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A Historian Goes to the Movies

Ancient Rome

Course Guidebook

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Gregory S. Aldrete is the Frankenthal Professor of History and Humanistic Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay. He received his AB from Princeton University and his PhD in Ancient History from the University of Michigan.

Professor Aldrete is a prolific scholar whose books include *The Long Shadow of Antiquity: What Have the Greeks and Romans Done for Us?* (with Alicia Aldrete); *Daily Life in the Roman City: Rome, Pompeii, and Ostia*; *Gestures and Acclamations in Ancient Rome*; *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome*; and *Reconstructing Ancient Linen Body Armor: Unraveling the Linothorax Mystery* (with Scott Bartell and Alicia Aldrete).

Professor Aldrete has won many awards for his teaching, including two prestigious national ones: He was named the 2012 Wisconsin Professor of the Year by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and he received the Award for Excellence in Teaching at the College Level from the Society for Classical Studies. At the state level, he was selected from among all professors in the University of Wisconsin System to receive the 2015 Regents Teaching Excellence Award, and his campus granted him its highest teaching award, the Founders Association's Faculty Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Professor Aldrete's scholarship has also been honored with a number of fellowships, including two yearlong humanities fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the Solmsen Fellowship at the Institute for Research in the Humanities in Madison, Wisconsin. He was also a fellow of two NEH seminars held at the American Academy in Rome and a participant in an NEH institute at the University of California, Los Angeles.

He was selected as the 2014/2015 Martha Sharp Joukowsky Lecturer for the Archaeological Institute of America, for which he gave a series of public lectures across the United States.

Professor Aldrete's innovative Linothorax Project, which involved him and his students reconstructing and field-testing ancient linen body armor, has attracted considerable attention from the media; it has been featured in documentaries on the Discovery Channel, the Smithsonian Channel, and the National Geographic Channel as well as on television programs in Canada and across Europe. Professor Aldrete and his research have also been the subject of internet news stories in more than two dozen countries and of articles in *U.S. News and World Report*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Der Spiegel* magazine, and *Military History*.

Professor Aldrete's other Great Courses are *History of the Ancient World: A Global Perspective*; *The Decisive Battles of World History*; *History's Great Military Blunders and the Lessons They Teach*; *The Rise of Rome*; and *The Roman Empire: From Augustus to the Fall of Rome*.

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A Historian Goes to the Movies: Ancient Rome

Have you ever wondered how accurate your favorite movie set in ancient Rome really is? Or how filmmakers go about recreating the colorful cultures, heroic battles, majestic cities, exotic costumes, and memorable characters of the ancient world? If so, then this course is for you. The lectures examine famous films and miniseries set in the Roman world to assess their historical accuracy in terms of plots, sets, themes, costumes, and characterizations. You will gain fascinating insights into the process of making such movies and the challenges the filmmakers faced in bringing the Roman world to vivid cinematic life. From film classics of the 1950s to more contemporary depictions, this course will leave you with a deeper understanding of both Roman history and modern cinema.

The first section of this course examines a number of films from the golden age of Hollywood sword-and-sandal movies during the 1950s and 1960s, which created many of the most enduring clichés of how ancient Rome is viewed today. This period was kick-started by the film *Quo Vadis* (1951), which established the irresistible formula of ancient pagan spectacle contrasted with Christian piety played out on an epic scale, with huge sets, lavish costumes, and a cast of thousands. The era hit a commercial and critical peak with *Ben-Hur* (1959), which raked in both money at the box office and Academy Awards and featured one of the greatest action scenes of all time: an astonishing chariot-race sequence. Another key film is Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), which created an indelible portrait of the title character—a gladiator who led a slave rebellion against Rome—and established a long-lasting trope of historical epics that revolved around a character's quest for freedom. This film also interestingly embodied many of the political and social controversies of the time, including the McCarthyite anti-Communist

movement as well as issues of race and gender. This phase came to a disastrous conclusion with two high-profile commercial failures: *Cleopatra* (1963), which took the idea of profligate spectacle to new heights, and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), an ambitious but rather gloomy exploration of Rome's decline.

During the 1970s, new creative approaches emerged for how to tell stories set in the Roman world without the ruinously expensive epic strategy of the previous era. On TV, the BBC produced the miniseries *I, Claudius* (1976), a literate soap opera centered around the first family of Roman emperors that managed to be entertainingly melodramatic without massive action sequences. Then, comic troupe Monty Python adopted a completely different method in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979), which humorously skewered the pomposity of ancient and biblical epics in a way that combined the absurd with astute historical commentary.

Two decades later, Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) revived the epic approach with a critical and commercial smash that told a powerful story of personal revenge set against a backdrop of spectacular gladiatorial fights and battles between the Roman army and barbarians. Big-budget epic then made its way onto the small screen with HBO's miniseries *Rome* (2005–2007), which not only covered a dramatic period of Roman history but also presented an unprecedentedly realistic portrait of Roman daily life.

The course then explores two recent films—*Centurion* (2010) and *The Eagle* (2011)—that illustrate the experiences of the Roman army fighting against barbarians in northern Britain. Another lecture looks at how Roman history has been portrayed by Italian filmmakers in two very different movies: *Scipione l'africano* (1937), a pompous work of propaganda for Fascist dictator Mussolini, and *Fellini Satyricon* (1969), a bizarre experimental film based on an ancient Roman novel. The course concludes with a lecture that delves

into one of the most pervasive Roman tropes in films: the notion that Rome kept its citizens passive by distracting them with "bread and circuses." This concept has proven especially influential in science fiction, and its fascinating evolution can be traced through such films as *Rollerball* (1975), *The Matrix* (1999), *The Hunger Games* (2012), and *Ready Player One* (2018).

Many of our ideas about the ancient Roman world have been indelibly shaped by the images we see in popular movies, and this course reveals just how accurate these cinematic portraits of antiquity really are. Covering seven decades of film and analyzing everything from characters to costumes, this series of lectures assesses how Hollywood's version of history compares to the real thing. It also takes you behind the scenes with entertaining stories of how these films were made and the challenges, triumphs, and disasters experienced by the filmmakers. Finally, this course sheds light on modern history by exploring how films about ancient history often reveal more about the times when they were made than they do about antiquity.

01

Quo Vadis Kick-Starts the Sword-and-Sandal Genre

The 1950s was the golden age of the so-called sword-and-sandal movie. Many of these films had a simple but irresistible formula revolving around a contrast between two stereotyped groups: on the one hand, a set of arrogant, decadent Romans who reveled in every sort of indulgence and vice, and on the other, a band of virtuous and devout Christians, who typically were the objects of cruel and imaginative persecutions at the hands of the Romans. The most essential element of these films—whether set in Rome or another ancient culture—were sequences that recreated, often on a colossal scale and in sensational fashion, the violent spectacles of the ancient world, such as gladiator combats, chariot races, and beast hunts. These films had it all: good versus evil, a troubled love story, sword fights, grand pageantry, triumphing against the odds, and lavish costumes. *Quo Vadis* was an influential movie that did much to shape the modern public's notions of ancient Rome.

The Classic Era of Sword-and Sandal Films

- The film that ushered in the 1950s golden era and that really established its template was 1951's *Quo Vadis*, made by MGM Studios. It starred Peter Ustinov as the tyrannical emperor Nero; Deborah Kerr as the virtuous young Christian girl, Lygia; and Robert Taylor as the Roman general Vinicius, who begins the film as an enthusiastic and dedicated defender of the empire but is gradually won over to the Christian cause through the love of Lygia.

- The movie follows the plot of a novel of the same title written by Polish author Henryk Sienkiewicz and published in 1896.* For its take on the novel, MGM went all out, committing to making one of the largest, most expensive films up to that point. It was filmed over six months on location at Cinecittà studios in Rome and in the Italian countryside around the city. The project had a for-the-time unprecedented budget of 7 million dollars, employed a veritable army of 30,000 extras dressed in some 32,000 custom-made costumes, and entailed the construction of a series of colossal sets, including a section of the Circus Maximus for the gladiator scenes.

- These efforts paid off, as the film was both a financial and a critical triumph. It was the highest-grossing film of 1951 and then earned eight Academy Award nominations. It spawned a host of imitators, so that the 1950s and early 1960s witnessed a steady stream of big-budget ancient-world epics, such as *Ben-Hur*, *Spartacus*, *The Robe*, and *Cleopatra*, as well as a veritable swarm of cheap sword-and-sandal knockoffs.

Quo Vadis was such a success that writers struggled to find appropriate descriptors, leading one to label it a "blockbuster," after a particularly powerful World War II bomb. This term subsequently became the standard way to designate cinematic success.

* The novel *Quo Vadis?* was a huge international best seller, translated into more than 50 languages, that brought Sienkiewicz to the attention of a global audience. In 1905, Sienkiewicz was even awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Christians and Romans

- The pair of lovers at the center of the story, the Christian girl Lygia and the Roman general Vinicius, are both entirely fictional inventions. They are, however, reasonably representative idealized types. Lygia embodies a core set of Christian virtues, especially modesty, steadfast devotion to her faith, and chastity; Vinicius personifies the perfect Roman general, exuding military competence, decisiveness, and dedication to serving the Roman state.

- While they are the notional lead characters, the real star of the film is Emperor Nero as portrayed by Ustinov. His Nero is vain, peevish, insecure, cruel, grandiose, and temperamental—all at the same time. He revels in self-absorbed pomposity, as when he repeatedly subjects the members of his court to his dreadful musical performances upon the lyre,† accompanied by horribly sung renditions of his even-more-wretched original poetical compositions.

- This behavior is actually straight out of the surviving primary sources for Nero, in which ancient Roman authors, such as Tacitus and Suetonius, similarly depict him as utterly obsessed with singing and acting. Nero apparently fancied himself a supremely gifted musician, especially on the lyre, and loved to enter musical contests, where, out of fear, the judges always awarded him first place. He traveled to Greece to participate in the most prestigious competitions,

† An ancient stringed instrument.

such as the Olympics. Competing in several categories as an actor, musician, and charioteer, Nero happily collected no fewer than 1,808 prizes, many of which were bestowed before he had actually performed or even if he completely blundered the performance.

- Ustinov's cinematic performance perfectly captures this sort of behavior, showing Nero constantly seesawing between ludicrous displays of overweening egotism, in which he proclaims his greatness and boundless talents, and abject moments of insecurity and self-doubt, in which he eagerly seeks affirmation and reassurance from his courtiers. This, too, seems not so far off the historical mark.

- The film also accurately depicts Nero's infamous cruelty and sadism, showing him chortling gleefully as he watches victims in the arena being torn apart by wild beasts and blithely ordering his minions to set fire to the city of Rome to clear space for his planned reconstruction on a more grandiose scale. The historical Nero was indeed an avid fan of violent spectacles and delighted in viewing people being tortured and killed. If anything, the film shies away from presenting some of his worst behavior in this regard.‡

- *Quo Vadis* is part of a pronounced tradition in 1950s historical films in which upper-class male British actors are invariably cast in roles of outright evil or as the arrogant and domineering agents of totalitarian power structures—typically the Roman state itself. Thus, Ustinov, who attended one of the most prestigious upper-class English boarding schools and had the accent to match, was a perfect choice for the role of Nero.

- On the other hand, it became a 1950s historical film convention for American male actors to be cast as the antagonists to these poshly accented villains. With their no-nonsense American intonations, these heroes usually represent some freedom-loving and persecuted disempowered group.

‡ Nero had almost every member of his immediate family murdered, including his mother, stepfather, stepbrother, aunt, sister, and wife.

- So in *Quo Vadis*, although Vinicius starts out with his allegiance to Rome, because he ends up on the Christian side, it is appropriate that he is played by American actor Robert Taylor, with a down-to-earth Midwestern accent. In keeping with his Americanization, the film also makes Vinicius far more clean-cut and agreeable than the corresponding character in the novel, who callously kills and mistreats several slaves. This was no doubt due to the filmmakers' desire to have their Vinicius conform to 1950s American audiences' taste for wholesome leading men and serve as an appropriate object of romantic interest for female moviegoers.

- The consistent casting of American actors as the heroes in these historical films was plainly the product of a 1950s Hollywood ideology in which the United States was justifiably viewed as having nobly defended the cause of freedom and justice against totalitarian dictators during World War II. This mindset and self-image had earlier antecedents stretching all the way back to the Revolutionary War, which was perceived as a similar contest of salt-of-the-earth colonists fighting for freedom from an overbearing and aristocratic British monarchy.

- *Quo Vadis*'s portrayal of devout Christians struggling against a frightening militaristic and pagan totalitarian state also neatly dovetailed with Cold War America's self-image as the defender of freedom locked in a death struggle with the implacable threat of Soviet Communism, significantly often characterized in propaganda of the time as "godless" Communism.

- As for the secondary characters in the film, a commendable number are at least somewhat based on actual historical figures. Foremost among these is Nero's chief courtier, Petronius, played by upper-class British actor Leo Genn. The historical Petronius was a sophisticated literary man who authored the novel the *Satyricon* and functioned as a kind of cultural advisor at Nero's court. The cinematic Petronius is a somewhat sympathetic character who is fully aware of how terrible Nero's artistic efforts are but, out of fear for his life, is forced to incessantly praise them.

- Other characters who are at least loosely based on historical figures include the praetorian prefect Tigellinus, Nero's mistress Acte, the Stoic philosopher Seneca, the Apostles Peter and Paul, and Nero's wife Poppaea. Although only appearing briefly on screen, these characters more or less conform to their supposed historical personalities.

Historical Accuracy

- One of the most exciting sequences of the film is its depiction of the most destructive fire ever to strike the city, an event known as the Great Fire of AD 64. This catastrophe did occur during the reign of Nero and resulted in the complete destruction of three-quarters of the city of Rome as the inferno raged unchecked for a week.

- In the movie, Nero is unambiguously portrayed as having deliberately ordered the fire to be set so that he could clear out the old city to make room for the newer, more elaborate version that he planned to build as a monument to himself—an ambition reflected in the fact that he also intended to rename the capital city, calling it Neropolis.

- The historical Nero shared his cinematic counterpart's plans to build a grander Rome that would be named after him, but there is no credible evidence that he was responsible for starting the fire. However, in the aftermath of the blaze, it is true that some people voiced this suspicion, and to divert any animosity against him that these rumors might arouse, Nero spread a counter-rumor that the fire had been set by the Christians.

- That the Christians actually ignited the fire is even less likely; in reality, it almost certainly started by accident. However, at this time, the Christians were an entirely obscure sect that no one knew anything about other than that they seemed secretive, so Nero's lie was effective in turning the Christians into scapegoats for the blaze. As depicted in the film, he did indeed round up a number of Christians and execute them.

- The most famous story associated with the fire is the legend that Nero was inspired by the sight of the burning city to put on his musician's robes and perform a song about the destruction of the city of Troy. This notion has been immortalized in the phrase "to fiddle while Rome burns,"[§] which has become shorthand for bad leadership or for exhibiting indifference to a crisis.

- *Quo Vadis* enthusiastically embraces this tradition and shows Nero merrily perched atop the palace playing his lyre and delivering one of his most pretentious and awful singing performances to a crowd of appalled courtiers while the city is dramatically engulfed in flames behind him. It is a memorable scene, but it probably never happened.

- While several ancient authors tell the story of Nero singing while Rome burned, our most reliable source, Tacitus, reports that it was likely just a hostile rumor. Nero wasn't even in Rome when the fire broke out. He returned to Rome while it was still burning and was especially active in organizing relief efforts for the survivors. In the aftermath of the blaze, he also ordered that the rebuilt city be made more fireproof.

- The Great Fire occurred in AD 64, but Nero was not deposed until AD 68. The movie compresses these events, depicting Nero's efforts to divert blame onto the Christians as failing, thereby prompting a provincial general, Galba, to stage a coup, accompanied by a general uprising of the city's populace against the emperor. In reality,

> Many of the accurate details of set, costume, and plot seem to have been attributable to the film's historical advisor, Hugh Gray, who collaborated with the film's composer to incorporate some of the few surviving fragments of ancient music into the original score for the movie and to employ reconstructions of ancient instruments to perform it.

[§] Fiddles were not actually invented until much later, and Nero's instrument of choice was the lyre, so this phrase should really be "to strum the lyre while Rome burns."

Nero seems to have succeeded in averting blame for the fire in its immediate aftermath. Eventually, however, his erratic behavior would catch up with him, leading Galba and others to rebel.

- *Quo Vadis* was made only a few years after the conclusion of World War II, and the recent conflict seemed to exert a noticeable effect on how the filmmakers portrayed the Romans, whose behavior and even appearance mirror aspects of Nazi Germany. The movie's Praetorian Guardsmen are identified by their menacing black cloaks and the black plumes on their helmets. This is not historically attested but obviously recalls the black uniforms of Hitler's SS storm troopers. They greet Nero by rigidly extending their right arms with open palms, precisely emulating the Nazi salute. This gesture is not clearly attested as having been used by the Romans as a salute, but for the film's postwar audience, it would act as an effective shorthand to convey a totalitarian or repressive state.

- Visual parallels with Nazism are found throughout the film. Classical scholars have pointed out how the movie's depiction of Vinicius's triumph directly echoes scenes from the infamous Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*, which records the 1934 Nuremburg rallies. Both feature such obvious parallels as orderly phalanxes of soldiers tramping by a review stand and massed standards and flags. But perhaps the most obvious parallel is that much of the plot revolves around the fact that—just as the Nazis were obsessed with persecuting and murdering the Jews—the film's Romans are fixated on oppressing and persecuting their own religious minority, the early Christians.

> *Quo Vadis* was a high-profile movie that established a successful and lucrative template for epic films set in classical antiquity and ushered in an entire decade's worth of sword-and-sandal flicks of varying degrees of quality.

READING

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02

Ben-Hur: The Greatest Chariot Race

By the late 1950s, MGM Studios was in dire financial trouble, and its executives daringly decided to gamble everything on making one huge movie extravaganza that would hopefully save the studio. Seeking the surest-possible hit, they decided to replicate the *Quo Vadis* formula by creating an epic film set in the ancient world that was based on a popular novel and that offered the opportunity to combine pagan pageantry with Christian moralizing. The book they selected was *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, published by General Lew Wallace in 1880.

A Gamble and a Triumph

- *Ben-Hur* was a safe choice, as the book had been a massive best seller and pop-culture phenomenon—only the Bible had sold more copies in English until *Gone with the Wind* appeared more than 50 years later. By the 1950s, *Ben-Hur* had already spawned several cinematic versions as well as a hugely popular play that toured America to packed houses for 20 years.

- MGM went all in on its gamble with this film, spending 15 million dollars—an unprecedented sum that made it the most expensive film yet made. Charlton Heston, fresh off his memorable turn as Moses in *The Ten Commandments*, was recruited to play the title role, and the rest of the cast was filled out with experienced top-rank actors. The epic would be filmed in Italy on a lavish scale, utilizing 50,000 extras, 100,000 costumes, and 300 sets constructed on 148 acres at Cinecittà studios outside Rome.

- It was a big risk, but it paid off in impressive fashion. The film came out in 1959 and became a cash machine, achieving not only the top place at the box office for the year, but earning second place of all time up to that point, raking in nearly 80 million dollars globally. As for critical reception, it garnered not only more awards than any other ancient epic, but more than any other film in history, winning 11 Oscars.*

* *Ben-Hur* would hold the record for the most Oscars won by a single film for nearly 40 years, until *Titanic* and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* each tied its record of 11 wins, although the latter films competed in an era when there were more possible categories for nomination.

The Central Judah-Messala Relationship

- *Ben-Hur* is an unusual sword-and-sandal movie in that very little of the action takes place in Rome, but instead mostly occurs in the remote frontier province of Judea and the surrounding territories. Additionally, much of the plot concerns tensions between the Roman administrators of the conquered province and various indigenous groups, such as the Jews.

- The Jewish prince Judah Ben-Hur and the Roman aristocrat Messala (played by Stephen Boyd) had grown up together in Judea as best friends before parting and pursuing their respective careers. The film begins when Messala returns to Judea as an administrator and the old friendship becomes strained because Messala wants Judah to aid him in suppressing Jewish dissidents.

- The movie mostly follows the novel, but significantly, one scene that lacks a counterpart in the book depicts Messala urging Judah to name disloyal Jews and Judah refusing to turn informer—the act that precipitates the collapse of their friendship. For contemporary audiences, this exchange would inevitably have called to mind the recent McCarthy-era hunt for Communists, during which people were pressured to provide names of alleged Communists and a number of prominent Hollywood figures were blacklisted for supposedly being Communist sympathizers.

- The film follows the 1950s convention of casting British actors to play upper-class Romans and Americans as their ethnic or religious antagonists. Thus, Messala is played by Irish actor Stephen Boyd and Roman general Arrius by English actor Jack Hawkins, while the purportedly Jewish Judah speaks in Heston's broad Midwestern American accent. This linguistic paradigm holds for most of the secondary characters as well, with other Romans portrayed by British commonwealth actors and the Jews by Americans.

- *Ben-Hur* famously contains two outstanding scenes of great spectacle: the naval battle and the chariot race.

The Naval Battle

- As punishment for a crime that he did not actually commit, Judah Ben-Hur is sentenced to serve in the Roman navy as a galley slave, chained to a bench and doomed to pull a heavy wooden oar. The movie suggests both that this is a standard legal punishment in the Roman Empire and that being condemned to the galleys is tantamount to a death sentence. The dehumanization of the slaves is symbolized by the fact that, once assigned to their benches, the slaves lose even their names and are simply referred to by the number of their position.

- The commander of the fleet, Quintus Arrius, superficially shares many of the characteristics of the other main Roman aristocrat in the film, Messala, but Arrius is given a degree of complexity so that he functions as a foil to Messala. Both men are arrogant and believe in Rome's greatness and its divine destiny to rule the world. However, Messala's utterly uncritical devotion to Rome causes him to sneer at all non-Romans, and he constantly and rather naively eulogizes the glories of Rome. Arrius, on the other hand, while just as dedicated to serving Rome, is more clear-eyed about the costs of imperialism and seems intended to represent a throwback to the legendary heroes of Rome's early days, who were stern yet morally virtuous.

- The rituals of naval combat in an oared galley are established in a marvelous scene in which Arrius visits the stinking, inferno-like hold where the rowers dwell and issues a series of orders steadily increasing the pace of their rowing to assess their readiness for battle. As the *hortator* pounds out a rhythm on a massive drum, the ship's velocity is ratcheted up from regular speed to battle speed to attack speed—and finally to the frenetically paced ramming speed, causing several slaves to drop dead from exertion. The subtext in this scene is a battle of wills between Arrius and Judah, as the admiral attempts to break the defiance that he detects in the slave's eyes.

> The shipboard scenes depicting the harshness of the rowers' existence and the cruelty that they are subjected to are among the film's most memorable and also serve the purpose of firmly establishing the Roman Empire as a force of oppression.

- Soon, the enemy Macedonian fleet is sighted and a spectacular naval battle ensues. As the two fleets close on each other, there is an exchange of missiles, as catapults hurl explosive flaming pots and archers shoot clouds of arrows. Such incendiaries were a part of ancient naval warfare and could be effective weapons against wooden ships. However, they were nearly as dangerous to the user as to the target, and it is not clear whether they were used quite so profligately as is portrayed in the film.†

- The main strategy in naval warfare of the time, however, was to smash the bronze ram located at the prow of each ship into the hull of an enemy vessel, and such catastrophic collisions are graphically shown in the movie. The climax of the naval battle occurs when an enemy vessel plunges its ram into the unprotected side of Arrius's flagship. The enemy warriors swarm aboard and hand-to-hand fighting ensues on deck, while below in the hold, water pours in, and the slaves who cannot escape the rising waters because they are shackled to their benches start to drown.

BATTLE OF ACTIUM

† At the most famous Roman naval battle—Actium—it seems that catapults hurling blazing missiles were only employed during the mopping-up phase of the battle.

- Just before the battle began, Arrius had ordered that Judah be unchained, and now, in the chaos, Judah manages to strangle a guard, steal his key, and release the other slaves. He arrives on deck just in time to see Arrius fall into the water, where his heavy armor drags him under. On an impulse, Judah dives in and saves him, and the two men are left bobbing, abandoned in the ocean, clinging to a raft of wreckage. Once rescued, the grateful Arrius takes on Judah as his personal servant and, impressed by his qualities, eventually frees him and adopts him as his son.

- These scenes offer a reasonable depiction of naval warfare and do a good job of capturing the horror and panic undoubtedly experienced by the men aboard a sinking vessel that has been rammed. There is, however, one gigantic historical problem: The oarsmen aboard Roman warships were not actually slaves, and being sent to the galleys was not a standard punishment in the Roman world. Instead, in all eras of Roman history, freemen were paid to serve as oarsmen in the galleys. In representing the rowers as brutalized slaves, the filmmakers were simply following Wallace's book, which had portrayed the oarsmen as slaves, a convention adopted by all the various cinematic and theatrical versions of the novel.‡

The Chariot Race

- The centerpiece of the movie—and its most famous and spectacular scene—is the chariot race pitting Judah and his Roman rival Messala against one another, with each driving four-horse chariots. This contest takes place in Jerusalem, in an arena shaped like an elongated horseshoe, which is obviously modeled on the great Circus Maximus chariot-racing stadium in Rome.

‡ There was an era in the Mediterranean when slaves were indeed commonly put to work on galleys, but this was more than a thousand years later than Roman times, beginning during the Renaissance and extending into the early modern period.

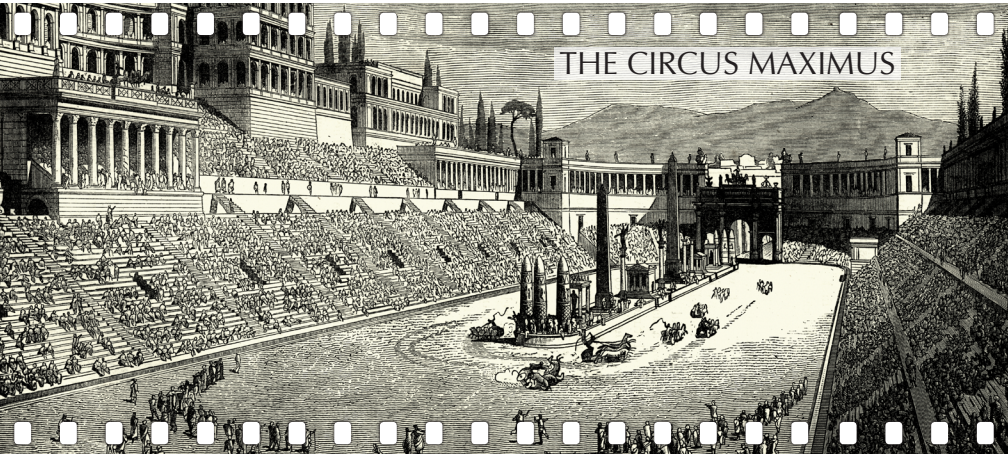
- The Circus Maximus was an awe-inspiring venue that was a third of a mile long and could seat a quarter of a million spectators. The chariots raced around an oval track that had a divider known as the *spina*, or spine, down the middle. At each end of the *spina* were three tall cones known as the *metae*, which were the turning posts around which the chariots circled. On the *spina* were golden dolphins, which served as lap counters, with one dolphin being tipped or lowered as each lap was completed. The *spina* was adorned with various statues, obelisks, and fountains. All these features of the Circus Maximus were faithfully recreated in the movie's fictitious Jerusalem Circus.

- Some minor differences are that the movie's race consists of nine laps around the *spina*, there are nine chariots in total competing, and the starting line is near the center of the track in front of the magistrate's box. In a standard Roman chariot race, there would actually have been seven laps and 12 chariots, and the racers would have begun inside a set of starting stalls at one far end of the arena. The film's chariots are also a bit heavier in construction than the very light and flimsy ones driven by Roman charioteers.

- Where the movie really shines is in depicting the drama, speed, and danger of a chariot race. The cinematographers magnificently capture the chariots flying at breakneck speed down the long straightaways on either side of the *spina*, accompanied by the pounding of the horses' hooves. They also capture how the chariots bunched dangerously together as they slewed around the 180-degree turn at each *metae*, their wheels raising dense clouds of dust.

- Real Roman chariot racing involved frequent, and often fatal, crashes, and the movie vividly portrays this, with more than half the competitors failing to finish the race—some smashing into the *spina*, others colliding with each other, and some losing wheels—with the result that the drivers are gruesomely trampled. This was a fate that was an unfortunately common occurrence in ancient chariot racing.§

§ A number of tombstones of Roman charioteers have been found, and many of these record the cause of death as a crash in the Circus Maximus.



Ben-Hur's chariot race sequences were not achieved through CGI, miniatures, or other special effects trickery; instead, a full-size Circus Maximus was constructed at Cinecittà studios in Rome, and stuntmen drove reconstructed chariots drawn by teams of real horses. This immense set occupied 18 acres and cost 1 million dollars to create.

- This scene is a thrilling feat of moviemaking and accurately captures many aspects of chariot racing; however, there are two major ahistorical aspects of it. Perhaps the biggest problem is that, in the movie, the different chariots are shown representing various geographic places. Thus, Judah is identified as racing on behalf of the region of Judea, while Messala races for Rome, and the other charioteers are named as competing for Athens, Carthage, Corinth, Phrygia, Alexandria, Messenia, and Cyprus. Such a competition in the Circus among different places or groups is a total fiction invented by Wallace.

- In reality, just as with professional athletes today, Roman charioteers performed as representatives of sports teams. Known as factions, the four main professional chariot-racing teams of the Roman world were identified by the colors each wore and thus were called the Blues, the Greens, the Reds,

and the Whites. In a standard Roman chariot race, there would be a total of 12 chariots, with each of the four factions entering three chariots. The three chariots of a given faction would work together, attempting to clear a path for their star driver and obstructing or hindering the chariots of the other factions.

- Romans would pick one of these factions to follow and, much like sports fans today, would dress in the appropriate colors, sit in blocks with other enthusiasts of their faction, and exchange verbal taunts and abuse with the adherents of rival teams.

- A second notable historical inaccuracy is that Messala's chariot wheels are equipped with long blades that viciously spin as the wheels revolve, and he uses these to intimidate his opponents and slice apart their chariots during the race. There is no attested instance of such blades being employed in any Roman chariot race; they were violent enough without such augmentation. However, such weapons are known to have been used on ancient battlefields,¶ and such military applications were no doubt the inspiration for the movie's inclusion of them.

Ben-Hur not only saved MGM Studios but became perhaps the most famous of all ancient epic films—and its success ensured that Hollywood would make more.

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Radford, "Hollywood Ascendant."

Theodorakopoulos, *Ancient Rome at the Cinema*, "*Ben-Hur*: 'Tale of the Christ' or Tale of Rome?" 30–50.

¶ At the Battle of Gaugamela, the Persian king's army included several hundred such chariots, which were launched against the Macedonian phalanx of Alexander the Great.

03

Spartacus: Kubrick's Controversial Epic

Despite it being one of the best-known and most successful films from the golden age of sword-and-sandal flicks, there are a number of oddities about *Spartacus*. It is an autobiography of the most famous of all gladiators, yet the film features only a single gladiator combat, and that is a small private bout, rather than a grand melee in the arena. Furthermore, it is a fight that the titular hero loses.

The plot revolves around a feisty band of underdogs rebelling and struggling to gain their freedom from an oppressive totalitarian state, an all-American premise that recalls the revolt of the 13 American colonies. Yet despite this apparently patriotic message, the film was widely boycotted, condemned, and picketed by conservative groups across the United States.

The Film as History

- The core plot of *Spartacus* is based on actual events. In 73 BC, a slave named Spartacus was being trained at a gladiator school run by Lentulus Batiatus near the southern Italian city of Capua. Spartacus led the gladiators in a rebellion, and about 70 of them escaped into the countryside. They took refuge on Mount Vesuvius, from where they raided nearby plantations, freeing more slaves and building a slave army that ultimately numbered more than 100,000.

- For several years, they roamed Italy, defying repeated attempts by the Romans to suppress their insurrection. Eventually, one of the leading Roman politicians of the time, Marcus Licinius Crassus, led a concerted effort by several Roman legions against them, and the slaves were defeated. As a deterrent to future rebellion, 6,000 captured slaves were crucified along the Appian Way. The movie conforms to these historically attested facts.

- One difference between the movie and history concerns the background and experiences of Spartacus himself. In the film, it is explicitly stated that he was born a slave in the region of Thrace to a mother who was also a slave and that before the age of 13, he was sentenced to labor in the mines of Libya. Later in the movie, when at the gladiator school, he meets and falls in love with a fellow slave, Varinia, who is identified as being from Britain.

- While this life story effectively dramatizes the genuinely horrible nature of slavery as an institution, it is invented. The real Spartacus was born a free Thracian, who, upon reaching adulthood, fought for Rome as a paid auxiliary. He then seems to have deserted, become a bandit, was captured, and, as punishment, was sentenced to slavery and sent to the gladiator school.

- The ancient author Plutarch notes that Spartacus did have a wife (whose name is not recorded) but says that she was a Thracian from the same tribe as him. The moviemakers probably changed her nationality from Thracian to British for no better reason than that Jean Simmons, the actress who plays her, was British.*

- Another way the film misrepresents Spartacus concerns his goals and historical legacy. In the movie, he is repeatedly depicted as a freedom fighter whose objective is not merely to escape servitude, but to destroy the entire institution of slavery.† In reality, Spartacus seems never to have harbored any such grand ambitions, but rather was much more narrowly focused on gaining freedom for himself and his immediate companions.

* Jean Simmons's Britishness is an unusual exception to the standard aural paradigm found in almost all ancient Hollywood epics made in the 1950s, whereby rulers, usually Romans, were played by actors with pronounced upper-class British accents, while their oppressed antagonists, usually either Christians or slaves, were portrayed by American actors.

† In addition to being the star of the film, Kirk Douglas was also the producer and had been responsible for both initiating the project and selecting Spartacus as its subject. In his autobiography, Douglas reveals that the idea of Spartacus as a kind of proto-abolitionist was what drew him to the topic in the first place.

- An even more grandiose thesis promulgated by the filmmakers is that the Roman Empire's collapse was due to its reliance on slavery and that Spartacus's revolt and his challenge to the institution of slavery directly contributed to that fall. This is a heroic interpretation that both ennobles Spartacus and makes him a pivotal figure in history.

> While Spartacus became an important symbol of freedom and opposition to slavery for later civilizations, his effect on subsequent Roman history seems to have been fairly negligible.

- Unfortunately, the reality is more complicated and less inspirational. Slavery does not seem to have been one of the key factors in the collapse of the empire, nor did Spartacus's rebellion initiate a growing movement challenging slavery. To the contrary, rather than representing the beginning of resistance, Spartacus's revolt marked the end of organized opposition. In the decades prior to Spartacus, there had been several other major slave rebellions, which had clearly served as inspirations for Spartacus, but after Spartacus, there were no more large-scale slave rebellions ever again in Roman history. Perhaps the cruel execution of the 6,000 captured Spartacans did indeed deter future uprisings.

Gladiator School

- The scenes in the gladiator school are some of the most memorable and enthralling and, on the whole, provide a reasonably plausible recreation. It is not known exactly how such training was conducted, but details of these scenes, such as the use of wooden practice weapons, is likely, since this exercise was attested in the Roman army for training recruits.

- Two minor inaccuracies are that the Romans did not brand their slaves as shown, nor was a short curl of hair worn at the back of the head as the mark of being a gladiator.

- When a private bout between Spartacus and an experienced gladiator named Draba is staged for the amusement of Crassus, we are treated to a display of combat techniques and weapons that are also authentic.

- Gladiators were trained to battle in one of several dozen specific styles, with equipment unique to each. Appropriately, Spartacus fights in the style of a Thracian, with a very small metal shield, a short sword, and minimal armor. His sword is not quite right, but otherwise the details are well done. The Thracian style favored speed and dexterity, and the athletic Kirk Douglas does a good job with the role.

- Draba is a retiarius, who wields a trident in one hand and a net in the other. This was one of the most unusual styles, and Draba, as played by former professional football player Woody Strode, skillfully and realistically employs the net.

The Final Battle

- The real-life Spartacus fought more than a dozen skirmishes and battles with Roman military forces—winning most of them—and looted four large cities, but almost none of this makes it into the movie. Other than a very brief night assault on a Roman camp, we see none of Spartacus's very impressive military victories, and the only battle portrayed in detail is the final one against Crassus, in which the slave army is decisively defeated.

- For this scene, filmed in Spain, director Stanley Kubrick was able to use 8,000 soldiers from the Spanish army, and the best element of this spectacular sequence is not the warfare itself, but the lead-up to it, when the slave army and the Roman legions face off on opposite sides of a valley. Spartacus's troops are assembled in a resolute but disordered mass, and a series of pans along the line emphasizes the diversity of the human beings making up the rebels, including old and young, men and women. These shots are close-ups, and the mixture of fear and determination is seen on their faces as all prepare to fight for their freedom. The slaves are realistically armed with a wide range of weapons and armor that they have scavenged from one source or another over the course of their rebellion.

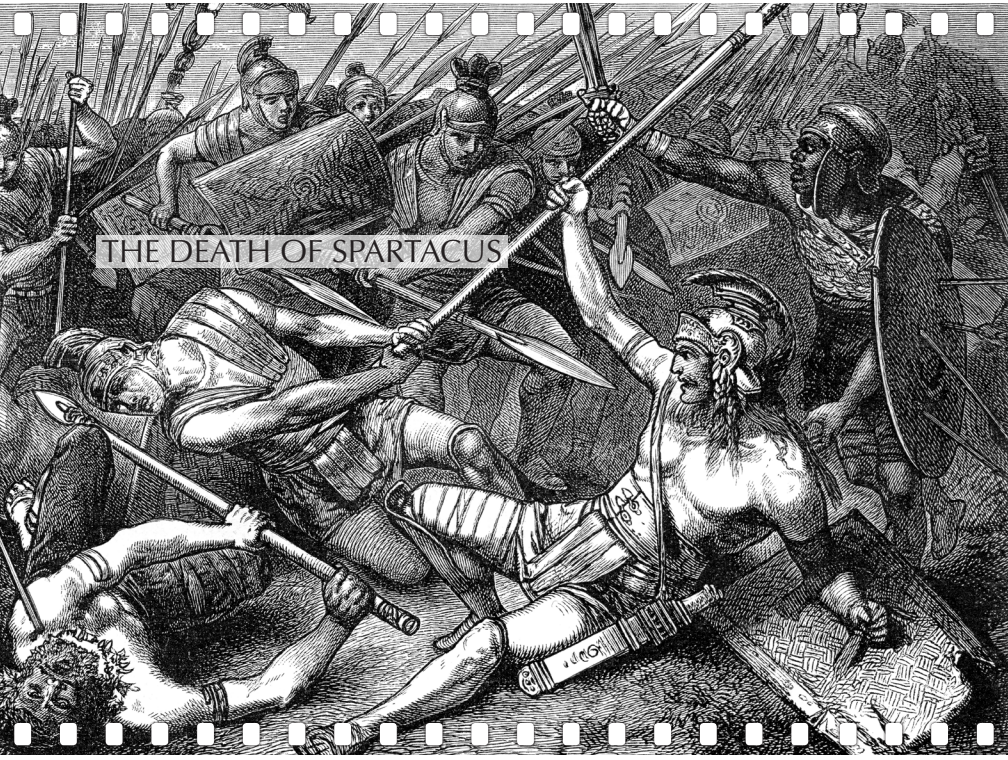
- By comparison, the Roman troops are always seen from a distance as orderly masses of identically equipped and faceless soldiers. The manner in which these scenes are shot transforms the Roman army into an impersonal machine of oppression, in contrast to the obvious humanity of the slaves.

- As the Roman army begins to march methodically across the valley, it maintains its perfect formations. Kubrick filmed this deployment from the slaves' side of the valley at a distance of half a mile, with the cameras mounted on 100-foot-high towers. One of the primary characteristics of the Roman military was discipline, and no scene in any movie has better illustrated this quality than this sight of thousands of men arrayed into precise blocks slowly moving forward and then smoothly shifting formation into a battle line as they approach the enemy. There are no sounds other than the heavy tramping of their massed feet and the jingle of their armor, and it is the very lack of histrionic yelling that makes their advance even more menacing.

- Military historians have correctly pointed out the flaws in this scene, among them that the legionaries are wearing ahistorical leather muscle cuirasses (instead of the mail shirt common to that era), that they are holding their shields the wrong way (horizontal rather than vertical), and that the formations themselves are closer to those used by the Romans several hundred years earlier (rather than the ones employed during the late republic). Nevertheless, the deployment sequence is a magnificent one that conveys something essential about the nature of the Roman war machine.

- Once the fighting starts, however, any attempt at realism goes out the door. First, the slaves unleash a series of flaming logs on the advancing Romans, which is visually exciting but completely unattested. Much worse is that as soon as contact is made between the two forces, the Romans promptly abandon their wonderfully precise formations and instead fight as a disorderly mob, with the rest of the battle consisting of a chaotic free-for-all. In reality, the professional ancient army would have maintained its discipline and formations.

- Oddly, in his final battle, the real-life Spartacus behaved more like a fictitious Hollywood hero than does his movie counterpart. In the film, Spartacus fairly passively observes the initial skirmishes, calmly orders the flaming-log attack, and then leads an ineffectual mounted charge. As described by Plutarch, however, the historical Spartacus comes off more like a true action-movie hero, delivering an inspiring speech that ends with him dramatically plunging his sword into his own horse's neck, thus demonstrating his commitment to live or die together with his men, who do not have horses. He then boldly charges into battle on foot, with the goal of attacking Crassus personally, but is slain before reaching him.


THE DEATH OF SPARTACUS

Political Controversy

- Despite its ancient subject matter, *Spartacus* became embroiled in contemporary American politics and constituted an important moment in the history of the McCarthyist anti-Communist movement. Additionally, although the film seems to espouse a very pro-American message advocating freedom, it became the target of conservative and religious groups, who boycotted it and condemned it as being anti-American.

- Spartacus was a relatively minor figure in Roman history up until the era of the Enlightenment, when intellectuals interested in individual human rights began to praise him as an early example of a freedom fighter and as an embodiment of the eternal struggle against totalitarian states and repressive governmental forces.

- By the 19th and 20th centuries, Spartacus had been transformed into a catchall symbol for fighting oppression generally. Thus, he served as an inspirational role model for proponents of rebellions such as the American and French Revolutions.

- Spartacus's admirers spanned a wide political spectrum, including America's founding fathers and Karl Marx,‡ and various Communist groups adopted Spartacus as an honorary forefather.§

- In the aftermath of World War II, spurred on by leaders like Senator Joe McCarthy, anti-Communist fervor resulted in the House Un-American Activities Committee investigating alleged Communists in the United States. Hollywood in particular was decried as a hotbed of supposed Communist sympathizers, and in 1947, the committee held hearings interrogating

‡ Marx stated that Spartacus was "the most excellent fellow in the whole history of antiquity … a real representative of the proletariat."

§ The German Communist Party in the early 20th century called themselves the Spartakusbund, or "Spartacus League."

prominent members of the film industry who were suspected of Communist leanings. When they refused to answer questions, a group of them, known as the Hollywood Ten,¶ were imprisoned and blacklisted by the industry.

- There are elements of the screenplay that could be viewed as vaguely Communist. Thus, there are a number of scenes depicting the harmonious society that the slaves form on Mount Vesuvius, in which collective action and equality are stressed. Recalling the Marxist adage of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need," newcomers to the slave army are given roles that best suit their talents. On the other hand, the same scenes could equally well be interpreted as representing an idealized early Christian community, such as a medieval monastery, where all property and possessions were shared and tasks were accomplished communally.

- Nevertheless, the ire of anti-Communist groups of the time was drawn. The influential American Legion called for a boycott of the film, and some right-wing and religious groups organized pickets of the film.

- A key turning point came when President John F. Kennedy—instead of watching the new film at a private viewing in the White House, as was common—attended a showing at a public movie theater in Washington, crossing a picket line to do so. Afterward, he commented favorably on the film. This action, along with the movie's commercial success, did much to legitimize it in the public eye, and these developments effectively ended Hollywood's blacklist era.

> The movie's content and production became intertwined with—and a lightning rod for—a number of volatile social issues of the late 1950s involving politics, gender, and race.

¶ While the actual Communist affiliation of many of the Hollywood Ten was tenuous at best, one person later imprisoned by the committee who legitimately had Communist sympathies was popular novelist Howard Fast. In 1951, Fast self-published a novel about Spartacus that turned out to be a huge success and a best seller. Meanwhile, having been passed over for the role of Ben-Hur, Kirk Douglas was eager to make his own ancient epic and chose Fast's popular novel as its basis.

While *Spartacus* was a solid hit—both commercially and critically, winning four Oscars—it would be the last of this era's ancient epic films to achieve such success.

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04

Cleopatra: Spectacle Gone Wild

The 1963 film *Cleopatra* is notorious for being excessive in almost every way, frequently in disastrous fashion. It was the most expensive film made up to that point, and if adjusted for inflation, it may well still hold the record as the costliest movie of all time. The initial attempt to film it was a total catastrophe that squandered two years and 7 million dollars—and yielded only 10 minutes of usable footage. As a result, the original director was fired and the entire cast was replaced. The film was eventually finished, although it ultimately cost 25 times its initial budget. So much money was spent on *Cleopatra* that—even though it was the highest-grossing film of 1963—it was still regarded as a financial disaster that drove its studio to the brink of bankruptcy. It is often blamed both for the destruction of the old Hollywood studio system and for killing the golden age of epic films set in antiquity.

Historical Information

- On the surface, it seems that *Cleopatra* should be one of the more historically informative films set in the ancient world. It covers one of the most pivotal periods in Roman history—the final years of the Roman Republic and the creation of the empire—and features some of the most famous figures in Roman history, including Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, Octavian (aka Augustus), and, of course, Cleopatra herself. The movie depicts a number of important historical episodes, such as Caesar's assassination, the struggle between Antony and Octavian, and the Battle of Actium.

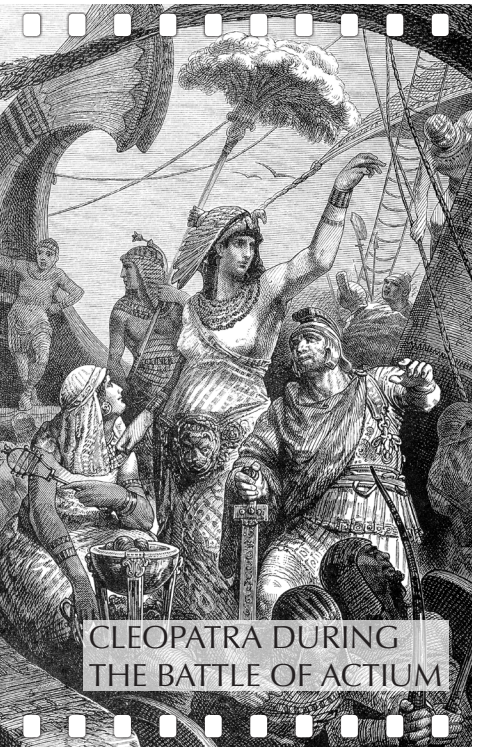
- *Cleopatra* is also distinctive in that it is one of the very few ancient epics made in Hollywood during this era that neither centers its plot around the conflict between Christians and pagan Romans nor frames its story with reference to Christianity. On the one hand, this might appear quite natural given that the events of the plot occur before the birth of Christ, but such chronological facts had not stopped other films, such as *Spartacus*,* from working in allusions to Christianity. Instead, *Cleopatra* focuses exclusively on the events of the crucial era it depicts.

- Complicating the assessment of the film as history is the issue that the available version is so truncated. The original concept had been to release two films in quick succession—the first on Cleopatra and Caesar and the second on Cleopatra and Antony—and each was planned to be three hours long. The director's original edit was this length, but the studio head decreed that he wanted only one film that could be no more than four hours long, so one-third had to be jettisoned. Then, it was cut down even further, to about three hours, so that theaters could offer two showings per night. The four-hour version survives, but the longer one has been lost.

* *Cleopatra*'s immediate predecessor, *Spartacus*, is set a full 70 years before the birth of Christ, but nevertheless begins with a prologue that immediately links it to the future religion, and throughout the film, numerous parallels are drawn between the life of Spartacus and the life of Jesus.

Cleopatra established a record for the highest salary paid to an actor, with Elizabeth Taylor first signing a contract for a then-unprecedented fee of 1 million dollars and ultimately pocketing millions more due to overruns.

- In its basic plot points, the film is reasonably accurate. Caesar did meet Cleopatra when he came to Egypt in pursuit of his rival, Pompey; the Egyptians did kill Pompey and present Caesar with his head; Caesar did take Cleopatra's side in a civil war with her brother; Caesar and Cleopatra did embark on a love affair resulting in a son, Caesarion; after Caesar returned to Rome, Cleopatra did follow; and Caesar was assassinated, after which Cleopatra returned to Egypt.



CLEOPATRA DURING THE BATTLE OF ACTIUM

- Caesar's lieutenant, Mark Antony, then engaged in a struggle with Caesar's adopted son, Octavian, for control of Rome. Antony also engaged in a passionate love affair with Cleopatra. Octavian cleverly stirred up public sentiment against the lovers and, eventually, at the Battle of Actium, fought and defeated them with the assistance of his admiral, Agrippa. After fleeing to Egypt, Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide in the manner shown.

- The film deviates from history in a few interesting ways. It makes a big deal out of Caesar's public acknowledgment of Caesarion, his son with Cleopatra, whereas in real life, he never bestowed such recognition. The film completely

omits the three other children that Cleopatra had with Mark Antony. It also garbles a number of points concerning Caesar's ambitions—for example, erroneously asserting that he desired to be called emperor, a title that did not yet exist.

- On the other hand, there is a particularly impressive military sequence in which Caesar's men are besieged in Alexandria by the forces of Cleopatra's brother. To neutralize enemy catapults, Caesar orders a sortie. His legionaries are shown deploying into a testudo (meaning "tortoise"), a formation in which the men huddle closely together in a block with their rectangular shields creating a solid shell on all four sides and overhead. They then slowly march forward in step until they reach the catapults, which they set on fire.

- The scene vividly illustrates the usefulness of the testudo when advancing under fire, as well as the rigid discipline and training necessary to pull it off effectively. Although the filmmakers added some inaccurate spikes to the shields, the episode is an enjoyable evocation of one of the more distinctive Roman military maneuvers. Incidentally, as depicted in the film, these battles did indeed result in part of the great Library of Alexandria catching fire and being destroyed.

- One of the most famous and notable aspects of the movie is its lavish costumes and sets, on which a good deal of its massive budget was spent.

The Costumes

- The Roman outfits are a mixture of historically plausible attire and Hollywood conventions of what Romans should look like. An example of the latter are the ubiquitous leather cuirasses worn by nearly every one of the major Roman characters (shown here). These are a staple of epic movies set in the ancient world but have no actual correlation in reality. Real Roman officers would have donned metal breastplates, not leather ones, or else would have been equipped similarly to ordinary legionaries, who at this time would have worn chain mail.

- Most of the Roman officers also sport an absurdly riotous pouf of tall plumes atop their helmets. Actual Roman battlefield helmets would have lacked such ornamentation or at most would have possessed far-more-modest crests.

- One authentic touch is the outfit worn by Antony when he meets Cleopatra aboard her fabulous golden barge. His breastplate is adorned with patches of leopard skin, and the *pteruges*, or flaps, that hang around his thighs are also made from leopard pelts. In their revels, Antony and Cleopatra liked to dress up as gods, and Antony most commonly assumed the role of Dionysus,† who was frequently depicted in ancient art clad in leopard skins, so Antony's armor here accurately and neatly evokes his historically attested identification with the god.

- Much less historically satisfying are the costumes worn by Rex Harrison as Caesar. While at first glance he seems to be wearing the same togas or leather armor with short *pteruges*-fringed skirt as the other Romans, closer inspection reveals that underneath these outfits, he is clad in strange long-sleeved, tight-fitting shirts and similarly close-fitting ankle-length tights or pants. The color of this long underwear–like clothing varies from white to red to purple to match whatever else he has on over it, but it is present in every scene.‡ Not only are such garments completely unattested as Roman apparel, but Romans of this period in particular would have regarded the wearing of any sort of pants as the hallmark of a barbarian.

- Taylor as Cleopatra appears in 65 different outfits, establishing a new record for costume changes in a film. Many of these are outrageously elaborate and expensive. Among the most impressive is the golden§ sheath dress that she wears during perhaps the most visually arresting scene in the movie: her spectacular arrival in Rome, in which she makes her grand entrance seated atop a gigantic sphinx and accompanied by an entourage of dancers. This garment actually has a historical basis; it is inspired by a relief of Cleopatra found on a temple in Egypt.

† Roman Bacchus, the god of wine and fertility.

‡ To create a more visually imposing Caesar, a foam rubber cast of Harrison's torso was made and equipped with generally augmented musculature. This is what was being concealed beneath the long underwear–style shirts. Similarly, Harrison's calves and thighs were fleshed out with padded inserts, which were hidden inside the pants or tights.

§ Some of Taylor's dresses were fashioned out of genuine gold.

- Equally arresting is Taylor's makeup in the film, which fully embraced the Egyptian aesthetic. Heavy bands of black around her eyes imitate the kohl eyeliner used by the ancient Egyptians, and she wears broad patches of metallic green-and-blue eye shadow.¶

The Sets

- One of the most impressive sets is the harbor of Alexandria, constructed on a monumental scale at Cinecittà studios near Rome. It does an excellent job of conveying how, according to ongoing archaeological excavations, Hellenistic Alexandria would have been an odd mixture of Greek and Egyptian architectural and stylistic elements. Thus, the set boasts a massive Doric-style Greek temple, but also uniquely Egyptian details, such as an obelisk and a sphinx.

- Another amazing set, which was used to portray Cleopatra's entry into Rome, depicts the Roman Forum. A reconstruction of the actual Roman Forum was deemed insufficiently impressive as the backdrop for this spectacular scene, so the movie's version was constructed on a scale three times larger than the real Forum. In the resulting scene, an audience of senators and Romans is treated to successive waves of elaborately garbed and choreographed performers. Finally, a phalanx of 300 slaves are seen hauling an enormous sphinx sculpture, atop which perch Cleopatra and Caesarion. All of the performers enter the Forum through a full-size reconstruction of the Arch of Constantine.

- In addition to the oversized Forum, another historical issue is that the Arch of Constantine would not be built for almost 350 years after Cleopatra's trip to Rome. It is a visually stunning sequence—and, in many ways, the highlight of the film—yet is another symbol of the film's extravagance, since the vast set was used only for this seven-minute scene.

¶ Accompanying the film was a well-designed marketing campaign urging American women to adopt the so-called Cleopatra look. Makeup giant Revlon came out with a movie-inspired set of products, including a lipstick color dubbed Sphinx Pink.

- The third great scene of spectacle is an even briefer one depicting when, in 41 BC, Cleopatra traveled to the city of Tarsus to meet with Antony. According to our ancient source for this trip, she sailed up the river Cydnus in a gilded barge powered by purple sails and silver oars. She dressed as the goddess of love, Aphrodite, surrounded by boys dressed as Cupids and women as sea nymphs, accompanied by music and the burning of incense. People lined the riverbanks to witness her grand arrival.

- The filmmakers spared no expense in recreating this moment. Whereas previous film versions of Cleopatra had been content with using a ship model for the barge, for this movie, a golden ship more than 250 feet long was built that replicated the description of the original barge in every detail. It was not just a static prop but a fully seagoing vessel. This single object cost 250,000 dollars, equivalent to 2 million dollars today.

Characterizations of Roman Historical Figures

- Harrison received considerable critical praise for his take on Caesar. In fact, he was the sole actor from the film to receive an Academy Award nomination. Harrison's performance does seem to capture a sense of Caesar's intellectual sharpness and decisiveness and can thus be considered a reasonable portrait.

- As Mark Antony, Richard Burton has elicited a more mixed opinion. Some have considered his love for Cleopatra to be genuinely moving, although it may be hard to disentangle his acting job from Burton and Taylor's tempestuous real-life affair.** Others have found his performance too self-conscious and histrionic. The real Antony and Cleopatra do indeed seem to have had a genuine passion for one another.

** Although they were both married to other people, during filming, stars Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton embarked on a highly public affair so scandalous that not only did it enrapture the popular press for several years, but it drew condemnation from the Vatican and politicians.

- One undeniable problem with Burton's Antony, however, is that he comes off as an ineffectual figure—indecisive, moody, and utterly outmatched as a general by Agrippa and Octavian. Although there are verbal references to his charisma and skilled generalship, none of this is actually ever seen, and viewers are left to wonder why anyone would have been inspired to follow him or how he managed to become one of the most powerful men in the Roman world.

- As for Cleopatra, the actual Egyptian[††] queen was a highly intelligent, multilingual, resourceful woman—and a shrewd and calculating political operator—but too little of this acumen comes across in Taylor's performance. Her main highlighted qualities are seductiveness and manipulativeness. The directors have stated that their original intent had been to emphasize the intellectual and political dimensions of Cleopatra. Again, critical reaction has been mixed.

- Perhaps the best bit of casting in the film is Roddy McDowall as the young Octavian. Octavian was a complex character who was supremely gifted at political infighting, and McDowall perfectly captures his coldly rational personality, constantly scheming and outmaneuvering those around him. The film's portrait of Octavian even depicts some of his flaws, such as the fact that he was not a talented general but instead relied on the abilities of his loyal friend Agrippa.

Coupled with the nearly simultaneous financial failure of another high-profile ancient epic, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, the tribulations and indulgences associated with *Cleopatra* so soured studios on the previously popular and lucrative genre of ancient epics that it would be nearly four decades before Hollywood would make another one.

[††] Cleopatra was not a native Egyptian, but rather a direct descendant of Ptolemy I, one of Alexander the Great's generals who had seized control of Egypt following Alexander's death.

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05

The Fall of the Roman Empire and Ancient Epics

Like *Cleopatra*, the 1964 epic *The Fall of the Roman Empire* was one of the most expensive ever made. But while the former eventually turned a profit, the latter was an unmitigated financial disaster.* Together, the failure of these two films brought the classic Hollywood era of ancient epics to a crashing halt and thoroughly poisoned the genre. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* was a complete commercial flop and a generally depressing experience for moviegoers. However, a number of critics and classical scholars regard it as one of the most thoughtful and sophisticated takes on the classical world made during the 1950s and 1960s.

* The film cost 19 million dollars to make and earned a paltry 4.75 million in return. It drove its studio, Samuel Bronston Productions, to bankruptcy, killing it forever.

A Somber, Serious Vision

- The film and its messages were very much shaped by the visions of two men: Anthony Mann, the director, and Samuel Bronston, the head of the studio.

- Bronston had established his own independent studio in Spain that specialized in making entertaining yet fact-based historical films. Many of his movies featured themes of individuals or groups from different cultures or nations uniting to achieve a goal, a premise that would figure prominently in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

- Mann was no stranger to ancient epics, having been the director of the Great Fire of Rome sequence in *Quo Vadis* and also the initial director of *Spartacus*, filming all of the opening scenes before being replaced by Stanley Kubrick. Both Mann and Bronston had a keen interest in creating historical films that made statements of contemporary relevance.

- This, then, was the central idea that the filmmakers wanted to explore: How does a great civilization unravel? And is such a decline inevitable? With the United States then at the pinnacle of its economic and political power and influence, it was a theme with obvious relevance for Americans of the mid-1960s.

- This particular focus also shifted the role of the Romans in the film. In most earlier ancient epics, the Romans were the villains, portrayed as imperialistic oppressors of some group, usually either slaves or Christians. In this movie, however, the viewer was being asked to identify with the Romans and to see them as the benevolent defenders of civilization against the forces of anarchy and destruction.

- Like almost every other ancient epic, this film begins with a voiceover by a solemn-voiced narrator, but whereas the prologue in previous films usually set up a simplistic dichotomy between good and evil, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*'s prologue instead poses complex and open-ended questions:

> *Two of the greatest problems in history are how to account for the rise of Rome and how to account for her fall. We may come nearer to understanding the truth, if we remember that the fall of Rome, like her rise, had not one cause but many. And it was not an event, but a process spread over three hundred years. Some nations have not lasted as long as Rome fell.*

- But despite the lofty aspirations of the prologue—and Mann's expressed desire to deviate from the usual ancient formula—in the end, much of the film did indeed include the traditional chariot races and battles and replaced a good deal of the complicated analysis of causation with a simple story of a personal rivalry between one good man and his evil antagonist.

This is an unusual beginning that places the focus squarely on the process of historical interpretation rather than on the events themselves. And while this kind of sophisticated analysis might delight professional historians, it wouldn't entertain a mass audience of moviegoers.

- The moment that the filmmakers selected to encapsulate Rome's decline is borrowed from the famous 18th-century historian Edward Gibbon, who posited that the period between AD 98 and AD 180—a time when Rome was ruled by the so-called five good emperors—was a golden age "during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous." This era came to an end when the last of the five, Marcus Aurelius, was succeeded by his son Commodus, who proved to be mentally unstable and a tyrant.

- In both Gibbon's and the filmmakers' assessments, although the empire would last several more centuries, it was all downhill from here. While a bit of an oversimplification, this is a plausible interpretation. Although otherwise universally praised for his wisdom, Aurelius's selection of Commodus as his heir is viewed as an atypically horrible decision.

- The film deviates in a significant way from the historical record by having Aurelius deciding to disinherit Commodus and instead elevate a general named Livius to be his successor. Livius is completely fictitious, and it is very clear that in reality, Commodus was Aurelius's enthusiastic choice. In the movie, before the change can be made official, Aurelius is poisoned and dies, Commodus becomes emperor, and Livius remains a general. Commodus revokes Aurelius's previously enlightened policies of rulership and embarks on a career of personal debauchery and public mismanagement.

- Eventually, this behavior provokes rebellions and tests Livius's loyalty, culminating in a gladiator-style duel between the two men during which Livius kills Commodus. Disgusted by the corruption and sycophancy displayed by Rome's senators and citizens during Commodus's reign, Livius refuses the throne and goes into self-imposed exile, abandoning the degenerate empire to what seems an inevitable path of decline and fall.

How Should Peoples Relate to One Another?

- Where other movies might open with a combat or race, instead the viewer is treated to what is essentially a conference, in which the emperor Marcus Aurelius, played by British actor Alec Guinness, summons representatives of all the nations, ethnic groups, and provinces that are part of the Roman Empire. It is a visually exciting scene, as each group, in their distinctive costumes, rides up in front of Aurelius, is formally greeted, and then joins the assembled throng.

- Aurelius delivers a speech in which he urges unity and proposes bestowing universal Roman citizenship upon them. Furthermore, he explicitly equates the glory and strength of the empire with the diversity of those who compose it. He memorably concludes his oration with this line: "No longer provinces or colonies but Rome, Rome everywhere, a family of equal nations." For mid-1960s audiences, such a "family of equal nations" would unavoidably bring to mind the United Nations and the United States as the driving force behind it.

- The actual Marcus Aurelius, known as the philosopher-emperor, was a devoted adherent of the Stoic school of philosophy. He also wrote a book of Stoic ruminations called the *Meditations*, which outlines a benevolent, humanistic set of values. Thus, ascribing to Aurelius an enlightened vision of a grand, harmonious union of humanity as laid out in his speech is not an implausible idea on the part of the filmmakers.

- Another issue with contemporary resonance is immigration. The first half of the film takes place in and around a grimly imposing legionary fortress located along Rome's northern frontier. Aurelius is portrayed as having been battling barbarians along this frontier for decades, but he now wishes to focus imperial policy more on accommodation and cooperation than on conquest and exploitation. The real Aurelius did both, spending much of his career fighting in the north as depicted but also engaging in diplomacy and even settling some barbarians on vacant farmland in Italy.

- One of the strengths of the Roman Empire—and one of the secrets underlying both its success and longevity—was that the Romans were quite open to incorporating conquered peoples and actively co-opting the most dynamic provincials into working for Rome rather than against it. Roman imperialism was certainly accompanied by instances of cruelty and exploitation, but through institutions such as the army *auxilia*, it could also offer routes of upward mobility. In modern terms, Rome was a thoroughly multicultural empire.

- A surprising amount of the film deals with this key historical issue of how best to treat provincials, the conquered, and those barbarians not yet vanquished. At one point, there is a debate in the Roman Senate during which Commodus and his minions urge a policy of shameless exploitation backed up by military force, whereas Livius and others try to preserve Aurelius's dream of inclusivity.

- As scholars have noted, this scene presents rival conceptions of the Roman Empire that mirror Cold War ideology. In one, the empire is based on equality, participatory citizenship, peace, and an open-door immigration policy, creating, in the words of one critic, "an idealized form of the United States," versus, on the other hand, a "cruel, militarist, totalitarian tyranny" that recalls stereotyped images of the Soviet Union.

- In the film, the adherents of Aurelius's side win the debate, and a group of Germanic barbarians is allowed to settle on unused land in Italy. There, the once-savage barbarians create an idyllic farming community and, somewhat improbably, produce so much surplus food that these new immigrants to the empire are shown jubilantly bestowing their agricultural bounty upon the starving citizens of the city of Rome. It is an appealing vision, but unfortunately, reality is less heartwarming. Aurelius's actual attempt to settle Germans on empty land in Italy ended in dismal failure, when the barbarians revolted and sacked the major Roman city of Ravenna.

Recreating Rome

- The movie is perhaps best known for the quality of several of the performances and the elaborateness of its sets. Alec Guinness is fantastic in the role of Marcus Aurelius. Sporting a full beard, he bears a very close resemblance to surviving portrait busts of Aurelius. He also radiates a convincing mixture of benevolence, wisdom, and authority that conforms to descriptions of the historical Aurelius.

> In purely visual terms, Guinness as Aurelius is one of the best casting jobs in any Roman movie.

- Christopher Plummer, who plays Commodus, also does an excellent job.† His performance nicely conveys a mix of boastfulness and insecurity consistent with the historical Commodus. He also makes credible Commodus's degeneration from pleasure-loving ne'er-do-well to mentally unbalanced megalomaniac. However, the real Commodus was in his late teens when elevated to the emperorship, whereas Plummer was in his mid-30s.

- Perhaps the most famous fact regarding *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is that it boasted the most elaborate reconstruction of the Roman Forum found in any film before or since.‡ The promotional materials produced by the studio delight in listing the admittedly impressive statistics concerning the size of this set and its alleged historical accuracy. Erected on the studio's lots outside of Madrid, it was an amazing assemblage featuring 27 full-scale three-dimensional structures, many of which contained elaborate interiors.

- From a historical perspective, on the whole, filmmakers did a good job. Probably the most notable discrepancy from the real Forum is that the statues and buildings are almost all white or natural stone in color. In reality, the

† As the movie emphasizes, Commodus admires gladiators and even aspires to fight as one in the arena, and it is well documented that the real Commodus shared this obsession with gladiators.

‡ The entire Forum set was 1,300 feet long by 750 feet wide and included 350 individual statues, 8 victory columns, 610 columns in buildings, and 1,000 hand-sculpted relief panels.

Romans often painted these, sometimes in rather garish colors. In defense of the filmmakers, however, an understanding of just how extensively the Romans painted their stonework resulted from scholarship done after the completion of the movie.

A Bleak Ending

- The ending of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is uniquely bleak. Every other ancient historical epic concludes on some kind of positive note.[§] This one, on the other hand, delivers exactly what its title promises.

- At first, the film seems to be treading a familiar path, with the hero vanquishing the villain in a dramatic one-on-one duel. But then, when Livius is offered the throne by men representing the irredeemably corrupted army and senate, he rejects it and walks away from them—and out of the film. Seen in a wide shot, he strides off at a corner of the screen while the camera stays centered on the Forum, where the army is now holding an auction, selling the Roman Empire to the highest bidder.

- The film's conclusion proposes a doubly pessimistic thesis: Not only is there no hope for the survival of civilization, as embodied in the form of the Roman Empire, but it has become so corrupt that it is not even worth saving. As this degrading auction—based on a real event—continues, the voice of the omniscient narrator that began the movie returns to intone its final words:

> *This was the beginning of the fall of the Roman Empire. A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within.*

- With this line, the film returns to the agenda set out in the prologue: to explore reasons for the collapse of the Roman Empire.

[§] Even the ending of *Spartacus*, in which the titular hero is crucified, affirms a new dawn of hope: both personally, in the form of his newborn son, and globally, in the promise of the abolition of slavery.

- While potentially offering useful historical insights, the movie did not prove a satisfying experience for viewers. First, the conclusion is rather open-ended, since the film does not actually show the collapse and fall of the empire, but rather just the beginning of that process. Second, there is absolutely nothing uplifting or rousing about it. And finally, Livius was not a particularly appealing or inspirational protagonist, basically giving up in the end.

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06

I, Claudius: The BBC Makes an Anti-Epic

By the mid-1960s, the craze for ancient epics seemed to have run its course. However, in the 1970s, the ancient world would take creative new forms that would inject fresh life into the stale genre. One of the most significant of these found its path to success not in movie theaters but on television screens. This was the miniseries *I, Claudius*. It brazenly flouted the conventions of the ancient epic and instead offered up 13 hours that consisted mainly of seasoned actors from the British theater sitting around a handful of fairly crude indoor sets and holding lengthy conversations with one another. With such an approach, you might even call it the anti-epic. Yet despite this seemingly unpromising strategy, it proved to be a resounding critical and popular success and resulted in one of the most influential and memorable portraits of the ancient world to ever appear on-screen.

Intimate Family Drama Replaces Visual Spectacle

- The *I, Claudius* miniseries was produced by the BBC and was based on two novels written by Robert Graves that were published in the 1930s. It premiered on BBC2 from September through December of 1976 and the following year was shown in the United States on PBS.

- Both the novel and the miniseries are told from the perspective of the elderly emperor Claudius, who is writing his memoirs. The action is set between 24 BC and AD 54, a particularly eventful period in Roman history covering the reigns of the first four emperors, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius—all of whom were related by blood as members of Rome's first family of emperors, the Julio-Claudians.

- These family connections are the key to understanding the show's approach to Roman history, because, above all, it is the story of a family and of all the rivalries, jealousies, and infighting among its members. The fact that this particular family just happens to control a vast political empire takes second place to their interpersonal relationships. Rather than showing the great events of history as shaping the personal lives of a group of people, *I, Claudius* inverts this formula, offering up a group of people whose personal lives shape history.

- The miniseries thus has much in common with the format of a soap opera, whose enormous popularity as a genre is a testimony to how effective and appealing such an approach can be to TV audiences. Furthermore, the family in the spotlight not only is rich but also is the hereditary ruling family of an empire—the ancient Roman equivalent of England's royal family. This enabled *I, Claudius* to tap into a whole second

> *I, Claudius* was a clever stew of sensational soap opera, royalty-watching, and *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* but additionally spiced up with enough convincing period detail to lend it the wholesome aura of a history lesson.

group of people: those who are obsessed with royalty. The show created a feeling of intimacy, as if you were eavesdropping on the private interactions of famous people and privy to secret knowledge.

- The writers made the dialogue match the approach, giving the characters a chatty, colloquial style of speech that was markedly different from the stiff pseudo-classical dialogue and lofty pronouncements found in earlier classical epics. Despite its dramatic and sometimes violent subject matter, the dialogue also includes quite a few humorous bits.

- The tight focus on the imperial family kept production costs down, which amounted to only about 2 million dollars for all 13 hours. Almost all filming was confined to interiors, primarily rooms in the imperial household, with the very few exterior scenes shot on modest sets. Here, the key was to build just barely enough to suggest the whole and let viewers' imaginations fill in the rest. This was the complete opposite tack from that taken by films such as *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, with its colossal, highly detailed reconstruction of the Forum.

With its emphasis on in-depth exploration of the characters' personalities, its literate and often witty dialogue, its structure focused on the multigenerational saga of a family, and its clever staging and camerawork, *I, Claudius* found a way to inject high drama back into the ancient epic without needing to resort to expensive sets, costumes, or visual spectacles.

- Shot with multiple cameras, the miniseries has been compared to live theater, and indeed, many of those involved came from a theater background. The classic epics of the 1950s and 1960s were filmed using camera systems that stressed the size of the screen and the panoramic nature of the cinematography. The small TV screen couldn't achieve that kind of grandeur, but it could create a greater sense of intimacy and closeness, which *I, Claudius* cannily exploits. Many of the takes are extremely long—four to five minutes without a cut, which again resembles theater—and the viewer is constantly given very tight close-ups of the actors' faces, which are almost never used in big-screen movies.

The Show's Claudius and Augustus

- To be successful, a story needs compelling characters as well as skilled actors to bring them to life, and *I, Claudius* had a plethora of both.

- The historical Claudius was the step-grandson of the first emperor, Augustus, but most members of his family viewed him with contempt, and he was not given any of the important government positions that you might expect for one with his family connections. This was because Claudius had been born with a variety of physical disabilities, including tremors, a limp, and a speech impediment. Because Roman society placed a high value on looking dignified, these infirmities made him an object of cruel scorn.

- However, his unimposing body harbored a sharp, if somewhat eccentric, mind, and Claudius found solace in intellectual pursuits. He lived through the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius and probably only survived the tenure of the mad emperor Caligula by playing the fool. Then, in an unlikely twist, after the Praetorian Guard had murdered Caligula, apparently on a whim, they elevated Claudius to the emperorship.

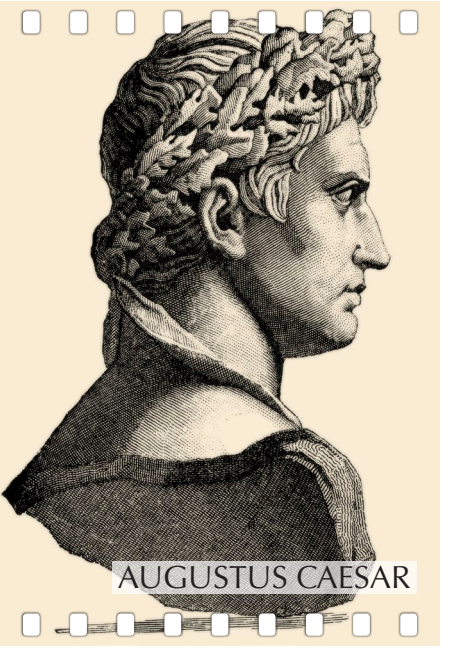
- This challenging role is superbly performed by Derek Jacobi, who makes Claudius a sympathetic narrator for the tale. It is a tour-de-force acting job, especially considering that he had to play Claudius from the time he was a young man all the way through old age. In fact, a number of the actors had to play their characters over a span of many decades, and this required the heavy use of old-age makeup.*

* *I, Claudius* was one of the first productions to take advantage of new advances in facial prosthetics, although the techniques were still being developed, resulting both in prosthetics that frequently and inconveniently fell off during filming and in others that stuck to the actors too well, making their removal extremely painful.

- Perhaps the most memorable character—and the most controversial in terms of the historical accuracy of her portrayal—is Augustus's wife, Livia, played in the series by Siân Phillips. The show depicts her as the driver of most of the action and the true power behind the throne. She is portrayed as being scheming, manipulative, coldly intelligent, and amoral. The character of the first emperor, Augustus, is conversely diminished by Livia's brilliance, as the credit for many of his strategies and achievements is shifted to her. While the primary sources and historical evidence could be read to suggest that Livia was an active partner to Augustus, nowhere is it implied that she was basically the brains behind the entire operation.

- In Graves's novel, Augustus is boyish and a bit ineffectual and would rather bring back the republic, but he stays on as emperor because of Livia's prodding. How could such a good-natured guy, whom we're meant to sympathize with, have amassed so much power? Through Livia's ruthlessness, of course. All the cleverness and nastiness required for achieving sole power are transferred to his wife.

- In the miniseries, Augustus is portrayed by Brian Blessed, who plays him as a bluff, hearty fellow who basically means well, despite being prone to flashes of temper and violence. He's also kind of clueless—blissfully unaware of Livia's machinations until near the end of his life and also seemingly the only one ignorant of his daughter Julia's many affairs.



- The show's Augustus does possess more force, agency, and decisiveness than Graves's version, because Blessed—with his brawny physique, booming voice, and confident manner—can't help but project energy and authority. Others defer to him, even Livia, and his occasional eruptions of anger give him a certain unpredictability and underlying menace. The historical sources clearly suggest that the real Augustus was far more of an active agent and had the cunning, calculation, manipulativeness, and ruthlessness here attributed to Livia. In physical appearance, Blessed is also pretty much the opposite of the historical Augustus, who is described as slight of build, on the short side, and often sickly.

Livia the Schemer

- The series' and books' conception of Livia goes much further than just showing her as a behind-the-scenes puppet master pulling the strings of her husband, however; they turn her into a mass murderer who kills multiple members of her own family to advance her agenda.

Both the books and the miniseries generally adhere much more closely to actual ancient sources than many cinematic depictions of the ancient world. In particular, Graves drew heavily on the Roman historian Tacitus and the biographer Suetonius, from which many incidents, details, and even bits of dialogue are taken directly.

- In actuality, of the various ancient historians who mention Livia, the majority were relatively neutral in tone or even positive. Suetonius, for example, who normally delights in recounting lurid details about sex and violence among the Julio-Claudians, has little negative to say of Livia.

- The notion that Livia was systematically eliminating all possible successors to Augustus in order to clear the way for her son Tiberius can be traced to ancient historian Cassius Dio, who records rumors about Livia without endorsing them or while simultaneously almost undercutting them. But he also presents a long speech, purportedly by Livia, in which she advises Augustus to rule more mercifully—hardly the words of a "wicked" woman.

- The historian Tacitus more clearly seems to have a strong dislike for Livia but takes a similar route in making insinuations rather than outright accusations. He repeatedly uses a Latin word for stepmother that carried negative connotations to describe her. He never plainly states that she killed Tiberius's rivals but instead hints and suggests, saying that he is simply relating rumors that he has heard or slipping in unfounded alternative explanations without any actual evidence.

- The show's portrait of a villainous Livia is both one of its most memorable aspects and the key to its main plotline. And it has at least some foundation in ancient sources.

- Whether true from a historical perspective or not, Phillips's characterization of Livia is an indelible one that has influenced how several generations view Livia and has created a vogue for scheming upper-class female characters.†

- Phillips, Jacobi, and Blessed all gave wonderful performances in their roles as Livia, Claudius, and Augustus, respectively, and *I, Claudius* can attribute much of its success to the fact that its entire cast was an extraordinarily talented group of British thespians, many of whom went on to become quite famous.

† HBO's *Rome* miniseries would later create its own scheming Livia-like figure in the character of Atia.

Critical Reaction

- Critical reaction to the series in the UK was initially negative; an early review in *The Guardian* declared, "There should be a society for the prevention of cruelty to actors." This might be attributable to several causes: The levels of sex, nudity, and violence were, at that time, unprecedented and shocking in a television show, and in contrast to the publicly funded BBC's traditional mission of presenting "morally wholesome" adaptations of classic literature and educating its audience, *I, Claudius* was more akin to a contemporary soap opera.

- From the start, however, the response of television audiences in both the UK and the US was enthusiastic. After their initial shock, critics also soon came around. *I, Claudius* garnered three British Academy of Film and Television Arts awards, including Best Actress for Phillips and Best Actor for Jacobi. In 2000, the British Film Institute even placed *I, Claudius* 12th on the list of the 100 greatest British television programs of all time. For many, the show's portraits of Livia and Claudius are the definitive ones, which have permanently influenced how their historical counterparts are viewed.

- In more recent times, some have asserted that the show had a misogynistic tone, and this criticism is not without basis, since many of the female characters—most prominently, of course, Livia—are portrayed as immoral schemers, while their male counterparts are often good-natured but ineffectual or else constantly being manipulated by the women. On the other hand, for the time when it was made, simply showing female characters as powerful, determined, and smarter and more competent than the male ones was a relatively progressive choice.

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07

Life of Brian: The Roman World's a Funny Place

As tends to happen with any genre of films, once a set of conventions has been established, they soon harden into clichés, which in turn quickly become ripe for parody. With regard to the ancient epic genre, such parodies soon appeared on the heels of the golden age of 1950s sword-and-sandal flicks. One comedic take on antiquity is a witty parody of both biblical and Roman epic films, *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, released in 1979. In the eyes of the irreverent UK comedy group Monty Python, the historical setting for Jesus's life and aspects of organized religion in general seemed worthy targets for comedic criticism. They eventually came up with the idea of presenting a biography of a character named Brian of Nazareth: a fictional nobody who lives at exactly the same time as Jesus and whose life parallels that of the Christian savior.

Monty Python was an irreverent group of six highly educated men—Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin—who had achieved a cult following in the United Kingdom and the United States as a result of their groundbreaking BBC sketch comedy television show, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.

The Ancient Epic Becomes Ripe for Parody

- *Monty Python's Life of Brian* methodically moves through a number of the most well-known clichés of the ancient epic—which had previously been presented in a solemn or reverential manner—and uses humor to deflate their pretentiousness.

- At first, the opening shot seems like a standard depiction of the birth of Christ, complete with angelic choir, shepherds, the Star of Bethlehem, and the three wise men coming to worship the arrival of the messiah. However, they mistakenly enter the wrong manger and encounter newborn Brian and his mother, bestowing upon the puzzled woman their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Soon realizing their error, they unceremoniously rip the gifts out of her hands and proceed next door, to where Jesus has just been born.

- Minus the mistaken identity, this is similar to the opening of *Ben-Hur*, arguably the most famous of the 1950s biblical epics, and the parallel continues with the credits that follow. The movie's title is spelled out in colossal, imposing stone blocks, just like in the posters for *Ben-Hur*, but in the Pythons' version, the massive stones soon ignominiously crumble and collapse, dissolving into one of Python member Terry Gilliam's trademark zany animated sequences, with bits of famous classical statuary zooming around.

- The movie then jumps ahead three decades to Jesus delivering the Sermon on the Mount, with Brian and his mother among those in attendance. Here, the Pythons tackle another stock scene found in almost every historical epic film—in fact, historical films set in every era: the rousing oration before a huge audience. The most common form such speeches take are ones delivered by the hero, usually before a battle to inspire his troops.

- The Pythons brilliantly subvert the trope of the heroic speech through the simple expedient of pointing out the practical problems with giving an outdoor oration in an era before the invention of microphones, loudspeakers, and other types of artificial voice amplification. As recent scholarship has shown, in reality, the words of anyone attempting to communicate in such a fashion would have been inaudible to anyone other than those within a few dozen yards of the speaker.

- The Pythons begin their depiction of the Sermon on the Mount with the camera tightly focused in on Jesus, and we hear his words clearly. Then, it steadily pulls back, and our perspective recedes away from him, over the heads of the gathered crowd, until Jesus has been reduced to a small figure in the distance. As the camera withdraws, the volume of Jesus's voice steadily decreases, and the ambient noise increases, until we arrive at the back of the crowd, where, instead of Jesus's sublime words, all we can clearly hear is the voices of several of the spectators, who are inanely bickering with one another. Nor can the crowd members themselves hear. For example, Jesus's injunction that "Blessed are the meek" is misheard as "Blessed are the Greek."

- A number of medieval historians have commented that *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* in many ways offers a far more accurate depiction of the Middle Ages than supposedly serious films on the period, and here, the Pythons present a much more realistic rendition of what attending an ancient public oration would actually have been like than appears in any allegedly serious historical epic.

Monty Python Goes to the Games

- In the same fashion that the Pythons poke fun at the historical movie convention of the rousing speech, they provide their uniquely insightful take on another staple of ancient epics: extravagant entertainments in the arena. Gladiator battles or chariot races are usually the dramatic highlights of films set in the Roman world, and these are invariably presented as exciting, if violent,

spectacles. The Pythons' version of an amphitheater scene thoroughly deflates this cliché and, again, astutely emphasizes how the practical details of such an event might undercut its glory.

- Hollywood epics, especially those of the 1950s, loved to present gladiator fights but usually shied away from showing just how gruesome such entertainments would actually have been. The Pythons immediately shove this aspect of the games in our faces by opening their amphitheater scene with the image of a bored slave shuffling around the blood-soaked sand of the arena in the aftermath of a gladiator fight, picking up sundry dismembered limbs and organs and dumping them into a basket. In the stands above, instead of the usual densely packed mob of enthusiastically shouting spectators, we see a very sparse audience listlessly looking on with bored expressions.

- Once some of the body parts have been cleared away, a deep-voiced herald dramatically announces the next bout, featuring a gladiator with the menacing name of Frank Goliath, the Macedonian Baby-Crusher. Two gladiators emerge: one a tall, muscular, imposing figure in armor, with his face concealed by a helmet, and the other a scrawny man equipped in the standard gear of a retiarius-style gladiator, with a net in one hand and a trident in the other.

- But rather than attacking one another in a furious and dramatic display of skilled swordplay, as previous films have accustomed us to expect, the scrawny retiarius emits a frightened squawk, immediately drops his weapons, and runs away from his opponent. His more heavily armored foe laboriously chases him, and, to the jeers of the crowd, the two repeatedly circle the arena until the pursuer suffers a heart attack and drops dead. The unexpectedly successful, if fainthearted, retiarius then capers about in a ludicrous victory dance.

- Thus, in their amphitheater scene, the Pythons thoroughly subvert the conventions of gladiator movies, presenting us with realistic gore but no accompanying glorious spectacle and with a triumph of cowardice rather than martial skill.

Monty Python's Take on Romans

- In Roman movies, it had become a convention to cast British actors with posh upper-class accents in the roles of Roman authority figures, such as generals and politicians. This casting decision lent an undeniable air of seriousness, authority, and all-around gravitas to such figures.

- The Pythons, of course, cannot resist poking fun at this hoary cliché. Thus, they saddle each of the two highest-ranking Romans in the movie with outrageous lisping speech impediments. The result is that the solemn authority that these men hope to project is undercut with every word they speak. The joke is intensified by the fact that they are completely unaware of their verbal mannerisms, with the result that they repeatedly make portentous declarations—such as "Vewy well, I shall welease Woderick"—but then are puzzled by the crowd's laughter and the snickering of their own guards.

> Mocking pretentiousness and authority figures is a staple of the Pythons' repertoire.

- A more serious scene involving the Romans occurs at a meeting of the People's Front of Judea, when their leader, Reg, delivers a fiery screed denouncing Roman imperialism and their cruel exploitation of the provinces. In the course of his invective, Reg dramatically exclaims, "They've taken everything we had … And what have they ever given us in return?"

- This is meant as a rhetorical question, but one of his men pipes up and says, "The aqueduct." Others chime in, listing additional benefits of Roman civilization, which results in Reg modifying his statement:

> *Apart from the sanitation, medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the freshwater system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?*

- When someone answers, "Brought peace," the enraged Reg responds with an exasperated "Oh, peace … Shut up!"

- It's a funny moment, but in this brief scene, the Pythons also quite effectively give a nutshell summary of one of the most complex and interesting debates concerning the Roman Empire and its effects. The Roman conquest of the Mediterranean was certainly accompanied by a great deal of violence and exploitation of the provincials, but for many regions, the arrival of Rome also brought order, prosperity, opportunity, and culture.

- It is an age-old argument that touches on issues of colonialism, imperialism, and the merits of spreading so-called civilization—and whether or not the attendant loss and assimilation of indigenous cultures is ultimately offset by whatever supposed benefits the conquering civilization brings. Roman writers such as Tacitus raised these issues 2,000 years ago, and they remain hotly debated and relevant topics today. It is rare for even serious historical films to tackle such complicated and contentious subjects, yet the Pythons manage to do so in a way that is both concise and funny.

The Pythons' Take on Religion

- While the film is actually quite respectful of Jesus, it is fiercely critical of the human institution of organized religion—and, really, of any sort of organization or bureaucracy.* Many of the movie's sharpest jabs are directed at the human tendency toward factionalism and tribalism. Accordingly, Judea is depicted as rife with rival Jewish rebel groups who are more obsessed with and passionate about their hatred of each other than they are with their animus toward their Roman overlords. Thus, the People's Front of Judea is deeply offended at being mistaken for the Judean People's Front, and both organizations despise the Judean Popular People's Front.

* While intended as a comedy, *Life of Brian* also had the more serious purpose of, in the words of John Cleese, offering a critique of "closed systems of thought, whether they are political or theological or religious or whatever."

- Ancient Judea was also a hotbed of religious factionalism and what the Pythons aptly refer to as "Messiah mania." In one memorable scene, Brian walks down a street on which every dozen feet is a different self-appointed "prophet" loudly proclaiming some new religion. Forced to imitate one of these while fleeing from the Romans, Brian inadvertently attracts a throng of ardent disciples who obsequiously address him as "master" and interpret his every platitudinous comment as divine revealed wisdom.

- Brian's fawning disciples are eager to interpret anything he says or does as evidence of his holiness. For example, when one complains about being hungry and Brian helpfully points out a nearby juniper bush, they all excitedly proclaim it a miracle and beg him to perform another.

- In the course of attempting to flee from his adoring disciples, Brian loses one of his sandals and gives away a gourd that he had been carrying. The mob instantly seizes upon these mundane items as holy relics of their messiah and carries them triumphantly about as objects of veneration. Almost immediately, however, disagreement arises between those who identify as "followers of the gourd" and as "followers of the sandal."

- Again, in an amazingly brief scene, the Pythons effectively present a microcosm of how almost every religion has developed, including a founder figure, the evolution of theology and doctrine, the establishment of symbols, and the seemingly inevitable schism into an ever-increasing number of rival sects, each rabidly espousing some relatively trivial variant on the core system of beliefs.

Reaction to the Film

- Although they had harbored some concerns about religious groups responding negatively to the film, the Pythons seem to have been surprised by the vehemence of the hostility it provoked. It was banned in Ireland, Italy, and Norway and elicited formal charges of blasphemy in Britain. In the United States, some theaters showing the film were targeted by picketing and even bomb threats. Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant groups all issued denunciations.

- Much of the animosity came from people who had not actually seen the film and who insisted on believing that the Pythons intended Brian to be Jesus—and thus that anything comic involving Brian constituted mockery directed against Jesus. This is a motive the Pythons adamantly denied, since the entire reason they had based the movie around Brian and not Jesus in the first place was to prevent such an interpretation.

- In the end, the controversy probably did less to harm the film than to help it by drawing attention to it and increasing its box office take. Today, it is considered a comedy classic, even being named as the greatest comedy of all time by British film magazine *Total Film*.

> At the end of the film, Brian, along with a large number of other condemned prisoners, is sentenced to be crucified, but, at the last minute, a centurion shows up, announcing that Pilate has issued a reprieve for Brian. In a clever inversion of the famous "I am Spartacus" scene, in which Spartacus's followers all claim to be him to prevent his being singled out for punishment, all of Brian's fellow prisoners shout out "I'm Brian!" in an attempt to avoid punishment.

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08

Gladiator: The Historical Epic Revived

In 2000, *Gladiator*, directed by Ridley Scott, single-handedly resuscitated a genre that had been dormant for almost four decades: the big-budget sword-and-sandal epic. And by any measure, it was a smashing success. The film not only was a commercial triumph* but also managed to garner the highest critical accolades, snagging five Oscars, including Best Picture.

* *Gladiator* earned 458 million dollars at the box office worldwide.

Historical Accuracy

- The film opens with the usual written prologue:

> *In the winter of 180 AD, Emperor Marcus Aurelius's 12-year campaign against the barbarian tribes of Germania was drawing to an end. Just one final stronghold stands in the way of victory and the promise of peace throughout the empire.*

- In AD 180, the emperor was indeed Marcus Aurelius, and he had in fact been battling Germanic barbarians for more than a decade. However, in AD 180, this war was nowhere near reaching a decisive military conclusion, and Rome was not close to winning—nor was there any "final stronghold" in Germania whose conquest would bring peace.

- As Aurelius looks on, the savage Germans are vanquished by the valiant Roman legionaries under the inspired leadership of their general, Maximus.† After the battle, Aurelius informs Maximus that he intends to appoint him as his heir in preference to his natural son Commodus, whom he characterizes as "not a moral man." Aurelius adds that Maximus is to then oversee the process of restoring Rome to a republican form of government. However, when Aurelius informs Commodus of his plans, Commodus responds by strangling his father and claiming that he perished from natural causes.

- Commodus is acclaimed emperor and sends assassins to kill Maximus, who escapes. But Maximus is soon captured by slave traders and ends up being sold to Proximo, the owner of a provincial gladiator school in North Africa. Proximo takes his gladiatorial troupe to Rome, where they fight in the Colosseum, and Maximus unexpectedly triumphs, earning both popular adulation and the hatred of Commodus, who recognizes his old enemy. Eventually, Commodus

† Maximus was a provincial aristocrat originally from Spain.

faces Maximus in the arena, and although the contest is rigged against him, Maximus kills Commodus. He then orders the restoration of the republic, before expiring from his wounds.

- In its plot, *Gladiator* is essentially a remake of 1964's *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, with the twist that it changes the name of the protagonist from Livius to Maximus and makes him a far more dynamic, charismatic, and sympathetic figure who the audience can actively root for. In place of the earlier film's grim musings on the historical process and the decline of civilizations, there's an emphasis on Maximus's exciting new second career as a gladiator.

- As in the earlier film, the single biggest deviation from actual history is that, while emperor Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus were real people, the main character is a complete invention of the filmmakers. But while Maximus is fictitious, he is an accurate representation of a type that played an important role in the development of the empire. Rome was particularly adept at identifying promising provincial elites and harnessing their energies on behalf of the empire.

- A second major ahistorical element is that the plot turns on Marcus Aurelius's decision to pick Maximus over Commodus as his successor. In reality, Aurelius vigorously promoted Commodus as his heir, bestowing a plethora of imperial honors and titles upon him and having Commodus elected as consul—the chief magistrate of Rome—at the tender age of 15. Aurelius shared his titles, triumphs, and offices with his son, and from AD 177 onward, Commodus was technically coruler of the empire with his father. Far from trying to disinherit Commodus, Aurelius did everything in his power to make sure that he would be his successor.

- A third significant way in which the events depicted in the film differ from history is the ending. In the movie, Maximus kills Commodus soon after he has taken the throne. In reality, Commodus enjoyed a long reign as emperor of the Roman world, ruling for 12 more years after Aurelius's death.

- Also, as the movie ends, there is a strong implication that Aurelius's desire that the Roman Republic be restored will be fulfilled. In reality, by AD 180, no one—neither the emperor nor the people—was looking to revive the old republican form of government. The institution of the emperorship was firmly established, and the only question was which faction would have the greatest say in selecting emperors.

Depiction of the Main Characters

- Maximus is invented, so little can be said about him, but Aurelius and Commodus are well-attested figures about whom much is known.

- Marcus Aurelius was famously an adherent of the Stoic school of philosophy. In keeping with this, Aurelius departed from the Roman tradition of being clean-shaven by affecting a beard in emulation of those worn by Greek philosophers. The movie accurately portrays him with such a beard and emphasizes his philosophical inclinations. But while his beard is accurate, Aurelius is portrayed in the film as a frail old man, but in AD 180, at the time of his death, he was still only 58 years old and, despite some health issues, still very active.

- Commodus, the villain of the film, is depicted as a mentally unstable, vain, vindictive, and cruel man who is preoccupied with public entertainments and who fancies himself a great warrior. This is not so far from the mark.‡ The real Commodus was obsessed with spectacles and staged elaborate gladiator shows and beast hunts. He also participated in them himself, slaughtering hundreds of animals and supposedly fighting as a gladiator, although these contests were almost certainly rigged. He terrorized the senate, had a number of senators put to death, and wanted to change the name of Rome to Commodiania.

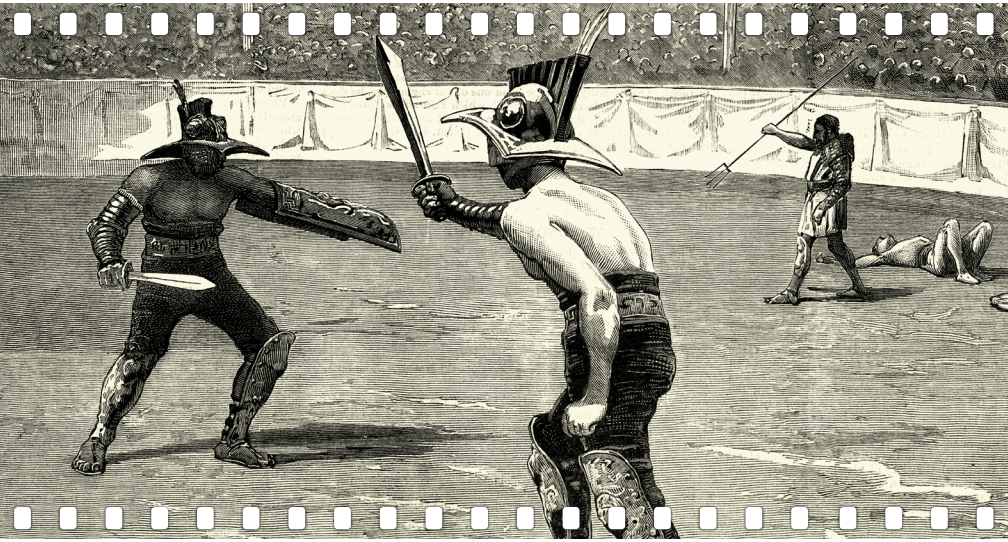
‡ One ancient source describes Commodus as "immoral, shameless, cruel, lecherous, and depraved."

- Although Joaquin Phoenix captures the personality of Commodus, he does not look much like him. At the time of his accession, the real Commodus was just 18 years old, had light-blonde hair, and is known to have fought left-handed. Phoenix is in his late 20s, has black hair, and fights right-handed.

Gladiatorial Combat

- The dramatic highlights of the film are its gladiator contests. Worth noting is the recreation of Proximo's gladiator school in North Africa. As portrayed in the film, every Roman city would have had its own miniature amphitheater, which hosted small-town versions of the great games staged in the capital.

- In the first actual gladiatorial combat, Maximus and other recently acquired gladiators are flung together, with only minimal training, into the arena, where they are collectively pitted against a group of more experienced warriors. A chaotic bloodbath ensues, with gladiators fighting all over the arena until the majority of them are slain.



- In reality, gladiators, although slaves, were highly trained professionals who received extensive weapons instruction before entering the arena. They were valuable commodities to their owners and would not have been wasted in such a cavalier fashion. Also, gladiators almost never fought as groups; instead, gladiator combats were one-on-one matches, and the Romans tried to pit two fighters of similar skill levels against each other.

> Many—perhaps most—gladiator matches ended with both fighters still alive.

- When the action moves to Rome, *Gladiator* makes extensive use of modern computer-generated imagery (CGI) effects to recreate the buildings of ancient Rome—in particular, the Colosseum, more correctly known as the Flavian Amphitheater.

- Overall, the filmmakers did a respectable job with the amphitheater. They correctly show such details as the multiple levels of the exterior and the interior, reserved seating for high-status groups, and the imperial box, where the emperor and his entourage sit. They highlight the technologically sophisticated features of the building, giving prominence to the retractable awnings called the velarium that were employed to shade the spectators, as well as the elevators and trapdoors set into the floor of the amphitheater that allowed fighters and wild beasts to spring up dramatically into the arena.

- The first combat sequence in the Flavian Amphitheater is another pitched battle involving several dozen gladiators—in this case, Maximus and his fellow gladiators from Proximo's school versus a swarm of chariots occupied by female gladiators dressed in golden armor and wielding bows and spears. This fight is presented as a reenactment of a historical event: the battle at which the Romans defeated the Carthaginian military genius Hannibal, ending the Second Punic War. The herald introducing the spectacle refers to it as the Battle of Carthage, although it is known as the Battle of Zama and took place in the desert outside Carthage.

- This scene correctly captures an aspect of Roman games that has often been ignored in gladiator films: the fact that the Romans were quite fond of staging elaborate spectacles that recreated famous historical or mythological episodes. Once again, the ranks of the combatants in such large-scale reenactments, however, would have been filled out with prisoners of war, rather than valuable trained gladiators.

- Where this sequence in the film fails as history, however, is in the details. The outfits are horribly wrong, and Roman soldiers did not fight from chariots, nor were there ever any female Amazonian warriors in the Roman military.

- There are also equipment problems with the other gladiator sequences. In reality, each individual Roman gladiator was trained to fight as one very specific type of gladiator, each of which had a distinctive and well-defined set of armor and weapons. More than a dozen of these different gladiator types are known.

- In the movie, neither Maximus nor the other gladiators are depicted as training or fighting as any of the historical types, but instead battle with a seemingly random array of equipment in each of their combats. Not only are many of the weapons and armor that they employ not of any appropriate type, but quite a few of them are not Roman at all.

- Another issue related to gladiators involves scenes in which the crowd and Commodus make the familiar thumbs-down gesture to indicate that a defeated gladiator should be killed. Recent scholarship has revealed that the thumbs-down sign was most likely a way of calling for the victorious gladiator to drop his weapon and spare his enemy, whereas the thumbs-up sign meant to stab him in the throat.§

> Early gladiator movies decided to use the thumbs-down gesture for death, and after having been reinforced by decades of further films, this convention became deeply ingrained in the public consciousness.

§ The relevant passage from the ancient text describing this only says that the gesture involved the turning of the thumb but does not specify the direction.

Roman Warfare

- The other major action sequence is the battle between the Roman army and Germanic barbarians that opens the film. Here, the propmakers did a decent job of equipping the Roman legionaries in appropriate garb. Most of them wear the *lorica segmentata*, an armor composed of metal plates bound together with leather straps, resembling the segments of a lobster. This is a legitimate variety of Roman military armor, and it is complemented by reasonably authentic legionary helmets of the so-called Gallic type. They wield the distinctive Roman gladius, or short sword, and bear large, slightly curved, rectangular shields, both of which are accurate.

- Two minor errors are that the Romans are equipped with leather or metal forearm guards, which are not attested, and that the Roman cavalry have stirrups, which were not yet in common use. Their German opponents are less convincing, outfitted in a variety of costumes—some plausible, others less so.

- The battle sequence begins promisingly, with the Romans marching back and forth and assembling into orderly ranks and formations. The primary characteristics of the Roman army were discipline and organization, and the prebattle scenes capture this well.

- In contrast, the Germans are simply massed into a loose mob, and this accurately reflects their combat tactics. The Roman archers then unleash a barrage of flaming arrows, and the catapults hurl dozens of clay pots, which explode upon contact.

- While all of this looks dramatic visually, it bears little resemblance to actual Roman military practice. Catapults were rarely employed on a large scale by the Roman army except during sieges, and when they were used, they typically hurled stones or giant arrows rather than the implausibly incendiary bombs depicted in the movie. There were archer contingents in the Roman army, but they most certainly would not have used flaming arrows in this situation.

- The two sides then crash together, and this scene is initially good, with the Romans realistically maintaining their formations, while the Germans surge forward in a disorganized mob. Maximus charges in at the head of the Roman cavalry, and the battle then unfortunately degenerates into a confused melee. This allows Maximus and others to engage in heroic-looking one-on-one duels, but it is a violation of every Roman tactical rule. The whole point of the Roman army's style of combat—and the reason for its success—was to fight as a group, not as individuals. No senior Roman general would be in the front lines either, as Maximus is in this scene.

> *Gladiator* would inspire a slew of new sword-and-sandal epics during the next decade, including *Alexander*, *Troy*, and *300*.

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09

Lecture

Rome: HBO's Gritty Take on Ancient History

The HBO miniseries *Rome* presents viewers with an ancient Rome that is far dirtier, more crowded, more colorful, more multicultural, and more lawless than the city of serene white marble monuments and stately aristocrats on display that exists in many earlier cinematic representations of Rome. The show is not without significant flaws, but in its best moments, it offers the most realistic rendition of life in a Roman city yet to appear on-screen. Religion, slavery, politics, and all elements of daily life—especially as experienced by nonelite Romans—are some key aspects of Roman civilization that most film versions of Rome have typically shied away from or misrepresented but that HBO's *Rome* attempts to portray in a more accurate way.

A More Accurate Vision of Roman Life

- HBO's *Rome* is set during the turbulent final decades of the Roman Republic. The 12 episodes of the show's first season, which premiered in 2005, cover the years 52 to 44 BC and trace the struggle for dominance among Julius Caesar; his rival, Pompey the Great; and the members of the Roman Senate, as embodied by characters like Brutus and Cicero, who are trying to preserve their traditional power.

- Other important male characters include Caesar's second-in-command, Mark Antony, and Caesar's teenaged grand-nephew and heir, Octavian. *Rome* also gives us two powerful and ambitious women that are obviously inspired by the scheming and manipulative Livia of the 1970s BBC miniseries *I, Claudius*: Octavian's mother, Atia, and her archenemy, Servilia, who is Brutus's mother.

- Season 1 ends with the assassination of Caesar by Brutus, and season 2 covers the three-way contest for power that ensues among Antony, Octavian, and the senate, culminating in Octavian's victory at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, which established him as sole ruler of the Roman world.

- The show features two lower-class protagonists who parallel and intertwine with the lives of these famous Romans. Both are soldiers in Caesar's army: a centurion, Vorenus, and a common legionary, Pullo.* The series thus has an *Upstairs, Downstairs* sort of structure, by which the audience gets to experience some of the most well-known events in Roman history from the perspectives of people at opposite ends of the social spectrum.

- The show has the two men becoming fast friends, but they form an odd couple. Vorenus is a serious, conscientious family man with traditional values and middle-class aspirations, whereas Pullo is gregarious, pleasure-seeking, and carefree, with a happy-go-lucky attitude.

* Vorenus and Pullo are historically attested figures, being the only two ordinary soldiers mentioned by name in *The Gallic Wars,* Caesar's account of his northern conquests.

Roman Paganism

- Religion infused all aspects of Roman culture, from politics to entertainment, but this is almost never portrayed in movies. If it shows up at all, it is usually in a few token references to Jupiter, or else presented in a highly pejorative manner, as a contrast to Christianity.

- *Rome*, however, depicts religious practices and rituals as woven into the pattern of everyday life. It also illustrates how the vast pantheon of gods in Roman paganism was situationally invoked depending on what issue individuals were facing. Thus, when Vorenus is starting a new business, he and his family pray to a bust of Janus, the god of new beginnings.

- The more free-spirited Pullo also demonstrates piety, at least in moments of distress. Many of Pullo's prayers correctly follow the format of him offering something to a god if, in return, the god will grant his request. This accurately reflects one of the essential characteristics of Roman paganism and one of the key ways that it differs from modern, particularly Christian, notions of the relationship between humans and the divine: In Roman belief, the gods generally do not help you because they are altruistically concerned for your welfare; rather, it is a reciprocal relationship in which you give in order to get. Offerings often took the form of a sacrifice, which could range from something as simple as fruit or olive oil to the killing of an animal, such as a sheep or a bull.

- The show also realistically illustrates two other characteristics of Roman religion: that it is a component of nearly all facets of life and that individuals differ in their degree of belief. This is a more nuanced view of paganism than one normally sees, with different attitudes ranging from those who are passionately devout, to those who engage in religious rituals mostly out of habit or to fit in socially, to those who are openly critical.

- Both points are driven home by Vorenus's and Antony's inductions into magistracies. These political appointments are accompanied by religious rituals, but whereas Vorenus participates in his ceremony with an air of piety and humility, the skeptic Antony lounges indolently in a chair wearing a bored expression while chanting priests circle around him.

- Another aspect of Roman piety was their deep reverence for their ancestors, who were the focus of family rituals and prayers. In the foyers of their homes, members of patrician families displayed wax death masks of deceased family members, sometimes going back centuries. These masks featured prominently in rituals such as funerals, during which current children of the family wore them, stressing the continuity of the family line and the importance of remembering and honoring the ancestors. These masks, known as *imagines*, never appear in Roman movies, but here, they are conspicuously flaunted in the homes of Atia and Servilia, members of the Julii and the Junii families,† respectively.

† Both the Julii and the Junii families are among the oldest and most aristocratic in Roman society, so it is entirely correct that ancestral masks would be prominently visible in their houses.

- One of the stranger components of Roman religion from a modern standpoint is its use of various methods of divination, such as examining internal organs of sacrificed animals or observing the flight of birds to ascertain the will of the gods. *Rome* includes quite a few instances of this at both the public and private level.

- The miniseries even examines those aspects of ancient Roman religion that might be regarded as superstition or magic. Curses figure prominently, with both upper- and lower-class figures calling down the wrath of gods on their enemies through ritualized invocations.

Slavery

- Another aspect of the Roman world that the show gets right is its portrayal of slavery. Too often, Roman movies attribute anachronistically empathetic attitudes to their heroes in regard to slaves, but here, even the relatively good characters exhibit an unquestioning and callous acceptance of slavery that is probably truer to reality.

- In the homes of the wealthy, slaves are a ubiquitous background presence—always ready to attend to their master's needs but treated as invisible objects. Thus, characters perform the most intimate actions in front of their slaves with no more thought than they would give to doing such things in the presence of a piece of furniture. Over the course of the series, as Vorenus moves steadily upward in status and wealth, these changes are mirrored in domestic scenes in which his household acquires more and more slaves to match his rising position.

- The show also nicely depicts the complex nature of Roman slavery as an institution in which there were huge variations in the way that different slaves were treated and in the material conditions of their existence. Agricultural slaves frequently lived lives filled with hard labor and abuse, whereas slaves who were body servants to rich people often became their close confidants and experienced considerable luxury.

- This is presented with the chief slave handmaids of Atia and Servilia, who are clearly their mistresses' most trusted companions and assume the role of friend, or even mother, to them. Caesar's personal clerk, Posca,‡ is his constant companion, the custodian of his money, and practically the only person who regularly dares speak truth to the powerful general. Freed in Caesar's will, Posca then fulfills the same duties for Mark Antony. His manumission exemplifies another characteristic of Roman slavery: that the line between free and slave status was a permeable one, and there were many who crossed it in both directions.

- While quite a few slaves wield surprising amounts of influence due to their proximity to their masters, the show does not whitewash the horror and dehumanization inherent in the institution of slavery. In one scene, a slave is sadistically tortured on the orders of Atia, who exhibits a clear understanding of Roman law when she correctly notes that the testimony of a slave is only legally admissible in court if it has been obtained through torture—certainly a revealing insight into Roman attitudes toward slaves.§

Politics and Oratory

- A third area in which the miniseries is especially astute compared to most Roman movies is its depiction of politics—specifically of the broader game of Roman politics, including the informal methods exploited by politicians in their struggle to gain advantages over their rivals. The driving force behind politics in the Roman Republic was a small number of aristocratic families, such as the Julii and the Junii, who were constantly jockeying for position and forming and dissolving alliances with one another.

‡ Posca often uses the pronoun *we* when speaking, as if he were simply an extension of Caesar, rather than a separate individual—which, in legal terms, was correct.

§ Many of the slaves are depicted as having to wear signs around their necks bearing their name and their master's name, in exactly the same way that we now put tags on our dogs to identify them as our property. While not universally used, such slave collars did exist in ancient Rome and can be viewed in archaeological museums today.

> The real achievement of HBO's *Rome* is its gritty depiction of daily life in ancient Rome. The city is grungy and dilapidated, but also vibrantly alive.

- For these upper-class families, marriage was not a love match but simply a mechanism for creating or solidifying alliances. Women were political pawns who were married and divorced at the command of the men in charge of their families.¶

- Rumor and slander were other tools employed by Roman politicians, and this is also accurately portrayed in the miniseries in a number of ways. One of these that gets a good deal of screen time is graffiti. The walls lining urban streets were covered with graffiti of all kinds, and politicians could hire professional graffiti writers to slander opponents.

- Sure enough, in the show, Caesar's enemies arrange for obscene graffiti mocking an adulterous affair that he is conducting to be painted around the city. Later, one of the factors that prompts Brutus to turn against his old friend Caesar and plot his assassination is graffiti calling on him to live up to his family's reputation as tyrant slayers. That such graffiti influenced the historical Brutus is specifically stressed by ancient sources.

- Another interesting and unusual inclusion that features prominently in season 2 is the collegia, which were trade associations, somewhat like the later medieval guilds, that played a major role in both social life and politics.** In the miniseries, Vorenus becomes the head of the Aventine collegium, and the collegia are portrayed as a combination of trade organization and proto-mafia. Although their criminal activity is probably exaggerated from reality, there was indeed a persistent fear on the part of upper-class Romans that the collegia might serve as focal points for riots and criminality.

¶ Octavian forced his sister Octavia to marry Antony to cement a temporary alliance between the two men.

** One of the most common types of graffiti found at Pompeii was endorsements of various politicians by different collegia.

- One other informal part of Roman society that factored into politics was the patron/client system, which tied together upper- and lower-class Romans in a complex web of obligation and exchanged favors. Illustrating this central, but often neglected, aspect of Roman culture are several scenes of great Roman politicians receiving the petitions of clients.

- When Vorenus runs for election from his district, we are treated to a brief but welcome glimpse at Roman electioneering. We see him don the *toga candida*, a special extra-white toga worn only by candidates for political office, and then attempt to deliver a public oration. His initial efforts are amusingly amateurish, as he clumsily attempts to emulate the oratorical gestures employed by Roman politicians, and he is bedeviled by hecklers, who loudly interrupt his oration. All of these details—from the toga to the gestures to the hecklers—paint an accurate portrait of what it was like to run for office in ancient Rome.

> Public speaking was central to Roman politics, and the show is quite good at emphasizing this, especially since the actors were trained to employ the stylized gestures actually used by Roman orators.

Problematic Aspects

- While there are many things to like about HBO's *Rome*, there are some real problems as well. HBO series are notorious for including heavy doses of sex and violence, and while you'd think the historical Rome offered more than enough to satisfy this impulse, the writers upped the ante by adding a number of lurid episodes that are blatantly ahistorical. For example, they invent an incestuous relationship between Octavian and Octavia. Such a liaison would have been just as shocking and taboo to the Romans as it is today.

- Another jarringly ahistorical element is that both ancient Rome and Egypt are depicted as having a lively culture of recreational drug use. Multiple characters from both the upper and lower classes repeatedly make references to smoking and are shown inhaling hemp or opium. But although opium and hemp derivatives were known to the Romans, there is zero evidence in the primary sources that these drugs were used recreationally or that there was a thriving drug culture.

- Opium was administered in small doses to treat sleeplessness, while cannabis was recommended for preventing flatulence. Additionally, the drugs were usually taken orally, and there is no mention in any source of Romans smoking them. The drug-use scenes seem inserted solely for their shock value.

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10

Legio

Centurion and *The Eagle*: The Legions in Britain

An entire Roman legion marches into the mists of Scotland and mysteriously disappears, apparently wiped out to a single man by savage British tribes. The Romans are so traumatized by this catastrophe that their expansion northward comes to a grinding halt, and the emperor Hadrian builds his famous wall to keep the northern barbarians at bay. This story is so compelling that several big-budget films were made based on it, including *Centurion* and *The Eagle*. Each film claimed to be inspired to varying degrees by this historical event, but the actual evidence for a "lost legion" is extremely scanty, and many scholars are very skeptical that such a military disaster even happened.

The Legend of the Lost Legion

- In 1954, Rosemary Sutcliff published a novel called *The Eagle of the Ninth*, which tells the heroic tale of a young Roman soldier, Marcus Flavius Aquila, who is the son of the destroyed legion's commander. To redeem his family's honor, he ventures beyond the wall, accompanied only by a British slave, Esca, on a mission to retrieve the lost eagle standard of his father's legion. The young adult novel was enthusiastically received and became a beloved formative reading experience for several generations of young Britons. *

- The legion in question is the Ninth Legion, which was a real legion that was originally formed during the late Roman Republic and that fought in the civil wars of the 1st century BC. A century later, when Rome invaded Britain, the Ninth was one of the legions stationed there and participated in a number of major battles. During the great revolt led by Queen Boudica of the Iceni tribe in AD 61, the Ninth was nearly wiped out. However, it was reconstituted, and in AD 82, it was one of the legions deployed by the Roman governor Agricola when he launched an invasion of northern Britain, known by the Romans as Caledonia.

- During this invasion, the Ninth allowed itself to be taken unawares by a large force of Britons, who attacked its camp at night. The Britons killed the sentries, scaled the walls, and broke into the camp itself. Agricola rushed to their aid with cavalry, and, according to the Roman historian Tacitus, a fierce and confused fight raged within the ramparts of the camp during the night. Tacitus states:

> *As dawn was breaking, the standards of the [relief force] could be seen. Caught thus between two fires, the Britons were dismayed, while the men of the Ninth took heart again […] at last the enemy was routed by the efforts of the two forces.*

* Sutcliff went on to write dozens of other historical novels and was recognized with one of Britain's highest honors, being named a Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

- It is known that the legion was still posted in Britain in AD 108, since a surviving inscription records that it participated in the construction of a major stone legionary fort at Eburacum, modern York. After this, however, its whereabouts become uncertain.

- A famous 19th-century historian named Theodor Mommsen combined their apparent disappearance from the historical record with a stray reference in a literary source to Britons killing a lot of Roman soldiers during the reign of the emperor Hadrian to hypothesize that the Ninth was annihilated by the Britons around AD 120. When this theory was repeated in Sutcliff's popular novel, Mommsen's speculation was transformed into a widely accepted "fact" among the general public.

- In the 1990s, however, new archaeological evidence appeared, in the form of several inscriptions suggesting that the Ninth, or at least some elements of it, were in the Netherlands after the date of its supposed annihilation in Britain.

- It does seem that the legion no longer existed by the 3rd century AD, leading some historians to conjecture that it was transferred to the east and then destroyed there, with the presumed site of its demise varying from Judea to Armenia. There is at least one scholar who continues to believe it was obliterated north of Hadrian's Wall in Britain, but at this point, the consensus is that the evidence is simply too sketchy to draw any firm conclusions.

> When legions were dramatically wiped out wholesale as a result of enemy action, it usually was recorded and commented on by multiple ancient authors. On the other hand, it was quite common for understrength legions to be combined together or even just disbanded for a variety of reasons. Therefore, the fact that we don't know the precise moment when the Ninth ceased to exist does not necessarily imply that anything nefarious happened to it. Rather than being massacred by barbarians, it's more likely that the Ninth fell victim to bureaucrats performing a reorganization.

Centurion

- Whereas Sutcliff's novel concerns efforts to retrieve the Ninth's eagle standard, the 2010 film *Centurion* is a prequel set 20 years earlier that imagines the circumstances of how the Ninth was actually lost.

- The film opens with a night attack on a small encamped detachment of Roman soldiers that recalls Tacitus's description of the actual major nocturnal assault on the Ninth. In this case, however, no help comes, and all the Romans are slain except for one centurion, Quintus Dias, played by Michael Fassbender.

- The attack is excitingly and gorily filmed, although once atop the walls, the Picts[†] inexplicably shoot flaming arrows. Not only would such arrows have been counterproductive, since the flames would have helped the targeted Romans dodge them, but it isn't explained how the Picts could have lit them. Of course, the real reason for their inclusion is the usual filmmakers' love of visually exciting pyrotechnics, but the conceit ruins an otherwise effective sequence.

- Fassbender's captured centurion manages to escape and encounters the main Roman force, the Ninth, which is marching north to punish the Picts. The commander of the Romans is named Titus Flavius Virilus and is depicted a bit unrealistically drinking, socializing, fighting, and even arm wrestling with the common soldiers. This wins him their affection. He is clearly intended to represent the epitome of masculinity, a point crudely emphasized by his very name, Virilus, which in Latin means "manly."

- The ambush and destruction of the Ninth in the film resembles what was perhaps the most famous defeat in Roman history, when three legions were surprised and wiped out in AD 9 by Germanic barbarians in the Teutoburg Forest in Germany. There are numerous parallels:

[†] The term *Picts* does not appear in any ancient source for several hundred more years, and the Romans would have probably just referred to barbarians native to this region as Caledonians, or just generically as Britons.

- In both cases, the Romans are led into a trap by a barbarian whom they believe is on their side but is really acting as a double agent. In the Teutoburg massacre, this was a German chieftain named Arminius; in the movie, this role is updated for 21st-century notions of gender equity as a warrior woman of the Picts named Etain, who is pretending to be a scout for the Romans.

- In the Teutoburg disaster, the Romans were caught strung out while marching through heavily forested and swampy terrain that was ill-suited to their style of fighting, which depends on open ground where they can deploy into fighting formation. In the film, just such an ambush occurs in the dense woods. In both cases, the discipline and organization of the Romans help them fend off the initial assaults, as small groups of legionaries form defensive squares behind a wall of shields.‡

‡ In the film, a Roman officer instructs his nervous troops, "Whatever comes out of that mist, lads, you will hold the line." This accurately reflects the emphasis on discipline that constituted the core of the Roman military machine.

- In the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest, the Roman formations were gradually worn down over several days of continuous fighting, until the exhausted and scattered groups could be picked off and massacred. The movie substitutes a quicker and more dramatic mechanism for Roman defeat that, once again, anachronistically involves fire. The Picts unleash a barrage of gigantic flaming balls that weave through the forest, miraculously dodging all the trees but unerringly smashing into the densest concentrations of Roman troops. This improbable method of attack is completely unattested in any ancient sources but was undoubtedly inspired by the similarly invented use of flaming logs in the 1960 version of *Spartacus*.

- The remainder of the film follows the adventures of a handful of Roman survivors of the ambush, including Fassbender's centurion. At first, they attempt to rescue their beloved commander, Virilus, who has been taken prisoner. However, when this proves impossible, they then focus their efforts on escaping back to Roman territory, pursued the entire way by the vengeful Picts, led by the bloodthirsty Etain.

- While the film is not an accurate depiction of historical events, it is a solid adventure/war movie and at least references or mirrors some actual episodes in Roman history.§ The movie was filmed on location in the highlands of Scotland, rather than in a studio, and employs physical special effects rather than computer-generated ones, lending it a nice aura of authenticity.¶

§ The name of the governor who wants to cover up the massacre is Agricola, a clear nod to the most famous Roman governor of Britain. He ruled over the province a few decades earlier in the 80s AD and, incidentally, was the father-in-law of the historian Tacitus, one of our main sources for events there.

¶ So realistic was the filming that several of the actors got frostbite, and there were almost two dozen injuries among the crew. It's also a rather gory film, using up more than 50 gallons of fake blood.

The Eagle

- The 2011 film *The Eagle* is directly based on Sutcliff's novel and is set in AD 140, 20 years after the events of *Centurion*. The son of the commander who lost the Ninth's eagle standard, now a centurion himself, comes to Britain determined to redeem his family's honor. Played by Channing Tatum, the character is called Marcus Flavius Aquila—again, a less-than-subtle use of names to indicate what is important about him, since *aquila* in Latin means "eagle."

- Like *Centurion*, this movie begins with a night attack on a small Roman fort—although in this iteration, the Britons more realistically spring out of the dark without giving themselves away with flaming arrows. But they are then repulsed, thanks to Aquila's alertness.

- The next day, they begin to execute some Roman prisoners before the walls, and Aquila leads a sortie to rescue the captives. He orders his men into the defensive testudo formation, in which the troops create a dense rectangle with a solid barrier of shields on all sides and overhead. They shuffle forward as a mob of frenzied Britons engulfs them, seeking a weak spot.

- The Romans are realistically depicted as jabbing at the surrounding tribal warriors with their short swords from behind the wall of their shields. Though not accurate in every regard, this is a good scene overall that reasonably portrays how one of the more famous Roman battle formations could be employed against less disciplined troops.

- The Britons counter with an attack by chariots equipped with blades on their wheel hubs. Aquila saves his men by heroically spearing the lead driver but is badly wounded in the process. The Britons did use war chariots, so, again, this is an accurate detail. Whether or not they actually had chariots with blades on the wheels is debated.**

** There is one not-very-reliable source that mentions this, but at least such scythed chariots are attested as having been used in warfare by other ancient civilizations.

- Several times Aquila is shown praying before battle to the god Mithras, a deity who was especially popular with soldiers. Roman religious beliefs are also alluded to when, uncertain what direction to take, Aquila offers a prayer while clutching a totemic carving of an eagle. An eagle promptly appears in the northern sky, and Aquila follows this divine omen. In fact, augury involving observing the flight of birds—and especially of eagles—was an important practice in Roman paganism.

- Discharged from the military due to his injury but still seeking to bring honor to his family, Aquila decides to venture north of the wall in an attempt to find and recover the lost eagle standard of the Ninth Legion. As a culture, the Romans, and especially members of the hereditary aristocracy, were obsessed with family honor and one's family name, so Aquila's fixation with these is legitimately representative of Roman values. Accompanied only by his body slave, Esca, he sets off.

- Although Esca is the son of a chief slain by the Romans and therefore hates them, he is bound by a debt of honor to serve Aquila. They and other characters engage in a number of debates over the presence of the Romans in Britain and the nature of Roman imperialism, which neatly encapsulate opposing perspectives on this complex issue.

- As Aquila and Esca continue on their quest, they encounter Guern, a Roman survivor of the last battle of the Ninth who has gone native and who leads them to where it took place. What follows is an effectively unsettling sequence, as they wander over the site of the decades-old massacre while Guern tersely describes the slaughter. This creepy scene seems to have been directly based on another passage from Tacitus, in which a Roman army finds the site of the infamous massacre of three legions in the Teutoburg Forest years after it occurred.

- Although depicting what was probably a fictional Scottish woodland massacre of a Roman army, this scene is a terrific evocation of the actual event described by Tacitus of the aftermath of the destruction of three Roman legions in the forests of Germany.

- From here, the film moves firmly into the territory of fiction, as Aquila and Esca are captured by the completely nonhistorical tribe of the Seal People, experience further adventures, discover the eagle standard among the Seal People, steal it, become fast friends, manage to return south to the Roman lines, return the eagle, and resolve their respective father issues.

Centurion and *The Eagle* are probably not as well known as some of the other movies in this course, but for those interested in Roman Britain or the Roman army, they are worth watching.

READING

McCall, *Swords and Cinema*.

11

Scipione l'africano and *Fellini Satyricon*

Made decades apart, *Scipione l'africano* and *Fellini Satyricon* could not be more radically different in almost every way, including approach, intent, message, and style. But they are both examples of how modern Italians have depicted their own country's history on screen. *Scipione l'africano* is a pompous 1937 military epic about Republican Rome's struggle against the Carthaginian general Hannibal. It was intended as propaganda for the dictator Mussolini and was explicitly made to justify Fascist Italy's recent aggressive colonial invasion of Ethiopia. *Fellini Satyricon* is a bizarre, subversive 1969 film by acclaimed Italian director Federico Fellini that surreally mixes ancient and modern imagery.

Scipione l'africano

- *Scipione l'africano* is set during the Second Punic War fought between the Roman Republic and its main rival for control of the western Mediterranean, the North African city-state of Carthage. The Carthaginian army was commanded by the military genius Hannibal, who invaded Italy and inflicted three crushing defeats on the Romans, including the Battle of Cannae in 216 BC, at which more than 50,000 Romans were killed.

- Eventually, the Romans found a good general of their own—Scipio Africanus—who launched a counterinvasion of North Africa. The two generals met in 202 BC at the Battle of Zama in the desert outside Carthage, and despite Hannibal having a contingent of war elephants, he was vanquished by Scipio.

- Telling the story of Scipio's invasion of Africa, the film utilized 32,000 extras from the Italian army* and 40 actual elephants. How and why this enormous epic was made is inextricably linked with dictator Benito Mussolini and the Fascist movement.†

- All the Fascist states of the time, including Hitler's Germany, were keenly aware of the value of propaganda and its ability to inspire and motivate their populations. Both Mussolini and Hitler adroitly deployed such propaganda across a wide range of media and contexts, including art, architecture, clothing, symbols, film, rituals, and language. All of these come together in Leni Riefenstahl's frighteningly effective 1935 documentary covering the Nazi Party rallies at Nuremburg: *Triumph of the Will*.

* Many of the extras were shortly to embark upon military service in Africa.

† In the 1920s and 1930s, Mussolini founded the international Fascist movement, eventually gaining political control over Italy and establishing an Italian Empire with colonial territories in Africa. Throughout this process, he explicitly portrayed himself and his regime as a modern revival of the ancient Roman Empire.

- Mussolini wanted the Italian filmmaking industry to similarly support his regime, and to promote this, in 1936, he established the famous studios of Cinecittà on the outskirts of Rome. This was just one of many grand projects initiated by Mussolini, many of which were intended to link his regime to ancient Rome.

- Another way in which Mussolini wished to emulate ancient Rome was by conquering a great empire. His efforts in this direction were aimed at Africa, where Italy had long harbored colonial ambitions. By 1934, Italy had managed to acquire territories in Libya, Somalia, and Eritrea and were next targeting Ethiopia. Mussolini was particularly desirous of subjugating this country because, 40 years earlier, Italy had invaded Ethiopia and suffered a humiliating defeat at the 1896 Battle of Adwa. He at last realized his ambition in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935 to 1937, during which his army invaded and annexed Ethiopia.

- Even before the invasion of Ethiopia, Fascist officials were lobbying to get a film made about Scipio Africanus and ancient Roman imperialism in Africa as a way to assert a sort of historical Italian claim to the region and thereby justify the current invasion. A strongly negative international reaction to Italy's attack on Ethiopia gave further impetus to the project, as a way to combat the criticism with positive propaganda.

- The Fascist state was involved in every stage of the planning, production, filming, and distribution of the film. A special fund of 12.6 million lire was created to pay for it, making it the most expensive film yet created by the Italian film industry.

- An experienced director, Carmine Gallone, was chosen, and those working on the movie were under no illusions as to its propagandistic motivation. LUCE, the Union of Educational Cinematography, which was a state-sponsored media institute, churned out a constant stream of propagandistic newsreels

and documentaries about the making of the epic. These show Mussolini and other Fascist dignitaries visiting the sets at Cinecittà studios and observing the process.

- In the movie, many scenes depict the ancient Romans hailing Scipio by anachronistically using the Fascist salute, with outstretched right arms and open hands. The word *fascist* is derived from an ancient Roman symbol, the fasces, which was a bundle of sticks tied together with an axe that was carried by the attendants of Roman magistrates as an emblem of their authority. Because of its association with power, the fasces was adopted by Mussolini as well. In the film, fasces appear prominently, constantly being carried around before Scipio—a not-very-subtle nod to contemporary Fascism that no one would have misunderstood.

- Scipio makes a number of speeches, and in these, his body language and delivery style are clearly modeled after the well-known oratorical mannerisms of Mussolini himself. Even the way that the actor playing Scipio was filmed, often from angles emphasizing his profile, imitates the way that Mussolini liked to be portrayed.‡

- The film also depicts the Carthaginian soldiers as animalistic brutes, similar to how Italian Fascist propaganda represented the Ethiopians, thus advancing the argument that the invasion of Ethiopia was necessary to bring civilization to these savages. In the movie, not only are many of Hannibal's troops portrayed as having black or dark skin, but many are even dressed in the clothing of contemporary African tribesmen of the 1930s.

‡ In an ironic touch, the first name of the actor playing Scipio was Annibale, or Hannibal.

- The most famous sequence is an extended recreation of the Battle of Zama. The movie does deserve praise as a very rare instance of trying to accurately represent the different stages of a historically attested battle. It is also the only cinematic example of a large-scale charge by dozens of war elephants performed by real animals rather than computer-generated effects.§

- The 1930s conquest of Ethiopia was viewed by Italians as avenging the earlier defeat at Adwa and restoring Italian honor. The film explicitly makes this connection as well, drawing a parallel with Rome's initial defeat at Cannae followed by its eventual victory at Zama.¶

§ There is suspicion that some of the elephant spearings in the movie were genuine.

¶ The first shot of the film is of a sea of Roman dead littering the battlefield in the aftermath of Cannae, and the movie ends with a soldier exultantly exclaiming after the triumph at Zama, "You have avenged Cannae!"

- When evaluating the film, it is hard to separate it from its propagandistic intent and close association with the Fascist regime. The acting is stilted and the characterizations simplistic, and much of the camerawork is unimaginative. It cannot be denied, however, that some of its more spectacular moments, such as the Battle of Zama, are impressive simply due to their scale.

- Despite the Italian government's vigorous promotion and being awarded the Mussolini Cup for Best Italian Film at the 1937 Venice Film Festival, the movie has not proven to be enduringly popular.**

Fellini Satyricon

- Just as *Scipione l'africano* was very much a product of the 1930s Fascist era, *Fellini Satyricon* was deeply influenced by the time when it was made. The film appeared in 1969, at the height of the social and sexual revolutions of the 1960s and amidst an era of experimental avant-garde filmmaking—and both of these movements left an indelible mark on the movie.

- The film is based on an ancient novel known as the *Satyricon*, written by the Roman author Petronius, who lived during the reign of the emperor Nero in the 1st century AD. The *Satyricon* is a rather racy picaresque novel that traces the amorous and seriocomic adventures of Encolpius, a pleasure-seeking young Roman man. The main one involves a three-way love triangle of Encolpius; his sometime friend and sometime rival, Ascyltus, another decadent young man; and Encolpius's pretty 16-year-old slave boy, Giton, who is an object of lust for both.

- The novel has not survived intact, and what remains today consists of several fragments from the middle of what was originally a significantly longer work. Nevertheless, the surviving pieces are substantial, amounting to more than 100 pages in a standard modern paperback.

** It can be hard to find a copy of the film to watch. There is a version dubbed into English that is a half hour shorter than the original, entitled *Scipio Africanus: The Defeat of Hannibal*.

- The film that Fellini based on this source material is a controversial one. Critics and audiences were, and still are, sharply divided in their reactions. Some hail it as a sophisticated work of genius that is a brilliant commentary on the process of interpreting the past and our inability to truly understand ancient civilizations; others were left confused and alienated by its off-putting narrative structure and style and repulsed by what they viewed as its excessive, and even deviant, sexuality.

- The incomplete nature of the novel is clearly one of the aspects about the project that excited Fellini. He wanted his film to have a similarly fragmented quality. Additionally, rather than attempting a veristic reconstruction of the Roman world, it would instead offer an imaginative vision inspired by certain elements of it.††

- Fellini, who was attracted to presenting a mixture of the modern and the ancient, was energized by how much remains unknown about Roman civilization, and the finished film certainly reflects this philosophy. Like Petronius's text, it is fragmentary, with long digressions and gaps in the story. And, like the novel, the film begins abruptly and then ends in the middle of a random sentence. Fellini deliberately keeps viewers distanced and confused through sudden, inexplicable jumps to new locations and situations, and characters who seem to die in earthquakes or be murdered show up later, unharmed, without explanation.

†† A number of critics, especially classical scholars, have admired this aspect of the film, praising it as a sophisticated exploration of how our interpretations of antiquity are really modern constructs and how we can never know what it was really like.

- The audience is not meant to empathize with these characters but instead just to observe their actions, and the protagonists themselves are not especially appealing, being petty and self-absorbed and unreflectively engaging in numerous acts of criminality and debauchery.

- The film is visually overwhelming, packed with Fellini's trademark collection of misfits, freaks, and grotesques. It is a feverish odyssey through a garish Roman netherworld—a surreal and nightmarish carnival of lurid and disturbing images and people—staged on sets that at times resemble an Escher drawing, with disorientingly jumbled networks of staircases, ramps, passages, and levels.

> Watching the movie is like looking at a 2,000-year-old fragment of a painting on a Greek vase and envisioning the whole—not with the intent to fashion a plausible historical reconstruction, but rather to create a personal act of imagination.

- Every sense is assaulted and bewildered, including hearing. The film's music is intentionally discordant and bizarre, incorporating everything from spacey synthesized bleeps, to jarring sound effects, to contemporary ethnic music. The characters speak a perplexing and illogical mixture of languages, including Italian, Latin, Greek, German, English, Turkish, and sometimes even pure gibberish. The entire film is dubbed, but this is deliberately done in a disorienting manner, with the movements of the actors' lips wildly out of sync with the audible dialogue.

- Nevertheless, many scenes, and even large chunks of dialogue, come straight from Petronius's text. And some episodes in the movie are imported from or inspired by other ancient authors. In fact, a sequence in which an aristocratic Roman couple free their slaves and commit suicide after a political regime change mirrors any number of similar actual suicides in Roman history, including Petronius's. None of this is explained, so unless the viewer has an extensive knowledge of Roman history and literature, the viewer will probably be left puzzled by what appears to be a seemingly random assortment of disturbing images.

- Also, despite the film's aggressively surreal and modernistic components, it mixes these together with many details reflecting a knowledge of ancient Roman daily life. For example, an extended sequence near the movie's beginning follows Encolpius as he strides through a Roman bath, then a brothel, and finally the cavernous, multilevel interior of a high-rise apartment building in a slum section of ancient Rome. In each location, we are treated to a rapid series of vignettes of daily life. Although not realistic in any literal sense, the sequence captures something wonderfully true to life about the city of Rome as a bustling, crowded, vibrant, diverse, and alternately magnificent and sordid urban space.

- The final shot of the film is a close-up of Encolpius, on which the camera freezes, and then the actor's image gradually transforms into a painting on a wall. The camera pulls back to reveal all the other characters, also in wall-painting form, but significantly, the crumbling section of wall is part of a ruined building, and the images are cracked and faded. This serves as a final distancing mechanism and reminder of the inscrutability of a world that is long gone.

- Even for those who admire this movie's intellectual content, it can be a hard slog to get through. It contains images that many would find disturbing or even repulsive—including overindulgence, murder, sexual debauchery, and cannibalism—but the movie does raise some interesting questions about the nature of historical reconstruction and the limits of knowledge.

READING

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12

Level 3

Bread and Circuses in Sci-Fi Films

What unites *The Hunger Games*, *The Matrix*, *The Running Man*, *Rollerball*, and *Ready Player One*? Of course, they are all popular science fiction films, but they also all derive their basic plot premise from a 2,000-year-old line of Roman poetry. The line in question was written by the Roman satirical poet Juvenal, who lived during the latter half of the 1st century AD.

"Bread and Circuses"

- In his 10th satire, Juvenal writes:

> *The [Roman] People have abdicated their duties; for the same people who once upon a time handed out military commands, high civil offices, legions—everything—now restrains itself, and instead, eagerly hopes for just two things: bread and circuses.*

- The "bread" that Juvenal refers to is the free monthly grain dole that citizens of the capital city were eligible to collect, and the "circuses" are the violent public spectacles, such as gladiator games in the amphitheater and chariot races, which were staged in the enormous racetrack called the Circus Maximus.

- What Juvenal is asserting here is that, during the Roman Empire, the previously highly engaged and politically active Roman people had traded away their political power in exchange for basic sustenance and mindless entertainment. Furthermore, in this interpretation, Rome's rulers deliberately kept the populace in a complacent and inert state by continually plying them with handouts of free food and lavish, violent shows.

- Often expressed in shorthand by the expression "bread and circuses"—or occasionally in the original Latin version, *panem et circenses*—this is one of the few concepts about ancient Rome that seems to have permeated the public consciousness. This idea has had an unbelievably widespread influence on science fiction films and TV shows of the last half century and, indeed, has inspired many of the most memorable sci-fi plots of this period.

The Hunger Games

- One of the most successful sci-fi franchises of the 2000s has been *The Hunger Games* trilogy of books written by Suzanne Collins and the subsequent four movies based on the trilogy.*

- *The Hunger Games* takes place in a future dystopian state where the citizens of the central city, referred to simply as the Capitol, enjoy lives of luxury and decadence, supported by the labor of the denizens of 12 surrounding regions known as districts. Each year, a boy and a girl are chosen by lottery from each district to participate in an event known as the Hunger Games. These so-called tributes have to hunt and kill one another until only one remains. The victor achieves fame and wealth, and the entire contest is broadcast as a spectacle accompanied by breathless commentary and analysis.

> The Latin phrase translated as "bread and circuses" is *panem et circenses*, and the name of the country where the novels are set is Panem.

* In both forms of media, *The Hunger Games* has been a phenomenal worldwide success, with the books translated into 54 different languages and selling more than 100 million copies and the films collectively grossing more than 3 billion dollars.

- Author Suzanne Collins has stated that she drew inspiration for her story from two key classical sources: the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, which involves an annual tribute of young people who are sacrificed to the monster; and Roman history—especially the role of gladiator games in Roman society. Her books' vision of a depraved and profligate Capitol is an obvious evocation of Juvenal's portrayal of the decadence of the city of Rome, and the Capitol's exploitation of the districts recalls the manner in which the provinces of the Roman Empire were taxed and plundered to supply food and resources for the city of Rome.

- The status of Hunger Games victors—who are simultaneously powerless pawns furnishing entertainment and adored icons—precisely mirrors the odd position of gladiators in Roman culture as both slaves and celebrities. The correspondence is especially blatant in scenes such as when the Hunger Games contestants enter a stadium riding in chariots to thunderous applause.

- The most significant parallel is that in Collins's books, the games serve the bread-and-circuses social function of distracting the inhabitants of the districts and keeping them politically inactive. Another Roman influence is that many of the characters, especially inhabitants of the Capitol, bear Roman names, including Brutus, Octavia, Caesar, Flavius, Aurelius, and Claudius. Not only do the games provide entertainment, but the "bread" half of Juvenal's bread-and-circuses maxim is addressed as well, since winners of the games earn awards consisting chiefly of food, which is bestowed upon their entire home district.

> Traditionally, the genre of science fiction has often been used more as a way to comment on current events than to offer predictions of the future. Similarly, science fiction films often reveal far more about the fears, concerns, and desires of the era that produces them than it does insights about the future.

The Matrix

- Perhaps the most important sci-fi film of the 1990s was *The Matrix* (1999). With its groundbreaking "bullet time" special effects, much-imitated future-noir style, and philosophical questionings of the nature of reality, it has become a fixture on lists of the top sci-fi films of all time. While these are the elements that made it famous, the plot at the core of this influential futuristic film is just yet another twist on Juvenal's 2,000-year-old dictum.

- In the movie, machines with artificial intelligence have won an apocalyptic war against mankind, after which the bodies of the surviving humans were plugged in and exploited as energy sources. While their bodies are kept alive by machines, the consciousness of each human dwells in a virtual world known as the Matrix, which they mistake for reality, unaware of how they are being used.

- This system represents perhaps the most extreme version of the bread-and-circuses theme, one in which humanity is reduced to utterly passive vessels, their bodies being force-fed while their minds exist in a realm that is entertaining but entirely an illusion.

The Running Man

- The 1980s produced its own sci-fi take on the bread-and-circuses theme with *The Running Man* (1987), featuring action superstar Arnold Schwarzenegger. Based on a novel by the popular horror writer Stephen King, it hypothesizes a future in which a totalitarian government maintains control through manipulating the media—in particular, through a nightmarish game show in which contestants must wend their way through a maze stocked with professional assassins.

- In the by-now familiar formulation, this violent entertainment occupies the attention of the masses and thus serves as a way for the power structure to sustain its dominance. Predictably, Schwarzenegger's character ends up as a contestant and, one by one, dispatches the assassins who attempt to kill him in gruesome fashion.

- While the film is mindless escapism and presents violence in a purely sensational way, it does occasionally touch on interesting issues—in particular, when fiction and reality overlap in entertainment. One of the unique aspects of some Roman spectacles, such as recreations of famous battles or reenactments of mythological stories using gladiators or prisoners of war, was that they transgressed the boundary between fiction and reality, since they resulted in genuine death and violence within the context a performance.

- In *The Running Man*, the game—while gleefully presented with all the tacky trimmings of a game show—is not really a game, since the stakes are life and death. Also, in a nice bit of casting that similarly blurs between fiction and reality, the smarmy futuristic game show host is played by real-life smarmy game show host Richard Dawson.†

- *The Running Man* shamelessly exploits violence to make money and is infused with a postmodern sensibility whereby the film and its characters smirk self-consciously at themselves and at any viewer foolish enough to take them seriously.

Rollerball

- The 1970s offered a more serious attempt to explore Juvenal's theme in *Rollerball* (1975), directed by Norman Jewison and starring James Caan and John Houseman. The film imagines a not-too-distant future in which the world is controlled by corporations that provide generous basic necessities at the cost of suppressing individuality and knowledge.

† The film features two actors who would make the transition from being fictional leaders to real-life ones: Schwarzenegger would be elected governor of California, and Jesse Ventura would be elected governor of Minnesota.

- The passions and allegiances of the masses are directed away from politics and nationalism toward athletic teams that compete in a violent mixture of roller derby and football called rollerball.‡ Violence is a standard part of this contest, and players wear leather gloves studded with spikes, resulting in frequent maimings and deaths. James Caan plays Jonathan E., the most successful rollerballer, who enjoys celebrity status and who, against all odds, continues to survive and dominate the sport year after year.

- The main conflict in the movie comes from the growing fear among the corporate executives that Jonathan's success and fame might be parlayed into political power. The executives had designed rollerball to distract the masses and channel their energies in a harmless direction, but they also intended the brutality of the sport to render it impossible for any player to survive for very long and thus gain too much power. The executives push Jonathan to retire, and when he refuses, they gradually alter the rules of the game to increase the likelihood of him being killed, until the movie culminates in a championship game/bloodbath in which there are no rules.

- In addition to the general bread-and-circuses theme, the movie contains a number of specific allusions to, and parallels with, gladiator games and Roman society. Just as one of the most popular aspects of gladiatorial combat was that it pitted different types of gladiators using distinct equipment and strategies against one another, there are different types of rollerballers with varying equipment and tactics. Just as there was an imperial box for the Roman emperor and his family, the executives preside over rollerball bouts from a special box. At the beginning of each rollerball game, the team members parade around the ring, echoing the *pompa*, or formal parade, that preceded each gladiatorial contest.

‡ Rollerball is played by two teams on a circular inclined track. A solid steel ball is shot from a cannon around the track at great velocity, and the goal of the game is to obtain the ball and throw it into a goal.

- One important element that always seems to be left out of films depicting Roman entertainments is the central role played by fans of the main Roman chariot-racing teams, called factions. *Rollerball* shows the fans of each team seated in blocks in the stands, decked out in their team colors, chanting acclamations in unison—just like the fans of the Blue or Green faction at the circus. Also like a Roman circus claque, the supporters of each rollerball team have their own distinctive gestures, which they perform in unison.

- Just as the common stereotype of Roman aristocrats under the Roman Empire is that they are a decadent, morally degenerate group given to orgiastic celebrations, the executive class in the movie is portrayed in much the same way. The movie includes an extended party sequence in which the executives and their vacuous, pleasure-seeking trophy wives indulge in alcohol and drugs while watching highlights of rollerball games projected on giant television screens.

- Gladiators in ancient Rome, while usually slaves and looked down on as a very low-status group, nonetheless frequently enjoyed celebrity and even admiration. This phenomenon of status dissonance is also depicted in the film: On the one hand, rollerballers are sneered at by the executives as dumb brutes, yet on the other, they are idolized and envied.

- Similarly, just as gladiators were the nexus of a complex interplay of attitudes and symbols related to sexuality and were on occasion notoriously chosen by upper-class women as lovers, the star rollerballers are invited to executive social events, where the elite women ogle them and are fascinated and aroused by the violence and masculinity that they represent.

- *Rollerball* thus constitutes an interesting exploration of a number of issues raised by Juvenal's maxim while updating it to the modern corporate world.

Ready Player One

- The latest iteration of the bread-and-circuses theme appears in director Steven Spielberg's *Ready Player One*, which presents an earth of the near future in which teeming masses live in squalid shantytowns resembling the slums of South Africa or the garbage-dump cities of Mexico. Their wretched existence is made bearable because they spend every moment they can in a massive virtual world, essentially playing video games. In this virtual world, individuals exist as avatars who enjoy luxury and excitement.

- A conflict arises between a group of gamers and the corporation that runs the system, and when their revolution succeeds, the underdog heroes predictably triumph over the soulless corporation. Rather disturbingly, however, after achieving victory, their platform for reform is not to insist on improvements to their squalid real-world lives. Instead, they merely demand that the number of product placement ads in the virtual world be limited and that players should go outside at least one day a week—although presumably, they intend to continue spending the other six days immersed zombielike in the virtual reality game.

- This movie depicts a populace that has wholeheartedly bought into the notion of corporate consumerism, and they are more than happy to give away their political and social autonomy in exchange for diverting entertainment.

> Just as Juvenal's ageless dictum has proven enduringly stimulating for generations of sci-fi filmmakers, Roman history itself continues to inspire new cinematic depictions.

READING

Veyne, *Bread and Circuses*.

List of Notable Films Set in the Ancient Roman World

(Films discussed in the course are in bold.)

Cléopâtre	1899	One of the earliest Roman movies, by innovative filmmaker Georges Méliès.
Cabiria	1914	Influential Italian silent film set during the Second Punic War between Rome and Carthage.
Intolerance	1916	D. W. Griffith epic with multiple story lines set in different eras, one of which concerns the life of Christ during the Roman Empire.
Cleopatra	1917	Early version of the Egyptian queen's story, with Theda Bara in the title role and memorable Art Nouveau style.
Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ	1925	Silent version of the Wallace novel. Its chariot race and naval battle are nearly as spectacular as the more famous 1959 versions. Worth viewing just for those scenes.
The Sign of the Cross	1932	Famous Cecil B. DeMille Bible epic starring Claudette Colbert and Charles Laughton.
Cleopatra	1934	Cecil B. DeMille spectacle with Claudette Colbert as vampy Egyptian Art Deco queen.

Scipione l'africano	**1937**	**See Lecture 11**
Caesar and Cleopatra	1945	Yet another film version of the famed romance, with Claude Rains and Vivien Leigh in the title roles.
Julius Caesar	1950	Adaptation of the Shakespearean play, with epic staple Charlton Heston as Julius Caesar.
Quo Vadis	**1951**	**See Lecture 1**
Julius Caesar	1953	Probably the most famous and interesting version of Shakespeare's play, with worth-seeing performances by Marlon Brando as Caesar and James Mason as Brutus.
The Robe	1953	Popular Bible epic that follows the *Quo Vadis* formula of a Roman soldier converted by a pious Christian woman, set during the reign of a mad emperor.
Demetrius and the Gladiators	1954	Sequel to *The Robe* starring Victor Mature that features surprisingly violent gladiator scenes.
Attila	1954	Only slightly historically accurate but entertaining biopic about the king of the Huns, with Anthony Quinn as Attila and Sophia Loren as sister of the Roman emperor.

Jupiter's Darling	1955	Odd and ill-conceived attempt to insert aquatic film star Esther Williams into a Roman historical film.
Hannibal	1959	Italian epic with frequent sword-and-sandal star Victor Mature in the title role as the Carthaginian general intent on conquering Rome.
Ben-Hur	**1959**	**See Lecture 2**
Spartacus	**1960**	**See Lecture 3**
Revenge of the Barbarians	1960	Italian movie about the sack of Rome by Alaric and the Visigoths in AD 410.
King of Kings	1961	Reverential Bible epic starring Jeffrey Hunter as a famously blonde and blue-eyed Jesus.
Barabbas	1961	Bible epic that also features dramatic gladiator battles. Stars Anthony Quinn and Jack Palance.
The Rape of the Sabine Women	1962	Italian sword-and-sandal film about the earliest days after the foundation of the city of Rome.
Constantine and the Cross	1962	Somewhat fictionalized biographical film about the early career of the first Christian emperor.

Brennus, Enemy of Rome	1963	Italian flick vaguely based on historical events from early Roman history.
Cleopatra	**1963**	**See Lecture 4**
Carry On Cleo	1964	Absurdist British comedy that is part of the Carry On series of historical spoofs.
The Fall of the Roman Empire	**1964**	**See Lecture 5**
Hero of Rome	1964	Typical, somewhat-campy Italian sword-and-sandal flick loosely based on the Roman expulsion of the Etruscan kings and the legendary Roman hero Mucius Scaevola.
Coriolanus: Hero without a Country	1964	Low-budget Italian film that takes loose inspiration from the conflict between plebeians and patricians during the early Roman Republic.
A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum	1966	Successful comedy that cleverly recycles tropes from the ancient Roman comic playwright Plautus.
Massacre in the Black Forest	1967	Based on the ambush and destruction of four Roman legions by Germanic barbarians in the Teutoburg Forest.

The Caesars	1968	British TV miniseries about the first family of Roman emperors. Interesting as a precursor to *I, Claudius.*
Fellini Satyricon	**1969**	**See Lecture 11**
Julius Caesar	1970	Uninspiring adaption of the Shakespearean play, with Charlton Heston playing Antony.
Antony and Cleopatra	1972	Stilted adaption of the Shakespearean play, with Charlton Heston playing Antony.
I, Claudius **(TV series)**	**1976**	**See Lecture 6**
The Eagle of the Ninth	1977	British TV series based on the popular young adult novel by Rosemary Sutcliff.
Warrior Queen	1978	British TV series about Boudicca, the queen of the Iceni tribe in Britannia who led a rebellion against Rome. Stars Sian Phillips, who played Livia in *I, Claudius.*
Caligula	1979	Infamous X-rated film about the demented emperor, made by *Penthouse*'s Bob Guccione and starring Malcom McDowell.

Monty Python's Life of Brian	**1979**	**See Lecture 7**
Masada	1981	Excellent TV miniseries starring Peter O'Toole that offers a fairly accurate account of the Roman siege of the Jewish fortress.
History of the World, Part I	1981	Irreverent Mel Brooks comedy that contains one sequence set in ancient Rome.
The Last Days of Pompeii	1984	TV miniseries based on the novel by Edward Bulwer-Lytton. Contains a number of cameos by big-name actors, including Laurence Olivier, Ernest Borgnine, Ned Beatty, and *I, Claudius*'s Augustus, Brian Blessed.
Quo Vadis	1985	Yet another version of the book—in this case, a rather superfluous TV miniseries.
The Last Temptation of Christ	1988	Provocative exploration of the life of Jesus, directed by Martin Scorsese.
Cleopatra	1999	TV miniseries about the Egyptian queen, with Timothy Dalton as Julius Caesar and Billy Zane as Mark Antony.

Titus	1999	Extremely visually creative but disturbing version of the Shakespearean play directed by Julie Taymor.
Gladiator	**2000**	**See Lecture 8**
Druids	2001	Biopic about Gallic chieftain Vercingetorix and his fight against the legions of Julius Caesar, with Christopher Lambert in the title role.
Attila	2001	TV miniseries with Gerard Butler as Attila that gives a rather sympathetic treatment to the king of the Huns.
Julius Caesar	2002	TV movie about the Roman politician with an interesting cast, including Richard Harris and Christopher Walken.
The Passion of the Christ	2004	Mel Gibson's rather-violent take on the crucifixion of Jesus.
Empire	2005	Middling TV miniseries about the rise of Octavian and his establishment as the first emperor.
Hannibal	2006	BBC pseudo-documentary, with Alexander Siddig as the brilliant Carthaginian general.

***Rome* (TV series)**	**2005–2007**	**See Lecture 9**
The Last Legion	2007	Despite its title, only very tangentially connected to the legend of the lost legion. More of a fantasy film about Arthurian legend.
Agora	2009	Good film about the 4th century AD female philosopher Hypatia of Alexandria, played by Rachel Weisz.
Spartacus: Blood and Sand, Gods of the Arena, Vengeance, War of the Damned (TV series)	2010–2013	Successful TV series made by STARZ based on the story of Spartacus. Notable for high levels of sex and violence.
Centurion	**2010**	**See Lecture 10**
The Eagle	**2011**	**See Lecture 10**
Pompeii	2014	Uninspired tale based on the eruption of Vesuvius and the destruction of Pompeii in AD 79.
Ben-Hur	2016	Unnecessary and inferior remake of the 1959 classic.

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