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### Ancient History: Spartacus and the Slave Rebellion

By Kenneth P. Czech

Rome trembled at the grave rumors in 73 bc that the city was about to be attacked by a rabble army of gladiators and rebelling slaves. The vaunted Roman legions had been defeated, their noble standards captured. News of atrocities against slaveholding landowners dominated conversation in Rome's marketplaces and public buildings. The very name of the slave rebellion's leader, Spartacus, generated terror.

Slave insurrections were not really new to Rome. Extreme cruelty to slaves had sparked a revolt on the island of Sicily in 135 bc. More than 70,000 slaves had taken up arms and effectively battled local militia until a Roman army triumphed over the rebels two years later. A second servile war erupted on the island in 104 bc, when 40,000 slaves rampaged through its farmlands. After four years of bloody fighting, the last remnants of that rebel horde were captured by Roman consul Manius Aquillius and shipped to Rome to fight wild beasts in the arena.

But those revolts had been in far-off Sicily. The new insurrection threatened Rome itself, a city where a great percentage of the inhabitants were slaves. To make matters worse, several legions had already been demolished by the slave army.



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Forming the nucleus of the threat were gladiators—prisoners of war, convicts and slaves specially trained to fight and kill one another as entertainment for crowds packing amphitheaters throughout Latin lands. Notoriously tough and highly skilled, the gladiators surging toward Rome had little to lose. Facing death in the arena on an almost daily basis, these warrior-slaves felt their only key to freedom lay in crushing Rome itself.

Combats between trained warriors had first surfaced to commemorate funerals during the First Punic War in 264 bc. In 174 bc, 74 gladiators fought each other during a three-day span as part of special funeral ceremonies for wealthy Romans. The first officially sponsored gladiatorial 'games were held nearly 70 years later, and they were an instant success with the public. As the Roman appetite for blood sports

grew, thousands of prisoners captured in Rome's numerous wars of conquest were trundled off to specially constructed training centers, or schools, to prepare them for the games.

The gladiators took their name from the Latin word *gladius*, the short sword favored by many of the combatants. Early gladiators were outfitted with an ornately wrought visored helmet, a shield and an armored sleeve worn on the right arm, after the fashion of Samnite warriors defeated by Rome in the late 3rd century bc.

Samnite-style gladiators relied on their swords. Other gladiator styles evolved from the national themes of the lands conquered by Rome. Thracian-style gladiators, for instance, carried a *sica*—a curved, short-bladed scimitar—and a round buckler. Gaul-style gladiators wielded long swords and rectangular or oval shields. Another gladiator type, more exotically accoutered and called *retiarius*, fought with a trident, a dagger and a fishing net strung to the wrist by a thong and designed to ensnare an opponent and draw him into harpooning range.

Pairing the warriors was done by drawing lots. Mercy was rarely offered in the arena, with crowds often controlling the immediate fortunes of a wounded gladiator by signaling or calling for life or death. While several noted Roman writers applauded the games as invigorating spectacles, the writer-philosopher Seneca abhorred them, commenting: I come home more greedy, more cruel and inhuman, because I have been among human beings....Man, a sacred thing to man, is killed for sport and merriment.

A number of gladiator training schools sprang up throughout Italy, concentrated near the town of Capua, north of present-day Naples. At such schools, gladiators received training in a variety of weapons, though they usually specialized in one. Diets were carefully observed, and a strict exercise regimen was maintained. Discipline and punishment were harsh.

It may have been pure brutality that convinced 78 gladiators to rebel at the school of Lentulus Batiatus, near Capua, in 73 bc. The gladiators, who had been severely treated, sallied from their quarters and overpowered their guards with cleavers and spits seized from some kitchen, reported Roman historian Plutarch. After scrambling over the school's walls, the slaves were fortunate to find a wagon transporting gladiators' weapons to another city. Armed with these familiar—if not military-issue—weapons, the little band had suddenly become a dangerous fighting force.

Masterminding the revolt, according to the sources, was Spartacus, a Thracian by birth who may even have once served as an auxiliary in the Roman army before being sold into slavery. Sharing command were two Gauls: Crixus and Oenamus. The triumvirate raided the countryside, terrorizing landowners in the lush Campania farming district. Field hands and house slaves, many armed with farm tools and kitchen utensils, declared their own freedom by joining the gladiators.

As word of the insurrection spread, Spartacus led his force up the slopes of the dormant volcano Vesuvius. Close on his heels was a hastily assembled army of 3,000 militia under the command of Clodius Glaber. Poorly trained and untested, the militia was usually sent to control riots or outbreaks of brigandage, while the solid legions of the regular army were used primarily in foreign conquests.

Glaber deployed his troops at the base of Vesuvius and blocked the sole road leading to its crest. In his mind, the gladiators were effectively cut off from the plains and could be starved into submission. Not about to be besieged, however, Spartacus ordered his men to hack the abundant vines growing near the crest and fashion them into crude ladders. After sunset, the slaves descended on their ladders and fell upon the few sentries Glaber had bothered to post. In minutes, the gladiators were slashing their way through the slumbering Roman camp, routing the militia and seizing valuable stocks of military arms and armor.



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Two legions of militia under the command of the praetor Publius Varinius then were dispatched from Rome to track the insurgents and bring them to justice. Unknown to the Romans, the gladiators' army had swollen to nearly 40,000, including bands of shepherds who were familiar with the countryside and acted as scouts. Lacking knowledge of the terrain, Varinius was further hampered by disease brought on by damp autumn weather—and by an outbreak of insubordination among his own troops. Perhaps even worse was his own refusal to consider the slaves a serious fighting force.

Spartacus was determined to crush the Romans. Near Vesuvius, he surprised an advance column of 2,000 men under Varinius' lieutenant Furius and annihilated it. Using his scouts to good advantage, the gladiator discovered another party of Romans under Cossinius at a camp and bath near Herculaneum. In a swirling battle, Spartacus nearly captured Cossinius, then pursued him as he fled. The Roman and the remnants of his column were brought to bay and slaughtered.

Slipping southward, Spartacus' army continued to grow. Varinius trailed him into Lucania, where he suddenly found the rebels deployed in battle formation. The insubordination that had plagued Varinius earlier now flared up once more. Some soldiers refused to advance, while others fled. The Roman praetor (a magistrate next below the rank of consul) continued his attack but was badly mauled. Varinius escaped, though his horse and his official standards and insignia were seized, adding to the Roman humiliation. Captured legionaries were forced to fight each other as gladiators or were crucified, just as some Romans crucified captured slaves.

Spartacus and his army marched north, reoccupying Campania and destroying a Roman corps under Gaius Thoranius that had been left there by Varinius to restore order. Spartacus undoubtedly realized that his ragtag force had been lucky so far. It had defeated several Roman forces, but the rebels had not yet faced the rugged veterans of wars in Spain, Gaul and Germany. The Thracian advocated marching his horde to the Alps to escape from Rome's long reach. Unfortunately for the slaves, another faction, this

one led by the Gaul Crixus, was full of confidence after helping to crush the Roman militia and argued that Rome itself should be attacked. Taking as many as 30,000 men, including a contingent of German and Gallic gladiators, Crixus broke with Spartacus to plunder neighboring villages and towns.

No longer considering the gladiator uprising as a mere outbreak of brigandage, the Roman senate decided to send two more armies against the slaves in the spring of 72 bc. Commanded by the consuls Lucius Gellius and Gnaeus Lentulus, four Roman legions took to the field. It was relatively easy to follow the trail left by Crixus and his band as they levied tribute in the Apulia region at the heel of the Italian peninsula. Gellius sent two legions under his praetor Quintus Arrius to hem in the gladiators against the coast. Surprised by the Romans near Mount Garganus, Crixus found himself surrounded. Despite furious fighting, the Gaul and two-thirds of his army were cut down.

Spartacus, meantime, had made good use of his winter respite while camped in the Appenines. His men scoured the area, raiding estates and towns, particularly in search of horses. The slave leader hoped to build and train a cavalry unit to be his eyes as his rabble marched toward the Alps. Towns such as Consentia and Metapontum were stormed, their newly released slaves joining ranks with Spartacus and swelling the army to more than 70,000. Any freed slaves capable of bearing arms received rudimentary training.

In the spring of 72 bc, the gladiator army trekked northward, pursued by the consuls and their legions. In three separate engagements, Spartacus first defeated Lentulus, who had attempted to surround the slaves, and then both Gellius and the praetor Arrius, who had recently slain Crixus and his Gauls. At Mutina in the Cisalpine Gaul region of northern Italy, the governor, Caius Cassius, futilely attempted to stem the slaves' trek with an army of 10,000 men. Spartacus' horde collapsed Cassius' center, slaying many of the legionaries, and Cassius barely escaped with his life. To appease the ghost of Crixus, 300 Romans were sacrificed or forced to fight each other as gladiators.

With Cassius' army demolished, the path to freedom over the Alps now lay clear. Surprisingly, Spartacus chose to lead his slaves back into Italy. Perhaps a contingent of his gladiators preferred looting the peninsula as Crixus had, and Spartacus may have feared that a further division of his force could be disastrous if Roman legions pursued them and forced them into battle. He may have even entertained the idea of raiding Rome, the source of enslavement of so many peoples. For whatever reasons, the Thracian led his mob southward.

Rome was beside itself with anxiety. The gladiator army was estimated at between 75,000 and 125,000. With the losses of the various legions, the city was short of available troops and able commanders. The most experienced generals, such as Quintus Metellus and Gnaeus Pompey, were stationed with their battle-hardened legions in rebellious Spain, while Lucius Lucullus kept an eye on troublesome Asia Minor. For the moment, only poorly trained local levies remained to defend Rome.

The Roman senate finally gave supreme military command to the praetor Marcus Crassus, the only man who offered to take the post. A multimillionaire, Crassus had built his fortune through astute real estate

deals. More important, he had gained valuable experience while serving under the command of the great Roman general Sulla, who died in 78 bc.

Crassus inherited the remnants of the legions of Publius Varinius that had fled the battlefield in their earlier disastrous engagement with the gladiators, in addition to several newly raised legions.

News then reached the Romans that Spartacus was marching through Picenum, along Italy's central Adriatic coast. Crassus ordered his lieutenant Mummius to lead two of the new legions in a circle behind the slave rabble, but, as Plutarch notes, not to join battle nor even skirmish with them. Unfortunately for Crassus, Mummius unwisely attacked the gladiators from the rear, obviously thinking that he would have the advantage of surprise. In the ensuing melee, many of the legionaries were slain, and hundreds of others broke rank and fled.

Crassus was livid with anger. Assembling the shattered remains of Mummius' legions, he ordered 500 men accused of cowardice to be divided into 50 groups of 10 each. Lots were drawn in each group, with one unlucky soldier chosen for execution. The entire army was forced to witness the deaths of their comrades as warning to any others who considered disobedience.

With discipline re-established, the new general proceeded to retrain and rearm his troops. Each soldier became proficient in the use of the short-bladed *gladius*, ideal for either thrusting or slashing. In addition, the Roman levies were drilled in the use of the *pilum*, an iron-headed spear whose metal neck, extending to a wooden shaft, would snap downward after hitting an object to prevent its being thrown back by an enemy. The legions were also divided into regiments, called cohorts, of 480 men each and were instructed how to maneuver on the field of battle. A complete legion stood ready for action with roughly 5,000 men.



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With eight new legions under his command, Crassus pursued Spartacus the length of Italy, getting the best of him in a running battle in the Lucania region in the south. Stung, the gladiator army limped through Bruttium on the toe of the Italian peninsula, finally reaching the coastal city of Rhegium across the Strait of Messina from Sicily. Spartacus managed to contact Sicilian pirates, paying them handsomely from gold and treasure looted from countless estates to ferry thousands of his men to Sicily, where he hoped to rekindle the slave rebellion that had erupted there barely a generation earlier. The pirates, however, deceived the rebels. They accepted the payment but failed to take their fleet to the approved rendezvous. For the moment, the gladiator army was literally left high and dry on the Bruttium peninsula.

Crassus, in the meantime, realized he had the slaves trapped. Rather than face the cornered gladiators in a pitched battle, he ordered his legions to construct a wall completely across the peninsula to hem in the enemy and starve them into submission. The legionaries excavated a ditch 15 feet deep and wide across the 32-mile distance, then fashioned a wood and stone wall along one edge of the ditch.

Spartacus, for a time, ignored the Roman wall. He desperately searched for some other means to transport his army but could not devise one. With winter setting in and supplies running low, he determined his only recourse was to smash through the barricade across the peninsula. The Thracian waited for a snowy night and a wintery storm, noted Plutarch, when he filled up a small portion of the ditch with earth and timber and the boughs of trees, and battered his way through.

With the freed gladiators once more tramping toward Lucania, Rome panicked. The senate authorized the return of Pompey from Spain and Lucullus from his recent wars with Mithridates to bolster the legions of Crassus. Fearing the glory of subduing the gladiators would be won by those political rivals, Crassus redoubled his efforts.

Fortunately for the Romans, the gladiators were once again weakened by internal squabbling. Two more Gauls, Ganicus and Cestus, broke away from the main army to plunder area villages and estates. Encamped at the Lucanian Lake, this splinter band was surprised by Crassus and his legions. With no retreat possible, the gladiators fought with the desperate fury of cornered men. More than 12,000 rebels fell in the battle before Spartacus arrived to rescue the survivors.

Pursued by the Romans, Spartacus led his army to the mountains of Petelia. Several legions under Crassus' lieutenants Scrophas and Quintus harassed the slaves by making several daring attacks on their rear. Suddenly Spartacus wheeled his force about and fell on the Romans. In the furious battle that followed, Scrophas was wounded, and his legionaries barely managed to drag him to safety. The defeat became a rout, as Romans streamed away by the score.

News reached the slaves that Pompey and Lucullus had been dispatched with their legions and were at that moment marching to put an end to the insurrection. Spartacus advised his followers to continue their retreat through the Petelian heights, but many of his officers advocated heading south to Apulia to reach the seaport of Brundisium on the heel of the Italian peninsula. There, it was hoped, they could capture merchant ships in a desperate escape attempt.

With the legions of his political rivals rapidly approaching, Crassus was determined to bring Spartacus to a decisive battle. His legions hounded the gladiators as they fled southward. Stragglers were rapidly picked off and executed. When word reached him that Lucullus had landed at Brundisium and was marching inland, Crassus knew he had the Thracian at his mercy.

Spartacus found himself trapped between the two armies, with the legions of Pompey still on their way. Drawing his force up to face Crassus, the weaker of the two opponents. Spartacus commanded that his horse should be brought to him. Drawing his sword, the slave leader stabbed the animal to show his men that there would be no further retreat—only victory or death.

Sweeping forward in a wave of humanity, the slaves sought to overwhelm the Romans by sheer numbers. Seeing Crassus through the confusion, Spartacus fought to reach the Roman general. With weapons flying around him, the Thracian nearly reached his goal, slaying two centurions in individual combat before being surrounded by the enemy. Ancient Roman sources agree that although he was severely wounded, he continued to wield his spear and shield until the Romans swarmed over him and a small contingent of bodyguards.

The Roman victory was complete. Almost the entire gladiator army was annihilated, its remnants scattering to the nearby hills. Although Crassus was accorded the victory, his own decimated legions were unable to track down all the fugitives. That dubious honor was left to Pompey, who had recently arrived on the scene. Rebel slaves were hunted without mercy throughout southern Italy, many of them fighting until they were cut down by the legions. More than 6,000 captured slaves, according to Appian, were crucified along the whole road from Capua to Rome.

The Spartacus rebellion was the last of the major slave insurrections that Rome would experience. The fear engendered by the revolt, however, would haunt the Roman psyche for centuries to come. During the reign of Nero (54-68 ad), panic erupted when gladiators at Praeneste attempted a breakout. Their army guards overpowered them before the revolt could spread, according to one historian, but the Roman public, as always terrified or fascinated by revolution, were already talking of ancient calamities such as the rising of Spartacus.

Gladiator games, in spite of the dangers posed by strong-willed warriors such as Spartacus, continued to grow in popularity. The Roman public became so thirsty for the spectacle that politicians often sponsored elaborate games to win votes. During the Emperor Trajan's rule, 4,941 pairs of gladiators saw combat through 117 days of festivities. By the time the games peaked in the 4th century ad, 175 days a year were devoted to the sport.



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Societal changes and the influx of barbarian peoples into the Roman Empire ultimately ended the popularity of the gladiator contests. About 404 ad, the Emperor Honorius banned the games.

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