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# The Horrible Life of Gladiators: Revisionist History and the Violence of Roman Gladiatorial Games

by George Evans

WESTERN SOCIETY is obsessed with gladiators. From the numerous on-screen adaptations of gladiatorial games, to a gladiator amusement park that may be opening in Italy<sup>1</sup>, people cannot seem to get enough of these semi-nude ancestral war machines. In most depictions, fights between gladiators are portrayed as chaotic, merciless, and dehumanizing, always culminating in the death of one of the two participants. However, several scholars have recently challenged this consensus, claiming instead that gladiators “were like modern-day athletes: highly trained, overpaid, well-fed sex symbols who were not expected to die.”<sup>2</sup> In a phrase, “They were celebrities,”<sup>3</sup> not slaves. These scholars cite archeological evidence to support the idea that gladiatorial games were heavily structured sports in which contestants honored gentlemanly rules of conduct. While gladiators may have followed “strict rules of combat,”<sup>4</sup> historians should never take the violence of the arena lightly. Gladi-



Gladiator Mosaic, 4th Century CE. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/CC-BY-SA-3.0.

atorial games were hyper violent events that satiated the bloodlust of Roman society and further degraded an abused underclass of human beings.

Tuck, Walters and Potter are among scholars that argue gladiators, “were celebrities”<sup>5</sup> in non-lethal competitions of dignified athleticism. In defense of this assertion, Tuck states that, “Gladiatorial combat is seen as being related to killing and shedding blood... But I think that what we are seeing is an entertaining martial art that was

1 Patricia Treble, “A Gladiator Theme Park for Rome,” *Macleans* 121, no. 35/36 (September 8, 2008): 38.

2 Zach Zorich, “Gladiators Get a Thumbs-Up,” *Discover* 26, no. 5 (May 2005): 18.

3 Ibid.

4 “Gladiators Played by the Rules, Skulls Suggest,” accessed December 6, 2014, [http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/03/0303\\_060303\\_gladiators.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/03/0303_060303_gladiators.html).

5 Zorich, “Gladiators Get a Thumbs-Up,” 18.

spectator-oriented.”<sup>6</sup> In his opinion, gladiatorial games were less about blood and carnage than they were about displaying true athleticism. Walters takes this argument a step further, positing that gladiators, “...were entertainers, sports stars...the privately owned, pampered Beckhams of their day.”<sup>7</sup> He justifies this on the grounds of economics. In his view, “They did not go into the arena to die, because they cost far too much for that to happen on anything like a regular basis.”<sup>8</sup> Not only were gladiators treated like celebrities, but according to Potter, they could become rich from their fame. “Gladiators, like modern professional athletes,” he says, “could become little corporations.” After all, in “a culture that was obsessed with superstars” gladiators must have been the purest symbol of this obsession.<sup>9</sup>

To further support their argument, these historians draw on archeological evidence recently unearthed by Fabian Kanz, and Karl Grosschmidt who both headed up a study of bones unearthed in a gladiator cemetery in Turkey.<sup>10</sup> Using highly advanced techniques, the scholarly duo was able to differentiate between wounds that were lethal and non-lethal as well as discover how some gladiators died. When interviewed, Kanz stated, “Wounds that occur at or near the time of death are distinguished by lack of healing and [by] fracture margins characteristic of fresh bone breaks.”<sup>11</sup> Using this, and other similar techniques, they were able to analyze how the gladiators lived and died. According to their analysis, “injuries to the back of the head were rare” and “All but one of the gladiators

studied had only one wound associated with his death.”<sup>12</sup> In their opinion, these facts indicated that “gladiator fights had strict rules of combat,” as there were “...no sneaky blows from behind.” To Kanz and Grosschmidt, then, the majority of gladiators that were killed died according to the rules of a well-ordered martial art.<sup>13</sup> Also, few gladiators died in any given match. According to Kanz, “The audience and the organizer of the games decided whether gladiators would live or die, but if two brave gladiators put up a good fight, they often both got out alive.”<sup>14</sup> It is perhaps because of this, that we find “Ancient fight records” showing “that around 90 percent of trained gladiators survived their fights.”<sup>15</sup> While he was not associated with the study, Stephen Tuck cites all of this evidence to support his views. In his opinion gladiators “...were not just beating each other into the ground,”<sup>16</sup> but rather, living celebrity lifestyles as pampered professional athletes like those in any other organized sport.

While scholars like Tuck bring up some very interesting points, certain elements of their interpretation fall apart upon close analysis. For starters, Kanz and Grosschmidt’s study does not directly support their argument. It is true that Kanz and Grosschmidt agree that gladiators followed specific rules, had a high chance of survival, and refrained from mutilating their enemies, but these things do not change the fact that gladiators lived dangerous and violent lives full of human tragedy. A ten percent fatality rate is still horrendous. This means that, in any given round of fighting, one in every ten gladiators would end up lying in a pool of their own blood before the day was done. Also, while the gladius (a small Roman sword) and trident

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6 “Gladiators Fought for Thrills, Not Kills - Life - 19 January 2005 - New Scientist.”

7 “Gladiators- More Showbusiness than Slaughter,” accessed December 5, 2014. <http://www.scotsman.com/news/sci-tech/gladiators-more-showbusiness-than-slaughter-1-672063#>.

8 Ibid.

9 Zorich, “Gladiators Get a Thumbs-Up,” 18.

10 “Gladiators Played by the Rules, Skulls Suggest.”

11 Ibid.

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12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

may have caused injuries that were “non-fatal” on some occasions, they definitely still mutilated those unfortunate enough to get in their way. Some of the bones analyzed in the study showed evidence of “sharp, slice-like wounds, which the scientists think were caused by the dagger-like gladius.” Gladiators struck by this weapon may have survived. They may have even “received excellent medical care.”<sup>17</sup> But this medical care might have been administered because gladiators, like other slaves, were worth money as “a...legitimate branch of commerce.”<sup>18</sup> It must be remembered that these men were slaves forced to fight and occasionally die in dehumanizing conditions, all for the sake of entertainment. This dehumanization was perhaps most aptly demonstrated by the way in which many of the gladiators were executed. Kanz and Grosschmidt found that “Ten of the gladiators had square holes in the sides of their skulls, validating the theory that very badly wounded gladiators were killed by a hammer-wielding executioner who waited in the wings.”<sup>19</sup> Kanz and Grosschmidt do not hide from the fact that, “outcomes [of fights] may have been brutal...” they simply wish to put forth the idea that gladiatorial violence, was, if nothing else, ordered.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, Tuck oversteps what can be reasonably inferred from the survey. Rather than use the survey data to vindicate the character of gladiators, he makes excuses for the practice of gladiatorial fights.

Furthermore, Tuck’s assertion that The Colosseum

17 Ibid.

18 “Gladiator (Roman Sports) -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia,” accessed December 5, 2014. <http://academic.eb.com/EBchecked/topic/234706/gladiator>.

19 “Gladiators Played by the Rules, Skulls Suggest.”

20 Ibid.

was a place obsessed with gore clashes strongly with the reality of the execution of prisoners and the “animal hunts” (*venations*) that went on there.<sup>21</sup> Unlike the gladiator fights that concluded each day’s gory festivity, these events always culminated in death and gratuitous bloodshed. The execution of prisoners took place before the main event of the gladiatorial games, but it was just as bloody. A group consisting of prisoners and criminals would be paraded into the arena to be butchered as punishment for their crimes. Those that refused “were driven into the arena with whips and red-hot irons.”<sup>22</sup> The arena was also the place where thousands of animals were butchered for

the entertainment of the crowds. These games were called *Venationes*. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, “The popularity of *Venationes* became such that the world was searched for lions, bears, bulls, hippopotamuses, panthers, and crocodiles to be...slaughtered.”<sup>23</sup> During the reign of Trajan “As many as 11,000 animals were exhibited and killed on a single occasion.”<sup>24</sup> Contrary to Tuck and Walter’s opinion, the coliseum was a place dedicated to the love of carnage.

Perhaps Tuck’s most egregious error is the way he over-emphasizes his main source. Though he has analyzed a gargantuan amount of gladiator imagery from ancient Rome, Tuck’s main discovery came from comparing this imagery to Renaissance martial arts manuals. In his

21 “Venationes (Roman Spectacle) -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia,” accessed December 5, 2014. <http://academic.eb.com/EBchecked/topic/625043/venationes?anchor=ref280477>.

22 “Gladiator (Roman Sports) -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia.”

23 “Venationes (Roman Spectacle) -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia.”

24 Ibid.



Jean-Leon Gerome, Pollice Verso, 1872. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/CC-BY-SA-3.0.

words, these manuals “...are incredibly important because they show sequences of moves and have accompanying descriptions.” Tuck points out that, “there were often three critical moments in such fights. The first was initial contact, with both opponents fully armed...The second was when one gladiator was wounded and sought to distance himself from his opponent [and] In the third, both gladiators dropped their shields before grappling with each other.” This third step is vitally important to Tuck’s analysis. In his opinion, the “very act of throwing down shields and weapons to grapple was a common way to conclude a fight, without [inflicting fatal wounds].”<sup>25</sup> As interesting as this analysis may be, a group of Renaissance fighting manuals tell us nothing about the Roman culture of nearly

<sup>25</sup> “Gladiators- More Showbusiness than Slaughter.”

a thousand years prior. One contributor sums this complaint up quite adequately, saying, “The late medieval fighting manuals are great...long-neglected resources, but there is no justification for presuming that their conventions of combat were at all applicable over a thousand years before”<sup>26</sup>

The argument of Tuck and Walters also clashes with what some Roman sources tell us about the gory life of gladiators. We see frequent evidence that gladiators were not purely celebrities, but rather dehumanized slaves. According to Seneca, a stoic philosopher who wrote during the time of the Roman Empire, one gladiator was so scared of fighting in the ring that he took “a stick with sponge on the end of it used for wiping away...feces”<sup>27</sup> and shoved it down his own throat, suffocating himself. Clearly this gladiator was not enamored with the glory he could receive in the arena; rather, he was scared out of his wits, and desperate for escape.

Another source that Tuck must contend with is the *Satyricon* written by Titus Petronius Niger during the time of the emperor Nero. While Niger’s work is a “comic, picaresque novel”<sup>28</sup> and therefore not serious history, it still tells us a great deal about the presuppositions of Romans during the time. In the novel, Niger’s narrator says that, “We pledged our bodies and souls to our master most solemnly, like regular gladiators.”<sup>29</sup> Niger’s charac-

<sup>26</sup> “Cronaca: Gladiators: The Professional Wrestlers of Antiquity?” accessed December 5, 2014. <http://www.cronaca.com/archives/003196.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Brendan D. Nagle, *The Roman World: Sources and Interpretation*. 1 edition, Pearson, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> “Gaius Petronius Arbiter (Roman Author) -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia,” accessed December 6, 2014, <http://academic.eb.com/EBchecked/topic/454501/Gaius-Petronius-Arbiter>.

<sup>29</sup> Petronius Arbiter, Michael Heseltine, and William Henry Denham Rouse, *Petronius. Apocolocyntosis*. W. Heinemann, 1922.

ters, and therefore the Romans that read about them, understood gladiators to be regular slaves. This clashes quite discordantly with Tuck's idea that they were pampered celebrities. Famous, they may have been, but it seems that few Romans envied their lives. After all, to "be the head of a school...of gladiators was a well-known but disgraceful occupation."<sup>30</sup>

Seneca also uses the death of gladiators in an analogy, clearly inferring that gladiators would have commonly faced death. In his *Epistles*, he writes, "For death, when it stands near us, gives even to inexperienced men the courage not to seek to avoid the inevitable. So the gladiator, who throughout the fight has been no matter how fainthearted, offers his throat to his opponent and directs the wavering blade to the vital spot."<sup>31</sup> While Seneca is speaking figuratively, he is drawing on common cultural information that his audience would have understood. If Roman audiences were familiar with the death of gladiators, then these deaths must have been common enough to make the life of a gladiator an ongoing game of Russian roulette.

Marcus Tullius Cicero also speaks on the topic. While he thinks that no punishment is too severe for criminals and slaves, he bemoans that the death of free citizens in the arena as a tragedy. In his *Tusculan Disputations* he writes, "A gladiatorial show is apt to seem cruel and brutal to some eyes, and I incline to think that it is, as now conducted."<sup>32</sup> <sup>33</sup> He sees these 'free-will' fights as tragic, while lauding fights that feature condemned criminals and slaves. He even nostalgically admired the games of old, in which, "it was criminals who crossed swords in the

death struggle."<sup>34</sup> In Cicero's opinion, there "...could be no better schooling against pain and death"<sup>35</sup> than to see condemned gladiators cut each other to ribbons. While we cannot infer from Cicero's comment that gladiators died in the majority of games, they were common enough to be used as examples in intellectual writing.

Clearly gladiators were not the "pampered Beckhams of their day."<sup>36</sup> They were a brutalized under-class of human being, forced to fight and kill one another for the entertainment of a "pampered" crowd. While Tuck and Walters' main assertion that gladiators were overpaid sports stars lacks serious supporting evidence, they do accomplish a good thing by drawing people's attention to the study performed by Kanz, and Grossschmidt. Unlike Tuck and Walters these two scholars perform thorough work that should revolutionize the way we see the gladiators. In their view, gladiators may have been popular, even infamous, they may have "fought like gentlemen"<sup>37</sup> in an orderly game, but this does not change the fact that their line of work relied on mutilating other human beings<sup>38</sup> for the entertainment of warmongering spectators.

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30 "Gladiator (Roman Sports) -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia."

31 "Seneca Epistles Book 1" accessed December 6, 2014, [http://www.stoics.com/seneca\\_epistles\\_book\\_1.html](http://www.stoics.com/seneca_epistles_book_1.html).

32 Ibid.

33 Thomas Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

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34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 "Gladiators- More Showbusiness than Slaughter."

37 "Gladiators Played by the Rules, Skulls Suggest."

38 Ibid.