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Gladiator Truths Counter Movie Myths

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June 26, 2007 — Gladiators were bean-eating vegetarians who fought barefoot, participated in refereed matches and suffered floggings if they became inebriated or behaved inappropriately with women, new findings suggest.

Those conclusions counter a number of popular Hollywood myths, such as "gladiator sandals," the notion that these athletes could do as they pleased outside of the arena, and the idea that all gladiators fought to the death.

"If you're operating a gladiator operation and you have someone like Mel Gibson fighting for you, you're not just going to kill him off," said Stephen Dyson, a professor of classics at the University of Buffalo, in reaction to the news.

University of Muenster scientists announced earlier this month that they had also identified what could be one of the world's earliest training manuals — an instructional tablet for the treatment of gladiators.

The nearly 6-foot-high, 3-foot-wide marble object "is a sensation," according to Elmar Schwertheim, an archaeologist who led the research team that recently deciphered the writing on the tablet. It was first excavated in 2003 in Alexandria Troas, Turkey.

Hadrian, the Roman emperor from 117 to 138 A.D., laid out the rules, which called for flogging if the athletes were "undisciplined," in ways such as "drinking too much or womanizing."

The stone tablet also mentions that entry fees were collected for discus and javelin throwing events. Cities that embezzled such money and prize fees were to be punished with sanctions.

At April's meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, yet another research team presented data concluding gladiators consumed a vegetarian diet primarily consisting of beans, barley and dried fruits washed down with a drink rich in minerals.

Medical University of Vienna anthropologists Fabian Kanz and Karl Grossschmidt analyzed gladiator skeletons unearthed near an ancient Ephesus stadium in what is now Turkey. The researchers found high levels of the trace element strontium, associated with plant-based diets, in the athletes' bones.

The discovery validates historical accounts of what gladiators, who were rather hefty and short by today's standards, ate.

The tallest gladiators measured around 5 feet 5 inches tall.

Kanz and Grossschmidt also translated tombstone inscriptions, which indicated that some gladiators survived more than 100 fights. Injuries still detectable on the skeletons show bouts were organized, conducted barefoot and likely involved a referee.

Dyson, who formerly served as the president of the Archaeological Institute of America, said many fights operated within circus-like groups that traveled from city to city.

"Since gladiators were fairly expensive to maintain and train, economically it doesn't make much sense for them to have been killed off intentionally on a regular basis," he added.

Out of 68 skeletons analyzed at the Turkish burial site, however, all men ranged in age from 20 to 30, except for one individual who died at 55.

Dyson thinks that although the fights were organized, wounds inflicted by weapons such as tridents, hammers and foot-long sharp swords could take their toll over time.

He explained, "Given the state of ancient medicine, and the fact that these men were wounded on a regular basis, I suspect tetanus and other injury-related problems killed many gladiators off."

The University of Muenster team from Germany plans to further excavate the Alexandria Troas site later this year in hopes of finding more gladiator artifacts.

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