

## Constructing a Narrative for Spectacle

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**Resumen:** Los relieves de la armadura de gladiador han pasado por alto en la escritura académica. Utilizando análisis visuales, escritos e históricos, este proyecto busca explicar los relieves en un solo casco de Pompeya, a la vez que proporcionar el contexto y la narrativa para el relieve y ofrecer una idea de la necesidad de construir narrativas sobre armaduras. Los motivos de la armadura eran capaces de funcionar como un trofeo, puesto al servicio de la conmemoración victoriosa de Roma y del gladiador, proporcionando así también más información sobre el espectáculo romano.

**Palabras Clave:** Augusto, Roma, gladiador, Pompeya, armadura.

**Abstract:** Reliefs on gladiator armor have been largely overlooked in academic writing. Using visual, written, and historical analyses, this project seeks to explain the reliefs upon a single helmet from Pompeii, provide context and narrative for the relief, and insight into the need to construct narratives on armor. Armor motifs were capable of functioning as a wearable trophy, boasting the victory of Rome and of the gladiator, providing further insight into Roman spectacle.

**Keywords:** Augustus, Rome, gladiator, Pompeii, armor.

It is well known in classical and art historical studies that the tragic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D. has allowed for wonderful preservation of artifacts and artworks in the area of Pompeii. Included in these artifacts is gladiatorial armor, discovered in the renovated portico of the Large Theater, which appears to have been adapted into a gladiatorial barracks.<sup>2</sup> Though multiple pieces of armor and weapons were discovered in the renovated portico at Pompeii, the focus of this paper will be upon a singular surviving helmet decorated with metal relief. This paper will seek to explain the motifs that can be observed within the helmet relief, provide a context and narrative for the relief, and to provide insight into the need to construct such a narrative on armor.

This paper will start by introducing the gladiator and their role in Roman society. The profession of gladiator was one that came with the label of *infamia*, like other professions that catered to entertainment of the masses. Unlike other professions that fell into the class of *infamia*, for gladiators this title was juxtaposed, representing the negative connotation associated with *infamia* and the prized value of martial *virtus*

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This study began as a seminar paper in a class taught by Dr. Elizabeth Wolfram Thill at IUPUI.

<sup>2</sup> Joanne Berry, *The Complete Pompeii* (Thames & Hudson, 2007), 144.

at the same time.<sup>3</sup> Gladiators were often slaves, more accurately prisoners of war, or criminals, though they could be citizens or freedmen that entered into a contract. The stigma of *infamia* was likely intended to remove any individual value and identity from the gladiator, though this was not fully successful as gladiators could still obtain popularity and fame with the public.<sup>4</sup> While essentially stage names, the names of gladiators with notoriety can be found throughout the Roman world in surviving texts and graffiti, with examples of such found in Pompeii. The nature of gladiatorial spectacles was to reinforce imperial ideals associated with *virtus* and military power to the masses, but in a way that did not threaten imperial power.<sup>5</sup> The writings of Pliny the Younger seem to confirm this notion, "...something which would inflame men to face admirable wounds and show a contempt for death, where the love of glory and desire for victory could be discerned even in the bodies of slaves and criminals."<sup>6</sup> The gladiators were admired for what they represented in place of individual worth. To revisit Pompeii, where the helmet to be discussed was found, it would seem safe to assume that Pompeian society had a certain level of value for gladiators based on the abundance of artworks that vary from graffiti to frescoes. The apparent wealth of the gladiators living in the barracks of the renovated Large Theater would also seem to point to some value of them, as well as the recognition of individual gladiators in a relatively neutral way in found graffiti.<sup>7</sup>

The helmet that this paper focuses on is specifically a *Murmillio* type. Gladiators were sent to schools to train in combat modes that reflected certain gladiator types, which were based in ethnic categories of fighting. In particular, the *murmillio* type evolved from and replaced the *gallus*, Gaul, type.<sup>8</sup> Each of these gladiator types displayed distinctive and characteristic martial combat styles and armors that were modelled after the styles of the ethnic groups that they represented, all of whom were enemies of Rome and that Rome had in some way conquered. The most distinct differences amongst the different types can be spotted by the form that the helmets and shields take. Carrying a large and oblong shield capable of shielding the whole body, and equipped with an arm guard, metal greaves, and helmet, the *murmillio* was one of the most heavily armored gladiator types.<sup>9</sup> The *murmillio* helmet is distinct with an angular crest, often ornamented with relief, and a visor that covered the face.<sup>10</sup>

While there were common themes that appeared in motifs of armor, as is true of most art types in the Roman world, there is no standard relief decoration on gladiatorial armor. This is true of the helmet being examined here as well: it can and should be considered unique in its decoration.

To start, the reliefs upon the front of the helmet will be examined first. Most prominent, as it is the center of the helmet front, is a relief of Mars holding what appears to be a metal greave in one arm and a staff in the other hand (see Figure 1). Mars is not a surprising motif, as it is a common figural motif used by the Roman imperial army among soldiers and emperors alike and could be displayed upon armor

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Stevens, *Staring Into the Face of Roman Power: Resistance and Assimilation from Behind the Mask of Infamia* (University of California, 2014), 149.

<sup>4</sup> Stevens, *Staring Into the Face of Roman Power: Resistance and Assimilation from Behind the Mask of Infamia*, 149.

<sup>5</sup> Stevens, *Staring Into the Face of Roman Power: Resistance and Assimilation from Behind the Mask of Infamia*, 164.

<sup>6</sup> qtd. in Stevens, 164

<sup>7</sup> Stevens, *Staring Into the Face of Roman Power: Resistance and Assimilation from Behind the Mask of Infamia*, 204.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (Pearson/Longman, 2008), 98.

<sup>9</sup> Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome*, 98 and 104.

<sup>10</sup> Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome*, 104.

and the military standards that not only signified honor but were thought to be themselves deities.<sup>11</sup> The Mars on the helmet front is also flanked by two Roman standards that are held by two helmeted, kneeling male figures. An interesting aspect of the Mars motif is that it is not a standard depiction of Mars. The clothing is a crossed sleeveless, one shouldered, tunic of short length along with sandals and a three crested helmet (Figure 1). Only a single other example of Mars with such an appearance can be observed in Pompeii, found in the House of the Punished Love (see Figure 2). The fresco is of an outdoor scene of a standing Mars and a seated Venus, dated to the first century C.E. The Mars in this fresco wears the same unusual tunic style, but holds the usual spear, which has been substituted for a decorative staff on the helmet, and wears a helmet on which the three crests have been made of feathers.

The helmet could be depicting a popular deity or a common military symbol, thus invoking the image of the Roman military and ideal of a soldier, for which the gladiator was a substitute. Or it could go further. The gladiator was essentially an actor in a part of a political theater, playing the part of a soldier.<sup>12</sup> Given the almost costumed quality of the Mars figure upon the helmet, it is reasonable to read this as the gladiator representing himself as Mars, possibly hitting at the fact that gladiators were actors of sorts, not real soldiers. Mars was the god of the real army, which the gladiator did not fully conform to, thus the real Mars was substituted. The gladiator may have chosen to have himself represented as a god of war flanked by standards that further created a character and evoked a sense of status and superiority that played into that character.

Also upon the helmet front is a ship beak, on which Mars rests his elevated foot (Figure 1). The presence of the ship beak is potentially to reference a naval battle. Given that the arena personas were usually created in relation to an ethnic type, and the helmet's armor type is reminiscent of the Gaul, it likely is making reference to a Roman battle with the Gauls. Since most Roman battles with the Gaul did not involve naval fleets, it is likely that it is noting one such battle that did. The Battle of the Teutoburg Forest in 9 A.D. gained notoriety as one of the most crushing Roman defeats in the history of the empire.<sup>13</sup> When Rome began to branch into areas east of the Rhine, they created a naval fleet to move along the Rhine and other rivers because they provided access into interior Germanic territory that was more efficient for moving troops and supplies.<sup>14</sup> While it was not common practice to reference Roman defeat, there are multiple hints on the helmet that would point to this particular battle, the ship beak being one of them.

Another depiction in the relief is the presence of what appear to be heads on the trophies and at the foot of the right trophy (see Figure 3). This is also unusual to see in motifs of trophies, or actually present on them. The outcome of the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest was further burned into the memory of the Romans by the fact the general Varus was decapitated by the Gauls and on the follow up military campaign, Germanicus and his troops surveyed the site of the lost battle and were met with the sight of severed heads fixed to trees.<sup>15</sup>

While it is hard to comprehend from the majority of the battle outcome why such a thing would be commemorated on a helmet, or why Rome would have allowed

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<sup>11</sup> Jon Coulston, "Courage and Cowardice in the Roman Imperial Army." *War in History* 20, no. 1 (2013): 15-16.

<sup>12</sup> Stevens, *Staring Into the Face of Roman Power: Resistance and Assimilation from Behind the Mask of Infamia*, 169.

<sup>13</sup> Coulston, "Courage and Cowardice," 28.

<sup>14</sup> Peter S. Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome* (W.W. Norton and Company, 2003), 88.

<sup>15</sup> Coulston, "Courage and Cowardice," 28-29.

it, there is a possible reason. While the majority of soldiers were massacred or taken hostage (some of whom were ransomed back to Rome), there were a few soldiers who did manage to escape.<sup>16</sup> While the narrative for the gladiator may have been a fearsome barbarian warrior, the *virtus* and might of the Roman soldiers that survived is also encapsulated, reminding people of Rome's perseverance in the face of tragedy and eventual victory over their enemy. It is also worth mentioning that starting with Augustus, ship beaks started to play a subsidiary role in Roman landscape trophies, which consisted of monumental relief friezes that stood at territorial boundaries.<sup>17</sup> While the helmet relief is undoubtedly depicting a battle, it may also be employing the trophy tradition as well that advertised Rome's superiority on all battle fronts.

The depictions of captives on the helmet also reference battle and victory customs, though this is again a less common depiction (Figure 3). The helmet shows female hostages in non-Roman style attire with their hands bound behind their backs, so it is evident that they are barbarian women. Hostage taking practices and depictions were usually male with female hostages appearing in smaller numbers.<sup>18</sup> Quite notably though, Augustus is credited with being the first take female hostages, specifically Germanic women because they held more sway than male captives in dealings with the Gauls.<sup>19</sup> Roman practice was to parade their prisoners of war through the streets as a display of triumph. Another significant aspect to the presence of women in the relief is the fear by Roman soldiers of torture by enemy women, which they felt served as a loss of identity through gender humiliation.<sup>20</sup> The capture of enemy women may advertise further triumph and superiority for both the Romans and the gladiator.

The final motif to be examined is that of winged victory and the trophies. The personification of Victory, Nike the goddess of victory who bestows fame, is shown aiding in the construction of a trophy, handing a shield on a branch as though it were the finishing touch (Figure 3). Nike aiding in the construction of Roman trophies can also be observed on the Column of Trajan and other monuments and coins, where a shield is also the finalizing piece that she adds to a trophy (see Figure 4). The Roman trophy was adopted from Greek practice. However, unlike their Greek counterpart, they are difficult to analyze because of the fact Romans adopted many forms of equipment from the 'barbarians,' making it unclear whether the trophies are decorated with the armor of the victors or losers of a battle.<sup>21</sup> With this in mind, it brings into question whether or not the helmet relief depicts Roman loss, with the individual victories of few survivors, or the idealized image of Rome taking its revenge.

Interestingly, while a literal trophy may have been restricted to feats of Rome, motifs of such objects were not. Frescoes of trophies were discovered at the renovated theater portico in Pompeii that was serving as a gladiator barracks.<sup>22</sup> This brings about further questions as to whether or not it is army propaganda being shown, or a braggadocious display of the gladiator's greatness through many victories in the arena, with a symbolic trophy constructed from the armor of defeated gladiators. It seems likely that both are simultaneously possible, that both are being suggested.

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<sup>16</sup> Coulston, "Courage and Cowardice," 29.

<sup>17</sup> Lauren Kinnee, *The Greek and Roman Trophy: From Battlefield Marker to Icon of Power* (Routledge, 2018), 108 and 123-124.

<sup>18</sup> Joel Allen, *Hostages and Hostage-Taking in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 13.

<sup>19</sup> Allen, *Hostages and Hostage-Taking in the Roman Empire*, 180.

<sup>20</sup> Coulston, "Courage and Cowardice," 27.

<sup>21</sup> Kinnee, *The Greek and Roman Trophy: From Battlefield Marker to Icon of Power*, 15-16.

<sup>22</sup> Stevens, *Staring Into the Face of Roman Power: Resistance and Assimilation from Behind the Mask of Infamia*, 203.

To fully create context and perspective, it seems necessary to consider why the gladiator who owned this helmet would have needed to construct a narrative for himself and why it needed to be displayed on the helmet. To revisit the earlier comment about gladiators being akin to actors, their real names were not known: they only existed through their arena personas. Just as a theater mask covered the face of an actor, the helmet of the *murmillo* hid the face of the gladiator, a tendency Rome had toward occupations that were encompassed in *infamia*. The mask does two things. It simultaneously conceals the true appearance of those who wear it, and it also serves to project a desired image to the spectators.<sup>23</sup>

Focusing solely on masked helmets, the surviving examples were richly ornamented with reliefs. These reliefs were often composed of figural scenes and military symbols.<sup>24</sup> These helmets were multifunctional, serving as a protective element, parade costuming, and advertisement of propaganda, often with a reference to the frontiers.<sup>25</sup> It is also likely that the masks served other functions, not only to emphasize *infamia* status, but to desensitize all involved in the spectacle. The masked helmets would have promoted emotional detachment from the crowd who was unable to see pain or fear on the face of the gladiator, reducing the chance of the crowd showing sympathy.<sup>26</sup> The visor also would have provided detachment for the gladiator as well, making the task of wounding, even killing, another person easier because they could not attach a face to their opponent. Rome and the gladiators both needed the masked anonymity of the visored helmets. The persona adapted by the gladiator would have provided further detachment, by convincing themselves that they were living up to their invented character, making it easier to harm others to further their own fame and chances of success. Their survival depended on their ability to win notoriety with the people, creating a character and living up to it. The distinctiveness and individuality of the relief that adorned the helmet would have helped to remind the public that it was a person that they favored underneath it, through the story of the character depicted on it.

In summary, the motifs featured in the helmet relief are standard and abnormal at the same time. They depict common themes observed in Roman propaganda, but differ in the details, offering surprising twists within already complex themes. The narrative most likely invoked the attributes of a Gaul character, a formidable and fearsome opponent even for the likes of Rome, but not above being conquered and enslaved by Rome's superiority. The appearance likely was designed to boost the image of the gladiator's status, depicting him as often victorious. The relief decorated helmet was something akin to a wearable trophy, boasting the victory of Rome and likely of the gladiator as well. Wearing armor that brought to mind the military trophies that were adorned with foreign armors and the landscape trophies constructed of high relief and covered with propaganda imagery. Given the role of the gladiator, it does not seem to far of a stretch that gladiatorial armor could have functioned in this way.

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<sup>23</sup> Stevens, *Staring Into the Face of Roman Power: Resistance and Assimilation from Behind the Mask of Infamia*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Krzysztof Narloch, "The Cold Face of Battle- Some Remarks on the Function of Roman Helmets with Face Masks." *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt* 42, no. 3 (2012): 378.

<sup>25</sup> Narloch, "The Cold Face of Battle," 378.

<sup>26</sup> Stevens, *Staring Into the Face of Roman Power: Resistance and Assimilation from Behind the Mask of Infamia*, 174.

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## Figures



Figure 1. "Details vo der Kalotte des murmillo-Helms 120." Das Spiel mit dem Tod, by Marcus Junkelmann, p. 85.



Figure 2. "House of the Punished Love; Mars and Venus." 1st century CE, fresco, Pompeii.  
[https://library-artstor-org.proxy.ulib.uits.iu.edu/#/asset/LESSING\\_ART\\_10311442156](https://library-artstor-org.proxy.ulib.uits.iu.edu/#/asset/LESSING_ART_10311442156).



Figure 3. "Details vo der Kalotte des murmillo-Helms 121." Das Spiel mit dem Tod, by Marcus  
Junkelmann, p. 85.



Figure 4. “Winged Victory Inscribing a Shield Flanked by Two Trophies.” 113 A.D., carved stone relief, Forum of Trajan, Rome.  
[https://library-artstor-org.proxy.ulib.uits.iu.edu/#/asset/ARTSTOR\\_103\\_41822003517958](https://library-artstor-org.proxy.ulib.uits.iu.edu/#/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822003517958).

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