

What can a Roman historian say about the movie "Gladiator"? It was the best of films. It was the worst of films. One of the best things about this movie is that it is part of a long line of books, plays, films, and works of art that keep alive interest in the Ancient World among the general public, something at which artists and writers have been far more successful over the centuries than professional historians. Unfortunately, the creative minds who do the most to shape popular views of the past often have little regard for the level of accuracy that preoccupies professional practitioners of Clio's craft. Artists and writers mine the past for raw materials that support their own creative agenda. Few writers other than the most scrupulous of historical novelists will ever let the facts that concern professional historians get between them and paying customers.

As the worst of films, "Gladiator" provides a perfect example. Right from the opening scene, the inaccuracies are legion. First, there was no last great battle with the Germanic tribes on the eve of Marcus Aurelius' death. There was a great daylong battle late in the campaigning season of A.D. 179, but Marcus died on March 17 of 180, just as he was about to launch another great military campaign. One could say that the scriptwriters needed to foreshorten the chronology here to save time in a long movie, but they certainly played fast and loose with some other aspects of the battle. I have found no attested parallel to the war dog of the Roman commander Maximus, the movie's hero, and if there were one, it would not have been a German shepherd, a breed that did not exist in Antiquity. The use of fire-hurling catapults and mechanical dart launchers against the oncoming barbarians was certainly dramatic but probably unhistorical. By and large such weapons were too cumbersome for use on the open battlefield and were confined to more static siege warfare.

The whole movie has radically compressed the chronology of the Emperor Commodus' reign. He became sole emperor upon his father's death in March of 180 and was assassinated almost thirteen years later on December 31, 192. Although the time encompassed by "Gladiator" is not precisely indicated, it would appear that no more than two years could have elapsed before Commodus was killed. Within that time-frame, however, the script does utilize some historical facts: Commodus was fascinated with shows of beast hunting, chariot racing, and gladiatorial combat; he did train himself in those skills; and eventually, to the ultimate scandal of all classes, he fought in the public arena as the kind of light-armed gladiator known as a secutor (pursuer). In an inscription, he even boasted of his 620 victories in gladiatorial combat.

In real life, Commodus' eldest living sister, Lucilla, did plot with a number of senators to kill him within the first two years of his

reign. As the movie indicates, she had been married to Marcus' former co-emperor, Lucius Verus. After that, however, specific historical details and the movie part company. Only fourteen when she married Verus in 164, Lucilla had borne him three children before she was widowed in 169. Obviously, the character identified as their eight-year-old son named Lucius Verus in the movie is unhistorical. In fact, their only son and one of their two daughters had died as infants. Their other daughter (of unknown name) survived to be engaged to Claudius Pompeianus Quintianus, either a nephew or son by a previous marriage of Lucilla's second husband, Tiberius Claudius Pompeianus. Both this daughter and Quintianus participated in the plot of 182 but appear nowhere in the movie.

Interestingly, Lucilla did have a young son by Pompeianus at the time in which the movie takes place. About six years old in 182, he was Aurelius Commodus Pompeianus, who lived to become a consul in 209. He had survived because his father had never opposed Commodus.

Lucilla had nothing in common with her son's father. Both she and her mother, the Empress Faustina, bitterly resented the marriage that Marcus had hastily arranged between her and Claudius Pompeianus. It had taken place only nine or ten months after Verus' death, before the proper mourning period had ended. Lucilla was unhappy with the extreme difference in their ages: She was only nineteen and a half, and he may have been over fifty. Both she and her mother found him socially beneath their dignity. He was the son of a provincial Equestrian from Antioch in Syria. This marriage was the source of the cold relations between Lucilla and Marcus that the movie never adequately explains.

Having been an Augusta as the wife of Verus, Lucilla undoubtedly wanted to be one again. Marcus, however, had chosen Pompeianus as her second husband precisely because he was a loyal and valuable military officer who could protect the Imperial family but whose social station foreclosed any ambitions of his own for the throne. Even though his son or nephew Quintianus, his wife, and his stepdaughter were at the center of the plot in 182, he was completely uninvolved. That was fortunate for him. Unlike in the movie, the unsuccessful conspirators were executed, even Lucilla after she was briefly exiled on the Isle of Capri.

Except for a love of the games, there is not much that is historical about "Gladiator's" version of Commodus. In the movie he appears to be in his mid-to-late twenties, is of average build, has dark hair, and fights with his right hand. In reality, he was only eighteen and a half when Marcus died, had a very strong

physique, sported golden blond hair, and fought with his left hand. Moreover, he was not single, as the movie represents him. In 178, at the age of sixteen, he had been married to Bruttia Crispina, and it was not until after the conspiracy of 182 that he divorced her for adultery and executed her.

The picture of Commodus as a man starved for paternal affection, lusting after his sister, and finally murdering his father to avoid the ultimate rejection of being passed over for as his father's successor has some support in the often tendentious and sensationalistic sources. The Life of Commodus in the notorious pastiche of fact and fiction known as the *Historia Augusta* takes pornographic delight in depicting the drunkenness and sexual excesses that every ancient rhetorical hack stereotypically ascribed to a tyrannical ruler. Ironically, Lucilla is the only sister with whom he is not accused of incestuous relations, but the filmmakers are to be commended for not focusing on the biographer's unreliable charges to make "Gladiator" into another cheap sexploitation epic of Roman Imperial orgies.

One might argue that the serious nature evident since boyhood and the self-control of a Stoic philosopher, which was clearly demonstrated at the death of Commodus' twin brother, would not have made Marcus Aurelius a very warm or demonstrative parent. Nevertheless, the picture that emerges from his correspondence with his beloved teacher Cornelius Fronto and from his own *Meditations* is one of a kind, sympathetic, and affectionate man. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that he had at least fourteen children with his wife of thirty years simply out of a grim sense of Stoic duty.

The idea presented in the movie that Marcus had decided to pass over Commodus and restore the old free Republic is ludicrous. Nobody, not even the real senators who plotted against Commodus, wanted to restore what people today think of as the Republic. The office of emperor was a recognized necessity. The main source of friction between the emperors and a number of senators was the question of how that office should be filled. Leading senators wanted to be able to choose a mature man of experience and proven merit from their ranks. The soldiers, however, always favored hereditary succession by birth or adoption, and without dynastic loyalty, it was too easy for an ambitious general to use his soldiers to contest the choice of a new emperor other than himself.

The ancient reports of Marcus Aurelius fearing that Commodus was an unsuitable candidate for emperor and that Commodus brought about his death are fictions designed to discredit Commodus and justify his overthrow. Contrary to the picture

presented in "Gladiator," Commodus was in fact joint ruler with his father from the beginning of 177, when Commodus became the youngest of Roman consuls up to that time. From August of 178, they jointly commanded the war on the Danube until Marcus' death.

Marcus was not quite 59 when he died, perhaps of plague. "Gladiator" does capture his kindly and philosophical nature, but his decrepit frailty, thin beard, and wispy fly-away hair in the movie bear little resemblance to his statues, busts, and portraits on coins, even one depicting him at age 56. They show him as a fairly vigorous man with a full beard and a thick head of curly hair. Of course, official portraiture tends to improve on nature, and Aurelius himself complained of poor health. He also endured war and two winters along the Danube, and if he did contract plague in the second winter, he might even have looked preternaturally aged just before he died and as he appears in "Gladiator."

Unfortunately, there are no portraits with which to compare the Hero of "Gladiator", the Spanish general Maximus. He never existed at all. He is a pastiche, a composite portrait of the kind of able men from the provinces who were tangible proof of Marcus Aurelius' insistence on promoting men because of merit wherever he found them. Like Marcus himself, Trajan, and Hadrian, the character Maximus came from a provincial family in Spain. His longing for home and family in the movie echo sentiments that Herodian attributes to Claudius Pompeianus, whose career as a military officer from the provinces resembled his in many ways. The man who most likely held the supreme field command in the great battle of 179 on which the opening scene is probably based was Tarutienus Paternus, senior prefect of the Praetorian Guard, who was later executed for supposed involvement in the plot of 182.

One wishes that the late Oliver Reed's last character, the lanista or gladiatorial impresario Proximo were an historical character, but, of course, if he were, his name would be the Latin "Proximus" and not the Italian "Proximo". Symbolically, perhaps, Latin gets butchered even more when Proximo brings his troop of gladiators to Rome where they enter a building labeled LUDUS MAGNUS GLADIATORES, instead of LUDUS MAGNUS GLADIATORUM. Finally, Proximo wrongly claims that Marcus Aurelius had banned gladiatorial contests and thereby forced him to leave Rome to scratch out a living in hick towns like North African Zucchabar, which, mirabile dictu, really was a Roman colony in Mauretania. In fact, Aurelius had enacted legislation to guarantee the continuance of gladiatorial games in hard economic times.

The depiction of gladiatorial armor, weapons, and combat in "Gladiator" is riddled with errors. By the second century A.D., gladiators had been divided into strict categories according to their arms, armor, and style of fighting. In most cases, gladiators of different types were paired in certain standard combinations. For example, since Commodus always fought as a secutor, Maximus should have faced him as a retiarius, a man who fought with a circular net, a trident, and a short sword (gladius) and whose only protection was on his sword arm. Moreover, true gladiatorial combats were not the kind of mass melees often shown in the movie but individual duels fought under strict rules enforced by referees.

Despite its many specific inaccuracies, "Gladiator" is the best of films because it does vividly and convincingly portray some important general truths about the late second-century-A.D. Roman World. Many people find the movie offensively violent, bloody, and gory. Unfortunately, life in the ancient world in general was much more violent and gruesomely bloody than life in modern industrial democracies. Marcus Aurelius spent most of his reign in fighting wars. Despite the misplaced fire-hurling catapults, the brutal hand-to-hand butchery of the opening battle gives a good idea of the ugly face of legionary combat and the gruesome ways in which one could be killed or wounded. Indeed, such scenes are graphically depicted on the famous column that commemorates Aurelius' Northern Wars.

Not just on the battlefield but everywhere people constantly confronted sudden violent or painful death. People were acutely aware that we are, as the character Proximo, misquoting Horace (Odes, 4.7.6), more than once said, "shadows and dust." Murder was frequent in crowded, poorly policed cities, and the countryside was constantly being raided by brigands and invaders. After the abortive plot of 182, the senatorial class again faced the kind of murderous purge such as had occurred earlier under Caligula, Nero, and Domitian. The brutal murders of Maximus' wife and son in "Gladiator" mirror that reality. Marcus avoided such extremes in dealing with his domestic opponents, but those who were loyal to him did not scruple to cut off the head of the hapless Avidius Cassius and send it to him. Plague had ravaged the Roman Empire since the return of Lucius Verus' army from Parthia in 166, and the lack of modern medicines rendered all diseases more deadly than now. Death rates were very high. Marcus himself had buried his wife and eight of their fourteen known children.

With the rictus of the Grim Reaper visible at every turn, people of all classes were preoccupied with the prospect of imminent death. That preoccupation permeates Marcus Aurelius' own Meditations, and it is summed up in the words that Maximus

ascribes to Marcus in the movie: "Death smiles at us all. All a man can do is smile back."

The pressing perception of death lurking everywhere helps to explain the popularity of gladiatorial shows all over the Empire. As the fictional senator Gracchus in the movie said of Commodus and his attempt to win the hearts of the masses: "He will bring them death, and they will love him for it." While gladiatorial shows and related games like beast hunts and chariot races were religiously charged spectacles of Roman power used to maintain political and social control, the great popular enthusiasm that they generated had nothing to do with any popular love for Roman rituals and expressions of power. It had everything to do with the ancient warrior code that stressed overcoming death by achieving honor and undying fame through killing others in battle or at least meeting a glorious death. Gladiatorial combat replicated the daily struggle with death faced by everyone and provided the model for how to confront it heroically. As the Black gladiator Juba, who healed Maximus' wound, said to him when at first he refused to play his new role as a gladiator, "Why don't you fight? We all have to fight!" Through heroically facing death, one might actually overcome it for the present by defeating one's foe or, by fighting courageously even in the face of overwhelming odds, one could obtain a degree of heroic honor in defeat that transcended death. Proximo said it all when he said, "Ultimately, we are all dead men .... We have to decide how to meet death in order to be remembered as men."

The lesson taught in the arena was that by not giving up without a fight, even someone who had suffered the all-too-common misfortune of enslavement could become a noble hero. Again, to quote Proximo, "You will die to the sound of 'clap, clap.' Gladiators, I salute you." Maximus overcame his reversal of fortune and accomplished one of the deeds that brought the greatest heroic honor and fame: vengeance on his enemy. When death finally claimed his own battered body, Lucilla said, "He was a soldier of Rome. Honor him!" and many willing hands bore him off in triumph.

It was a powerful end to an exciting film that has sparked enormous interest in the history behind it. Perhaps Roman historians should be grateful for its valid general insights and overlook its many factual errors. The artiste will say that concern with such details merely reflects the overly punctilious quibbles of pettifogging pedants who cannot appreciate the forest for the trees. Certainly creative artists need to be granted some poetic license, but that should not be a permit for the wholesale disregard of facts in historical fiction and costume dramas. In most cases, the easily determined factual details would not have

made "Gladiator" less interesting or exciting, and the record of Commodus' reign contains characters and events that could easily make what is now a good story even better history.