

Russell Crowe starred in *Gladiator* in 2000.



Photo: Australian Picture Library

by Kathy Helidoniotis

Gladiators Go Wild

So you've heard of the movie. And you've probably heard that the ancient Romans had a habit of feeding gladiators to the lions. Sounds disgusting, right? But what was a gladiator's life really all about?

Gladiator fights started as funeral entertainment over 2000 years ago! Wealthy Romans thought that having a few slaves punch each other at the funeral of a loved one was a great way of seeing their dearly departed off in style. The trend spread and the fights got bigger and became more violent. Eventually there were so many slaves fighting that arenas were used to display this barbaric sport. The Romans forgot all about honouring their loved ones and decided that slave fighting was a sport for everyone! And so the gladiators were born.

Gladiator School

Their role as funeral entertainers may have stopped, but the gladiators were still slaves. They had to fight whether they wanted to or not. In fact, they were even sent to gladiator schools to learn how to fight.

Gladiators used all sorts of weapons from conventional swords to fishing nets, which they used to trip their opponents. The highest prize for a champion gladiator was freedom.

Kirk Douglas starred in *Spartacus* in 1960.

And the Band Played on

The more gladiator fights the ancient Romans saw, the more they wanted – and the more interesting they tried to make them. Sometimes musicians played, other times wild animals such as panthers, tigers, bears, or elephants were set loose inside the arenas; and unarmed gladiators were even fed to the animals. Gulp! Many gladiators and animals died for the amusement of the powerful Romans.

Battling Superstars

The biggest gladiator arena of them all was the Colosseum in Rome which could seat 50 000 spectators. All kinds of fights were held there. In fact, some emperors ordered that the Colosseum be flooded so naval battles could be held inside. The Emperor's orders were always obeyed. He chose which gladiator lived or died by giving a thumbs up, or a thumbs down!

The gladiators were so popular that some became superstars. The best and the bravest won laurel wreaths to wear on their heads and had hordes of adoring fans, just as a pop star or a famous actor might have today. They wore amazing armour, partly for protection, partly for looks!

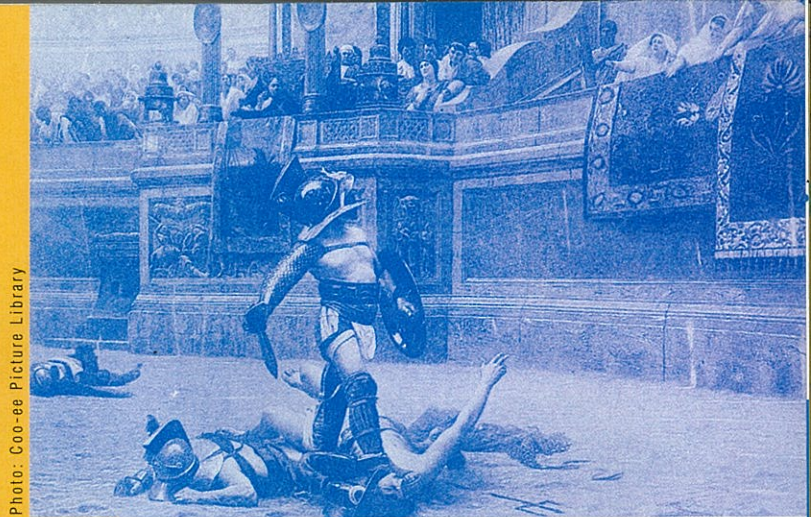


Photo: Coo-ee Picture Library

An engraving of a gladiator defeating his opponent.

Did you know?



Prospective politicians 'put on' gladiatorial shows to try to win votes. Even the great Julius Caesar organised gladiator fights in Rome.

The demand for wild animals to be slaughtered was so high that some species became extinct. Lions were wiped out of **Mesopotamia**, hippos from **Nubia** and elephants from North Africa.

Spartacus was a gladiator who was angry about the way slaves were treated. He broke free and led a force of 100 000 slaves in a revolt against the Romans which lasted for three years! Eventually Spartacus and his slave army were defeated, but not before Spartacus himself and many thousands of his men had died in battle.

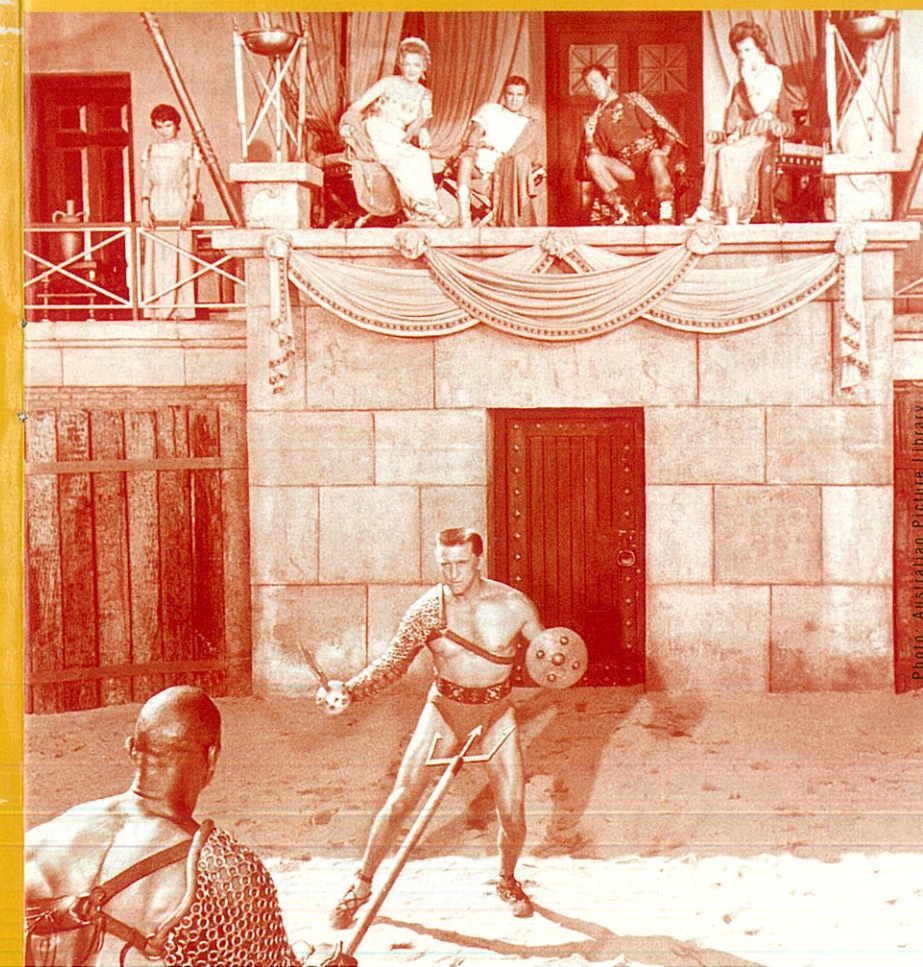


Photo: Australian Picture Library

Glossary

gladiator from the Latin word *gladius*, meaning sword

laurel a small, evergreen tree

Mesopotamia present-day Iraq

Nubia present-day southern Egypt and northern Sudan

Check this out!

<http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/consortium/gladiators.html>