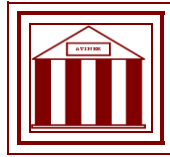


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Battle with the Germans Compared to a  
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**“Who Let The Dogs Out?” The Film *Gladiator*’s Battle with the Germans Compared to a Contemporary Roman Cavalry Scene from the Portonaccio Sarcophagus**

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**Abstract**

In the stirring opening battle scene of the Academy-Award winning film, *Gladiator* (2000), General Maximus leads his Roman cavalry into a burning forest in dramatic charge, slaughtering rows of irregular Germans while his “wolf-dog” faithfully runs by his side, leaping with reckless abandon through fire and dismembered corpses. Actual wolflike relatives of the movie’s power pooch were known in the Rhineland during the Roman Empire, and such unlikely “Rin Tin-Tin” antics are forgivable in a film with a camera-trained canine. Where the Roman military was concerned, however, the mighty Mastiff would more likely have been the breed of choice- other considerations, it seems, determined the ultimate casting of MAXimus’ pup. The “wolf” was, after all, the symbol of Rome, and, as evidenced in *Gladiator: The Making of the Ridley Scott Epic* (2000), p.115, the updated 2000 version of the script, and director Ridley Scott’s own commentary on the DVD version of the film, symbolism was more important here than breed. In fact, it appears that an actual wolf at one time “read” for the art. It goes without saying that wolves never ran wild with legions. From such considerations, however, we may conclude that accuracy was never meant to be a hallmark of *Gladiator*’s general representation of the Roman military- and it is not.

**Keywords:**

In the stirring opening battle scene<sup>1</sup> of the Academy-Award winning epic, *Gladiator* (2000), General Maximus leads his Roman cavalry through a burning forest in a dramatic charge. Mindless of the uneven terrain and trees, he and his companions effortlessly slaughter rows of frantic Germans, while his faithful “wolf-dog” (a German Shepherd) runs along side with reckless abandon through fire and dismembered corpses. German Shepherds, however, are a modern breed, and where the Roman military was concerned the mighty Mastiff would typically have been the choice in combat. Other considerations, however, determined the casting of Maximus’ *canis familiaris* since everyone is supposed to know that the “wolf” was (and is) the symbol of Rome. In fact, symbolism was so important here to *Gladiator*’s director, Ridley Scott, that he had initially wanted actual wolves for the part. Unfortunately, England’s rabies quarantine nixed that idea,<sup>2</sup> and Scott ended up having to compromise. It goes without saying, however, that wolves never ran with Roman legions, and most movie audiences are unfamiliar with such symbolism, anyway. All Maximus’ companion probably did was to assure many pet owners that German Shepherds actually did fight with the Romans. Such a “Who Let the Dogs Out” faux pas serves to establish that accuracy was never intended to be a hallmark of Scott’s portrayal of the Roman military.

Maximus’ canine probably would quickly have fallen victim to enemy or friendly fire, anyway, since neither man nor beast was safe in the just as fictional devil-may-care, rear guard cavalry charge depicted in the film. In the company of fellow Roman horsemen who apparently would just as soon end up in Elysium (as Maximus jokingly taunts before the raid), “Rome’s greatest general” and his thundering hoard ride roughshod over the unsuspecting and outmatched Germans. Surprised at the charge from behind, they fall like heavy matchsticks on the film’s storyboard before the onslaught. The dog seems oblivious to any signs of danger, preferring, instead, to munch on any random German limb that came its way.

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All photos by author.

<sup>1</sup>The opening battle scene in *Gladiator* is, arguably, the most visually stunning movie representation of a Roman army in action ever attempted. It incorporates many of the same elements found in the “Moon Gate” clash in the 1963 epic, *Cleopatra*, which, however, is set in an urban context and inevitably pales in comparison to director Scott’s “fisticuffs.” We are also reminded of the larger scale confrontation recreated for *Spartacus* (1960), which methodically deploys Crassus’ mighty Roman legionaries across an open plain from Kirk Douglas’ ragtag army of slaves, who defiantly await their predictable fate. In fact, much in *Gladiator* is reminiscent of these and other earlier films on Rome-- not the least is Hollywood’s apparent reluctance to change the armor worn by Roman soldiers. The same basic style used in *Spartacus*, for example, set in the first century B.C., is also seen (among other odd representations of Roman armor) in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) in the second century A.D. It reappears in *Gladiator*. Consequently, filmdom’s Roman soldiers wear the same basic outfit for over two centuries, something akin to Vietnam era soldiers wearing eighteenth-century American Revolution gear.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. *Gladiator: The Making of the Ridley Scott Epic* (New York: New Market Press, 2000), page 115; the updated 2000 version of the movie’s script; and director Ridley Scott’s own commentary on the DVD version of the film.

**Figure 1a.** *Scale Model Representation of Maximus with His “Dog” Emblazoned Armor in Gladiator*



This certainly would not seem to be the ideal situation into which to introduce one's favorite dog, apparently so dear to Maximus that its image graced both the general's helmet and cuirass (figure 1). In fact, if one compares the perilous film action to the portrayal of an actual engagement of Marcus Aurelius' cavalry against the Germans on the Portonaccio Sarcophagus at

Rome, tentatively dated to the same year in which *Gladiator* is set in 180 A.D., there would not appear to be room for a dog of any breed to make a difference. The intense, bloody, and savage melee is vividly presented on the front panel of the Sarcophagus now displayed in the Palazzo Massimo alle Terme. It depicts a similar charge of Roman horsemen-- this one in the company of foot soldiers-- against Germans in quarters so close that one wonders how anyone could emerge unscathed (figure 2). A final expression of anguish marks barbarian faces everywhere. They seem to succumb as readily as they do in the film before the weathering onslaught of swords, lances, and, interestingly, long “battle sticks” in the hands of the Roman general and his lieutenant riding behind him.

**Figure 1b.** *Close Up of the Dog's Face on Maximus' Helmet Visor*



**Figure 1c.** *Close Up of Central Dog's Face on Maximus' Cuirass*



The Sarcophagus scene is all the more relevant here because it is thought to have originally been fashioned for (but never finished or used by) Aulus Julius Pompilius,<sup>1</sup> who, like Maximus in *Gladiator*, served Marcus Aurelius at about the same time in the same general area. The real emperor had placed young Pompilius in command of two legions, the I *Italica* and the IIII *Flavia Felix*<sup>2</sup>, which included cavalry squadrons, on the Danube frontier in Lower and Upper Moesia during the war against the Marcomanni (172-175 A.D.). The descriptive narrative accompanying the Sarcophagus' display in the Palazzo Museum also identifies the emblems of these two legions, the wild boar's head (I *Italica*) and the eagle (IIII *Flavia*), at the very top of the battle scene, just below the Sarcophagus' lid—making its connection to Pompilius an even firmer one. It is certainly unlikely that another general would have been leading these same cavalry squadrons at this very moment and be represented doing so on such a worthy casket. The high-snouted, curled lipped boar<sup>3</sup> appears at the top of the general's raised weapon in the space precisely between the crossed weapons of him and his lieutenant (an eye-catching place to locate the creature). With the larger, open-winged eagle perched on the side opposite peering directly at Pompilius, also from just under the Sarcophagus lid, the two legionary symbols appropriately frame their general in the central scene (figure 3). Interesting, too, is the fact that Pompilius leads the IIII *Flavia Felix* and, in *Gladiator*, it is the “Felix” legions that Maximus commands — a “lucky” happenstance, if not intended.<sup>4</sup> Also in *Gladiator*, the standards of the *Felix* III

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<sup>1</sup>A. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press [revised edition], 1987), page 176, identifies him as Julius Pompilius Piso; also cited elsewhere as Aulus Julius Pompilius Piso.

<sup>2</sup>For the name IIII *Flavia Felix*, see L. Keppie, *The Making of the Roman Army: From Republic to Empire* (New York, N.Y.: Barnes & Noble Books ([reprint], 1994), pages 206 and 214.

<sup>3</sup>The boar appears to have had his once threatening tusk broken off but otherwise closely resembles heraldry illustrations. The Palazzo Museum's experts are convinced. Of particular usefulness for comparison are the line drawings #2, 3, and 9 on the top row of illustrations at “Images for wild boar heraldry” when “Googled” under that entry.

<sup>4</sup>Commodus, the son and successor of Marcus Aurelius, was also given the name “Felix.” See *Scriptores Historiae Augustae (Augustan History)*, “Commodus,” 8.1-2.

**Figure 2.** *The Portonaccio Sarcophagus Cavalry Battle Scene (Palazzo Massimo Alle Terme Museum, Rome). The Face of The General Was Never Finished*



**Figure 3.** *The Wild Boar Symbol of Legio I Italica (Left), And Eagle Of IIII Flavia (Right) Are Displayed Just Below the Lid of The Sarcophagus, Framing Pompilius Charging on Horseback in the Center*





Legions sport a lion, which was the emblem of the IIII *Flavia* before it adopted the eagle.

The same placard accompanying the Portonaccio Sarcophagus in the Museum also states that its decoration was “inspired” by scenes from the now fallen Antonine Column. Indeed, their appearance and that of other contemporary sculpture relating to Marcus Aurelius supports the dating. For instance, a relief in the Palazzo dei Conservatori (Capitoline Museums) portrays Marcus as he proceeds on horseback among his general(s) and praetorians showing clemency to captured barbarians (figure 4). His general’s cloak (*paludamentum*) flowing airborne behind him is so similar to the one Pompilius is wearing on the Sarcophagus relief that the same artist(s) could have sculpted both (figures 5 and 6). The towering Aurelian Column in the Piazza Colonna at Rome would also soon be completed (c.193 A.D.) and depicted these very wars. Its extensive sculpture work may already have been underway at the same time the Sarcophagus was being fashioned. Consequently, if one were to suggest a historical figure with whom Maximus’ character in *Gladiator* might best be compared— a general and cavalry commander fighting Germans on the Danube frontier under Marcus Aurelius--there appears to be no better candidate than Pompilius.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Allen Ward overlooks Pompilius completely, not even mentioning his name, and offers instead Claudius Pompeianus and Taruttienus Paternus as contemporary military models for Maximus’ character. He also suggests an alternative script plot involving the Quintilii brothers, Maximus (coincidentally named) and Condius and their sons. See Allen M. Ward, “*Gladiator* in Historical Perspective,” in Martin M. Winkler (editor), **Gladiator: Film and History** (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), pages 38, and 43-44. Kathleen M. Coleman’s “The Pendant Goes to Hollywood: The Role of the Academic Consultant,” pages 45-52 in the same volume offers little more than general observations about her mostly neglected role as consultant for *Gladiator*. Why the magnificent Portonaccio Sarcophagus was never used is unknown, but it may be that the young senator never had opportunity to use it if Pompilius was, like Maximus, a general who defied the new emperor Commodus following the death of Marcus Aurelius on the frontier of plague or cancer (not smothered by his son as in the film) in 180 A.D. While there were certainly many bizarre occurrences during Commodus’ twelve year reign (not the one year apparently offered in *Gladiator*), we can be reasonably assured that if Pompilius died at the hands of Commodus, he did not perish as a gladiator in a dual with him in the Colosseum. Nonetheless, he could very easily have been executed if he had indeed opposed the new emperor, as many did. That could explain why the sarcophagus was never used, becoming instead something of a trophy for Commodus (a possible reason why it survived?). It would also be convenient to view the unfinished faces of the principles on the sculptured relief as purposeful defacements— but the rough stone has more the appearance of uncompleted artistic work than of being defaced.

**Figure 4.** *Relief from A Monument in Honor of Marcus Aurelius: Imperial Clemency*



Palazzo dei Conservatori (Capitoline Museums, Rome).

**Figures 5.** *Similarly Sculpted General's Cloaks (Paludamentum) of Pompilius (figure 5) and Marcus Aurelius (figure 6)*



**Figures 6.** *Similarly Sculpted General's Cloaks (Paludamentum) of Pompilius (Figure 5) and Marcus Aurelius (Figure 6)*



It is not, however, our purpose here to identify an actual person upon whom the fictional General Maximus might be based. For the cavalry action in *Gladiator*, it is enough that we have contemporary scene of a Roman general leading a charge against Germans in the same geographical area and at the time represented in the film-- Marcus Aurelius' cavalry attacking Germans along the

Danube in 180 A.D. In that respect, the scene on the Portonaccio Sarcophagus is a useful historical corrective for *Gladiator*. If Pompilius is the general shown in the scene, then so much the better.

Oddly, the military iconography of the Portonaccio Sarcophagus is conspicuously missing from modern handbooks on the Roman army.<sup>1</sup> Its authenticity does not appear to be in doubt-- and both its subject matter and representation of the battle appear almost unique among relics from this period. The main scene may have been idealized for purposes of composition and theme, and symbolism and artistic license have understandably been employed to please an obviously prominent client: This was, after all, going to be Pompilius' final resting place. Artists also are known to have taken liberties. For example, some suggest that the (modern recreationist favorite) pointed helmeted, ankle length skirted "Levantine" archers in mail armor on Trajan's column who have been resurrected in *Gladiator* to shoot flaming arrows, are actually artist composites. The frieze on the Sarcophagus lid also appropriately favors the nobility of the general's family, his own *clementia* (akin to that Marcus Aurelius is exercising in the aforementioned relief in the Piazza dei Conservatori in figure 4), and other qualities one would expect on such a monument. However, even with such embellishments, there appears to be little fundamentally wrong about the central battle scene, and the lack of attention it has received seems curious to say the least. The detail is just too specific not to have been based on actual illustrations and models. Aside from the need to adjust proportions of horses (the central group is reminiscent of ones on merry-go-rounds, but others are in realistic postures of intense action or have fallen) and individuals to fit the tight space on the Sarcophagus, the details are so specific that it is almost as if the artist had been there. While it may be the result of an eyewitness account(s), perhaps that of Pompilius himself (although he certainly appears too preoccupied), the tradition of the campaign artist is a long one. There is no reason that Roman emperors and generals did not take artists along to recapture their glory in battle (one wonders if artist renderings did not originally accompany Caesar's war commentaries)— especially if the artist were subsequently to paint or sculpt a battle scene such as the one on the Sarcophagus. This seems particularly noticeable in the use of the previously noted "battle sticks," wielded by Pompilius and his officer behind him. The unusual weapon must have been the one he used on this occasion-- a personal favorite. Pompilius would now be shown with it raised and ready to strike barbarian skulls for all eternity. If not, he would have been depicted using the standard, elongated *spatha* cavalry sword-- or lance that others in his company employ. The "battle sticks" are no mistake, and, as noted before, both those of him and his lieutenant form a crossing pattern close to the middle of the action with the *Legio's* boar's head symbolically appearing between them at the top.

In *Gladiator*, of course, Maximus charges headlong through the burning forest without a thought of danger and with his sword ablaze. It ultimately ends

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<sup>1</sup>Although it attracted enough attention for the makers of another film on Rome, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966), to parody it in the end credit art and even make the figures move their weapons.

up lodged firmly in the trunk of tree after a powerful swipe has separated a German from his head (Maximus will later return to retrieve the sword). At least Maximus is correctly shown at the start of the charge raising his *spatha*, a sword usually about three feet in length, which had replaced the shorter military *gladius* in mounted combat. It spared a cavalryman having to lean down from his horse to strike an enemy foot soldier and chance falling off his saddle (no stirrups) as he rode swiftly by. Maximus' companion officer, however, was apparently not informed about the improvement because he still raises the less impressive *gladius*. Longer, of course, is always better when it comes to powerful men, and the film audience will not mistake who is in charge here.

Among the Romans engaged on the Sarcophagus, however, no one is shown with a *spatha*. That detail would also appear to make this a more authentic representation of an actual cavalry charge because if it had been left entirely up to the artist, he would probably have done exactly what the technical people of *Gladiator* did— arm the film cavalry with the kinds of weapons everybody wants to see: swords and lances.

On the Sarcophagus, however, as his cavalry engages the Germans with lances, Pompilius and his lieutenant are armed with the aforementioned “battle sticks,” a weapon that is neither mentioned nor described in standard texts on Roman weapons. In what is apparently the fullest discussion of “clubs” in Roman warfare, Michael P. Speidel also overlooks them, even though he is one of the few to mention the Sarcophagus and provide two small illustrations from it, primarily in regard to Germanic horse stabbing and hewing weapons.<sup>1</sup> It would be difficult to believe that these “battle sticks” had not been noticed previously, but as of this writing, I have not been able to locate anything about them— or what the Romans called them. It is not our purpose to investigate these weapons further, but only to note their presence on the Sarcophagus. Consequently, until more is known, I will describe them as “Battle Truncheons”— most appropriate, perhaps, because the latter word was once used to describe a fragment of a spear (i.e. lance) shaft used as a weapon. From a distance, some might mistake the “Battle Truncheons” wielded by Pompilius and his lieutenant as that very thing since there are many lances (at least two of them *are* broken, but this may be the result of later damage to the Sarcophagus) at work in the scene. In such a frantic encounter, the chances of breaking one's lance were very high and with no opportunity to secure another weapon, using the remainder as a club would only be natural. However, upon closer inspection (figure 7), it is unmistakably clear that the weapons of Pompilius and his lieutenant are *not* broken lances; nor are they clubs such as the one held by the German being attacked by Pompilius' lieutenant directly behind him (figure 8). They also display no similarity to the “clubs” described as being

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<sup>1</sup>See M.P.Speidel, *Ancient Germanic Warriors: Warrior styles from Trajan's Column to Icelandic sagas* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pages 87-97. See, also, Figures 17.4, and 18.2, for illustrations of his discussion of the Portonaccio Sarcophagus. One wonders, however, about Speidel's description of the battle scene on the Sarcophagus as an equal number of Germanic and Roman horsemen and foot soldiers engaged in combat.

“equipped with heavy iron knobs” in one of the rare mentions in ancient literature of club weapons used by Romans-- when Constantine’s soldiers are later reported<sup>1</sup> to have employed them with devastating effect against Maxentius’ heavy cavalry at the Battle of Turin in 312. In fact, the weapons on the Portonaccio Sarcophagus are not clubs in the conventional sense at all, because the general impression of a “club” is more like the one already mentioned being held by the German facing Pompilius’ lieutenant. That crude club is narrow at the base and thickens almost like a baseball bat as it progresses to the top. The German holds it midway at the point where it begins to increase in size and apparently becomes the most effective weapon.

**Figure 7.** Close up of “Battle Truncheons” in the Hands of Pompilius and his Lieutenant



<sup>1</sup>Panegyrici Latini: Nazarius, *Panegyric of Constantine* 4.22-24.3ff.

**Figure 8.** *German Opponent with Conventional War Club in Hand*



The “Battle Truncheons” that Pompilius and his lieutenant wield, however, appear to have a handgrip, indicated by the fact that Pompilius holds his at its base with his index finger opened over the top edge of it for a tighter grasp.<sup>1</sup> If there were no grip there, his fingers would be closed all together like those of his fellow horsemen who hold lances. In fact, no one can hold a lance or a sword in the way Pompilius holds his Truncheon-- nor could his lieutenant hold any other type weapon but a Truncheon with his hand positioned in the backward manner it is and still be able to strike downward on an enemy’s head.

Along the length of Pompilius’ long, rounded Truncheon, are also places where the sculpture has been broken and mended. There is at least one clear

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<sup>1</sup>As may be observed in the photos, Pompilius’ hand was once broken at the wrist, but the repair does not interfere in any way with his grip on the Truncheon handle.



previous break on his lieutenant's weapon as well.<sup>1</sup> As repaired, both their weapons extend about the length of a *spatha*, which should not be surprising since sword and Truncheon had to be long enough to reach victims from horseback. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know how these Truncheons ended because both are broken or chipped at the top. Marks on the Sarcophagus' lid above the lieutenant's weapon would indicate that it originally extended in front of it, just as Pompilius' badly chipped Truncheon continues to do so. It remains unclear whether or not they were tipped with metal, but it is more than likely that they ended with iron finals because if they did not the weapons would have been less effective and unbalanced. They do also not appear to be substantial enough to have supported the kind of heavy "iron knobs" Constantine's clubs are said to have sported-- but their shafts would have to have been strong enough not to break from the intense force of a single downward stroke meant to kill or disable. Perhaps they had an iron core-- but one not so heavy that they could not be wielded with one hand, as Pompilius and his lieutenant appear to be doing with ease.

These "Battle Truncheons," then, were specially crafted weapons, and no argument can successfully dismiss them as makeshift creations, pieces of broken lances, or unfinished work by the sculptor(s) who ultimately was going to fashion them into swords. They also cannot be unique to Pompilius and his lieutenant. There is, for example, at least one cavalryman depicted on the Column of Marcus Aurelius who appears to be holding another of these (broken) Truncheons upright in one hand (figure 9). They must have been much more widely used by horse soldiers than previously known-- as lethal battering weapons as they rode through swarms of barbarians busting heads. In the Sarcophagus sculpture, there even seems to be coordination between a Roman foot soldier in *segmentata* and oval shield who looks to be moving purposefully along side Pompilius to finish off any German not killed before he can recover from the blow of the general's Truncheon. The soldier is directly below his general's horse and is slashing the neck of a fallen opponent (figure 2). This "Hammer and Slash" type of strategy, as we might describe it, would appear to be a recognized way of engaging a clustered enemy-- a coordinated effort between cavalry and foot soldiers (much like the coordination of a tank and its foot soldiers in World War II) which grew out of the Roman's experience of fighting barbarians in the dense forests along the Danube. When Constantine later employed something of the same tactical concept of club warfare so effectively against Maxentius' heavy cavalry in different circumstances at Turin, the idea could not have been a new one. Some type of club has been used since the beginning of human conflict, and, unquestionably, soldiers in mail armor employ the more basic version of clubs on the Aurelian

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<sup>1</sup>I am working from my own digital photographs taken some time ago, so I cannot check the original Sarcophagus at this time; but it seems clear from the way the weapons are held, positioned, and raised to strike that they never were never meant to be finished as swords or are broken pieces of spears (which would also not make sense since it is only the two leading officers using them).

Column.<sup>1</sup> Such a weapon can be modified to the user's whim, so it should not be surprising to find sophisticated versions of more lethal clubs in the forms of these "Battle Truncheons"— in this case, in the hands of Pompilius and his lieutenant.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 9.** *Cavalryman (Left Center) on the Column of Marcus Aurelius Holding Upright (Top Broken) What Appears to Be Another Example of A "Battle Truncheon"*



<sup>1</sup>G. Becatti, *Colonna di Marco Aurelio*, Nos. 64-66 (Milano: Editoriale Domus, 1957).

<sup>2</sup>This was not only a more efficient way of disabling and killing an enemy, but it was "safer" for Roman troops fighting in close quarters. Razor sharp blades of *spathas* and *gladii*, and lance tips would not be indiscriminately slashing or pointed everywhere, potentially injuring Roman cavalry, horses, and soldiers instead of the enemy. A blunt, metal tipped Truncheon is also more likely to hit some body part with a full downward swing because it does not have to be aimed as precisely as a sword or lance, and the body language of Pompilius and his lieutenant already appears to demonstrate their confidence in doing great damage to those below. It was also a weapon that was designed for fighting from a horse, and if a cavalryman were killed or disabled and dropped the Truncheon, it would have been much more difficult (than with a sharp *spatha* or lance that would draw blood from any hit) for an enemy foot soldier to use the weapon to fight upward against a charging horse and cavalryman. Such Truncheons would also be a more useful weapon in cold climates, if or when needed since they could not freeze up. They certainly would appear to have been less expensive and easier to make than metal swords while continually in the field along the Danube, where resources were not as available as when closer to larger urban areas. All around, it seems a better weapon for use in the woods of Germania (*Gladiator*), and though evidence is scanty, its employment must have been widespread.

Swords and lances and arrows, particularly flaming ones as in the *Gladiator*, are more dramatic than soldiers in armor on horses going around bashing enemy heads. That is what film audiences today prefer to see, and it was probably the same for Roman artists and writers trying to elicit excitement from their viewers/customers, and readers. Perhaps the weapon never earned the “respect” the other more glorified ones did. The desire for entertainment and drama has not changed over the ages. Probably the only reason why we see these “Battle Truncheons” at all on the Portonaccio Sarcophagus is that it was the favorite weapon of the general for whom it was being crafted. He wanted the weapon with him in “Elysium” (Maximus to his cavalry before the charge<sup>1</sup>)-- apparently, more so than his dog.

The Portonaccio Sarcophagus relief is also instructive as a corrective for other misrepresentations in the *Gladiator* battle. These include the weather in which conflicts such as the one portrayed in the film are fought; the military attire of the Romans involved-- including that of a general; and attention to the Germans, who are not rendered simply as stereotypes as might be expected, but more individually in expression, dress, and weapons.

A pitched battle the size of the one that begins *Gladiator* (although, typically a greater number of Roman soldiers would have been involved) would be impossible in winter, especially along the Danube. Winter presents a different set of problems with which large armies were just not capable of dealing. Without even realizing it, the film makes clear why Romans would not be fighting in midwinter when Maximus’ Praetorian executioner tries to draw his frozen sword from its sheath, allowing Maximus time to react and kill him. “The frost,” he says with a wry smile. “Sometimes it makes the blade stick.” One wonders why this had not been a problem in the earlier battle scene since it was just as cold then. Perhaps the “heat of battle” loosened everyone’s blades. The cold air also would have made the lethal flight of Maximus’ sword more difficult as it flew unerringly across the forest into the visage of another Praetorian executioner on horseback. It is much more difficult for an army to move in winter, and Maximus probably would not even have been able to perform his stock Cincinnatus style “farmer’s ritual” of taking a handful of soil and letting it run through his fingers since the ground would have been frozen-- although the soil would vary from hard to muddy or soggy as the temperature changes, even during a single day. Clothing had to be heavier, as Maximus’ was-- so heavy that if his armor were not props, one wonders how he would even have been able to move. Supplies are more difficult to transport. Horses and draught animals have little fodder, and many would weaken or die of starvation (so much for a cavalry charge). Finding game to eat becomes almost impossible. Pillaging is unproductive because crops come in during the warm seasons. There was, in reality, nothing about fighting in winter, particularly in this area of Europe, that was positive-- and if there ever were a full scale attack like the one in the film, it would have to have been planned long in advance so

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<sup>1</sup>Maximus had earlier told Quintus to “Unleash Hell,” a problem with afterlives almost as difficult to fathom, as are his mixed religious sentiments throughout the film.

that all contingencies were calculated. Clearly, no battle such as the one in *Gladiator* could have happened in the forests of “Germania” at this time.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike Maximus and his soldiers, the Romans in the Sarcophagus battle all wear short sleeves. Some Germans are even bare from the waist up (similar examples appear on the Column of Marcus Aurelius). The battle is taking place, as would be expected, in a more temperate setting. Campaigns usually did not begin until March when the weather started to change. The heavy winter dress that Maximus and his companions wear is just not suitable for the rapid movements of a cavalry charge-- nor could their horses even hold the ground with such weight on frozen or partially frozen turf. There are downed and rearing horses in the Portonaccio relief, and the weather is good. In *Gladiator*, the charge is also at full speed over open, uneven terrain the Romans had not walked or inspected beforehand. They somehow just muster behind the Germans (who were very familiar with Roman tactics, many having served in the emperor’s military) without their suspecting and after a few encouraging words from Maximus, begin their charge. Even the movie horses would have to have been sure-footed, nervy animals to handle all this—especially with burning arrows and pots of fire flung from huge catapults (*onagers*) hitting and smashing all around. Of course, that never would have happened in a real Roman cavalry charge since the pyrotechnics are purely for the benefit of the audience. Fire may make for good film visuals, but once started, there is no way to control it-- and fire never knows whose side it is on, especially when used as indiscriminately as in *Gladiator*.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, *onagers* were typically used for sieges-- not open field battles. They lobbed large stones from a single arm sling (not a large “missile bowl” of “carved wood lined with

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<sup>1</sup>Dio, *Roman History* 71.7.1-5, reports a spontaneous winter battle between the Jazyges (Sarmatians) and Marcus Aurelius’ troops on the frozen Danube, probably in 173 or 174 A.D. The Jazyges thought they could catch pursuing Romans by surprise on the ice, where they believed they would have the advantage. However, the experienced Romans did not panic and quickly devised innovative ways to fight on the ice and stop the barbarian advance. The barbarians found they were no better off in such conditions than the Romans, and the ingenuity of the latter in handling the situation proved superior to barbarian surprise. Their attacking men and horses lost their footing and were pulled down. Dio treats the entire affair as an oddity, even a curiosity, which makes it clear such battles in winter were rare and impractical. Cf. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*, page 177.

<sup>2</sup>The Romans were never conservationists, and for the filming of *Gladiator’s* forest battle, an area known as Bourne Woods, slated for deforestation by the British Forestry Commission, was actually consumed-- adding dramatic visual impact and providing a frightening modern testament to the Roman military juggernaut. However, it would have been more accurate had Ridley Scott, the film’s director, followed his initial instinct to shoot the scene on the Danube not far from where Marcus Aurelius, emperor when the film begins, actually did fight the campaigns *Gladiator* attempts to reconstruct. The offer to burn up a more accessible English forest at no expense, however, persuaded Scott to move his production to the UK away from the harsh winters of Slovakia, deciding that *his* Romans could just as easily do their fighting in the pine trees of England (*Gladiator, The Making of the Ridley Scott Epic*, page 62). As historians, of course, we are disappointed. A director is always concerned with his budget and facilitating his production (ironically, it did start to snow while he was filming the battle), but his decision nonetheless shows a tendency to sacrifice accuracy for convenience—a tendency that resulted in other problems with his depiction of the Roman Imperial military.

copper”), and just as unfortunate, machines of such size did not even exist in 180 A.D. Even if they had, the idea of disassembling such heavy weapons (*Gladiator*’s are bigger than real *onagers* ever were) and moving them through the forests of “Germania” in winter is laughable. Once in place, they also could not be moved (no wheels) because a strong platform had to be built on which to place them since the concussion from firing (*onager* means “wild ass,” from the animal’s habit of kicking up its hind legs) could tip them over and kill the crews.<sup>1</sup> On frozen ground, firing them would have been impossible. They could also only be aimed straight ahead and had a finite range. As for the clay pots of fire that made the Roman assault so visually stunning in *Gladiator* as they hit distant trees and set them ablaze, such projectiles would have disintegrated from the g-force exerted on them before even clearing the sling and immolate everyone around. If Marcus Aurelius’ armies used catapults at all, they were much less impressive than even the smaller *ballistae* shown in the movie. The more practical one employed by the Romans in the European interior at this time was small enough to transport in a cart, as shown on the Column of Trajan (figure 10). The closest they ever got to the “wild ass” variety was the *mules* pulling their carts.

So, too, the formation used by Roman legionaries (not “legionaires” as in the movie, which is a disease) called the *testudo*, or “tortoise,” whereby soldiers advance with shields out to all sides and lifted above their heads to form an overlapping “roof”, was a siege formation— not used in the open field (figure 11). It should not have appeared in the movie. Nonetheless, director Scott apparently could not resist using both it and the *onagers* because he thought they would look just as good to the eyes of movie audiences, as did the sound to their ears of the frequently exchanged salute of “Strength and Honor” between Maximus and his fellows. Unfortunately, the phrase had nothing to do with Rome except that it was the [mis]translated *Latin* motto of Russell Crowe’s high school in Australia.<sup>2</sup> Commodus’ war wagon which brought him and his sister, Lucilla, to the battlefield too late was also a nice film prop-- but an actual vehicle of such weight would not have made it past the first stop sign in Northern Italy, let alone the Danube frontier. Even before bogging down in mud and water, the skeletons of the prince and princess would have been shattered from the uneven stone surface of Roman paved roads. The horses pulling it would have died early on of exhaustion. Such things only happen in movies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>So writes Ammianus Marcellinus, 23.4.5 and 24.4.28, in the fourth century A.D.

<sup>2</sup>If, as it appears, he was speaking in a T.V. interview some years ago about Sydney Boys High School, the motto is *Veritate et Virtute*-- and it officially translates as “Truth and Courage” rather than “Strength and Honor.”

<sup>3</sup>Films have also traditionally misrepresented Old West stage coaches as moving rapidly through desert country, usually without a care-- typically with four passengers, a couple of whom are going to be killed by Indians or highwaymen. Actual passenger narratives from displays in the courthouse at Tombstone, Arizona, for example, complain that it was not out of the ordinary to have as many as 25 passengers inside and out of the coach on the five dollar (!) trip from Tucson, and because the horses tired so quickly, passengers spent as much time

**Figure 10.** *Mule Cart Depicted on Trajan’s Column Carrying the Standard Type of Small Catapult that Would have been used by Roman Armies in the European Interior Instead of the Oversized Onagers Shown in Gladiator*



**Figure 11.** *Testudo, or “Tortoise” Formation, shown in Correct Usage against an Enemy Fort on the Column of Marcus Aurelius*



Directly below, the emperor is shown receiving a German chief begging for pardon. This rendering of Marcus, as well as the one in Figure 4, displays how he actually dressed, formally and informally, on the battlefield in contrast to the elaborate outfitting of Richard Harris in *Gladiator*. Of the figures on either side of Marcus, the one to the left may be Commodus. The other Roman officers are most likely Praetorians—again dressed very differently than in the film.

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walking with them to cool them down as they did riding on the coach when the animals finally got a second wind. The relatively short trip today, took hours by stagecoach.

Unlike in *Gladiator*, Pompilius' cavalry companions are arrayed in a variety of armors and helmets, only a few of which resemble the standard issue in the film.

There, every Roman involved in the battle (with the possible exception of the composite "Levantine" archers) appears to be wearing a one size fits all form of the familiar *lorica segmentata* armor. On the Sarcophagus, however, *segmentata* is apparent on only one foot soldier in the foreground-- but he has a smaller oval shield rather than the full rectangular one soldiers use in *Gladiator*. One cavalryman (perhaps two) also wears the same style. At least two others wear scale (*squamata*); and the rest wear cloaks making it difficult to determine their armor type. However, judging from their "decorative jagged fringe" short sleeves, they are wearing mail (*hamata*) since soldiers on the Aurelian Column (and Trajan's Column) wearing mail have that same type of pointed, short sleeve pattern. What seems to be the case here is that actual Roman cavalrymen wore armor and used shields most appropriate for the kind of fighting they did—and the favored style was not *segmentata*. On the Column of Marcus Aurelius, there are just as many soldiers and cavalrymen (perhaps more) who are not wearing *segmentata*. In *Gladiator*, Maximus and his cavalry are simply out of style.

On the Portonaccio Sarcophagus, General Pompilius is outfitted, as one would expect, in a manner that distinguishes him from everyone else. His horse also has a chest decoration, although nothing like Maximus' horse, which even has a large metal faceplate (including ears) in the cold weather. Whether or not someone like Pompilius would actually have gone into battle in such full regalia cannot be known. The idea was to survive by using the most efficient fighting gear— not to look good. Generals were also not usually in the thick of things, but this was, after all, to be an eternal representation of Pompilius on his Sarcophagus, so he would want to be shown in all his glory. His presence even seems to overwhelm his horse, which looks almost too small to support his splendid master. Be that as it may, he still represents how a general would be dressed (on or off the field) at this time, and is instructive in making a comparison with Maximus' costume in *Gladiator*.

General Maximus, played by Russell Crowe, is described as "Rome's greatest general." Someone of his rank, legate or *legatus*, would have worn an elaborate and distinctive costume— but the decoration of Maximus' battle cuirass may be somewhat overworked. Besides the face of his dog, two griffins face each another on the lower part of it. In *Cleopatra* (1963), Rex Harrison, as Caesar, wears armor with the same griffin motif— an obvious borrowing (one of many from earlier movies on Rome) by *Gladiator*. On the Sarcophagus, Pompilius wears a cuirass with less decoration, and anatomical features (as does Maximus). He also wears a general's battle cloak (Maximus has wisely shed his heavy wolf skin mantle for battle, but any distinguishing cloak is missing), which is anchored at the right shoulder and folds loosely around his neck to the other side. His general's belt is tied round his waist (as is Maximus'). He is (unlike Maximus) in short sleeves, with no metal wrist guards; and both generals have leggings-- although it is unclear if Pompilius

has any lower leg armor protection. If he does, it does not extend up to his knees as Maximus' does. Maximus' helmet sports a substantial plume— as do the helmets of his fellow officers. Plumes depicted on the Column of Marcus Aurelius, however, are mostly much smaller (as is that of Pompilius' lieutenant), rising in a fountain-like shape from the top of the helmet. Generals, however, needed to be distinguished and Pompilius' own plume is a very elaborate one. It has a metal crest with stylized feathers imprinted on it (unless they are meant to be actual feathers but too difficult for the sculptor to depict individually without the risk of them being broken off) and a very substantial plume flowing out the back and down his neck to his shoulders. It probably could not be much more elaborate without getting in the way. Maximus, on the other hand, has a fully distinct visor on his helmet, mostly designed to show off his dog's face again, and his well trimmed "cock-of-the-walk" plume begins atop his helmet crest and extends down the back of his neck. Unlike Pompilius, his helmet has full cheek pieces. He also has *segmentata* style armor protecting his shoulders, which Pompilius does not (although one of his companion cavalrymen does have an abbreviated form of such to protect his shoulders).

For visual comparison, we include a representation of General Maximus in his battle gear; General Pompilius on the Sarcophagus relief; and two other examples of generals from this same period (figures 12-15). One of the latter stands next to Marcus Aurelius in the relief previously cited that represents the emperor on horseback showing his clemency to barbarian leaders (figure 4) -- so there can be no question about what a contemporary general looked like. He also holds a lance as a symbol of his authority and is very close both in dress and weapon to a representation of the emperor on the Aurelian Column, where Marcus is also facing barbarian captives.<sup>1</sup> As the photos show, there are similarities to the real general's outfits, but, ultimately, Maximus' armor was something of a composite, more for show than substance-- and, of course, it was made mostly of foam and leather stripping. No one could have actually functioned, let alone fought on horseback, in his heavy, encumbering gear.

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<sup>1</sup>Becatti, *Colonia*, No.15. In this scene, as well as many on the Column of Marcus Aurelius and other reliefs (see, for example, figures 4 and 11), it is clearly shown how the real Marcus Aurelius dressed both formally and less formally as emperor. Richard Harris, who plays the emperor in *Gladiator*, however, is dressed in a battlefield costume that has no basis in historic representations but is drawn largely from earlier movies about Rome, particularly *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1965). In that film, Christopher Plummer plays Commodus, and the armor he wears when he arrives at his father's camp on the Danube frontier has clearly influenced Harris' outfit in *Gladiator*. Consequently, in two films made thirty-six years apart, both father and son wear the same basic Hollywood armor on campaign. Richard Burton's Antony in *Cleopatra* also wears armor that helped inspire Harris'. As can also be seen from some of the preceding photos, soldiers who would have to be Praetorians since they are so close to the emperor, looked nothing like their "facist-overtone" portrayal in *Gladiator*. They were also never a horse guard or archers.



**Figure 12.**



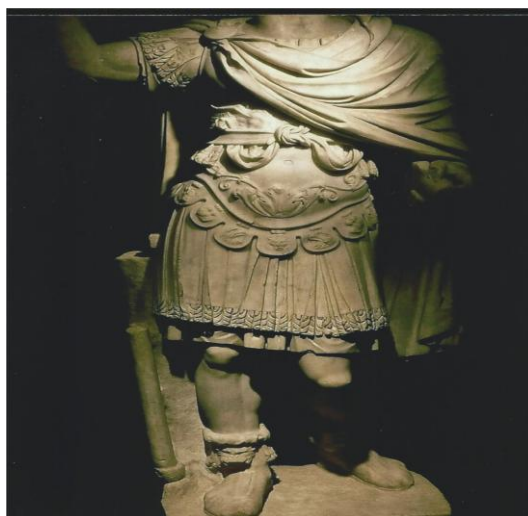
**Figure 13.**



**Figure 14.**



**Figure 15.**



**Figures 12-15.** General’s dress of Maximus, Pompilius, and one of Marcus Aurelius’ generals standing next to him in the “imperial clemency relief” (figure 4). The latter general’s costume is so close (save for the footwear) to that which appears on the contemporary torso (also displayed in the Palazzo Massimo Museum near the Portonaccio Sarcophagus) in Figure 15, that the original figure may have been of the same man. Even if it is not, it is probably closest to what Maximus should have been wearing in *Gladiator* as “Rome’s Greatest General.”

To conclude, there is, unfortunately, little in the Portonaccio Sarcophagus Roman cavalry scene that parallels Maximus’ dramatic charge in *Gladiator*. The sculpted relief is, of course, symbolic and designed to celebrate a champion of Rome-- expressing its domination in the slaughter of the Germanic barbarians. Nonetheless, despite the limited space and artistic liberties, the sculpture may be regarded as one of the most revealing representations of the Roman cavalry in action during this time. What cannot simply be made up are the general features of the cavalymen, their horses, how they fight their enemies, and the barbarians themselves. Observing this, there is small resemblance to Maximus and his men in the film. The engagement has little open space about it, and includes both foot soldiers and horsemen— and the weather is temperate. If nothing else, Maximus could have at least let his beard grow (it never changes) as long as those of both Romans and Germans in the Sarcophagus scene—but, then, of course, his wolf dog may not have been able to recognize him from the others amid the frenzy of the movie melee.

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