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Were There Jewish Gladiators? A Re-Evaluation of the Available Archaeological and Textual Evidence

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The participation of Jews in the arena, especially as gladiators, has received relatively little attention. The few articles written on this matter suggest that Jews were both spectators and participants. The present paper relates to all previously suggested indications for the existence of Jewish gladiators and also introduces new ones. Although the possibility that Jewish gladiators were active in the first–fourth centuries CE cannot be ruled out entirely, the evidence remains inconclusive, suggesting that their number was very limited at best. It is also suggested that if Jews had participated in the games, they possibly preferred to fight beasts rather than men.

Keywords: Jews, gladiators, Judaism, arena, Colosseum, Roman Games

Introduction

The arena and the performances therein were an integral part of daily life in a Roman city in most parts of the Empire (Weiss 2001:2–4, 431–433; Nosov 2009:11–43), the most famous spectacle being the gladiatorial games. As Jews comprised a significant percentage of the population throughout the Roman Empire,[2] the question whether Jews took part in the games, and even fought as gladiators, is an appealing and obvious one, and has been touched upon in the past. The existence of Jewish gladiators has previously been suggested (Loewe 1999:254; Ben-Sasson 2007), especially in the region of Judea, or regarding specific textual sources and archaeological finds (Weiss 1995; 2001), e.g., the gladiator helmet from Pompeii (Rocca 2006), the Talmudic text (particularly those dealing with Rabbi Shim'on

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[2] On the difficulty of estimating ancient populations, including several assessments of the number of Jews in the empire and their percentage in the general population, see McGing 2002. Israel (2020) estimated the number of Jews in the Roman period at 4.5–7.0 million, a large majority of whom lived under the rule of the Roman Empire.

ben Lakish (Reish Lakish),[3] Germanus' Grave from Bet She'arim and the Tel 'Eṭon burial cave (Weiss 2001:443).

Although certain aspects of the evidence of Jewish gladiators has been previously discussed (Olshanetsky 2021c; 2021d), the current paper goes one step further to encompass all the available archaeological and textual evidence pertaining to the role of Jews in the arena, both as gladiators and in other capacities. The full scale of the Jewish gladiator phenomenon is explored below through an examination of the different finds, some of which were discussed in the past and some new. The central question in this article is whether such a phenomenon ever existed, and if so, how common was it?

To examine and fully answer this question, the difference between gladiators and men condemned to death in the arena is presented. This is crucial, as numerous misconceptions in the literature have led to support the presence of Jewish gladiators. Various arguments supporting and negating the idea of Jewish gladiators are presented, including the service of Jews in the Roman army in the context of the Jewish community's attitude toward fighting and spilling blood in and out of the arena. While Jewish presence as audience in the arena was significant, the evidence provided to date is inconclusive and cannot be used to support the participation of Jewish gladiators; if there were such Jewish gladiators, they were very few. It also seems that while Jews were less keen to fight other men as gladiators, they had less qualms fighting animals as *bestiarii* and *venatores*

THE ARENA: ITS FIGHTERS AND LITERARY EVIDENCE FROM JUDEA

Testimonies of the earliest gladiatorial performances in Judea date them to the reign of King Herod. One such attestation originates in the Arabic Josippon, which might be the earliest version of the book of Josippon.[4] While regarded unreliable, the work is based on ancient sources, notably Flavius Josephus' writings, and has some historical value. Moreover, it is worth mentioning as it is one of few manuscripts documenting this phenomenon in Judea and can be compared to some of the events reported by Josephus (see below). The text reads:

> He brought there many types of lions and beasts. And he ordered men to be thrown before them and they were eaten in his presence; he ordered men to wrestle with them (the beasts)

[3] On the prevailing notion of Reish Lakish's identification as a gladiator, see Werblowsky and Wigoder 1967:360 and further discussion below. For further discussion regarding Jews in the arena in the Talmud, see Grossmark 2007.

[4] The book of Josippon is a medieval text that was used by Jews (especially in orthodox circles) from the medieval period to modern times as a major source for teaching the history of the Jews during the Second Temple period. The sources of the book are diverse, and it seems that most of them originated in the Roman world. The book has many versions. The Arabic version, known as Arabic Josippon, seems to be older than the Hebrew ones. Each of the different books that composed the Josippon had many different authors and there is no doubt that all are based on earlier texts (Sela 2009a:3–9).

and the one who had beaten them would have been favored by him and received great riches. And many brave heroes from all around the world came to him.[5]

It is clear from the text that there were two different groups in the arena, a fact well-attested in other sources, making the passage reliable in this respect. The first group comprised people deemed to be put to death for entertainment purposes—these were not gladiators, but as they came from territories under King Herod's control, they may have been Jews. The second group were gladiators, who travelled from afar in the name of fortune and glory. The fact that they came from all over the empire suggests that they were not necessarily Jewish. The role of both groups was to entertain the masses; however, the difference between these two classes in the arena is essential.

The men of the first group belonged to the margins of society—punished slaves, prisoners of war and criminals condemned to death—whose brutal demise was meant to amuse the public (Weiss 1995:15). In trials in the Roman Empire, the judges occasionally ruled explicitly to execute the condemned in the arena. They were thrown into the arena poorly equipped, if at all, where they were ordered to fight each other to death, or fight professional gladiators or beasts (Weiss 1995:15; Carter 2015:652–653). These battles were considered less appealing and were merely a warmup for the main spectacle, the gladiatorial fights.

The men of the second group—the gladiators—were the hailed and exalted performers of the day in the Roman Empire, somewhat comparable to modern football players. They were considered attractive by the wealthy women of Rome, and some were paid considerable sums of money to entertain these ladies, including in the bedroom.[6] The life of a gladiator was considered expensive, due to their long and costly training, making it in the best interest of their masters to preserve their lives (Haxby 2018:177, 180). Thus, a gladiator would have been proud of his profession (Hope 2000), and it seems that a large number of free men volunteered to fight in the arena, with their numbers rapidly growing, reaching a peak in the Late Republic and Early Imperial Period.[7]

Members of the lower classes, as well as members of the upper classes of the equestrian and senatorial orders (e.g., Dio, *Historia Romana* 61:9:1; 61:17:3–5), whose membership was determined by the wealth they possessed, volunteered and participated of their own volition. In an attempt to maintain the social order, Augustus tried to forbid such participation by members of the upper classes in 22 BCE (McCullough 2008:198). Yet in the face of the edict's failure to stop this phenomenon, he succumbed to the reality and published a new

[5] *Arabic Josippon*, to the Chronicles of Herod, the translation offered here is based on the latest academic edition (Sela 2009b).

[6] A fine example is the tale of Empress Faustina, the wife of Marcus Aurelius and mother of Commodus, who apparently had a gladiator lover and may have also carried his offspring (Carter 2015:50; Dio, *Historia Romana* 62:9:5–6).

[7] Barton (1989:2) estimates that free men who volunteered to fight were up to 50% of all gladiators in this period.

edicy in 11 CE allowing members of the equestrian order to fight in the arena (Dio, *Historia Romana* 51:22:4; 56:25:7). Emperor Tiberius and later Emperor Vitellius also attempted to forbid such participation, but it seems they too failed, whereas Emperor Nero was known to indulge such behaviors (e.g., Dio, *Historia Romana* 61:9:1; 61:17:3–5; 65:6:3). These failures resulted in the continuous participation of members of the upper classes in gladiatorial fights in the arena for almost two centuries after the death of Tiberius (Barton 1989:9–10). There were even Emperors who occasionally fought as gladiators. However, it seems that in such cases, the rules were altered to prevent any harm to the Emperor (Grossmark 2007:78).[8]

As noted above, the life of a gladiator was valuable, unlike popular depictions in modern-day movies. Their owners went to great lengths to keep them fit, healthy and alive. Due to this, and to create further interest in the games, the gladiators were sent to the arena equipped with both weapons and protective gear (Haxby 2018:172–174). This is true for all prestigious classes of gladiators (Nosov 2009:44–79), including the *murmillo*, the most famous and popular of them all. The *murmillo* were equipped with a unique helmet, a large scutum shield, greaves and a *manica* (armguard) on the hand that held the weapon. Similarly, the *provocator* gladiators were also equipped with a unique helmet, a cardiophylax (a small breastplate), a *manica* and a medium-sized rectangular shield.

There was always a clear distinction between gladiators and those who were sent to the arena for execution (Hope 2000:97). Yet, even in antiquity and especially in the modern world, there has been confusion between the two, with the term gladiator used erroneously for all who fought in the arena (McCullough 2008:206). This is despite the fact that there was a very clear visible difference between the two, as only gladiators were permitted to wear protective gear (Carter 2015:652). In one of his letters, Seneca complained that prisoners were sent to fight with only daggers at their disposal. His main objection was that such form of fighting did not demand or display any skill, as every blow found its intended target and penetrated the unprotected flesh. In his mind, this was neither entertaining nor respectful for the audience (Seneca, *Epistles* 7.3–4).

There were cases where those sent for execution received equipment similar to that of the gladiators, as well as some basic training. However, in such cases, they faced an experienced gladiator, giving them almost no chance of winning. In these battles, the participants were deprived of the right to surrender to their opponent, which would have spared their life.[9] Furthermore, such battles were an exception, similar to other battles with sharp weapons (Carter 2015), as professional gladiatorial battles were fought using blunt weapons with a

[8] Dio Cassius discusses Commodus and his habit to fight as a gladiator (*Historia Romana* 73:17:1–22:6), as well as Emperor Caracalla (*Historia Romana* 78:17:4).

[9] Gladiators could have long careers, even if they were not victorious in all their battles. For example, a tombstone from Italy notes that the interred gladiator fought in 34 battles, victorious in 21 of them, losing four and drawing on nine occasions. Another gladiator from Italy is known to have won only 19 of his 25–35 battles (Hope 2000:103).

strict adherence to rules, in order to avoid serious harm to the participants. Moreover, during gladiatorial fights, there were referees who ensured the gladiators abided by the rules of combat (Haxby 2018:177–178).

The gladiators received a nutritious and mainly vegetarian diet, as well as supplements that provided calcium to strengthen their bones and prevent them from breaking. One theory is that this diet enabled the gladiators to maintain a healthy layer of fat, which assisted in preventing life-threatening injuries and merely allowed for bloody, superficial injuries that made the spectacle more appealing to the audience.[10] A different suggestion is that this diet, for which the gladiators were known even in antiquity (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 18.14), was given to them for economic reasons, as a vegetarian diet was significantly cheaper than a meat-rich diet. Yet, the absence of large portions of meat from a gladiator's diet did not prevent them from having a lean physique, as they burned carbohydrates while training and, therefore, developed muscles and a body akin to current vegan and vegetarian athletes (Mastro 2010). Some gladiators are known to have had a paunch of fat in the abdomen (Galen, *On Food and Diet* 1.19) due to this diet, or to the consumption of more calories than they burned. In addition, the gladiators received first-rate medical care. Even the famous physician Galen of Pergamon began his career in treating gladiators (Haxby 2018:180; Nutton 2019).

Evidence for Jews in the arena is limited to those sentenced to death, particularly after uprisings, namely the First and Second Jewish Revolts, where they fought beasts or one another to the death. This is attested to in the works of Josephus (*Jewish War*, 6.9.2):

> …he selected the tallest and most handsome of the youth and reserved them for the triumph; of the rest, those over 17 years of age he sent in chains to the works in Egypt, while multitudes were presented by Titus to the various provinces, to be destroyed in the theatres by the sword or by wild beasts; those under 17 were sold.

This, and similar literary evidence regarding Judea and the Jewish faith, are not an indication of Jewish gladiators, but rather of Jews who were forced into the arena as a form of execution and not as a profession.

Evidence of Jewish Gladiators

The First Century CE

The Jewish Giant in the Game's Procession

An excerpt from Columella's book on agriculture, written before 65 CE (Stern 1976:428), is relevant to the debate on Jewish gladiators (Columella, *De Re Rustica*, 3.8.2):

[10] Most of what we know about the gladiator's diet and its different aims, is based on the research of the anthropological remains from the gladiator's cemetery in Ephesus (Kanz and Grosschmidt 2005; Curry 2008).

> She has adorned Germany with armies of exceedingly tall men; but she has not wholly deprived other nations of men of exceptional stature. For Cicero bears witness that there was once a Roman citizen, Naevius Pollio who was a foot taller than the tallest of other men; and recently we ourselves might have seen, among the exhibits of the procession at the games at the circus, a man of the Jewish race who was of greater stature, than the tallest German.

The Jewish giant is mentioned as part of the procession before the games in the circus, suggesting that he participated in one of the games. Due to his physical features, it is most likely that he would have participated as a gladiator. It is possible that this is the same Jewish giant El'azar, who was given to Emperor Tiberius by King Artabanus of Parthia (*Jewish Antiquities* 18:103). However, as tempting this identification may be, it cannot be proven. Furthermore, this account does not provide unequivocal evidence for the existence of Jewish gladiators. Yet, it is one of the best we have.

The Gladiator Helmet from Pompeii[11]

In his article "A Jewish Gladiator in Pompeii," Rocca (2006) argued that one particular find provides sufficient evidence to determine the presence of a Jewish gladiator in the city. The find in question, a helmet found in the gladiator's school in Pompeii, is decorated with a seven-frond palm tree in the center of its visor, bearing two clusters of dates (Fig. 1). The main cusp of Rocca's argument that the owner of the helmet was Jewish is based on the depiction of the palm tree, which he stresses is a noticeably Jewish symbol minted on coins in the time of Herod. Rocca also mentions that palm trees were a popular symbol extensively used by other nations, particularly the Phoenicians and Carthaginians, as well as by the Romans, who depicted the symbol on coins minted in Judea, e.g., the Judea Capta coins, commemorating the quelling of the Great Jewish Revolt (Rocca 2006:288–292).

As the palm tree on the helmet from Pompeii has seven fronds, Rocca claims that it could not be Carthaginian, which did not consistently display seven fronds and whose trunk was often proportionately longer than the one depicted on the coins from Judea. On the other hand, Rocca notes that the number of fronds on coins from Judea is also inconsistent, but deduces it is a Jewish palm based on the similarities to coins of Agrippa I and Antonius Felix, where the palms have seven fronds (Rocca 2006:288–289). He does not explain why the inconsistency of one should be judged differently from the other. It is possible that Rocca rejects the Carthaginian option as the city of Carthage had been destroyed in 146 BCE, long before the burial of Pompeii under the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE, yet this is an erroneous assumption. Although Carthage was destroyed more than 200 years prior to the demise of Pompeii, the residents of North Africa lived much closer to Pompeii than the Jews, who lived mainly in Judea, Syria, Egypt and Asia Minor. Moreover, despite the destruction of Carthage, symbols of its culture, such as the Punic language, persisted in

[11] This section is a revised, amended and extended version of the arguments presented in Olshanetsky 2021c: 61–62.

Fig. 1. The helmet from the Gladiator School in Pompeii, with explanatory notes (after MANN inv. 5649).

North Africa well into the second century CE (Vierow 1999:600-601 n.4; Carter 2006:655), and even later. Enduring symbols of Carthaginian culture, including the Punic language, as well as the palm tree, remained in use in North Africa long after the destruction of Carthage. Interestingly, the term Punic originated from the Greek word for palm tree (Prag 2006:26–28).

As noted, Rocca emphasizes that the palm was not only present on Jewish coins, but on Roman ones minted in Judea as well. Yet neighboring pagan nations, such as the Phoenicians, also depicted palms on their coins. Furthermore, Rocca does not raise the possibility that the palm was a geographical botanical symbol, but insists on its Jewish correlation. He backs this claim with a problematic argument, quoting a *midrash* (a Talmudic legend) where the palm tree is used as an allegory for the Jewish people (Rocca 2006:290). However, this is inadequate, as in the Mishna, Talmud and other Jewish texts, numerous types of plants and trees were used as metaphors for the Jewish people. The object or symbol used to describe the Jewish people in these tales suits the emphasis of the narrative and should not be seen as an eternal symbol of the Jewish people (Goodenough and Neusner 1988).

Rocca also fails to mention that Christians also used the palm tree as a symbol, which can also be seen in North Africa during the period of the Late Empire, such as in the Theodoulos mosaic (Parrish 1980:229–239). Many early Christians came from areas in the east, where the palm tree was a common symbol. The chance of a Christian to be enslaved and eventually sent to the arena to meet his death was equal to that of a Jew (Plescia 1971; Janssen 1979).

Another important feature that was overlooked in relation to the attribution of the helmet to a Jew is the griffin with two horns perched on top of the helmet. Being a mythological

creature, Jews of the Pharisaic sect and Rabbinic movement would have viewed this as a distinctly pagan symbol and refrained from its depiction. Nevertheless, it is possible that the helmet belonged to a Jew of a different denomination, as Hellenistic Judaism had no religious issues with integrating pagan symbols as decorative elements (Goodenough and Neusner 1988; Levine 1998). However, Rocca does not distinguish between different movements in Second Temple period Judaism, nor does he note that some of the decorative elements on the helmet, especially the griffin, are not Jewish symbols. Nevertheless, although the griffin is not a Jewish symbol, it is not enough to disqualify its owner from being Jewish.

The most important aspect overlooked in Rocca's study is the fact that this is not the only case where an artefact bearing a palm is linked to gladiators. For instance, there are numerous depictions of this tree and its fronds on gladiator graves (Carter 2006), as a victor in a gladiatorial fight would be given a palm frond as a symbol of his victory (Carter 2009:438–441). Therefore, it is more probable that the palm tree on the helmet from Pompeii is a symbol of the owner's gladiatorial profession and not of his national roots.

Rocca also claims that Jewish gladiators are documented in Josephus' writings regarding the reign of King Herod and as a Roman punishment for rebellious Jews. In this case, Rocca uses the term gladiator too freely (see above) as his interpretation of the texts is inaccurate (Rocca 2006:292–293). During Herod's reign, games were held in cities where Jews were a minority. In addition, Josephus never stated that the men he described as gladiators were Jews. The only Jews mentioned in the arena were sent there for execution (*Jewish War* 6:9:2). The single other example Rocca brings for Jewish gladiators, mentioned only briefly, is that of the famous Rabbi Shim'on ben Lakish, commonly known as Reish Lakish. However, this is a complex case and not as clear cut as sometimes claimed (see below).

In summary, Rocca was too quick to identify owner of the helmet from Pompeii as Jewish, thus ignoring or lessening the importance of other, more probable, identities. As shown, there are many alternative explanations for the owner's nationality. Firstly, he may have originated from Phoenicia, North Africa, or another place where the palm tree was a popular symbol. Secondly, the owner could have been Christian. Finally, the palm tree on the helmet most likely symbolized victory in the arena and not a specific nationality.

The Demise of Senator Glabrio During the Reign of Domitian

This tale, found in Dio Cassius' *Historia Romana* and written in the early third century CE, may indicate the existence of a Jewish gladiator in the first century CE that was never noted in this context. Glabrio's demise is presented as part of the events occurring under the reign of Domitian in the last two decades of the first century CE (Dio, *Historia Romana* 67:14:1–30):

> …Domitian slew, along with many others, Flavius Clemens the consul, although he was a cousin and had to wife Flavia Domitilla, who was also a relative of the emperor's. The charge brought against them both was that of atheism, a charge on which many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned. Some of these were put to death and the rest were at

> least deprived of their property. Domitilla was merely banished to Pandateria. But Glabrio, who had been Trajan's colleague in the consulship, was put to death, having been accused of the same crimes as most of the others, and, in particular, of fighting as a gladiator with wild beasts. Indeed, his prowess in the arena was the chief cause of the emperor's anger against him, an anger prompted by jealousy. For in Glabrio's consulship Domitian had summoned him to his Alban estate to attend the festival called Juvenalia and had imposed on him the task of killing a large lion; and Glabrio not only had escaped all injury but had dispatched the lion with most accurate aim.

Senator Glabrio possibly fought as a gladiator against wild beasts. Gladiators fought wild beasts until the mid-first century CE. Fighters specializing in in these games, called *bestiarii* or *venatores*, gradually and completely took over this aspect of the games during the first century CE (Nossov 2009:30–31, 48–54). Glabrio was a member of the senatorial order, who fought in the arena like some of the other members of that order, although it was often considered illegal. According to this story, he was executed because the emperor was jealous of his professional prowess. However, it seems that the main allegation against him was that he began practicing Judaism. It is not clear whether he actually converted to Judaism or just practiced and adopted some Jewish customs (who were known as godfearers), which was very common among many pagans in the Roman Empire, especially among the senatorial and equestrian orders.[12] If the allegation had been false, Dio would have been expected to write against this accusation, as he did in many other different cases.[13] It is also interesting to note that it seems that Dio did not view this allegation as a wrongdoing. Moreover, after Domitian's reign, Emperor Nerva forbade the accusation or execution of anyone under such allegations, so the consul Fronto complained about the drastic change in attitude under the new emperor (Dio, *Historia Romana* 68:1:2–3). This suggests that senators practicing the Jewish faith was indeed common.

While some suggest that Dio was discussing Christians and not Jews, this is improbable, as there is no good reason for Dio, who was acquainted with both Judaism and Christianity, to confuse between the two and define Christians as those who follow the way of the Jews. Furthermore, there is no archaeological or epigraphic evidence of Christianity in Roman aristocratic circles prior to 200 CE (Stern 1980:380–383). Therefore, this story indicates

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[12] Even from the first attestation of the Jewish community in Rome, from 139 BCE, we learn that at least some of the members of the community were expelled from the city for spreading their belief among non-Jews (Valerius Maximus, *Facta et Dicta memorabilia*, 1:3:3; Servius, *Commentarii in Vergilli Aeneida*, 8:187). When many women of the senatorial and equestrian orders began practicing some Jewish customs and donating money to the Jewish community, Emperor Tiberius decided to banish many of the Jews who lived in Rome in 19 CE, and recruited many others into the Imperial army and sent them to fight in Sardinia (*Jewish Antiquities* 18:81–84; Tacitus, *Annales* 2:85; Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 36; Dio, *Historia Romana* 57:18:5a; Rocca 2010).

[13] For example, see Dio, *Historia Romana* 78:12:3–4; 77:7:3–4 78:16:1–4; 79:15:3–4; 79:18:1–3; 79:22:1–2; 80:4:6–7.

that there was a senator who fought in the arena against beasts, who either was a godfearer and practiced some aspects of the Jewish faith or converted to Judaism all together, possibly making this the best textual evidence of an existing Jewish gladiator.

However, there are two caveats. The first is that, if the story is correct, Glabrio was not a Jew by birth but a convert. The second is that there is a contradictory account, provided by Suetonius (*Domitian* 10:2), contemporary with Glabrio, who notes that Glabrio was executed for plotting a rebellion. Therefore, it is possible that he was not an aristocrat who started to follow Judaism and was only mistakenly considered as one of them by Dio. Additionally, even if he did convert to Judaism, his participation as a gladiator in the arena may only represent his origin culture and was not necessarily linked in any form to acceptable or common Jewish tradition. Furthermore, it is important to note that either Glabrio was one of the last gladiators to be assigned to fight beasts or that he was one of the arena performers that specialized in this form of fighting, either a *bestiarius* or a *venator*.

THE SECOND CENTURY CE

Tertullian

Another text that may indicate the existence of a Jewish gladiator, not previously discussed in this context, can be found in Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*. In this text, dated to the final years of the second century CE, the early Christian author Tertullian renders the following passage (Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* 1:14):

> Report has introduced a new calumny respecting our God. Not so long ago, a most abandoned wretch in that city of yours, a man who had deserted indeed his own religion—a Jew, in fact, who had only lost his skin, flayed of course by wild beasts, against which he enters the lists for hire day after day with a sound body, and so in a condition to lose his skin—carried about in public a caricature of us with this label: Onocoetes. This (figure) had ass's ears, and was dressed in a toga with a book, having a hoof on one of his feet. And the crowd believed this infamous Jew.

The faith of the protagonist in this story is puzzling. One option is that he was a Jewish apostate; however, this seems illogical as this would not further Tertullian's broader goals. This story was meant to show the immoral nature of Jews, or people who abandoned Christianity, something that could not have been achieved had he spoken about a man who turned his back on Judaism. Therefore, it seems more likely that what Tertullian meant was that the Jew left Christianity or a different faith altogether, either converting or reverting to Judaism. It is important to note that the central figure is not a gladiator, but a *bestiarius* or a *venator*, who specialized in fighting beasts. It was considered a respectable profession, but not as greatly esteemed as a gladiator. This entire story should not be taken at face value, as it is not certain that such a person existed, or whether it was in Tertullian's interest to be accurate, as he had religious motives in this passage as well as in the entire text it is embedded in. Yet, this story is possible evidence of a Jew, or someone who was considered Jewish by others, who professionally fought beasts in the arena.

The Third–Fourth Centuries CE

Reish Lakish[14]

The story of Reish Lakish (*Shim'on ben Lakish*), one of the most famous rabbis in Judea/Palaestina in the third century CE,[15] is one of the most renown stories presented as evidence for Jewish gladiators. The main basis for this claim is found in the Babylonian Talmud: ריש לקיש זבין נפשיה ללודאי, i.e., "Reish Lakish sold himself to a lwd'y/to the ludim" (BT, *Gittin* 47a:4). The greatest difficulty in the verse's understanding is the term lwd'y (לודאי), a word that rarely appears in the Talmud. In fact, all other mentions of Reish Lakish associate him with brigands or criminals (ליסטים, Eichah Rabbah, *Petichta* 15; Kohelet Rabbah 7:26:1), not with ludim (לודים). Many scholars concur that the terms ludi/lwd'y (לודי/לודאי),[16] ludin (לודין) and ludim (לודים) refer to gladiators, based on the similarity to the Latin word for gladiator, *ludarius* (e.g., Lieberman 1942:142; Brettler and Poliakoff 1990:93–98; Weiss 2001:442; Grossmark 2007:77). However, this translation should not be regarded as the only possibility.

Josephus noted that at least two nations were called Luddim, suggesting that the Talmud refers to one of them. The first are the Ludieim (*Jewish Antiquities* 1:136–137), a people originating from one of the eight sons of Egypt.[17] Shalit (1944:16, n. 139) used the plural form for the sons/nations, yet stating that it may have been more accurate to translate it into the singular form. In this case, their name would be ludi (לודי). The second nation are the Lydians, once known as the Ludim, who were the descendants of Lud (*Jewish Antiquities* 1:145), son of Shem. According to Shalit, their identification as Lydians was made to differentiate them from the Ludieim, the descendants of Egypt who were dwelling in Africa. In his opinion, it was only natural that Josephus surveyed the different nations outside Africa and came across the Lydians, who were living on the banks of the Maeander River and saw them as the descendants of Lud. This identification was also convenient for Josephus, since the scholars of his time saw these nations as the etymological source for the word "game" in Latin—*ludus*. The common belief at the time was that these people were the inventors of games (Shalit 1944:17, n. 165).

In the scholarly interpretation of Reish Lakish's story, the term is perceived as gladiator, or someone affiliated with the games in the arena. This is quite puzzling, as in all the dictionaries that they rely on, the term gladiator (meaning performer) appears immediately after the term referring to the nations mentioned above (e.g., Jastrow 1903:695). Furthermore,

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[14] This section is a revised, amended and extended version of Olshanetsky 2021d.

[15] Defined as such even in the Encyclopaedia of Jewish Religion (Werblowsky and Wigoder 1967:360); this stance also prevails in academic publications (Wasserstein 1979; Brettler and Poliakoff 1990; Rocca 2006: 294; Grossmark 2007: 76-77; Bar-Asher 2015).

[16] Brettler and Poliakoff (1990:95, n. 6) correctly state that in Aramaic, lwd'y (לודאי) literally means Lydians. Therefore, it is very surprising that they accept the opinions of Jastrow (1903:695) and others.

[17] The origin of this legend is in the Bible: Genesis 10:13 and 1 Chronicles 1:11.

the Thesaurus Syriacus (1095), a dictionary on which this claim is partially based, only mentions that Lydius, the inhabitants of Lydia, are called Ludiem (לודים) in Hebrew, while providing no Hebrew/Aramaic translation for gladiator. It is clear that the similar spelling and pronunciation could have easily created confusion, as most Jews of the period did not have an excellent command of Latin, especially in Babylon and the rest of the Persian Empire. The two words sound almost identical and so, the words would look identical when transcribed to Aramaic. This close etymological resemblance made it logical to attribute the invention of the games to these people.

Furthermore, the sentence and its inherent logic in the different translations must be examined. Had the sentence read "Reish Lakish sold himself to *be* a gladiator," it would be logical to assume that he in fact did take part in the games. However, if the correct reading is "Reish Lakish sold himself *to* a gladiator/gladiators," it is more difficult to reconcile. The owner of a gladiator was known as a *lanista*. Therefore, researchers concluded that lwd'y (לודאי) is either referring to a *lanista*, or is a general term for someone who is associated with the games (Lieberman 1942:148; Weiss 1995:16; 2001:442, n. 70; Grossmark 2007:77, n. 59). However, while there is a phonetic connection between one of the Latin terms for gladiator (*ludius*) and the lwd'y (לודאי) in the Talmud, there is no such connection to the term *lanista.* Therefore, while one way to translate the verse does allow the identification of Reish Lakish as a Jewish gladiator, there are several other possible interpretations, which fit better with the rest of the story and the larger debate.

To fully comprehend the meaning of the verse as a whole, and the term lwd'y in particular, it must be examined in connection with the complete story. In the story, Reish Lakish is granted a last wish a day before he is meant to die (BT, Gittin 47a:4–5):

> רֵישׁ לָקִישׁ זַבִּין נַפְשֵׁיהּ לְלוּדָאֵי שְׁקַל בַּהֲדֵיהּ חַיְיתָא וְגַלְגַּלְתָּא אֲמַר גְּמִירִי דְּיוֹמָא בָּתְרָא כֹּל דְּבָעֵי מִינַּיְיהוּ עָבְדִי לֵיהּ כִּי הֵיכִי דְּלֵיחוּל אַדְּמֵיהּ. יוֹמָא בָּתְרָא אֲמַרוּ לֵיהּ מַאי נִיחָא לָךְ אֲמַר לְהוּ בָּעֵינָא אֶקְמְטִינְכוּ וְאוֹתְבִינְכוּ וְכֹל חַד מִינַּיְיכוּ אֶמְחֵיהּ חַיְיתָא וּפַלְגָא קַמְטִינְהוּ וְאוֹתְבִינְהוּ כֹּל חַד מִינַּיְיהוּ כַּד מַחְיֵיהּ חַד חַיְיתָא נָפַק נִשְׁמָתֵיהּ חַרְקִינַּיְיהּ לְשִׁינַּיְיהּ אֲמַר לֵיהּ אַחוֹכֵי קָא מְחַיְיכַתְּ בִּי אַכַּתִּי פָּשׁ לָךְ גַּבֵּי פַּלְגָא דְּחַיְיתָא קַטְלִינְהוּ כּוּלְּהוּ

> Reish Lakish sold himself to a lwd'y/to the ludim. He took a bag and a round stone inside of it with him. He said: There is a tradition that on the final day of a captive's life, before his captors kill him, they do for him anything that he requests of them, so that he would forgive them for the spilling of his blood. On the final day before they were set to kill him they said to him: What is amenable to you? He said to them: I want to tie you up and have you sit, and I will strike each one of you one and a half times. He tied them up and had each one of them sit. When he struck each of them with one strike with the stone in the bag, the one whom he struck died, because Reish Lakish was of great strength. Reish Lakish gritted his teeth in anger, and said to the one whom he killed, in order to prevent the others from realizing what was happening: Are you laughing at me? You still have half of a strike remaining with me, as I struck you only once. He killed them all, and Reish Lakish escaped his captors.[18]

[18] All translations into English of the Babylonian Talmud are based on the Davidson Talmud translation, and all of them include some amendments by the author.

Brettler and Poliakoff (1990:9; see also Weiss 1995:16; 2001:442, n. 70) understood this last wish as a representation of the gladiator's ceremonial meal before battle, the *cena libera.* They claimed that the difference between the two is minor and insignificant. In actuality, the difference is enormous: men that were sent to be executed in the arena were not gladiators and there is no direct link between a ceremonial meal and the last wish of a condemned man. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, only a small percentage of gladiators died in the arena, as they were considered greatly admired performers. As noted above, many were free men and there were even emperors who participated as gladiators in the arena; in addition, the gladiators received first-rate medical care. Subsequently, this story in the Talmud, even if it was meant to refer to gladiators, indicates that the authors lacked an understanding of the games in the arena, and of the gladiator's role in particular. This is possibly due to the fact that the Babylonian Talmud was compiled many centuries after the games ceased to exist. These inaccuracies deem it an unreliable source, even if it was meant to represent gladiators.

The story of Reish Lakish appears just after a debate in the tractate of Gittin on redeeming and releasing Jewish captives and slaves owned by foreigners and so may be connected to it. This debate appears both in the Jerusalem (JT, *Gittin* 25b:3) and Babylonian (BT, *Gittin* 46b) Talmud, which mention the term Ludim. The use of the pluralized term Ludim challenges the interpretation of the term as a *lanista*, as a person would sell himself to one individual, not a few *lanistae*, and definitely not to a single or several gladiators. It is clear that the selling of a Jew or any person to the Ludim endangers this person's life, but this is not the main reason why the person must be redeemed. Although it is possible that this refers to the professional hazard of fighting in the arena, this is not definitive. Countless debates in the Talmud are theological, philosophical and hypothetical and do not necessarily reflect the reality of the time. The Talmud sages tried to comprehend the most minute details and meanings, not necessarily out of the assumption that the questions and possibilities they raised could ever occur in the real world. Jewish religious texts, such as the Mishna and Talmud, are entirely different from the laws and edicts issued by a state, as the latter are meant to stop or tackle an existing phenomenon. The danger of death in selling oneself to the lwd'y also appears earlier in the Babylonian Talmud (BT, Gittin 46b:18–47a):

הָהוּא גַּבְרָא דְּזַבִּין נַפְשֵׁיהּ לְלוּדָאֵי אֲתָא לְקַמֵּיהּ דְּרַבִּי אַמִּי אֲמַר לֵיהּ פִּירְקַן אֲמַר לֵיהּ תְּנַן הַמּוֹכֵר עַצְמוֹ וְאֶת בָּנָיו לַגּוֹיִם אֵין פּוֹדִין אוֹתוֹ אֲבָל פּוֹדִין אֶת הַבָּנִים מִשּׁוּם קִלְקוּלָא וְכָל שֶׁכֵּן הָכָא דְּאִיכָּא קְטָלָא.

A certain man sold himself to the luda'ei. He came before Rabbi Ami and said to him: Redeem me. Rabbi Ami said to him: We learned in a Mishna: With regard to one who sells himself and his children as slaves to gentiles, he is not redeemed. However, his children are redeemed due to the harm of becoming assimilated among the gentiles, and all the more so here, where there is a concern that leaving him in bondage may lead to his death, he should be redeemed.

This text similarly encapsulates the idea that selling oneself to the lwd'y put the person in danger. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that this term relates to a gladiator, as there were numerous occupations in antiquity that were dangerous, including for slaves. This passage

emphasizes that the need to redeem someone is not because of the danger he may physically encounter; he should be redeemed as otherwise he would lose his faith because of foreign company. It may imply that the lwd'y were foreigners, but not necessarily gladiators or their masters. Therefore, the possibility that this term sometimes referred to gladiators cannot be dismissed entirely, although in other cases, it is certain that it was not used to describe gladiators. Furthermore, it is extremely puzzling that the story of Reish Lakish and the main evidence that the selling of a person to the lwd'y endangers their life only appears in the Babylonian Talmud and not in the Jerusalem Talmud. This is puzzling because Reish Lakish was a Rabbi in Judea/Palaestina in the third century CE, a short time before the Jerusalem Talmud was compiled in the fourth century CE, while the Babylonian Talmud was compiled in the sixth or seventh century CE. Thus, Reish Lakish's story does not assist in linking the term lwd'y to gladiator(s).

What is clear is that the life of Reish Lakish was in danger and that the Ludim were incompetent. The term Ludim was so ambiguous that it caused significant debate amongst the different rabbis over the last 1500 years, with some even interpreting it as cannibals (Brettler and Poliakoff 1990:95). The fact that the story only appears in the Babylonian Talmud raises the possibility that the rabbis in Babylon may have been trying to discredit one of their counterparts from Judea/Palaestina. The story clearly indicates that even the rabbis themselves did not fully understand the term lwd'y/ludi, and if indeed this term meant gladiator, the account shows that they were ignorant regarding gladiators.

Another possibility is that the term Ludim, whether it originally meant gladiators or a nation called Ludim, was used to represent an unclear entity in the period of the Babylonian Talmud. Even in the beginning of tractate Gittin, Gamliel referred to a village of Ludim as a geographic-ethnic representation (BT, *Gittin* 2a:2; BT, *Gittin* 4a:6; JT, *Gittin* 1a:1). From all of the above options, perhaps the best explanation is that the Ludim were the residents of the said village or the city of Lod, or from another origin or ethnicity, such as the Lydians, and were actually the brigands that Reish Lakish was associated with in other stories. If they were former comrades in crime and arms, it would explain why they gave him a last wish before killing him. In other stories rendered in the Talmud, the term lwd'y (לודאי) is used to refer to people that came from Lod or the village of Ludiem (BT, *Avodah Zarah* 36a); therefore, this is also the most likely meaning in the Reish Lakish story.

As the terms ludi/lwd'y (לודי/לודאי), ludin (לודין) and ludim (לודים) were used in the Talmud to describe foreign peoples, not gladiators, there is no solid ground to claim that Reish Lakish was a gladiator. Also, the comparison of Reish Lakish's last wish to the ceremonial meal of the gladiator, the *cena libera*, is erroneous, as gladiators were not considered disposable entertainment as those sent to the arena to be executed, but were highly valued and protected. Even in the less likely case that the story does refer to gladiators, it is grossly inaccurate, suggesting that it was a late legend, or a version of one, or that it was a story invented by the Babylonian rabbis to slander a rabbi from Judea. Thus, it cannot be considered reliable evidence to unequivocally deem Reish Lakish a gladiator in his youth. However, in the case that the text refers to gladiators, then it is an echo of earlier Jewish knowledge derived from

encounters in the arena. This is supported by our understanding regarding the participation of many Jews as spectators of the performances.

Additional Talmudic Evidence

Additional evidence for Jewish gladiators can be found in a passage from the Jerusalem Talmud, where there is a ruling by Rabbi Nathan (Weiss 2001:436–437), allowing Jews to go to the arena: משום שני דברים, מפני שצווח ומציל נפשות ומעיד על האישה שתנשא; Because of two things, since he shouted and saved lives and testified for a woman to marry (JT, *Avodah Zarah* 7a). This verse provides two reasons as to why a Jew should go to the arena and watch the games: (1) the screams of a Jew in the audience could save the life of a fellow Jew—Rabbi Nathan thought that the will expressed by the arena audience could influence the fate of the fighters; (2) a Jew in the audience could testify to a certain Jew's death so that the deceased's wife could remarry. Although these reasons may be linked to Jewish gladiators, it is as plausible to identify them as Jews sent to the arena for execution. The ancient world was crueler than the modern one, with a slower and different communication system. The idea of a man arrested, judged and executed without his wife knowing would not be surprising. This is only one example for why the presence of a Jew in the stands could assist in a woman's remarriage and prevent her from being "*agunah*" (bound in marriage to a husband who refuses to grant a divorce or is missing and not proven dead).

Although they opposed these activities, this is not the only case where rabbis referred to the arena and the games, and acknowledged or discussed Jews going there. As noted above, in many cases (such as that of Reish Lakish, if in fact one accepts the interpretation of his gladiatorial status), the stories were detached from reality because they were written many centuries after the games already ceased to exist, and/or written in Babylon, where there were no such games. A good example is Genesis Rabba 22:9, which speaks of Rabbi Shim'on bar Yoḥai, who gave a supposed example from the arena to explain why God challenged Cain only after Abel's murder, rather than intervening earlier to save the latter (Williams 2022). Although this is most likely a late legend, and was most probably written later than the events it describes, it may represent a reality in which many Jews went to the arena and the rabbis, even if they disapproved, were forced to acknowledge it. The idea that Rabbi Shim'on bar Yoḥai would endeavor to give an example from the arena proves how common it was for Jews to attend the games, while implying that certain rabbis may have been in favor of such activity. The idea that the fate of those competing in the games could be changed suggests that either Rabbi Shim'on bar Yoḥai was not familiar enough with the ongoings in the arena, or that the legend is a late fabrication.

The Talmud provides stronger evidence than the helmet from Pompeii but is not necessarily decisive regarding Jewish gladiators. The legends clearly show that Jews were among the spectators and were executed in the arena; however, they were not necessarily prestigious warriors known as gladiators. The Talmud does not provide any positive stories representing any participation in the arena, even as spectators. Thus, there is no evidence of a story praising a Jewish gladiator. It seems that the Pharisaic sect and the

Rabbinic movement generally opposed the arena and the different spectacles performed. Yet, sometimes the rabbis succumbed to the reality and ruled accordingly, at least on the issue of Jews as spectators.

Archaeological Evidence

There is sufficient archaeological evidence to determine that Jews attended the games in the arena as spectators. The best example is found in Miletos in western Anatolia, where the only clear-cut archaeological evidence for a Jewish community, well-attested in ancient texts, was found in the city's theater. The most famous of these second–third-century CE inscriptions reads "τόπος Εἰουδέων τῶν καὶ θεοσεβίον" (IJO II 37), translated as "the (seating) place of Jews, who (are also known as) the ones who fear God," or "the (seating) place both of the Jews and of the Godfearer(s)" (Stern 2018:146). Another inscription from the seats reads "θε[ος?]εβίον" (IJO II 38), meaning "Godfearers." A third inscription, of particular importance, reads "βενέτων ΕΙΟ.ΕΩΝ" (Εἰο[δ]έων, IJO II 39)," meaning "[the seats] of the Jews of/for the blues" (Stern 2018:146). The "blues" in the graffito refers to one of the four circus factions: greens, blues, reds and whites. The two larger groups were the blues and the greens, and Jews are always attested to be part of the former. These factions rivalled in everything and were associated with specific challengers in competitions like the chariot race (Cameron 1976). These factions also sponsored events in theaters and hippodromes, and even erected public buildings (Stern 2018:148). Consequently, Jewish participation in the Roman spectacles was widespread despite the Rabbis' unfavorable opinion.

Graffiti[18]

A third–early fourth-century CE graffito found on the wall of the burial cave of Germanus (son of) Yitzchak the Palmyrene (ΓΕΡΜΑΝΟϹΙϹΑΚΙΟΥ|ΠΑΛΜΥΡΗΝΟΥ) in the necropolis of the Jewish settlement of Bet She'arim is sometimes cited as evidence for a Jewish gladiators.[19] The burial place and name of the deceased suggest that Germanus was a Jew from the city of Palmyra/Tadmor (Safrai 2001:74). The grafitto, located near the inscribed name, depicts an armed man wearing an elaborate tunic with *clavii* (Fig. 2), and possibly a belt. The ornate attire was common and evidently attest to a wealthy person, also reflected in the location of his burial place. Yet, the most distinct feature in the graffito is the spear that the man is holding.

[18] This section is a revised, amended and extended version of Olshanetsky 2021c:63–66.

[19] Mazar, who originally excavated the necropolis, did not date the graffito and inscription, but claimed that Catacomb 4 in which they were found dates to the first or second century CE, based on some of the sarcophagus designs in the first chamber of the burial cave (Mazar 1973:182). This dating, problematic in its own right, cannot be used to date the graffito, as the dated sarcophagus originated from a different chamber. The dating presented here, based on the graffito itself, follows Weiss (2010), who showed that the site continued to be in use through the second half of the fourth–first half of the fifth century CE. For a photograph of the graffito and its condition as of 2011, see Stern 2018:108.

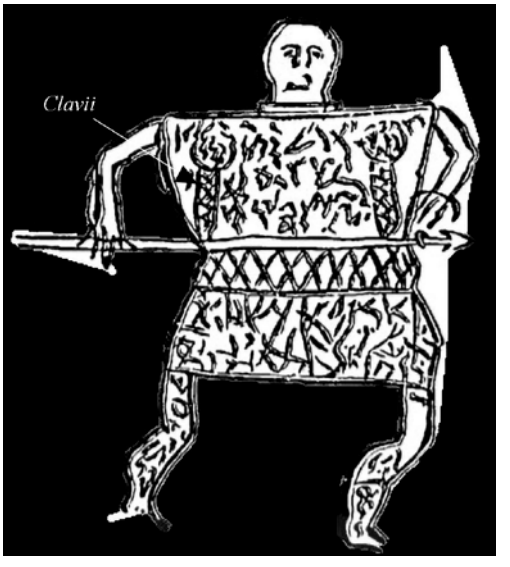

Fig. 2. The Germanus graffito (after Safrai 2001:74).

Fig. 3. The sign outside the cave of Germanus in the Bet She'arim National Park (©Hanay/Wikimedia Commons).

The proximity of the graffito to the name on the inscription led to an association between the two, suggesting that the warrior *is* Germanus. If so, the image hints at two main possibilities for Germanus' profession: gladiator or soldier. The first was adopted by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, who labelled it "Cave of the Jewish Gladiator" (Fig. 3). However, the possibility that he was a soldier should not be overlooked. Although there was no Jewish army in the third or fourth century CE, Germanus may have served in a foreign army. Several scholars identified Germanus as a military man, claiming that the date of the grave implies that he served in the Roman army (Olshanetsky 2018:18; 2021a:144–145).

But were there Jewish soldiers in the Roman army? Despite the heavy casualties, great destruction, and punitive actions that the Jews suffered as a result of the numerous revolts and insurgencies against the empire, there is ample evidence for Jewish participation and service in many positions in the Roman administration and army.[20] The Jews served in the army before and during the First Jewish Revolt, the Diaspora Revolt and the Second Jewish Revolt. Moreover, Jewish military service continued after these devastating revolts.[21]

[20] For broad discussions concerning Jews serving in Roman armies, see Castritius 2002; González-Salinero 2003; 2022; Oppenheimer 2005a:183–191; 2005b; Schoenfeld 2006; Roth 2007; Chomiak 2008; Rocca 2010; Weisman 2012; Olshanetsky 2018; 2021a. For discussions of specific finds, albeit without confronting the general phenomenon of Jewish military service, see Applebaum 1971; Woods 1992; Scharf 1997; Ecker 2022.

[21] The most extensive presentation of the available evidence was recently published by González-Salinero (2022; see also Olshanetsky 2021a; 2022). These publications prove beyond any doubt that extensive Jewish service existed in the Roman armies at least from the mid-first century BCE until the fifth century CE, and to a lesser extent, even until the sixth century (although González-Salinero did not claim so despite the extensive material he presents).

Evidence for this military service is diverse, including inscriptions and texts penned by ancient historians. However, the archaeological evidence, including many inscriptions, are less clear than the textual evidence. For instance, the Romans often used the same titles for people who were serving in the army and in the civil administration. Furthermore, most of the Jews of the period had Semitic, Hellenistic or Romanized names. Therefore, the identification of a specific individual as Jewish based on his name is often unclear, and even when someone is identified as a Jew and it is established that he served in the Roman administration, it is hard to prove that he definitively served in the army (Olshanetsky 2018:11–12).

On the other hand, texts written by ancient historians, such as Flavius Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 14:27–29, 60–61, 127–139, 202–204, 223–232, 234, 236–240; 16:52–53), Suetonius (*Tiberius* 36), Dio Cassius (*Historia Romana* 72:25:3–6) and the Historia Augusta (*Gordiani Tres* 34), provide unequivocal proof of Jewish military service. Even the Codex Theodosianus is a good example of this phenomenon. This codex was written and signed by the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II in 438 CE, and was subsequently approved and signed by the Western Roman Emperor Valentinianus III. It included many laws against the Jews, one of these being an earlier edict from 418 CE, which forbade Jews from serving in the army (*Codex Theodosianus* 16:8:24). This edict is clear evidence for the existence of Jewish service until and during that period, as it would not have been legislated had they not served.

Returning to Germanus, it is important to remember that Roman soldiers in the third and fourth centuries CE were dressed and equipped differently than most famous depictions of Roman soldiers, which represent their dress in the first and second centuries CE. During this period, the Roman Empire was in a constant state of war, and suffered from economic hardships. The diverse and constantly changing enemies and warfare created new military and economic needs, which changed the formation of the army and the different elements that composed it (Syvänne 2015; 2018; 2020). Such changes also affected the most obvious piece of gear of the infantrymen, his armor. The plate armor (*lorica segmentata*) almost completely disappeared from the ranks of the infantry, while mail armor (*lorica hamata*) continued to be the most common and widespread armor amongst infantries. Still, a certain portion of the men received scale armor (*lorica squamata*). However, economic hardships sometimes prevented Rome from supplying its men with armor, with entire units not receiving any at times. The same can be said regarding other expensive military equipment, such as helmets and swords. Soldiers wore tunics, which often had elaborate patterns according to the fashion of the period. A soldier lacking or not wearing his armor would have his tunic showing (James 2003). Furthermore, there was a change in the style of funerary art in this period and figures representing deceased soldiers were often depicted without armor, wearing only a tunic (Wijnhoven 2021:124), similar to the depiction of Germanus in the Bet She‘arim graffito.

Most of our knowledge about gladiators and other types of arena warriors originates from mosaics and statues. Many mosaics found in the Villa Romana Del Casale, a Roman villa uncovered near the town of Piazza Armerina in Sicily (Mistretta 1998), may be helpful. One depicts the scene of Roman soldiers hunting and gathering food (clearly showing their garb), dressed in tunics similar to the one in the Germanus' graffito (Figs. 4–6). Each soldier is equipped with spears and belts on his waist, like the figure from Bet She'arim. Similarly, like Germanus' graffito, many of the soldiers depicted in the Piazza Armerina mosaics do not carry shields with their units' emblems. Thus, there is a high probability that Germanus was a soldier.

Moreover, spears were not commonly used by gladiators. The only type of gladiator that used a spear was the *hoplomachus*, for which we have relatively little evidence. The heavily armored *hoplomachus* was meant to represent the style of fighting of the Greek heavy infantry (hoplites). They were named after the word *hoplon* (ὅπλον) meaning either equipment in ancient Greek or, more correctly in this context, the Greek heavy infantry's equipment (Nossov 2009:54–56), and they carried round shields along with their spears. Germanus' graffito does not depict the helmet, limb protection or round shield that an *hoplomachus* carried, indicating that Germanus was neither a *hoplomachus* nor any other type of gladiator.

Fig. 4. Depiction of a Roman soldier on a mosaic from Piazza Armerina (© Robur.q/Wikimedia Commons).

Fig. 5. Depiction of a Roman soldier fighting a beast on a mosaic from Piazza Armerina (© Robur.q/Wikimedia Commons).

Fig. 6. Depiction of two Roman soldiers on a mosaic from Piazza Armerina (© Robur.q/Wikimedia Commons).

Other professionals who fought in the arena may also be of relevance in understanding the graffito. It is clear that gladiators also fought beasts in the arena up to the mid-first century CE. During this century, *venatores* and *bestiarii*, who used lighter weapons and equipment, gradually replaced them in the battles against wild animals, sometimes as the opening act prior to the gladiator battle. The *venatores* seem to have used different types of polearms and spears (Nossov 2009:48–54). They did not ordinarily wear armor, but some mosaics, frescoes and stuccoes suggest that at least in some cases they wore a *manica* (armguard) on one of their arms (Fig. 7). At times, the only garment they wore to battle was a type of loincloth, but the most common dress was a tunic with *clavii* (Fig. 8), very similar to that of the figure in the Germanus graffito. Therefore, while the figure in the graffito does not represent a gladiator, it may represent a *venator*. Yet, when looking at other mosaics and Roman art from the period depicting Roman soldiers, the possibility that the graffito is of a soldier becomes no less probable. The resemblance in dress between *venatores* and soldiers of the period precludes a final determination on the identity of Germanus.

Based on other graffiti in a burial complex at Tel ʻEṭon, it was suggested that one or more of the deceased was a gladiator (Weiss 2001:443). There, an ensemble of graffiti illustrates

Fig. 7. A third-century CE mosaic from Bad Kreuznach, Germany, depicting a *venator* fighting a leopard while holding a spear and wearing a *manica* (© Carole Raddato/Wikimedia Commons).

Fig. 8. A third-century CE mosaic from el-Djem, Tunisia, depicting a battle between *venatores* and beasts (© Ad Meskens/Wikimedia Commons).

five men, each holding a trident, one also carrying either a net or shield (Fig. 9). Another graffito in the same cave depicts a horse and three men who seem to be fighting each other. Tzaferis (1982:25) suggested that the figures depicted gladiators or hunters (*venatores*),[22] yet did not link between the graffiti and the profession of the deceased, instead suggesting the deceased were possibly Jewish soldiers in the Roman army. The distinction between the deceased and the graffito is enhanced when considering that, as opposed to Germanus, the name of a deceased does not appear near the graffiti. Therefore, the graffiti may have only been an artistic representation or decoration. Gladiators were a common decorative motif, appearing on domestic items, such as lamps and tableware, as well as graves of people who were not gladiators (Hope 2000:112). It is possible that the depiction relates to a sport that the deceased enjoyed watching. In this case, when considering the equipment depicted, these

[22] The term *venatores* literally meant hunters, and it was borrowed as a term used to describe the "beast fighters" in the arena.

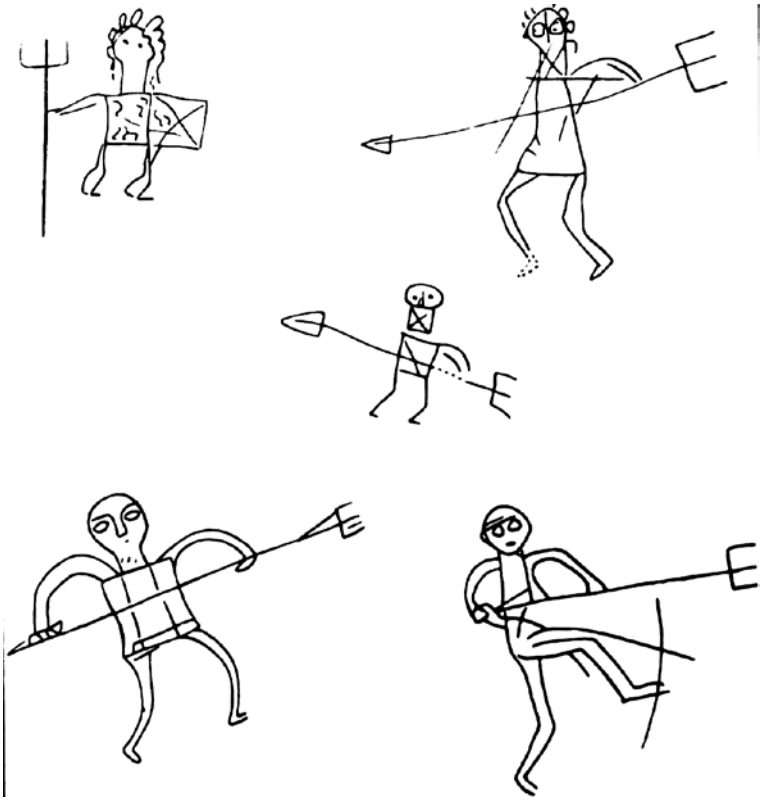

Fig. 9. Detail of the graffito from Tel ‘Eṭon, depicting five men holding tridents (after Weiss 1995:17).

may be *retiarii*, who are known to have fought with a net and spear. Four of the five figures are not holding a net, as used by *retiarii* fighting in the arena, however many depictions show *retiarius* without a net in his hand (Nossov 2009:62–68). The graffiti, however, may be depicting fishermen. Fishing using a trident was very common and widespread across the Roman Empire (Bekker-Nielsen 2010:188–189). As there is no difference between tridents used in the arena and those used by fishermen (Haxby 2018:176), this alone is not enough to refute the *retiarius* possibility.

A similar example is another graffito from Catacomb 4 in Bet She’arim. This graffito depicts two figures which are usually identified as a *retiarius* and his *murmillo* opponent, covered with the *retiarius’* net (Fig. 10; see Weiss 1995:18). Yet, there are a few problems in assuming that the interred was a gladiator: (1) the graffito is poorly executed and very faded; (2) as in the case of Tel ‘Eṭon, the name of the deceased does not appear near the graffito. Therefore, the most probable explanations for the graffito are as artistic, decorative representations, possibly related to a sport favoured by the deceased. As such, the graffito from both Bet She‘arim Catacomb 4 and Tel ‘Eṭon can be regarded as evidence of Jews

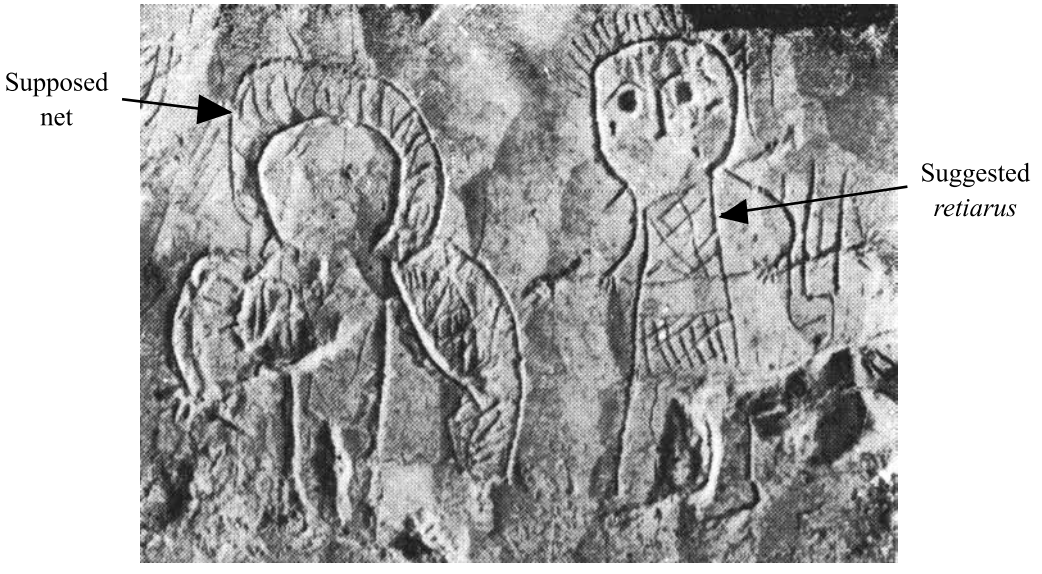

Fig. 10. The graffito from Bet She'arim Catacomb 4 (after Weiss 1995:18).

attending the arena to watch the games despite the ruling of some of the rabbis, but cannot be used as evidence of Jewish gladiators.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The evidence presented above does not provide a clear-cut confirmation for the existence of Jewish gladiators—glorious warriors in the arena, who used custom-made equipment, such as the helmet from Pompeii. It seems that there is no affinity between some of the artifacts used to promote the idea of Jewish gladiators and Judaism. The possibility that Reish Lakish was a gladiator, perhaps expressed in the term Ludi and Ludim, cannot be disregarded, although other explanations are just as plausible. Three new possible pieces of evidence of Jewish gladiators were presented: the passage from Tertullian, the Jewish giant and the Senator Glabrio. Regarding Tertullian's passage, it is questionable whether the man even existed, but if he did, it is most probable that he converted or reverted to Judaism. Moreover, he is not described as a gladiator, but either a *venator* or *bestiarius*, specializing in fighting beasts. It is certain that Glabrio fought in the arena in a similar capacity against wild beasts, yet it is not clear whether he fully converted to Judaism or just dabbled in it, and even if the accusation is historically accurate, the fact that he fought in the arena is not connected to Judaism but to his origin culture. The description of the Jewish giant does not provide enough information to determine whether or not he fought in the arena.

There is, however, ample evidence for the execution of Jews in the arena. There is also a plethora of evidence for Jews in the audience, and it seems that they may have been in the stands as much as any other group in Roman society. It is clear from the different rulings of the rabbis at the time, that even when they opposed the idea, they allowed it and even showed limited knowledge on the spectacles held in the arena.

While extensive and diverse evidence for gladiators has been obtained through osteological studies, the study of graves and inscriptions, determining the ethnic origins of individual gladiators is difficult, as they used pseudonyms and adopted Hellenistic or Roman names (Hope 2000:101). Therefore, compared to the number of gladiators participating in the arena, and even the amount of skeletal remains that were uncovered, only the origins of a small number of gladiators are known (Robert 1940; 1946; 1948; 1949; 1950). That said, there are some cases where inscriptions reveal the origin of gladiators. For example, finds from Italy, where there is relatively little evidence of gladiators compared to the empire as a whole, tell us of two gladiators described as Egyptians, two from Alexandria, several from Gaul, Iberia, Germania, Thracia and Italy, and one from Greece (Hope 2000:102). However, a grave unequivocally linking between a gladiator and Judaism has yet to be discovered. This is in sharp contrast to our knowledge of the integration of Jews in almost all positions and practices in the empire, including the army.

It seems that the unwillingness of Jews to fight in the arena was due to their attitude toward spilling blood. In the arena, blood was spilled for the sake of spilling blood, while in military service, blood was supposedly spilled for a higher goal, intertwined with an enormous sense of duty, honor and keeping an oath. In a cultural sense, Jews respected and sought to serve in the ranks. The fact that joining the military was common among Jews is highlighted by the abundant proof of military service, not only in the armies of Rome, but also in the earlier Assyrian (Dalley 1985; Olshanetsky 2021b), Persian (Porten 1968) and Hellenistic (Hengel 1974:85–92; 1980:12–18) armies. Also, Jews may have been prepared to fight beasts but were reluctant or even refused to engage in fighting other men, as they did not wish to spill the blood of human beings for sport.

The excitement of the arena still existed, and they wished to participate in some form. This is indicated by the fact that while there is no definitive proof of Jewish gladiators, there are possibly two Jews who were professional beast fighters: the first, mentioned by Tertullian, and the second, Germanus from Bet She‘arim. Furthermore, Glabrio’s story in Dio also speaks of fighting animals and not men.

Being a gladiator was not considered respectable among Jews, while their pagan neighbors idolized gladiators as heroes. Nonetheless, the possibility of Jewish gladiators fighting their peers cannot be ruled out for the simple reason that there were so many Jews across the empire, with the surviving evidence merely a tiny fragment of the entire picture. Thus, it is possible that there were at least a few Jewish gladiators. However, the scarce, inconclusive evidence available is a clear indication that gladiators of Jewish origin, and even Jewish *venatores* or *bestiarii,* were rare.

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