

THE MAN BEHIND THE MYTH

THERE HAVE BEEN MANY VERSIONS OF THE SPARTACUS STORY. BUT WHO WAS THE REAL MAN? CAITLYN LEHMANN SIFTS THROUGH THE HISTORICAL LAYERS.

For weeks after Spartacus' defeat the stench of rotting flesh hung about the roadway between Capua and Rome. It drifted from the putrefying corpses of Spartacus' followers, some 6000 of them, crucified in retaliation for an uprising that shook Rome to its core. The grisly spectacle, recorded by the Greek historian Appian (c.95 – 165 CE), was a silent but potent admonishment from an imperial power that asserted its supremacy through monumental sculpture, subjugation and four menacing letters, SPQR (the Senate and the People of Rome). Slavery was Rome's labour base. In a world without a philosophy of human rights or the language to express one, slavery was deemed intrinsic to the natural social order. The revolt led by Spartacus had terrorised the Roman populace for two years. It was particularly disturbing because it erupted not on the empire's far frontiers but on the doorstep of Rome itself.

When the slave uprising began in 73 BCE, up to 1.5 million slaves were toiling on the Italian peninsula. They laboured in the city-state of Rome itself and throughout the peninsula's Latin-speaking colonies and Roman-allied territories. Modern estimates suggest they represented about 20% of the total population. While many had been raised in slavery, decades of Roman expansion had added tens of thousands of war captives from across the Mediterranean. Spartacus himself was a Thracian, a native of one of many tribes inhabiting the plains and mountains of modern-day Bulgaria. According to Appian, he had resisted the Romans and been taken prisoner. Another source suggests he fought briefly as an auxiliary in the Roman army, where he would have acquired the knowledge of military tactics that stood him in good stead as a rebel leader.

All sources agree that Spartacus was a man of exceptional courage and physical strength. These qualities brought him to the attention of Lentulus Batiatus, owner of a *ludus* (gladiator barracks) in Capua. Situated at a safe distance from the capital, Capua was a hub of gladiatorial activity (even Julius Caesar owned a gladiator school there), and many slaves were sold to the *ludi* as punishment for misbehaviour. Spartacus was an unusual case, a casualty of injustice. His contemporary, the Roman scholar Varro (116 – 27 BCE), asserts that "Spartacus, though guiltless, had been thrown to a gladiatorial show." His plight perhaps gained him liking and respect, even among men already weary and embittered by their fate. However the revolt ignited, and whatever aided its success, Spartacus was among some seventy-odd gladiators – Thracians, Gauls and Germans – who broke out, seized weapons, and fled south towards Naples.

What started, from the Roman's point of view, as a minor skirmish involving runaways quickly developed into an insurgency requiring military intervention. From their encampment on the side of Mount Vesuvius, the gladiators attracted domestic

slaves and farmhands, "herdsmen and shepherds ... all sturdy men and fast on their feet" noted Plutarch (c.46 – 120 CE), "deserters and human flotsam" suggested Appian less kindly. Many fled to the rebels from the wealthy estates that dotted the rich lowlands of Campania, a region dominated by a pro-Roman elite. Within weeks several thousand followers had been equipped and organised to form an army. Still more flocked to join Spartacus after Rome's first hastily assembled forces were summarily defeated.

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To Roman authors, affronted, appalled and pushed to grudging admiration by Spartacus' daring, the slave leader was a puzzle, a man of dignity and intellect who defied a presumed 'barbarian' temperament. Sallust (86 – 35 BCE) regarded Spartacus as anomalous, a rare "noble mind" despite his inability to stop the "plundering and savagery" of his followers. The 2nd-century historian Florus also recounted the "terrible destruction" of the vengeful slaves, yet respected Spartacus for his imitation of Roman customs, including the practice of holding games to celebrate the dead. At the funerals of his fallen comrades, Spartacus is said to have staged gladiator fights of his own, using Roman prisoners. Three hundred prisoners were allegedly sacrificed after the death of Crixus, Spartacus' fellow gladiator and co-leader. Yet other accounts lend praise to Spartacus' restraint. Appian avows that "because [Spartacus] divided the spoils in equal shares his numbers quickly swelled." Pliny the Elder (23 – 79 CE) says, "we know that Spartacus forbade any one of his followers to introduce either gold or silver into the camp."

Sharing plunder equitably would undoubtedly have won adherents to Spartacus' cause, and not only among those legally enslaved. The historian Barry Strauss proposes that there was tacit support for the uprising among the poorest of Italy's free-born population, casualties themselves of the entrenched inequalities of the Roman social order. Fifteen years before Spartacus, Rome and its Italian neighbours had gone to war over the city-state's refusal to extend the legal privileges of citizenship to its allies. The conflict was compounded by Roman demands for tribute money, and land distribution that favoured Roman settlers. Rome won the war, the Italian allies won concessions, but the grievances remained. Despite Roman pretensions to fair governance, political power, by Spartacus'

time, was concentrated in the hands of a ruling elite that represented a mere half a percent of the empire's population. Moreover, Roman politics was increasingly the preserve of those with cash to match their ambition.

In fact, classics scholar Allen Mason Ward endorses the truth of a dictum that "no one wishing to be a first-rate power at Rome could count his fortune great enough unless he could support an army with his own income." Marcus Licinius Crassus supported more than one army. When the Roman senate, panicked and embarrassed, turned to Crassus to crush Spartacus, he recruited no less than six new legions, presumably at his own expense. Crassus was ambitious, hard-bitten: a new-money man. He made his fortune from silver mines in Spain, from property development in Rome (he reportedly had 500 slaves trained as builders and architects), and from hiring out skilled slaves as readers, copyists and wait staff. Crassus, sneered Cicero, would dance in the forum if it got him an inheritance. When Crassus's brother was beheaded in a failed coup, Crassus married Tertulla, his brother's wife, reputedly to save repayment of her dowry.

While Crassus mobilised, Spartacus had challenges of his own. Tensions bubbled over the ultimate goals of the revolt, and his growing army was compelled to divide to forage for supplies. After circumventing Rome to fight successfully in Italy's north, Spartacus' men again turned southwards, seeking milder climes. As Crassus' forces began their advance, Spartacus saw the danger and led his followers towards Sicily. But when their attempted sea crossing was thwarted, the slave army had no choice, and turned to face the Roman onslaught.

Spartacus' body was lost in the carnage of the final, desperate battle in Lucania, but from his loss a legacy was born. Confronted by the might of an empire, Spartacus had struck at Rome's certainties about its brutally enforced social distinctions. His against-all-odds success required a myth to make sense. Plutarch provided one, telling a story of a snake seen coiled around Spartacus' head as he slept, just after his arrival in and enslavement by Rome. Spartacus' wife, a Thracian prophetess, interpreted the snake as a sign that he would "have great and terrible power" ending in misfortune.

The slave uprising did end in misfortune, but Spartacus' "great and terrible power" endured beyond the battlefield. In the face of tyranny, his was the power of a simple idea: that there was nothing natural about servitude and Roman sovereignty – just possibly, all peoples were equal.

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