

# GLADIATORS

Gladiators have always fascinated me since I was a small boy, learning about them in History class and being allowed to watch the 1960 epic *Spartacus* by my father. My bloodthirstiness \*cough\*, or rather a profound interest in ancient cultures, has stayed with me ever since. So this issue we shall be taking a look at the truths behind gladiatorial exhibitions and how they can be introduced into a *RuneQuest* campaign.

## THE ORIGINS OF GLADIATORS

Gladiatorial combat originated in the region of Campania in Italy during the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. Although dangerous the focus was not the death of the participants, but a ritualised fight to spill blood upon the ground to feed the spirits of the dead. Thus these ritualised combats arose out of honouring the dead, not creating them.

What initially started as a display of combat between, at most, several pairs of gladiators, slowly grew to reflect the perceived importance of the man in whose honour they were held. In Rome family status depended on such things, thus privately funded and privately viewed exhibitions became so lavish in terms of participating gladiators that tickets were sold to help fund the *munera*, or funeral games.

Eventually *munera* were thrown open to public viewing to appease the envious poorer classes. They lost all ritualistic significance, instead devolving into crass displays of conspicuous wealth, and blatant opportunism to raise political support from the plebeians of the Eternal City.

## WHO WERE GLADIATORS?

There are no records of who the original gladiators were and it is unknown whether they volunteered to perform combat to honour the dead, or if they were forced to fight. However, as the popularity of the games

boomed during the late Republic the need for combatants multiplied beyond any ability of a few professional fighters to supply.

To supplement numbers, gladiators were increasingly drafted from criminals sentenced to death, captured prisoners of war and disobedient slaves. Those condemned to die by the sword (*ad gladium*) were obliged to be killed within a year; whilst the others were sent to gladiator schools (*ad ludum*), and could obtain a discharge at the end of three years if they survived.

A few citizens willingly enrolled, seeking a way to pay off financial debt or because they loved the adoration showered upon a successful gladiator. Beyond regular meals, good healthcare, prize money and amorous visits by devoted fans, there were other benefits to such a dangerous life. An ex-gladiator could reasonably expect employment as a bodyguard, night watchman or even as a janitor in an apartment block or villa after their career in the arena finished. The most famous were hired by schools to teach a new generation of gladiators.

## GLADIATORIAL TRAINING

Gladiators were trained in the owner's school (*ludus*), by expert teachers (*doctores*). Their training included repeatedly striking at a wooden post, sparring with fellow students, and in formulaic pattern exercises akin to modern martial arts kata. Since gladiators normally tended to fight other members of their own troupe, they were sometimes criticised for fighting in too choreographed a manner, instead of putting on a show of real combat.

Most schools were effectively prison encampments, where gladiators could be secured and trained under close guard. Much of their space was devoted to a central training arena, surrounded by small cells for sleeping. Other areas included a refectory, kitchen and a holding pen for the more rebellious trainees. Thus the *ludus* was a self contained world, from which only the most trusted gladiators would be allowed to leave. Life was not all discipline and brutality however. Feasts were often given for fighters who would appear in the next *munera* and prostitutes were also made available.

Within the schools new recruits (*novicii*) were normally chained until they conformed to the rules and discipline of the *ludus* and learned to fight with a wooden sword (*rudis*). Once their tuition was completed the unproven trainees (*tirones*) would be ready for their first fight. If they survived, they'd be regarded as gladiators proper, and rise through a hierarchy of grades (*palo*) which reflected their experience and skill. Being labelled as *Primus Palo* meant you were amongst the best fighters in your style.

"Scipio returned to New Carthage to discharge his vows and to exhibit the gladiatorial spectacle which he had prepared in honour of the memory of his father and his uncle. The gladiators on this occasion were not drawn from the class from which the trainers usually take them - slaves and men who sell their blood - but were all volunteers and gave their services gratuitously."

Livy - *Ab Urbe Condita*

## GLADIATOR BOUTS

During the Republic the emphasis of gladiatorial combat was on the display of bravery and skilful combat, not killing. An analysis of gladiator gravestones from just after the end of the Republic revealed that the chances of a trained gladiator dying during a match were low – less than 10%. These were probably more likely due to accidents rather than deliberate murderous intent, since most fights would be between compatriots from the same troupe. Although combat was dangerous, honourable dismissal and even draws were the norm.

The bout continued until one or both gladiators submitted, or were injured so badly that they were unable to carry on. At that moment referees would stop the fight, preventing the disadvantaged (or submissive) gladiator from being further wounded. Defeated gladiators raised a finger of their left hand in supplication to be granted permission to be dismissed alive.

Normally the loser was allowed to live since a trained gladiator was an expensive commodity. Compensation of up to a hundred times the worth of the gladiator had to be paid for those who died during the munera. For famous gladiators this could be ruinously expensive for whoever was sponsoring the games.

Few fights were declared as ‘bouts to the death’, save for the public execution of untrained criminals or slaves who’d been condemned *ad gladium*.

In the unlikely event that the loser was refused honourable dismissal from the arena, they were expected to face death bravely by kneeling, grasping their opponent’s leg and holding still whilst they were given the coup de grâce.

The winner was presented with a palm leaf symbolising victory and prize money commiserate with their rank. If they had fought exceptionally well, a laurel wreath (corona) was added as well. Then the victor would run around the perimeter of the arena to the applause of the crowd.

The fighting record of gladiators was an important part of their individual reputation, just as in modern boxing today. Such information was often inscribed on their tombstones, listing the number of bouts in the arena and their victories. Occasionally even their tied combats and losses were also recorded, such as one inscription from Sicily where Flammius a 30-year-old had fought 34 times; scoring 21 victories (*victoriae*), 9 draws (*stantes*) and had been pardoned four times after being defeated (*missio*). They definitively reveal that professional gladiators who lost were often spared. ▶





SAMNITE/PROVOCATOR



MURMILLO/SECUTOR



GAUL



THRACIAN

## TYPES OF GLADIATORS

To provide more tactically interesting fights, different types of gladiator were usually placed against each other, dressed as vilified enemies of Rome. Originally there was only the Samnite, the Gaul, and the Thracian. All three were equipped from captured arms and armour, the more exotic gladiators not appearing until the Imperial period.

To modern preconceptions gladiator arms and armour appear very strange, minimalistic to the extreme. The reasons for this were simple. Arena fights provided no rest breaks, the contestants continuing until submission, injury or death. Considering a gladiator might be fighting under the blazing sun, exhaustion and overheating was a significant problem. Since in reality it is much easier to strike at the limbs and head of an opponent (at least with slashing attacks) it made sense to leave the torso exposed, allowing it to act as a radiator. The weight of armour was also a contributing factor, and pieces were kept to a minimum except on those locations more frequently struck.

Most gladiatorial armour came in two forms. The first were leather wrappings about the lower leg or forearm. In later periods, these seem to have been replaced by quilted sleeves and leggings extending over the entire limb. The second type is made from metal which was formed into greaves, rectangular breastplates and helmets. Unlike those of later periods, these helmets had cheek guards, and sometimes a brim, but left the face open. Helmets were decorated with either crests or feather holders, and padded with felt to help cushion blows.

Weapons tended to be slashing and stabbing blades of short nature, with the trident of later centuries being a notable

exception. Aside from the fact that big two handed weapons were not part of Roman culture, an arena fight was supposed to be a demonstration of skill, not quick ending butchery which could potentially alienate the watching spectators.

The equipment of each type of gladiator is listed below, along with their specific *Combat Styles*. It is important to represent the historical effectiveness of gladiatorial armour when using hit locations, so Game Masters should refer to rules concerning Passive Blocking (*RQ6* page 154) and Weapon Reach (*RQ6* page 157).

Bear in mind that each of these gladiator types have specific strengths and weaknesses, and were usually paired against one another in long-established combinations - for example a Samnite would be placed against another Samnite, whereas a Retiarius would traditionally face a Secutor.

### Samnite/Provocator

Dressed in a loincloth held in place with a broad, decorated leather belt (2AP), Samnites wear a short greave on the leading leg (4AP), a square breastplate (4 AP) and a brimmed helmet with feathers (7AP). Their weapon hand and lower arm are wrapped with leather straps (2AP). One of the heaviest and most well armed gladiator types, they tend to favour brute force in bouts, wielding a Gladius (short sword) and a shortened Scutum (treat as a rectangular Hoplite shield).

#### Samnite Combat Style

Gladius, Short Scutum; and either 'Batter Aside' or 'Solid Stance' (resist Knockback, Leaping Attacks and Bash as if using the brace action) depending on the ludus.

### Murmillo/Secutor

As per the Samnite except that their helmets are crested instead of having feather holders, and in exchange for discarding the small breastplate, they get a full sized rectangular Scutum shield instead.

### Gaul

Based on conjecture, these gladiators are dressed only in trousers, padded or embroidered for protection (1AP) and a brimless helm with cheek guards (6AP). They use a large oval shaped Scutum reinforced with a vertical rib, and the longer Spatha (treat as a broadsword). The further reach of this weapon combined with the extra coverage of his shield make up for the lack of armour, often giving them initiative in combat; whether first strike due to superior reach or being less hindered by unnecessary weight.

#### Gaul Combat Style

Spatha, Scutum; and either 'Daredevil' or 'Intimidating Scream' depending on the ludus.

### Thracian

Dressed in the same loincloth and belt combination as the Samnite (2AP) they also have the padded sleeve or wrapped leather protector for their weapon arm (2AP). However they wear two greaves instead, which extend further up the leg to mid calf (6AP), making up for their smaller shields. Thracian helmets are crested, brimmed and possess full face protection with grills over the eyes (8AP). They are armed with a large forward-curved slashing knife called a Sica (dagger) and a small square shield called a parma (treat as a Heater).


**HOPLOMACHUS**

**RETIARIUS**

**DIMACHAERUS**

### Thracian Combat Style

Sica, Parma; and either 'Defensive Minded' or 'Hooker' (allows use of Pin Weapon special effect on a normal success) depending on the ludus.

### Hoplomachus

As per the Thracian, but are differently armed with a Hasta (shortspear), and a backup Pugio (dagger) held in the left hand behind the small circular Parmula (treat as a Buckler).

### Hoplomachus Combat Style

Hasta, Pugio, Parmula; and either 'Cautious Fighter' or 'Defensive Minded' depending on the ludus.

### Retiarius

Sporting the same loincloth and belt combination (2AP) a retiarius also has a padded sleeve up to the shoulder of their left arm, supplemented with a metal shoulder plate (4AP). Other than that they wear no other armour whatsoever, making them faster and more manoeuvrable than their opponents. The retiarius is armed with a Fuscina (trident) in the right hand and a Rete (net) in the left, which can be used to throw or parry as desired. They also have a backup pugio once the net has been cast. To survive a retiarius must utilise the length of their trident to keep foes such as Secutores at bay, preventing them from attacking until the opponent manages to close.

### Retiarius Combat Style

Fuscina, Rete, Pugio; and either 'Cautious Fighter' or 'Mancatcher' depending on the ludus.

### Dimachaerus

A rather strange gladiator, dimachaeri used padded or wrapped arm protection on both arms (2AP), greaves on both legs (4AP), and the traditional loincloth and broad belt protecting the stomach (2AP). For weapons however, a dimachaerus wielded two Siccae (curved knives) or twin Gladii (short swords), making defence difficult but potentially allowing the gladiator to launch flurries of attacks.

### Dimachaerus Combat Style

Sica, Gladius; and either 'Defensive Minded' or 'Do or Die' depending on the ludus.

Of course the gladiators provided above are historical examples from Roman history. Using these as a basis, a Game Master can easily create unique templates for gladiatorial schools and gladiator types to fit in their own campaign settings.

## GLADIATORS IN FANTASY CAMPAIGNS

Gladiators shouldn't be just limited to historical games. There are plenty of pulp fantasy books and RPG settings in which gladiatorial combat is a central part of the world. What is important is how the combats fit into the culture. Not all gladiators need to be owned, nor do they have to be unwilling participants facing death, although both are excellent motivations for Player Characters. Ritualised fighting can also be for sport, a way to settle civil disagreements, the means to climb social ranks, or perhaps a sign of disfavour!

For example, in the *Sword Dancer* books of Jennifer Roberson, the 'gladiators' are free

agents who perform ritualised sword fights within circles as a way to earn money via side bets or demonstrate your prowess as a warrior for hire. Whereas the *Battle Circle* series by Piers Anthony is a post-apocalyptic world in which social status (and ultimately political power) is won by ritualised combat using different types of weapons. One could even try to run a brutal game set in the futuristic dystopia of Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* where the convoluted life and death struggles of the participants are mere entertainment for the masses.

A gladiatorial bout does not have to be against other warriors either. The Romans famously set venationes (animal hunters) in the arena against leopards, lions and even elephants! Many films and books have the protagonists fight especially vicious monsters to prove their bravery or word of honour. John Carter in *The Princess of Mars* witnesses battles between Green Martians and Calots (wild martian dogs), the surviving beasts then having to face a mad Zitidar and so on, the victor progressing to the next round until it ends in a three way final... and who can forget the Rancor scene in *Return of the Jedi*?

Team combats are not out of the question either. A mammoth or tyrannosaurus is nearly suicidal to face single handed, but could be a glorious challenge and legendary win if beaten by an entire party of player characters.

Thus whilst gladiators and gladiatorial tradition need not be morally objectionable, they can in fact become an exciting and vivid aspect of your campaign; whether just illegal pit fighting as part of a society's dark underbelly, or the yearly competition to see who will become the next king of a nation. *Ave, Imperator, morituri te salutant!*