

# Roman Slavery, Gladiators, & the Spartacus Revolt

## ROMAN SLAVERY:



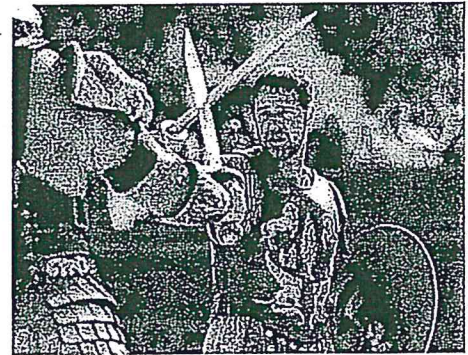
The subjugation (total control) of the Roman slaves was a result of the territorial conquests of the empire. As new land was acquired, the population of the area became the property of the Roman empire as well. The captives of the land joined the other slaves of the republic who had been stationed in this position by the same situation as the captured slaves, or because they had failed to enlist in the army or register in the census. Slavery was either a result of captivity or punishment for a rejection of governmental rule.

Once the slaves were acquired, they were sold at slave auctions under the jurisdiction of *aediles*.<sup>1</sup> Slaves with special talents were sold for higher prices, and female slaves were cheaper than males. It was cheaper to purchase new slaves than to breed more, and so the slave auctions were always highly populated and well attended.

The Roman slaves were treated as members of the family unit in the earlier days of slavery; their punishments were mild, and they were given holidays from their regular duties on certain occasions and festivals. On the Festival of Saturn, the slaves were allowed to wear the badge of freedom for the day, they were given freedom of speech, a banquet where their masters served them, and they were given the clothes of their masters to wear. Slaves were often buried in the familial plots of their masters, and masters would be punished severely for the murder of their slaves. Families of slaves could not be separated, but there was no legal relation between a father and his son. The children born to a slave mother were also slaves, and slaves could hold no property as all their possessions belonged to their master.

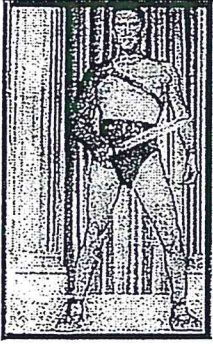
## GLADIATORS:

Gladiators<sup>2</sup> were usually recruited from criminals, slaves (especially captured fugitives), and prisoners of war. Criminals, having lost their citizen rights and slaves and prisoners of war having none, had no choice about becoming a gladiator, if they had the physical and emotional make-up necessary for the profession. Some free-born men, however, although they had not lost their citizen rights, voluntarily chose the profession and bound themselves body and soul to the owner of a gladiatorial troupe (*lanista*) by swearing an oath "to endure branding, chains, flogging or death by the sword" and to do whatever the master ordered. It has been estimated that by the end of the Republic, about half of the gladiators were volunteers (*auctorati*), who took on the status of a slave for an agreed-upon period of time.



<sup>1</sup> In ancient Rome, *aediles* were government officials involved in public works and the maintenance of cities.

<sup>2</sup> The word *gladiator* means 'one who wields a sword (*gladius*)'.



## **SPARTACUS & THE SLAVE REVOLT:**

Spartacus was born in Thrace (an ancient country, now part of Greece and Turkey.) When he was young he worked in the fields of his homeland. Somehow, he ended up serving as a Roman auxiliary in the legions. There is no clear evidence but it is believed that he deserted the Roman army and as a

result of that was sold into slavery.

Slavery became an important part of Roman life. As nobles became richer and lazier they began using slaves as gladiators for entertainment. Gladiators were trained slaves who were forced to fight wild animals and other slaves in huge arenas in front of thousands of people. It was a brutal and ugly sport and it was becoming very popular. While being enrolled in a training school in Capua in 73 B.C.E., Spartacus led a group of several other gladiators and fled the gladiatorial college capturing Mount Vesuvius. When other slaves heard about Spartacus they were motivated by his courage and readily joined him in the fight against the Roman nobility.

Spartacus hoped that in search for freedom his soldiers would attempt to cross the Alps, after which they could seek their own homelands. However, his plan didn't materialize as they preferred to plunder the rich Italian countryside. Within the space of two years they defeated no fewer than four Roman armies. With his huge army of 70,000 Spartacus' force overran much of Campania and Lucania defeating all the Roman opposition. Inside, however, Spartacus knew that if Romans really decided to make an effort his army stood no chance because "the well-equipped and numerous Roman legions would easily suppress his ragtag band."

By 72 B.C.E., the Senate realized that Spartacus and his army were an internal threat to security and ordered the consuls to crush the slave revolt. It turned out to be harder than they thought. Surprisingly the Roman army was defeated three times. On numerous occasions Spartacus tried to persuade his men to leave Italy and move northward towards Gaul but they refused. Eventually, he decided to turn southward and go to Sicily. However, that was a turning point of the slave war. The Senate placed Crassus, an able and competent general, in command of six legions. Although his initial attempt to crush the revolt failed, at Brundisium (now Brindisi) in 71 B.C.E., his army defeated the slaves and gladiators. Spartacus was killed in the battle and 6,000 captured slaves were crucified. That was the end of the last of the series of slave wars extending back to the previous century.