

INTRODUCTION

A FEW WORDS before you immerse yourself in the grandeur, action, and pomposity of ancient Rome ...

From its founding as a tiny shepherd's community in 753 BC to its growth as the largest empire the world has ever seen, the story of ancient Rome is a lesson in survival, absolute power, and corruption. Its expansion provoked one of the most dynamic periods in world history—at times violent beyond belief, yet also offering its inhabitants decades of peaceful, happy lives.

The old adage "Rome wasn't built in a day" is important to remember here. Many assume that icons such as the Colosseum, known in its day as the Flavian Amphitheater, always existed. Actually, it was inaugurated in AD 80, thirteen years after the story in this book ends. Therefore, the logical question "Why aren't these gladiators fighting in the Colosseum?" is answered simply: Because it didn't exist yet.

The largest arena in Rome during the setting of this book – AD 63 to 67 – was the Amphitheater of Taurus. As with all amphitheaters prior to the Colosseum, it was constructed primarily of stone and wood, although still of massive size. There are conflicting reports as to whether this amphitheater was destroyed in the Great Fire of Rome in AD 64. For the purposes of this story, I have assumed it survived, or at least was rebuilt, providing the characters a suitably imposing setting for their lethal battles.

Amphitheaters existed across the expanse of the Empire, from the northernmost provinces of Britannia to the southern reaches of the Roman outposts in North Africa. The action of this novel takes place in many of these smaller arenas. Although their geographical placement within the story may not mesh with current archeological excavations, provincial arenas did exist in or near virtually every major Roman settlement, a testament to the immense popularity of the games.

One of the most hotly debated aspects of gladiatorial games protocol revolves around the sentence of death to a fighter. Many scholars feel the commonly recognized "thumbs down" gesture is more a whim of movie directors than a result of historical research. 'the only mention of this practice in ancient writings is the term "...with thumb turned." This has been interpreted by various historians as a thumbs up motion, a thumbs down motion, and even a thumbs sideways motion. Many agree on the waving of white handkerchiefs to signify mercy. For the purposes of this story and the sake of clarity, I have elected to use the traditional "thumbs down" gesture to signify death and the waving of white handkerchiefs to signify mercy or *missio*.

Another common misconception about gladiatorial combat is that one of the fighters always died. In fact, most bouts ended with both fighters surviving. The primary reason for this was simple economics. It took a long time and a great deal of money to train a gladiator. The *lanistae* – the owners of the gladiators – were not willing to lose

half their investment at every arena event. The games *editor*, or sponsor, knew this and often had to pay extra for each gladiator condemned to death, so the majority of the vanquished fighters were spared. Of course, those gladiators who put on a poor performance or showed any sign of cowardice rarely left the arena alive.

Another point worth mentioning involves the training of gladiators. There were numerous fighting styles in which the gladiators were trained. The five most common were:

- Thracian: A lightly armored fighter carrying a small square shield (*parmula*) and curved sword (*sica*). His helmet crest often bore the image of a griffin fixed to the front.
- Hoplomachus: A gladiator who worked with a small round shield (*parma*), a large helmet with a high crest and feathers, and either a short straight sword (*gladius*) or a spear.
- Retiarius: A nimble fighter who used a long trident, a net (*rete*), and a small dagger (*pugio*). He was the only gladiator to fight without a helmet. Instead, he wore a high shoulder guard (*galerus*), which also protected his neck.
- Murmillo: A heavily armored gladiator, who fought with a large rectangular shield (*scutum*), a short straight sword (*gladius*), and a helmet with a high crest, usually topped with feathers or a plume.
- Secutor: Another heavily armored fighter, similar to the murmillo. Since he usually fought the retiarius, his helmet was smooth so it would not get snagged in his opponent's net.

Most gladiators also wore quilted fabric pads on the arms (*manica*) and legs (*fascia*), along with metal greaves (*ocrea*) that protected the legs. Often the sword arm would be additionally protected with a metal sleeve.

There were many other variations of fighters, which grew in number as the fickle mob demanded more variety in fighters. The key to the variations was its inherent system of checks and balances. For every positive, there was a negative; for every strength, a weakness. It was what kept the games interesting.

A few points on gladiator training... The correct term for a gladiator trainer is a *doctor*. This is not to be confused with a healer and practitioner of medicine, who was also a prominent figure at gladiator training schools. To differentiate between these two important positions, I have added an "e" to the trainer's title (*doctore*) and I refer to the medical doctor as the "physician."

A common misconception is that all gladiators were either condemned criminals or prisoners of war. Actually, not every fighter in a gladiator school (*ludus*) was there against his will. There were some who actively sought the gladiator lifestyle and joined a *ludus* voluntarily. The reasons were many – some craved the fame and glory, others a chance at riches, and some sought the adventure of facing death head-on to prove their mettle.

The question often arises, "Were women ever trained as gladiators?" The answer is yes. Although not a common sight, there were female gladiators. Most fought only other women, but you are about to meet a female fighter who was good enough to face the toughest male challenger.

Lastly, there are numerous references to money and Roman currency. I use the *sesterce* as the common monetary unit, since that is how most items and services were priced in ancient Rome. It is impossible to equate the value of "a sesterce" to modern currency, due mainly to the dramatic difference in the overall cost of living. Rather, to give you an idea of its value in ancient Rome, it would cost about one thousand sesterces per year to support a lower-class husband and wife. Typical military pay was nine hundred sesterces per year for a legionary. You will see the value of a gladiator was substantially higher than that, and a good gladiator could actually earn much more than a regular soldier in a year's time. Yes, gladiators were paid for their fights, usually in old coins, but sometimes in valuable trinkets and even livestock and villas.

I hope this book will open your eyes and minds to a side of the Empire you never knew. If so, and if you'd like to learn more, please visit our website: www.GladiatorsOfTheEmpire.com. There you'll find additional information, links to Roman and gladiator-related sites, and an annotated bibliography of reference materials used in my research for this novel.

But for now, let us escape to a glorious and exciting ancient world.

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