Cato, he was a man of simple tastes. Like the Gracchi, he believed in sharing the wealth among his men. Like Brutus, he fought for freedom.

Like the most ambitious Roman of them all, he claimed to have a personal relationship with a god like Caesar, Spartacus was a man of destiny. No sooner had he died than men began to dream of Spartacus's return. The human Spartacus fell to the power of Rome; the legend might topple empires still.

The Spartacus War describes the complexity of slave revolts too. We do not know if Spartacus wanted to abolish slavery but, if so, he aimed low. He and his men freed only gladiators, farmers and shepherds. They avoided urban slaves, a softer and more elite group than rural workers. They rallied slaves to the cry not only of freedom but also to the themes of nationalism, religion, revenge and local pride. Another paradox: they might have been liberators but the rebels brought ruin. They devastated southern Italy in search of food and trouble.

In the end, the story comes back to Spartacus. Who was he? What did he want? Our answers must be based less on what Spartacus said, about which we know little, than on what he did. By necessity we must be speculative. But we can also be prudent in our speculation because Spartacus's actions speak loudly. They fit the timeless patterns of insurgencies and uprisings, as shaped by the particularities of his case.

Rome was big, strong and slow; Spartacus was small, hungry and fast. Rome was old and set in its ways; Spartacus was an innovator. Rome was ponderous, while Spartacus was nimble. The Romans suffered so badly from Spartacus's ambushes, night moves, sudden turnabouts and mobile flank attacks that eventually they gave up facing him in battle. They insisted on isolating his forces and starving them out before they were willing to risk combat.

The ancient sources describe a man of passion, thirsting for freedom and burning for revenge. Spartacus's actions tell a different story. He was no hothead but a man of controlled emotion. Spartacus was a politician trying to hold together a coalition that was constantly slipping out of control. Whether by nature or training he was a showman. His greatest prop was his own body. Spartacus used many symbols, from a snake to his horse, to form his image. A cult of personality helped attract tens of thousands of followers but at a price of luring them into the delusion of invincibility.

Spartacus was Thracian, and in Thrace warfare was the most honourable profession. The name Spartacus - Latin for Sparada kos - is plausibly translated as 'Famous for his Spear'. Thracians were masters of the horse, which made them fast, mobile and utterly different from the Romans, who were born infantrymen with little talent for cavalry. And the Thracians had a genius for guerrilla warfare. They perfected light armour for foot soldiers and hit-and-run tactics, to which the heavy-armed Romans were vulnerable. And thanks to his service in an auxiliary unit of the Roman army, Spartacus had been schooled in conventional warfare too.

When it comes to the Romans, our evidence is better, if still limited. The Romans were constrained by the enduring strategies of counter-insurgency. They had to locate, isolate and eradicate an enemy.



who avoided pitched battle while harassing them via unconventional tactics. To do this required achieving superiority in intelligence, which in turn required local knowledge. Still, while no Roman adopted a strategy of winning popular support, they displayed more savvy in dealing with locals than we might expect.

But the Romans had a lot more on their minds than Spartacus. In 73 BC Rome was a city of scars. Italy was a peninsula divided between Rome and its often unwilling allies. Over the centuries Rome had conquered Italy's hodgepodge of peoples, including Greeks, Etruscans, Samnites, Lucanians and Bruttians. Many tensions existed, and two decades earlier they had exploded into a rebellion (91-89 BC). The Italian War (also called the Social War, that is, war of the socii, Latin for allies) took three years of bloody battles and sieges before Rome restored peace, and only at the price of granting citizenship to all the allies. Especially in the south, some Italians remained bitter and unreconstructed. The Italian War was followed by a civil war between the supporters of Sulla and the heirs of his late rival, Marius. Sulla won and served as dictator, but after his retirement in 79 BC and death a year later, civil war flared up again in 77 BC. Italy was at peace in 73 BC but stripped of legions, should trouble break out anew: they had been sent abroad to fight Rome's many enemies.

The Italian countryside included a large population of slaves, who often ran away and sometimes rose in armed rebellion. In 73 BC Roman Italy was, in short, a bone-dry forest in a summer heatwave. Spartacus lit a match.

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# BREAKOUT

## The Gladiator

Spartacus was a heavyweight gladiator called *murmillo*. A man 'of enormous strength and spirit', as the sources say, he was about thirty years old. *Murmillones* were big men who carried 35- 40 pounds of arms and armour in the arena. They fought barefoot and bare-chested, rendering all the more visible the tattoos with which Thracians like Spartacus proudly embellished their bodies. *Murmillones* each wore a bronze helmet, a belted loincloth and various arm- and leg-guards. They carried a big, oblong shield (*scutum*) and wielded a sword with a broad, straight blade, about a foot and a half long. Called the *gladius*, it was the classic weapon of the gladiator. It was also the standard weapon of a Roman legionary.

Although we know nothing of Spartacus's record in the arena, we can imagine him locked in combat one afternoon. Fans that they were, the Romans have left masses of evidence about the games and recent historical reconstructions enrich the picture. We know, for example, that Spartacus would have fought just one other man at a time, despite Hollywood's image of mass fights. Real gladiators fought in pairs, carefully chosen to make an exciting contest - but not a long life for the contestants.

A *murmillo* like Spartacus never fought another *murmillo*; instead, he was usually paired with a *thraex*. *Thraex* means 'Thracian', but Spartacus did not represent his country in the arena, perhaps because his owner feared stirring up his slave's national pride. The *thraex* was also a heavyweight but he had to be quicker and more agile. His arms and armour were similar to the *murmillo*'s but the *thraex* carried a small shield (*parmula*) that made him lighter and more mobile. And the *thraex* carried a curved sword (*sica*), like the one used by Thracians in battle.

Gladiatorial matches usually began with a warm-up with wooden weapons. Then the 'sharp iron' arms were brought in and tested to make sure they were razor-sharp. Meanwhile, Spartacus and his opponent prepared to die - but not by hailing the sponsor of the games. The famous cry, 'Those who are about to die salute you!' was, as far as we know, a rare - and later - exception. Instead, a match usually began with a signal from the *tibia*, a wind instrument like an oboe.

The contest unfolded with a combination of elegance and brutality. Gladiators attacked but rarely crossed swords, since their blades were too short. Instead, they thrust and parried with their shields, pushing an opponent back, drawing him forward, or - with the shield turned horizontally - hit him with the edge. The crash and boom of shields, rather than the metallic clank of swords, marked the sound of combat.

With his 15-pound *scutum*, a strong *murmillo* could hit harder, but a fast *thraex* could get in more blows in rapid succession with his 7-pound *parmula*. Knowing how much damage the curved sword the *thraex* could do, Spartacus guarded his flank. Instead, he tried to keep the battle on a vertical axis, constantly standing with his left shoulder and left leg forward, thereby denying his foe an opening while keeping up the pressure. He held his shield close to his body to prevent the *thraex* from rapping

at it with his *parmula* and destabilizing it. Every now and then Spartacus would bring his shield forward in a sudden, powerful thrust to shift the *thraex* off balance.

Denied Spartacus's flank, meanwhile, the *thraex* might have ducked and lunged at Spartacus's unprotected right leg. He might even have attempted the more difficult move of leaping up, powering his right arm over the top of Spartacus's shield and stabbing him with his curved *sica*. If these murderous manoeuvres failed, however, they would have given Spartacus a sudden opening. The smart move for Spartacus would have been to feint, thereby tempting the *thraex* into thrusting towards him, only to find Spartacus ready to parry and deliver a deadly riposte.

Every so often during a fight a glancing blow got through, leaving a man bleeding but not fatally wounded. Pumped up on adrenaline, he would have to keep fighting, however bruised, tired and sweating, all the while continuing to think on his feet, always shifting tactics. Although it appears that most bouts lasted only ten to fifteen minutes, there was no time limit; the fight went on until one man won. Meanwhile, each fighter had to close his mind to the noises of the crowd and the brass instruments accompanying the match and focus solely on combat. He also had to try somehow to keep the rules in mind. Gladiatorial bouts were no free-for-alls. A referee (*summa rudis*) and his assistant (*secunda rudis*) enforced the regulations. The most important rule was for a fighter to back off after wounding an opponent.

Let us imagine that Spartacus had driven his enemy off balance, knocked the man's shield out of his hand, and stabbed him in the arm. Spartacus would then withdraw from the wounded man. Whether to finish off the *thraex* was not up to a gladiator or referee; it was up to the producer (editor).

The producer, in turn, usually asked the audience. A decision about a fallen fighter was the moment of truth. If the crowd liked the losing gladiator and thought he had fought well, they would call for letting him go. But if they thought the loser deserved to die, they wouldn't be shy about shouting, 'Kill him!' They made a gesture with their thumbs, but it was the opposite of what we think today: thumbs up meant death.

In that case, the loser was expected to kneel - if his wounds allowed - while the winner delivered the death blow. At the moment that the loser 'took the iron', as the saying went, the crowd would shout 'He has it!' The corpse would be carried away on a stretcher to the morgue. There, he had his throat cut as a precaution against a rigged defeat. Burial followed.

Spartacus, meanwhile, would climb the winner's platform to receive his prizes: a sum of money and a palm branch. Although a slave, he was allowed to keep the money. After climbing down from the podium, he would wave the palm branch around the arena as he circled it, running a victory lap, taking in the crowd's approval.

It was an unlikely school of revolution. Yet fights like this steeled the blood of the men who would start the ancient world's most savage slave revolt.

Let us go back to where it all began, to the place where Spartacus lived and trained, the gladiatorial barracks owned by Cnaeus Cornelius Lentulus Vatia. Vatia was a *lanista*, an entrepreneur who bought and trained gladiators, whom he then hired out to the producers of gladiatorial games. Vatia's business was located in the city of Capua, which sits about 15 miles north of Naples. It is a part of Italy renowned for its climate, but Spartacus was not likely to appreciate the 300 days of sunshine a year.

He had come to Capua from Rome, probably on foot, certainly in chains, likely tied to the men next to him. In Rome he had been sold into slavery to Vatia. Imagine a scene like that of the slave seller carved on a Capuan tombstone of the first century BC, possibly marking a slave trader's grave. The slave stands on a pedestal, most likely a wooden auction block, naked except for a loincloth - standard practice in Roman slave markets. It was also standard to mark the slave by chalking his feet. Bearded and broad-shouldered, with his long arms at his sides, the slave in the relief looks fit for hard labour. And the artist uses a size imbalance to suggest a power imbalance, because he makes the slave smaller than the freedmen on either side of him.

Spartacus's first view of Capua might have been neither its walls nor temples but its amphitheatre. The building rose up outside the city walls and just to the north-west of them, beside the Appian Way. The structure had the squat and rugged shape of one of Italy's first stone amphitheatres, built in the Late Republic.

Most of Spartacus's life had unfolded on the broad plains and winding hills of the Balkans but not his frame of reference was no wider than the walls of Vatia's establishment, with occasional glimpses of Capua. The city and the business had much in common. Neither was respectable in Rome's eyes and both depended on slave labour. Each occasionally offered a ladder of mobility to slaves. But there was one difference: outside the house of Vatia, the ladder sometimes led to freedom, but inside, usually led to death.

Spartacus had taken the long route to Capua. In his native Thrace, young Spartacus had served in an allied unit of the Roman army. The Romans called these units *auxilia* (literally, 'the help') and its members were called auxiliaries. These units were separate from the legions, which were restricted to Roman citizens. Although they were not legionaries, auxiliaries got a glimpse of Roman military discipline. Spartacus's later military success against Rome becomes easier to understand if he had seen first-hand how the Roman army worked.

As an auxiliary, Spartacus was probably a representative of a conquered people fulfilling the military service to Rome; that is, he was probably more draftee than mercenary. As a rebel he would display the eye of command, which might suggest that he was an officer under the Romans. In all likelihood, he was a cavalryman.

Almost all of Rome's cavalry were auxiliaries. None made fiercer horsemen than the Thracians. The Second Book of Maccabees (included in some versions of the Bible) offers a powerful image of a Thracian on horseback: a mercenary, bearing down on a very strong Jewish cavalryman named Dositheus and chopping off his arm. The unnamed Thracian had thereby saved his commander Gorgias, whom Dositheus had grabbed by the cloak. That happened in 163 BC. In 130 BC a Thracian cavalryman decapitated a Roman general with a single blow of his sword. Fifty years later the Romans still shivered at the thought.

According to one writer, Spartacus next deserted and became what the Romans called a *latro*. The word means 'thief', 'bandit', or 'highwayman' but it also means 'guerrilla soldier' or 'insurgent': the Romans used the same word for all those concepts. We can only guess at Spartacus's motives. Perhaps, like many Thracians, he had decided to join Mithridates' war against Rome; perhaps he had a private grievance; perhaps he had taken to a life of crime. Nor do we know where he deserted, whether in Thrace, Macedonia or even Italy. In any case, after his time as a *latro*, Spartacus was captured, enslaved and condemned to be a gladiator.

In principle, Rome reserved the status of gladiator for only the most serious of criminals. Whatever Spartacus had done, by Roman standards it did not merit such severe punishment. He was innocent, we learn from no less a source than Varro, a Roman writer in the prime of his life at the time of the gladiators' war. Knowing that he was guiltless would have added flames to the fire of Spartacus' rebellion. In any case, Spartacus had become the property of Vatia. The next and possibly last act of the Thracian's life was about to begin.

Capua was known for its roses, its slaughterhouses and its gladiators. It was fat, rich and a political eunuch. In 216 BC, during the wars with Carthage, Capua had betrayed its ally Rome for Hannibal, Carthage's greatest general. After the Romans reconquered Capua in 211 BC they punished the town by stripping it of self-government and putting it under a Roman governor.

Yet Capua had bounced back, richer than ever. The city was a centre of metalworks and of textiles. It was also the perfume and medicine capital of Italy as well as a grain-producer and Rome's meat market, providing pork and lamb for the capital. Capua sits at the foot of a spur of the Apennine, Italy's rugged and mountainous spine. To the south lies a flat plain, hot and steamy in the summer when the fields are brown, alternately rainy and bright in the winter when the fields are green. Some of the most fertile land in Europe, this was Campania Felix, 'Lucky Campania'.

Lucky, that is, except from the point of view of its workers. Capua was in large part a city of slaves, both home-grown and imported. The number of slaves made Capua differ only in degree, not kind, from the rest of Italy. The 125 years of Roman expansion after 200 BC had flooded Italy with unfree labour. By Spartacus's day, there were an estimated 1-1.5 million slaves on the peninsula, perhaps about 20 per cent of the people of Italy.

It was the heyday of exploitation in the ancient world, the zenith of misery and the nadir of freedom. Yet it was also an era of large concentrations of slaves, many of them born free, some of them ex-soldiers; of absentee masters, and of few or no police forces. Add to that the freedom given to some slaves to travel and even carry arms. Finally, consider the many possible refuges provided by the nearby mountains. It is no accident that, within the space of sixty years, Sicily and southern Italy would explode into three of history's greatest slave uprisings: first in two separate revolts on the island (135-132 BC, 104-100 BC) and then in Spartacus's rebellion.

In the countryside, masses of slaves worked on farms, often in chains, usually locked up for the night in prison-like barracks. Others, employed as herdsmen, were left to fend for themselves or starve. Meanwhile, in town, slaves worked in every profession, from the shop to the school to the kitchen. In Capua, there were even slaves to collect the 5 per cent tax owed when slaves earned the freedom. A lucky few made it to freedom and some prospered; some, astonishingly, went into the slave business, turning their back on their humble origins. One Capuan freedman, for example, did not mind getting rich by manufacturing the rough woollen cloaks that were issued to slave field hands once every other year, that is.

Coarse and rapacious, Capua was destined to become the centre of gladiatorial games. Its sunny climate was considered ideal for training fighters and so Rome's impresarios came to scout talent there. Julius Caesar himself would own a gladiatorial school in Capua.

And yet, by 73 BC, not Capua but Rome - the capital - put on Italy's greatest gladiatorial games by far. Rome's cautious elite refused to allow gladiators to be housed there, though. Violent and dangerous, gladiators would have been foxes in the Roman henhouse. It was safer to keep the

outside the capital. Capua was ideal: only 130 miles away, and connected to Rome by the most famous highway in the world, the Appian Way, as well as by another great road, the Via Latina.

After travelling one of those highways or perhaps, even before, in the chain gang along the way, Spartacus was introduced to his new colleagues. They were a motley group. Almost all were slaves, whether from birth, by civilian capture and sale, or as a result of becoming prisoners of war. Many were Thracians. Thrace provided Rome with a steady stream of slaves, thanks to the endless wars with Rome's bordering province of Macedonia. And thanks too to the Thracians' burning passion for war.

Thracians loved three things: hunting, drinking and fighting. They were born brawlers with a reputation for brutality. Thracian cavalymen, for example, fought 'like wild beasts, long kept in cages and then aroused' when they defeated the Romans at a skirmish at Callinicus in 171 BC. They returned to camp singing and brandishing the severed heads of their enemies on their spears.

Another people in the Roman world who were similarly spoiling for a fight were the Celts. The Celts 'are absolutely mad about war', says the Roman writer Strabo. 'They are high-spirited and quickly seek out a fight.' And Celts made up the second large group of Vatia's gladiators. The sources call them Gauls, and surely some of them came from Gaul, that is, modern France. They might have been taken prisoner in one of several small Roman military operations in Gaul in the 80s and 70s BC. They might even have been the sons of war prisoners taken in Marius's great victories in the West in 102 and 101 BC. But most had probably been sold into slavery by civilians: the going rate for a Gallian slave was as little as an amphora (large jug) of wine. The Romans exported an estimated 40 million amphorae of wine (about 2.64 million gallons) to Gaul in the first century BC and got back in return, perhaps as many as 15,000 slaves a year.

But some of Vatia's Celts may have come from the Balkans, a Celtic population centre and scene of wars with Rome in the 80s and 70s BC, and so a rich source of slaves. The Scordisci, for example, lived on the plains south of the Danube, in what today is north-eastern Serbia, and were Celts who had mingled with Thracians and Illyrians (another warlike people of the ancient Balkans).

If Vatia or his agents indeed had bought Scordisci, they had chosen the wrong Celts. Thracians and Scordisci shared a border and a hatred for Rome. In 88 BC the Scordisci and many Thracians supported Mithridates in his revolt against Rome. A joint army of Thracians and Scordisci invaded the Roman province of Greece in a major raid; both peoples later suffered in Roman punitive expeditions.

We probably ought to add Germans to the mix of gladiators in the house of Vatia. Germans too played a prominent role as Spartacus's soldiers. Many of Italy's slaves were German or children of Germans who, like Celts, had been captured in large numbers by Marius thirty years earlier; others had been sold into slavery by civilians. Besides, there was no clear distinction between Celts and Germans in 73 BC: boundaries blurred. In any case, both Greco-Roman writers and archaeologists agree that the ancient peoples of today's Germany were warlike, like Celts and Thracians. 'Peace displeasing to [their] nation,' wrote the Roman historian Tacitus, who stated that the German economy rested on war and plunder. We don't hear of Germans until Spartacus's revolt spread, but maybe a few of Vatia's gladiators were German.

Perhaps other ethnic groups from around the empire contributed men to Vatia's enterprise. Anatolia and the Black Sea region both provided Rome with many of its slaves, and Vatia's establishment possibly included representatives of those lands. But one last important group to consider was not foreign at all: free Italians, even Roman citizens. Both poor and rich citizens volunteered

gladiators, whether out of desperation, boredom or a search for adventure. In the first century BC such forays into the Italian underworld had already become fashionable.

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And so we have the 200 or more gladiators owned by Vatia: Thracians and Celts, with a likely admixture of Germans, Italians and odd-lot others. Spartacus's colleagues were a multi-ethnic group. This was no accident. Roman authors advised mixing nationalities as a deterrent to solidarity. They recognized the deadly seriousness of a business that armed slaves.

Surprisingly, the Romans called a gladiatorial enterprise a game: in Latin, ludus. Ludus is often translated as 'school', and indeed it trained beginners but, with few exceptions, there were no graduates. Most gladiators lived and died in the ludus where they started out.

Romans also described a ludus as a familia, which means 'family' or 'household'. As in any household, the ludus attended to the basic needs of food and shelter but it also offered medical care. Gladiators had to limit wine intake and eat a high carbohydrate diet, heavy on barley porridge. Like sumo wrestlers they were encouraged to put on fat around the middle, in their case as a protective layer in case of wounds. Like pampered racehorses, gladiators ate well. 'Tell your masters to feed their slaves!' was the acerbic advice of a bandit in the Roman Empire as to how the Romans could stop crime. He would have been preaching to the choir had he addressed lanistae since they had to treat their gladiators well in order to succeed.

But a ludus was also a barracks and a prison. Gladiators were not free to come and go as they pleased. The best evidence comes from Pompeii, where two ludi from different periods have been excavated. Both stood at the edge of town. The earlier ludus was virtually a fortress, isolated by a raised, sloping pavement and additional steps, bringing the interior a full 10 feet above street level - all unusual for Pompeii. Other security measures were found inside: an extra door and a sealed courtyard. Pompeii's second, later ludus was more open but it did contain a small jail, complete with iron stocks, and it may have held a guard post as well.

Vatia's ludus too would probably have been built around an internal court, surrounded by stuccoed columns that were, in turn, covered with graffiti, such as these from Pompeii: Celadus advertised himself as 'the one the girls sigh over'. Florus reports that he won on 28 July at Nuceria and on 1 August at Herculaneum, both nearby cities. Jesus (sic) says, punning, that the murmillo Lucius Asicius stinks like cheap fish sauce (muriola) and is as weak as a lady's drink (also called muriola). Some gladiators record the name of their owner, while the gladiator Samus, who fought both as a murmillo and on horseback, says simply that he 'lives here'. The gladiators Asicius, Auriolus, Herachthinus, Philippus and the 'fearsome' Amarantus scratched their names and positions into the white stucco.

Ludus might mean 'game' but life there was serious. A new recruit took the most sacred oath imaginable - and the most terrible: he swore to be 'burned' (perhaps tattooed, tattoos being the mark of slavery), chained, beaten and killed with an iron weapon. It was, says the Roman writer Seneca, a promise to die 'erect and invincible', because facing death calmly was the height of the gladiatorial art. After his oath-taking, the new gladiator then followed a training schedule that was, in its own way, as pure and strict as a Spartan's.

Being a gladiator was a special privilege in Roman eyes, and not merely because gladiators were treated better than the average slave. Not that the Romans were simply positive about gladiators. Instead, they considered gladiators to be both good and bad. To be forced to be a gladiator was



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