

## PART ONE

# Introduction: The Roman Slave Wars and History

In the midsummer of 73 B.C., a savage uprising of rebel slaves erupted and then raged throughout Italy for the next two years. According to some stories, the violence was sparked by the escape of seventy slaves from a gladiatorial training school in the luxurious city of Capua, about 125 miles south of Rome. Whatever its precise origins, the slave revolt soon escalated into a larger-scale conflict, a war in which tens of thousands of slaves joined in mass armed resistance against their owners. Their main aim was, quite simply, to free themselves from the conditions of servitude in which they were forced to live. Whether the brutalities of this war were worse than the savageries of the civil war that the Romans had suffered in the previous decade is difficult to say. But the violence of this conflict, which pitted slaves against both their masters and the armed forces of the Roman state, was nevertheless particularly brutal. The battles, ambushes, and armed skirmishes that the slaves fought constitute one of the greatest wars of resistance in the history of slavery and the most famous slave war in ancient history. But it was actually the last in a series of three great slave rebellions that beleaguered Rome between the mid-130s and the late 70s B.C.

The two earlier slave wars were centered farther south, on the island of Sicily, the first of the Roman Empire's overseas provinces. The first Sicilian slave war lasted from 135 to 132 B.C.; the second

aged from 104 to 100 B.C.<sup>1</sup> Two charismatic slave commanders led the forces in each war: Eunus and Kleon in the first and Athenion and Salvius in the second.

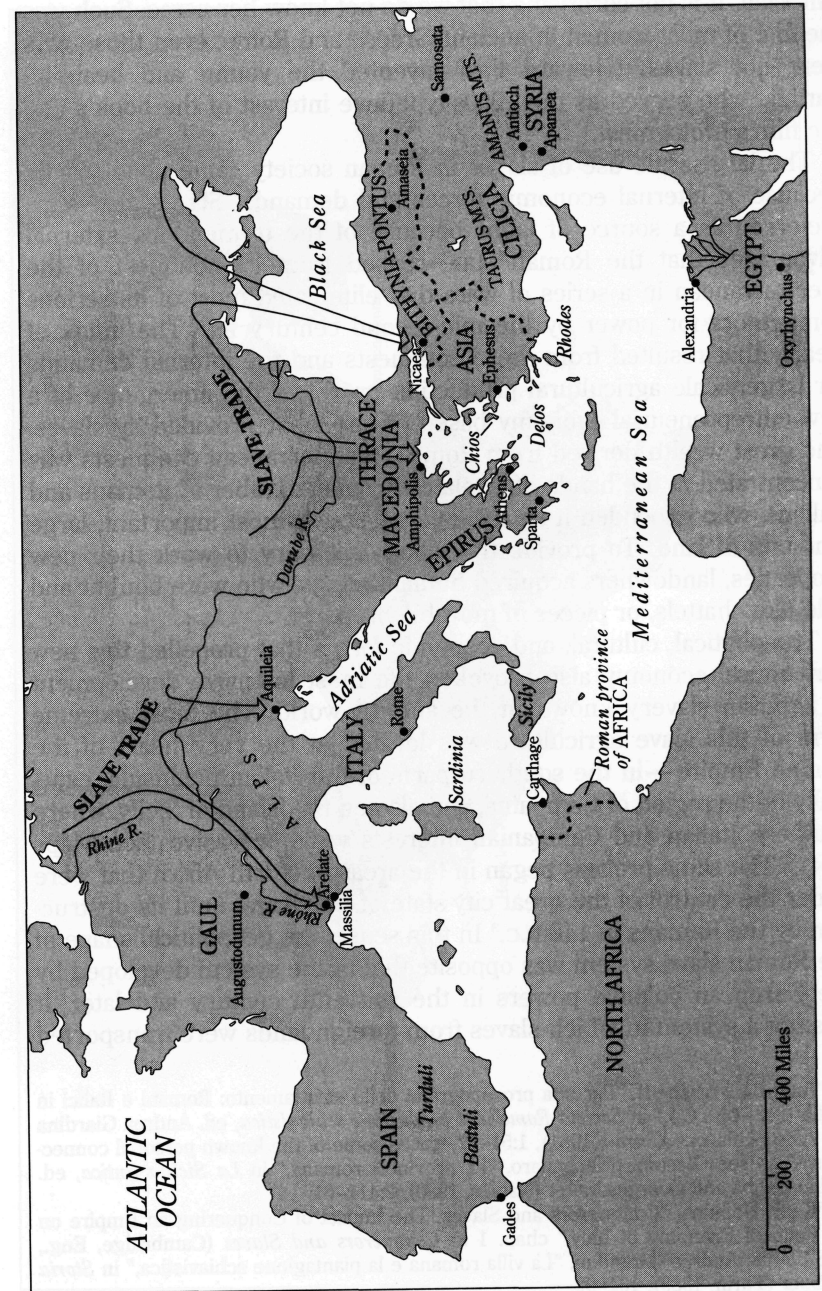
The last of the three great slave wars was fought mainly in southern Italy between 73 and 71 B.C. Although Spartacus emerged as the principal leader of this war, he was only one of many slaves involved in the incident that sparked the war. Who was Spartacus? Today he is a symbol of resistance to domination of mythic proportions, best known to most Americans from Howard Fast's 1951 novel *Spartacus* and the 1960 film based on that book. In fact, he has become such a powerful image that to ask the question "Who was he?" only provokes more difficult questions about the origins of the slave wars of the late Roman Republic, the veils of myth and legend that have grown up around him, and the sources that survive to tell his story.

### THE SLAVE WARS IN ITALY AND SICILY

Finding out about Spartacus is more difficult than understanding his role as a modern-day symbol of resistance. To see through the masks of our own modern images of him requires us to discover who Spartacus was in the world in which he and his fellow slaves lived. Most important is for us to understand the new slave economy and society that emerged in the third and second centuries B.C. Once we delve into this historical context, we can begin to learn more about the daily experiences of slaves in Roman society and their limited ability to resist the slave system. By attempting to understand the constraints on large-scale resistance, we can begin to appreciate the rarity of large-scale slave rebellions not just in the Roman Empire but throughout the world.

Let us begin with the social institution of slavery in which people like Spartacus found themselves. Spartacus came from the distant land of Thrace—roughly speaking, the area of the extreme northeastern part of modern-day Greece, southeastern Bulgaria, and the small part of Turkey west of the Bosphorus (see Map 1). He had been sent to Italy as a prisoner to be sold as a slave. His wife, we are told, also was

<sup>1</sup>Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Rebellion in the Roman World, 140 B.C.–70 B.C.* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989), especially chaps. 3–5; Arnold J. Toynbee, "The Insurrections of Slaves in the Post-Hannibalic Age," chap. 9 in *Hannibal's Legacy* (Oxford, 1965), 2:313–31; and Joseph Vogt, "The Structure of Ancient Slave Wars," chap. 3 in *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man* (Oxford, 1974), 39–92.



Map 1. The Mediterranean World at the Time of the Slave Wars, ca. 135–70 B.C.

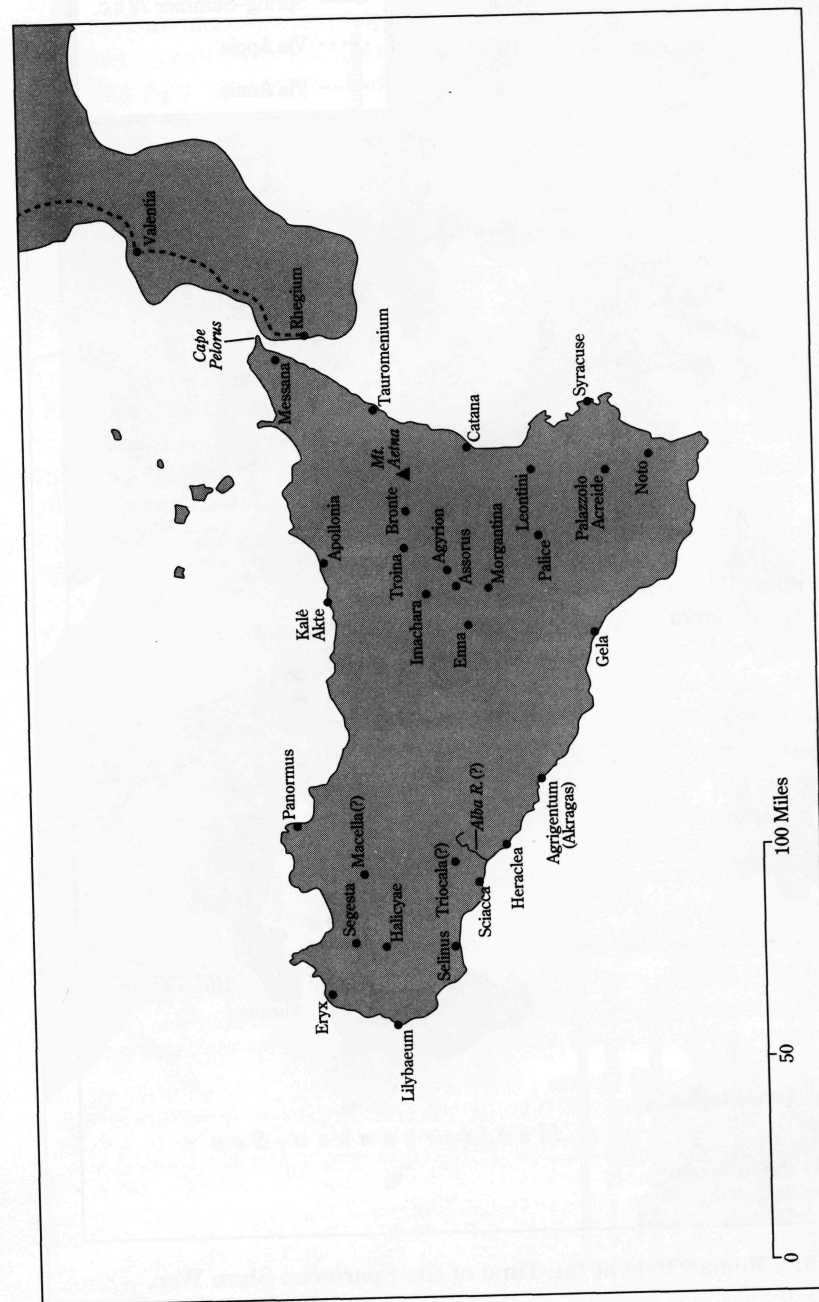
Thracian. It is not surprising that we do not know her name. Such was the fate of most women in ancient Greece and Rome, even those who were not slaves. (Howard Fast invented the young and beautiful Varinia, who served as the 1950s-type love interest of the book's and the film's protagonist.)

The large-scale use of slaves in Roman society came about partly because of internal economic forces and demands. Slaves also were preferred as a source of labor because of the tremendous external advantages that the Roman state reaped from its conquest of the Mediterranean in a series of wars that eliminated most of its serious competitors for power by the mid-second century B.C. The influx of wealth that resulted from these conquests and the internal demands for larger-scale agricultural production provoked the emergence of a new entrepreneurial economy based on the labor provided by slaves. The great wealth derived from Rome's Mediterranean conquests was concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of Romans and Italians, who expended it on luxury goods and, most important, large amounts of land. To provide the labor necessary to work their new properties, landowners acquired human beings, who were bought and sold like chattels, or pieces of movable property.

The political, cultural, and economic forces that propelled this new agricultural economy also provoked the most intensive development of agrarian slavery known in the ancient world. The most extreme form of this slave agriculture was located at the very heart of the Roman Empire—in the southern parts of the Italian peninsula, especially in the region of Campania, and also on the island of Sicily, where southern Italian and Campanian interests were pervasive (see Maps 2–4).<sup>2</sup> The same process began in the areas of North Africa that were under the control of the great city-state of Carthage, until its destruction by the Romans in 146 B.C.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, the geopolitical shape of the Roman slave system was opposite that of the system developed by the European colonial powers in the sixteenth century and later. It was not a system in which slaves from foreign lands were transported

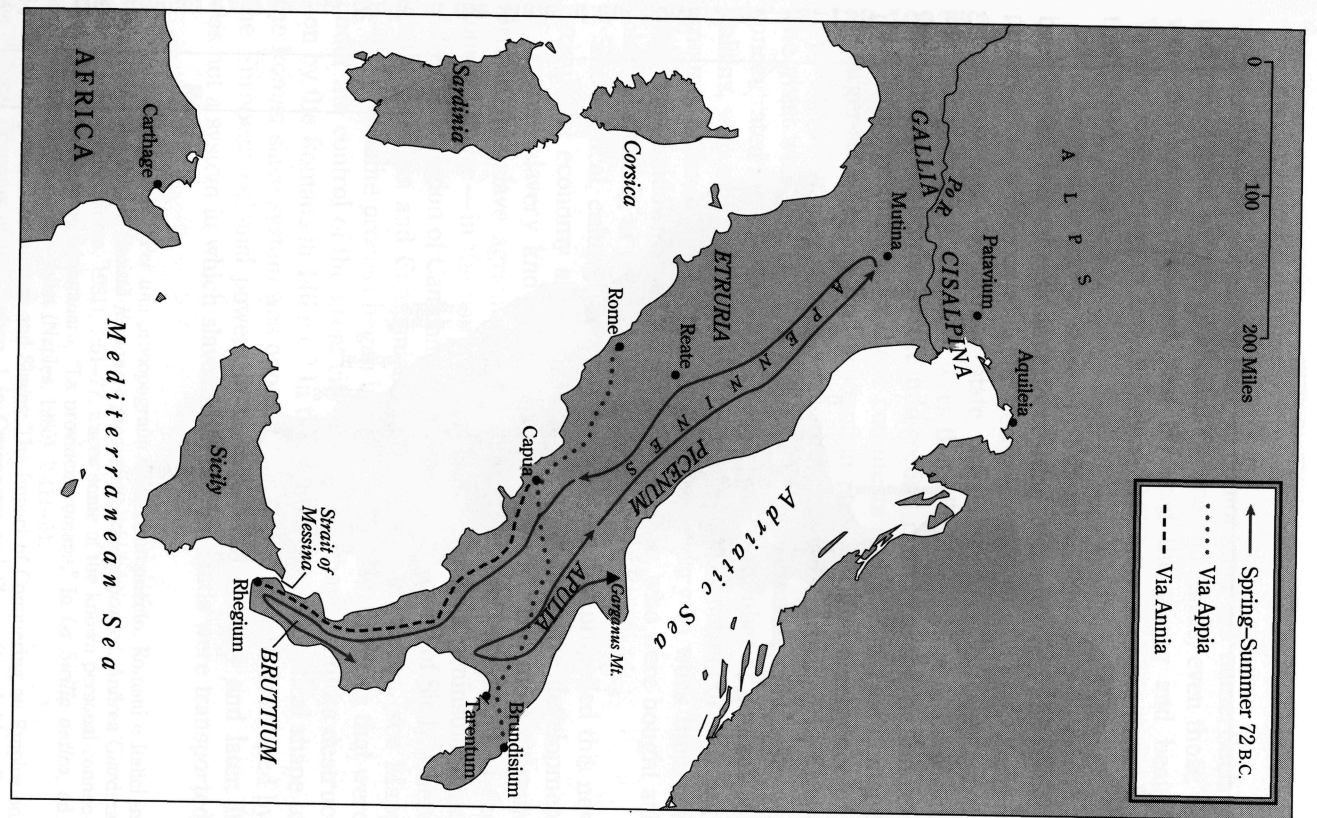
<sup>2</sup>Augusto Fraschetti, "Per una prosopografia dello sfruttamento: Romani e Italici in Sicilia (212–44 a.C.)," in *Società Romana e produzione schiavistica*, ed. Andrea Giardina and Aldo Schiavone (Rome, 1981), 1:51–77, traces some of the known personal connections. Also see Giacomo Manganaro, "La provincia romana," in *La Sicilia antica*, ed. Emilio Gabba and Georges Vallet (Naples, 1980), 2:411–61.

<sup>3</sup>Keith Hopkins, "Conquerors and Slaves: The Impact of Conquering an Empire on the Political Economy of Italy," chap. 1 in *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge, Eng., 1978), 1–98; Andrea Carandini, "La villa romana e la piantagione schiavistica," in *Storia di Roma* (Turin, 1989), 101–92.

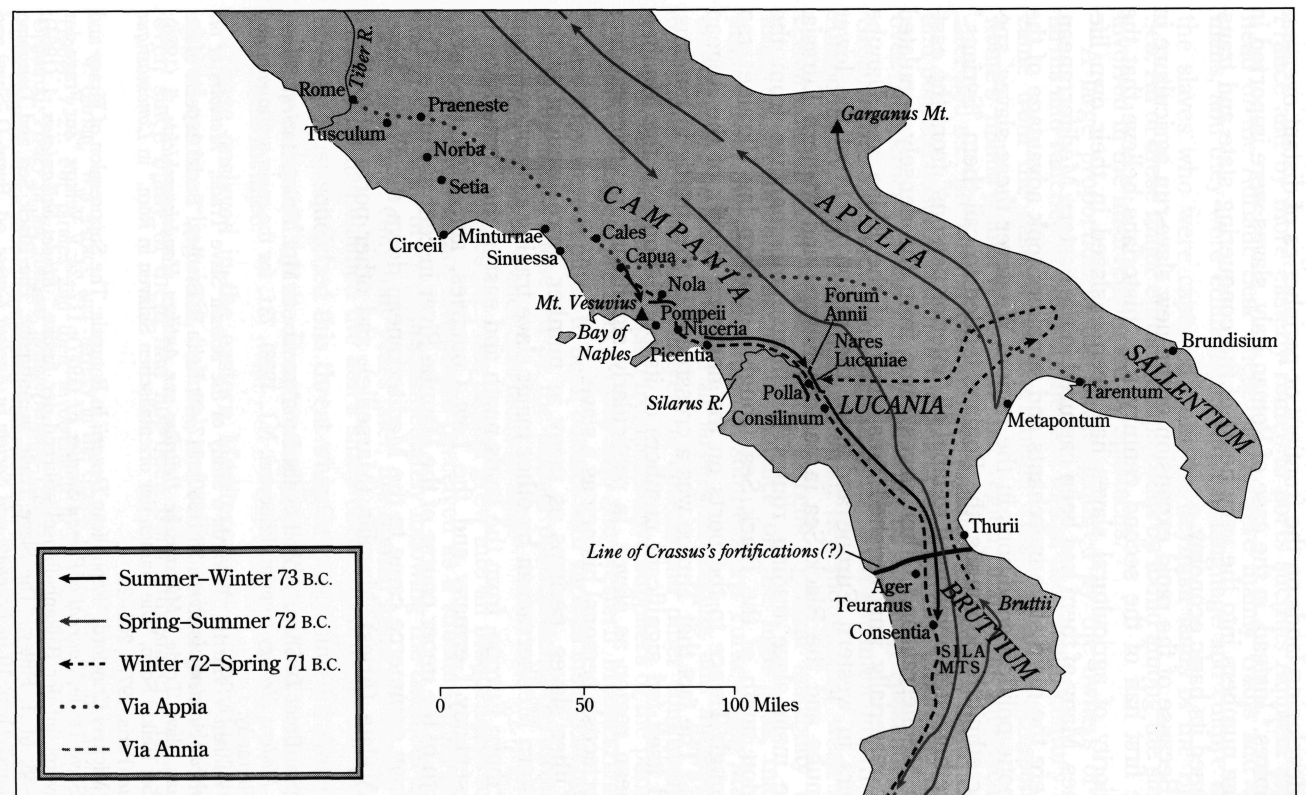


Map 2. The Roman Province of Sicily at the Time of the Slave Wars, ca. 135–100 B.C.

Map 3. Roman Italy at the Time of the Spartacus Slave War, 73-71 B.C.



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Map 4. Central and Southern Italy at the Time of the Spartacus Slave War, 73-71 B.C.

to developing lands on the frontiers or peripheries of distant overseas empires.<sup>4</sup> Instead, in the case of Roman Italy, slaves were imported in huge numbers into the very heart of the conquering state and transformed its basic economy.

Because of the rapid expansion of the new slave-run agriculture in the first half of the second century B.C., historians believe that the majority of agricultural slaves had been enslaved in their own lifetimes. Many of them had been captured in the eastern Mediterranean, where the main slave merchants and suppliers took advantage of the chaotic political conditions in the region. Whatever these slaves' specific ethnic backgrounds, the Romans tended to call them "Syrians," an ethnic stereotype used to label all "inferior persons" from the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>5</sup> Other slaves came from the densely populated but materially impoverished area north of the Rhine and Danube rivers in western Europe and from the region north of the lower Danube and the Black Sea in eastern Europe and western Eurasia. The main slave trading routes for human merchandise from the region north of the Black Sea (roughly, modern-day Ukraine) ran through Thrace to the ports on the northern shores of the Aegean Sea.<sup>6</sup> The fact that Thrace was a crossroads in this traffic in humans, and itself fed significant numbers of its population into the Mediterranean region as slaves, is particularly significant in understanding Spartacus's personal history as a slave.

Other slaves, perhaps as many in number, were brought to the western Mediterranean by other major slave trading networks—from northern Europe, from the lands north and east of the Rhine River in present-day Germany and the Low Countries, and from the areas north of the upper course of the Danube River in central Europe. This human commerce came to the Mediterranean down the Rhone River to Arles (Arles), Massilia (Marseille), and other ports in southern

<sup>4</sup>See Brent D. Shaw, "A Wolf by the Ears," preface to M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (reprint; Princeton, N.J., 1998), 73f., for the main arguments and bibliography.

<sup>5</sup>William V. Harris, "Towards a Study of the Roman Slave Trade," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 36 (1980): 117–40; Keith R. Bradley, "Social Aspects of the Roman Slave Trade," *Münstersche Beiträge zur Antiken Handelsgeschichte*, 5 (1986): 49–58; Heikki Solin, "Die Namen der orientalischen Sklaven in Rom," in *L'onomastique latine* (Paris, 1977), 205–20.

<sup>6</sup>Michael Crawford, "Republican *Denarii* in Romania: The Suppression of Piracy and the Slave Trade," *Journal of Roman Studies*, 67 (1977): 117–24; V. Velkov, "Zur Frage der Sklaverei auf der Balkanhalbinsel während der Antike," *Etudes balkaniques*, 1 (1964): 125–38; M. I. Finley, "The Slave Trade in Antiquity: The Black Sea and Danubian Regions," chap. 10 in *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*, ed. Brent D. Shaw and Richard P. Saller (New York, 1982), 167–75.

France and by more easterly routes to ports such as Aquileia at the head of the Adriatic Sea. These slaves were mainly Gauls and Germans, and they were ethnically distinct in language and culture from the slaves who were captured from the Scythian lands of the Black Sea. All of these major ethnic groups could be found among the slaves involved in the insurrection led by Spartacus.

A large proportion of the slaves acquired by the owners of the farms and ranches of Sicily in the first half of the second century B.C. came from the eastern Mediterranean. This was a direct result of Rome's military intervention in that region, mainly in the decades after 200 B.C. Roman expansion there entailed the military destruction and political destabilization of the Seleucid monarchy, which had ruled over the former Persian Empire following its defeat by Alexander the Great in the 330s B.C. The kings of Syria, such as Antiochus III and Antiochus IV, bore the brunt of Roman hegemony; their weak successors fared even worse. In the extreme political instability that followed, freebooting agents of violence on the high seas, mainly pirates from the region of Cilicia in southeastern Turkey (see Map 1 on page 3), became involved in large-scale raiding and kidnapping operations in which they preyed on coastal and other communities. The Cilicians became the main freelance slave suppliers of the period.<sup>7</sup> They even staged predatory raids into the western Mediterranean, where they were reputed to be in contact with various insurgent movements, including those led by the Roman political rebel Sertorius in Spain and the slave leader Spartacus in Italy.

In the 70s and 60s B.C., the pirates grew into an independent force in the Mediterranean. They were perceived as a substantial threat to the Roman state in the years immediately following the defeat of Spartacus in 71 B.C. Only four years later, the Roman general Pompey the Great, who had claimed the lion's share of the rewards for the defeat of Spartacus, squelched this threat when he was granted a sweeping military command by the Roman people to rid the Mediterranean of the pirate menace.

Those enslaved in the eastern Mediterranean during this period shared common linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Moreover, since many of them had not been born into slavery, they also

<sup>7</sup>Y. Garlan, "War, Piracy, and Slavery in the Greek World," *Slavery and Abolition*, 8 (1987): 7–21. For pirates and their involvement in the slave trade, see Henry A. Ormerod, *Piracy in the Ancient Mediterranean* (1924; reprint, Baltimore, 1998), especially chap. 6, which should be updated with reference to Hartel Pohl, *Die römische Politik und die Piraterie im östlichen Mittelmeer vom 3. bis zum 1. Jh. v. Chr.* (New York, 1993), esp. 161–65, 169–74, 186–90.

shared the memory of freedom. These factors contributed to their willingness to communicate with each other and to entertain the possibility of armed resistance to enslavement. Some of these slaves looked to legitimate freeborn rulers as examples. Eunus, one of the leaders of the first Sicilian slave war, renamed himself King Antiochus, a name used by kings of the Seleucid monarchy in Syria, from which Eunus and many of his fellow slaves had come.<sup>8</sup>

Most of the slaves sold to Italian and Roman owners at this time were used as manual laborers, the majority of them in various types of agricultural work. They were the permanent workforce of a revolutionary new rural economy of plantation agriculture. Roman writers later invented the term *latifundia*, or "wide fields" (see glossary), to evoke the panoramic perspective furnished by the ownership of extensive, often widely scattered, tracts of land and of the hundreds, sometimes thousands, of slaves needed to work them. The new latifundist agriculture was oriented toward the production of marketable surpluses needed to sustain the new luxurious lifestyles demanded by Roman and Italian aristocrats, including those of the competitive political elite in the city of Rome and of wealthy men of power in the cities of southern Italy (such as Capua and Pompeii) and Sicily.<sup>9</sup>

Broadly speaking, the slaves who labored on these new latifundia were of two types. The first type were slaves who cultivated cereal grains, vines, olives, and other arboreal crops. Ideally, these slaves worked under close supervision. For purposes of surveillance and security, during the night or at times when they were not working, the slaves were kept penned in quarters that the Romans called *ergastula*, or "work barracks." Such slaves were often found on small but intensively worked farms in rich agricultural areas, such as those around the city of Pompeii in Campania.

The open expanses of southern Italy and Sicily were more arid and could not easily sustain a viable market-oriented agriculture based on the intensive cultivation of cash crops. In these regions, therefore, slave owners developed a different type of agriculture that mixed the

<sup>8</sup>M. I. Finley, "The Great Slave Revolts," chap. 11 in *Ancient Sicily to the Arab Conquest*, rev. ed. (London, 1979), 137-47; Peter Green, "The First Sicilian Slave War," *Past and Present*, 20 (1961): 10-29; and W. G. G. Forrest and T. C. W. Stinton, "The First Sicilian Slave War," *Past and Present*, 21 (1962): 87-93.

<sup>9</sup>Arnold J. Toynbee, "The New Plantation Agriculture in Post-Hannibalic Peninsular Italy," chap. 8 in *Hannibal's Legacy* (Oxford, 1965), 2:296-312; Martin W. Frederiksen, "I cambiamenti delle strutture agrarie nella tarda Repubblica: la Campania," in *Società Romana e produzione schiavistica*, ed. Andrea Giardina and Aldo Schiavone (Rome, 1981), 1:265-87.

cultivation of cereal crops with the raising of large herds of cattle and sheep, and sometimes pigs and goats, which were often driven over long distances to widely separated pastures. These animals spent the summer in the mountains and the winter on the lowland plains. Thus, the second type of slaves were *pastores*, or "herdsmen," who drove these animals to pasture and tended them throughout the year, and who worked under the supervision of a *magister pecoris*, or "herd master." The slaves who worked on these ranches were fundamentally different from the slaves who worked on the agricultural latifundia.<sup>10</sup> Slave shepherds and herders could not be constrained by chains or housed in barracks each night. They had to be free to follow the herds. In addition, they had to be armed to protect the animals from predators, rustlers, and bandits. These two factors—freedom of movement and the possession of arms—made them potentially very dangerous men.

Just as important as the two basic types of slave laborers were the elite slaves, who provided the managerial skills and technical knowledge needed to run the slave farms and ranches. These slaves made sure that the complex farming operations were carried out to the owner's satisfaction. The most important of these slaves was the *vili-cus*, the "farm manager" or "bailiff," who organized the finances of the farm, bought and sold materials, and supervised the annual cycle of work. He also set the work details, controlled the workforce, and maintained surveillance over the slaves who did the manual labor.<sup>11</sup> These men were of great significance in the organization of any collective resistance by the slaves. Since they already had experience in controlling and directing the work and behavior of the slaves, they could easily apply the same skills to leading rebel armies and to governing new communities founded by the slaves.

The sudden introduction of a large number of slaves into a rapidly transforming economy produced conditions favorable to large-scale armed resistance against the slave owners. Three of the great slave wars washed over southern Italy and Sicily between 140 and 70 B.C. They occurred at approximately thirty-year intervals and so seem to reflect the similar reactions of three generations of slaves caught up in an economic revolution that depended on slave labor. The first two slave wars broke out on the island of Sicily and were confined to that

<sup>10</sup>Arnold J. Toynbee, "The New Nomadic Animal Husbandry in Post-Hannibalic Peninsular Italy," chap. 7 in *Hannibal's Legacy* (Oxford, 1965), 2:296-312.

<sup>11</sup>Egon Maróti, "The *Vilicus* and the Villa System in Ancient Italy," *Oikoumene*, 1 (1976): 109-24.

island. Sicily was the site of the most rapid and intense development of slave agriculture in the first half-century after 200 B.C., following the second great war between Rome and its principal military and political rival in the western Mediterranean, the city-state of Carthage in North Africa. Therefore, it is not surprising that these slave wars occurred there.

The first great slave war broke out in the mid-130s B.C. and ended in 132 B.C. It was divided into two theaters of operation, western and eastern, which reflected the basic geopolitical division of Sicily. One Roman treasury official, or quaestor (see glossary), was in charge of the western part of the island, headquartered at Lilybaeum, and another was stationed at Syracuse, on the east coast. Slave pastoralists and herders dominated the western region, and agricultural slaves dominated the grain-producing plains of the east.

The slaves in the eastern and western parts of the island appear to have risen separately—those in the east under a slave named Eunus and those in the west under a vilicus named Kleon. Eunus was a millenarian<sup>12</sup> magician, a wonder-worker, and a powerful religious leader. Kleon was not only the manager of a farming operation in western Sicily, but, like Eunus, he was also reputed to possess religious powers, including the ability to utter prophecies based on his astrological skills.

The slave war gathered momentum when these two leaders and their followers combined to form a single coherent force. The rapid escalation of their strength seems to have been abetted by the slave owners themselves, who had encouraged violent behavior by allowing their slave shepherds to feed and clothe themselves by stealing what they needed from other people on the island. In addition, the response of the local authorities in Sicily was lethargic, apparently because they greatly underestimated the slaves' ability to organize a large-scale military campaign. The senate in Rome also failed to respond quickly to the threat of the armed slaves. This is explained in part by the complex nature of the Roman government, which relied on officials who served for only one year at a time.

In terms of military operations, such as those required against the insurgent slaves, the most important officials were the two consuls (holding powers like those of a prime minister and a military field marshal combined; see glossary) and, beneath them, the six praetors (the chief legal and administrative officers of the Roman state; see glossary). These high-ranking officials were usually put in charge of

<sup>12</sup>*millenarian*: relating to mass movements powered by ecstatic personal religious experiences and a profound sense of impending revolutionary change in existing social relations.

Roman armies that battled formidable foreign enemies. Repressing rebellious slaves was beneath the dignity of these men and the legionary soldiers they commanded. Such a sordid task was normally left to the slave owners or to local militias, which were often corrupt, weak, and provisional. As the permanent governing body of the Roman state, the senate did have a long-term perspective on events, but it had to be moved by the recognition of a manifest threat of major proportions for it to direct the consuls or praetors to use the Roman army to deal with a slave uprising.

Roman provincial governors, such as those who administered the province of Sicily, were normally former praetors (occasionally consuls) who usually held their provincial commands for one-year terms. Because they were temporary and were severely understaffed by modern standards, these governors were dependent on the wealthy and powerful men who ran local towns and cities to help them administer their provinces. These provincial elites often gave their own interests priority over the rule of law and order that was supposed to be enforced by the governors.

Given the failure of the local forces to deal with the slave uprising in Sicily, the senate finally decided to dispatch Roman army units under high-ranking commanders to the island. As a result, the first slave war was finally brought to an end.

To a considerable extent, the second great slave war, which erupted on Sicily in 104 B.C. and ended four years later, repeated the patterns of the first. Resistance in the eastern part of the island was led by Salvius, and resistance in the west was organized by Athenion. Despite the lesson of the first slave war, the response by the Roman senate was similarly slow. Their inadequate reaction, due in part to the need for Roman forces to face German invaders threatening northern Italy, allowed the slaves to acquire considerable momentum in the early stages of the rebellion and then to coalesce in numbers that overwhelmed the local forces trying to subdue them. Once again, only the intervention of the larger, better-trained legionary forces of the Roman army finally brought the second war to an end.

The third great slave war that threatened Italy and Sicily between 140 and 70 B.C. was to be the last great slave war of antiquity. The war broke out a generation after the second slave war and lasted from 73 to 71 B.C. It is important to note that this rebellion, led by Spartacus, differed from the first two slave wars both in location—it was centered in southern Italy rather than in Sicily—and in the nature of its leadership. The core group of slaves who incited and led the rebellion were not agricultural slaves but rather men trained to kill each other for the

entertainment of others. They were known as *gladiatores*, or “men of the sword.” (See Figure 1.)<sup>13</sup> Like the two earlier wars, however, most of the slaves who joined the third rebellion were simple agricultural laborers.

### SPARTACUS: THE MAN, THE MYTH, AND THE MODERN SYMBOL OF REBELLION

On April Fool's Day of 1865, Karl Marx's elder daughter, Jenny, presented her father with a playful questionnaire. Not unlike the marketing surveys of our own day, it asked questions about his likes and dislikes: the qualities that he most preferred in a person, his favorite food (fish), his favorite color (not surprisingly, red), and various other preferences. The survey also asked about his hero, to which Marx replied, “Spartacus and Kepler.”<sup>14</sup> The fact that Marx chose Spartacus suggests how well known the story of a single slave who had led tens of thousands of his fellow slaves in a war against their Roman masters had become by the mid-nineteenth century. It is rather surprising to note, therefore, that only a century earlier Spartacus was all but unknown, even to most well-educated people.

Marx's attention had been drawn to Spartacus by two significant events of his own time. First, there were the revolutionary feats of Giuseppe Garibaldi, the romantic nineteenth-century rebel who was engaged in liberating Sicily and southern Italy from foreign domination. Second, there was the American Crisis, as the U.S. Civil War was then referred to in Europe. It was against this background of the Civil War that Marx was prompted to read about the civil wars that had beleaguered ancient Rome.

For recreation in the evenings I have been reading Appian's “Roman Civil Wars” in the original Greek text. A very valuable book. The fellow is Egyptian by origin. Schlosser says that Appian has no “soul,” probably because he is trying to discover the material bases of these civil wars “on the ground.” Spartacus emerges as one of the best characters in the whole of ancient history. A great general (unlike Garibaldi), a noble character, a genuine representative of the an-

<sup>13</sup>Michael Grant, *Gladiators* (1967; reprint, New York, 1995), offers some elementary facts. Much better is Thomas Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators* (New York, 1992). For gladiators and their personal cult of honor, see Carlin A. Barton, “The Scandal of the Arena,” chap. 1 in *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans: The Gladiator and the Monster* (Princeton, N.J., 1993), 1–46.

<sup>14</sup>“Karl Marx's ‘Confession’: Notebook of Jenny Marx (Zalt-Bommel, April 1, 1865),” in *Karl Marx–Frederick Engels: Collected Works* (London, 1987), 42:567–68 and plate, 569. Even for something as simple as this, there are two manuscript versions.

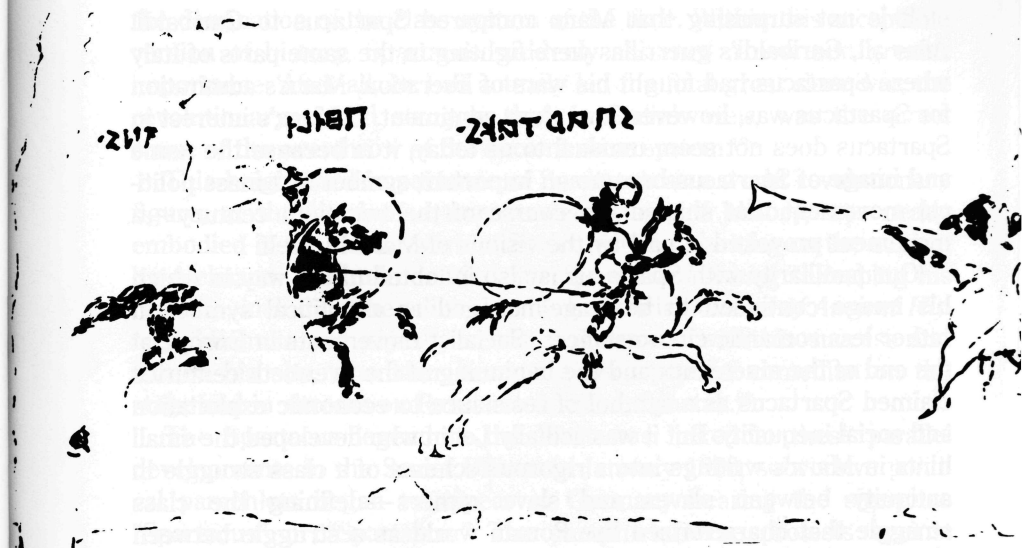


Figure 1. Spartacus the Gladiator.

This fresco from an entranceway to a house in Pompeii features two horse-mounted gladiators fighting each other. Compare the trumpeter to the right of the two men with Figure 3 on page 44, the graffito of another gladiatorial contest at Pompeii. The captions above the men are written in Oscan, a common language in this region of southern Italy before the Roman conquest gradually shifted the common language to Latin. The caption above the rider on the left (the Oscan writing has to be read right to left) says “Lucky is [...] ans! (PHILI[CS] . . . ANS)” [only the last three letters of the man's name survive]. More important is the inscription above the mounted man to the right: “Spartacus” [SPARTAKS]. The context of the find and the use of Oscan for the captions both argue for a date of 100–70 B.C. This is the same period when Spartacus was in training as a gladiator. Since Spartacus is a Thracian name that was not usually found in the region of Capua and Pompeii, the coincidences of time and place have suggested the possibility of an identification with the rebel slave. This is one of the earliest wall drawings known from Pompeii. Amadeo Maiuri, *Le pitture della casa di “M. Fabius Amandio,” del “Sacerdos Amandus,” e di “P. Cornelius Tegea” (Reg. I, Ins. 7); Monumenti della Pittura Antica scoperti in Italia*, 3: *La pittura ellenistico-Romana, Pompei, fasc. 2, Rome, 1939, p. 5, fig. 5b.*

cient proletariat. Pompey [was] a real shit (*reiner Scheisskerl*) [who] acquired an undeserved reputation only by claiming, as Sulla's “young man,” etc., Lucullus's victories [over Mithradates] and then Sertorius's [in Spain].<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Marx to Engels, London, February 27, 1861, *Karl Marx–Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 41 (London, 1985), 264–65. [A rather erratic English translation; the one above is my own, from K. Marx and F. Engels, *Werke* (Berlin, 1964), 30:160 (my translation)].



It is not surprising that Marx compared Spartacus to Garibaldi. After all, Garibaldi's guerrillas were fighting in the same parts of Italy where Spartacus had fought his wars of liberation. Marx's admiration for Spartacus was, however, a modern sentiment. If Marx's interest in Spartacus does not seem unusual to us today, it is because the name and image of Spartacus became an important symbol of a mass political movement that shaped the course of the twentieth century—a movement provoked in part by the visions of Marx himself.

Our familiarity with Spartacus is also indebted to the way in which his image continued to be stage-managed as a political symbol in rather less romantic circumstances. Socialist movements in Europe at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries claimed Spartacus as a symbol of resistance to economic exploitation and social inequality. But it was actually Lenin who developed the small hints in Marx's writings into a rigorous schema of a class struggle in antiquity between slaves and slave owners—defining the class struggle that characterized the Roman world as a struggle between slaves and masters<sup>16</sup>—ironically, a view not always shared by Marx. The way in which he did this provided the grounds for the subsequent exaltation of Spartacus in Russian and European socialist writing:

History is full of the constant attempts of the oppressed classes to throw off oppression. The history of slavery contains records of wars of emancipation from slavery which lasted for decades. Incidentally, the name "Spartacist" now adopted by the German communists—the only German party which is really fighting against the yoke of capitalism—was adopted by them because Spartacus was one of the most outstanding heroes of one of the very greatest slave insurrections, which took place about two thousand years ago. For several years the seemingly omnipotent Roman empire, which rested entirely on slavery, experienced the shocks and blows of a widespread uprising of slaves who armed themselves and joined together to form a vast army under the leadership of Spartacus.<sup>17</sup>

Most Soviet historians took their final cue for the historical significance of Spartacus from leaden hints in directives that were issued by Joseph Stalin.<sup>18</sup> In the official "stage theory" of history that was approved by Stalin, the Roman slave rebellions were likened to the Russian and French revolutions as armed struggles that overturned

<sup>16</sup>A position subsequently repeated by Stalin and by G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London, 1981).

<sup>17</sup>V. I. Lenin, "The State," in *Collected Works* 29 (Moscow, 1965), 29:481.

<sup>18</sup>For Stalin's views, see Mouza Raskolnikoff, *La recherche Soviétique et l'histoire économique et sociale du monde hellénistique et romain* (Strasbourg, 1975), 11–14, 127.

the domination of the class system of the time. Within this acceptable version of history, Spartacus suddenly assumed a new and greater importance. After all, he had actually led the final great slave war, the revolutionary armed struggle that, in Stalin's view, was the direct cause of the overthrow of the ancient slave system.<sup>19</sup>

This heightened importance of Spartacus as a world revolutionary figure, at the head of a transcendent stage of history, was neatly embodied in the classic work of Soviet historical writing on the subject by Aleksandr Mishulin entitled *The Spartacus Uprising*.<sup>20</sup> Reaping his rewards, including the editorship of the official *Journal of Ancient History*, Mishulin not unjustly credited Spartacus with his success and named his son, who later became a very popular comedian on the stage and in sitcoms on Russian television, Spartak.<sup>21</sup>

The Spartacus legend in the West was linked to these parallel developments in the Soviet Union. In January 1916, subversive political pamphlets began to appear in Germany bearing the signature "Spartacus" or "Spartakus." The pamphlets were protests against World War I, which was taking place at the time, and the current economic order. They were published by a left-wing political movement headed by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, who named their movement the Spartakusbund (Spartacus League). Luxemburg assumed the secret name of "Junius," after Lucius Junius Brutus, who, according to legend, assassinated the last tyrant king of early Rome in 509 B.C. and founded the Republic. Following the assassinations of Liebknecht and Luxemburg in January 1919 and their subsequent elevation to the status of political martyrs, the figure of Spartacus became entrenched as a special historical icon in the part of Germany that later developed into the Democratic Republic of East Germany.<sup>22</sup> Posters and leaflets distributed in New York and Los Angeles in recent

<sup>19</sup>On the role of history and the place of Spartacus in the politics of education in the Soviet Union in this period, see Raskolnikoff, *La recherche Soviétique*, pp. 111–14 and 127–30; for Stalin's line on history, see J. Stalin, "Decisions on the Manuals of History," in *Works* (London, 1978), 14:51–55.

<sup>20</sup>Aleksandr V. Mishulin, *Spartakovskoe vosstanie: Revoliutsia Rabov v Rime v I do n. e.* [The Spartacus uprising: The revolution of slaves in Rome in the first century before our era] (1936; 2nd ed., edited by L. Utchenko, Moscow, 1950).

<sup>21</sup>Wolfgang Zeev Rubinsohn, *Spartacus' Uprising and Soviet Historical Writing*, trans. John G. Griffith (Oxford, 1987), 7.

<sup>22</sup>Exemplified in a book by one of its leading ancient historians, Rigobert Günter, *Der Aufstand des Spartacus: Die grossen sozialen Bewegungen der Sklaven und Freien am Ende der römischen Republik* [The revolt of Spartacus: the great social movement of slaves and free men at the end of the Roman Republic] (Berlin, 1979); and by Armin Jähne, *Spartacus: Kampf der Sklaven* [Spartacus: The struggle of the slaves] (Berlin, 1986), who took the same political line.

years attest to the continued existence of left-wing political groups that still identify themselves as "Spartacists."

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, people who became the victims of McCarthyism in the United States also drew on the figure of Spartacus as a paradigm of active resistance to injustice. Such ideals inspired Howard Fast, an American writer of socialist sentiments, to write the novel *Spartacus*. Mainly through the machinations and direct personal intervention of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, however, Fast was blacklisted, and the book was systematically rejected by numerous publishers. He was finally forced to self-publish the novel in 1951.<sup>23</sup>

The Hungarian expatriate Arthur Koestler took another view of Spartacus in his novel *The Gladiators*, written in the late 1930s and reprinted in the mid-1950s, during the cold war and after the publication of Fast's *Spartacus*.<sup>24</sup> Koestler used the Spartacus war to sustain a perspective that was almost diametrically opposed to Fast's. He portrayed the uprising as a revolutionary movement that was inspired by high ideals but that soon degenerated into tyranny and oppression. This metaphoric vision of "the god that failed"—Koestler's condemnation of the actual practice of the ideals of European socialism under Lenin and Stalin—could not be missed.

The image of Spartacus that is arguably the most pervasive in the modern world is that of Kirk Douglas as Spartacus, mounted on a horse, sword drawn, face set in a determined, if not fierce, expression of independence. This image, grounded in the portrayal of Spartacus as a rebel underdog, was the main force that propelled the formation of the modern myth of Spartacus. In fact, after reading Fast's novel in 1957, Douglas began to identify personally with Spartacus. In his autobiography, Douglas describes his feelings as he visited various Roman ruins during his travels:

Looking at those ruins . . . I wince. I see thousands and thousands of slaves carrying rocks, beaten, starved, crushed, dying. I identify with them. As it says in the Torah: "Slaves were we unto Egypt." I come from a race of slaves. That would have been *my* family, *me*.<sup>25</sup>

Although our current image of Spartacus comes primarily from these sources, if we consider the entire scope of the historical interest

<sup>23</sup>Howard Fast, *Spartacus* (1st ed., New York, 1951; reprints, New York, 1958, 1960; reprint, Armonk, N.Y., 1997).

<sup>24</sup>Arthur Koestler, *The Gladiators*, trans. Edith Simon (1939; 2nd ed., New York, 1956, 1962; with new postscript, New York, 1965).

<sup>25</sup>Kirk Douglas, *The Ragman's Son: An Autobiography* (New York, 1988), 303–4.

in Spartacus since the end of the Roman Empire, it is clear that this image was actually first created during the 1760s. Indeed, in the vast span of time before the mid-eighteenth century, no one cared about Spartacus or even mentioned him as an especially important historical character. He merited nothing more than perfunctory notices in the standard histories of Rome. It was only during the 1760s that Spartacus became "an important man."<sup>26</sup> The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau set the tone in some of his writings, in which he proclaimed the right of every human being to freedom and the natural right of every person to guide his or her own life. In other writings of the time, one can sense the undercurrent of romance and revolution that hailed Spartacus as a hero for the new age.<sup>27</sup> The historian Charles de Brosses, who was writing a history of the Roman Republic at the time, produced a detailed study of the rebellion of Spartacus, which was presented to the prestigious Academy of Inscriptions in Paris in May 1768.<sup>28</sup> A fellow historian, Jean Lévesque de Burigny, published a lengthy treatise on the condition of Roman slaves in 1766 and 1767, giving serious historical consideration to the Roman slave wars on Sicily and the one led by Spartacus.<sup>29</sup>

In 1769, Voltaire made one of the first specific references to Spartacus in the context of the justification of armed resistance to unjust oppression. In words that would later be echoed in the American Declaration of Independence, Voltaire referred to the slave war led by Spartacus as "a just war, indeed the only just war in history."<sup>30</sup> Perhaps more significant, however, was a popular play by Bernard Saurin titled *Spartacus: A Tragedy in Five Acts*, staged at the Théâtre Français in

<sup>26</sup>Mouza Raskolnikoff, *Histoire romaine et critique historique dans l'Europe des Lumières: la naissance de l'hypercritique dans l'historiographie de la Rome antique* (Strasbourg, 1992), 335–41; Heinz Schulz-Falkenthal, *Sklaverei in der Griechisch-Römischen Antike: eine Bibliographie wissenschaftlicher Literatur vom ausgehenden 15. Jahrhundert bis zur Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Halle, 1985), 61–69.

<sup>27</sup>Wolfgang Zeev Rubinsohn, *Die grossen Sklavenaufstände der Antike: 500 Jahre Forschung* (Darmstadt, 1993), 28–30.

<sup>28</sup>Charles de Brosses, "La seconde guerre servile, ou la révolte de Spartacus en Campanie. Fragments de Salluste, tirés des IIIe et IVe livres de son Histoire générale," *Mémoires de Littérature, tirés des registres de l'Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 37 (1774): 23–86. De Brosses's *Histoire de la République romaine dans le cours du septième siècle par Salluste* was published in 1777.

<sup>29</sup>Jean Lévesque de Burigny, "Premier mémoire sur les esclaves Romains . . .," *Mémoires de Littérature, tirés des registres de l'Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 35 (1770): 328–59; and "Second mémoire sur les esclaves romaines . . .," *Mémoires de Littérature . . .*, 37 (1774): 313–39.

<sup>30</sup>Voltaire, *Oeuvres*, 53 = vol. 9 of *Correspondance générale*, 461–63 (Letter no. 283 of 5.4.1769).

Paris in 1760.<sup>31</sup> Not only is the earlier date significant, but so is the fact that this first public presentation of Spartacus was both popular and fictional. Even at the time, the character was recognized as a fabrication, an imaginary being who responded to the current society's demands for a model of just rebellion. Saurin himself said that he wished "to evoke the picture of a great man . . . who would combine the brilliant qualities of the heroic men of justice and humanity . . . a man who was great for the good of men and not for the evil that they suffered. . . . His real aim was the abolition of slavery, whose chains he broke."<sup>32</sup> Saurin's play was the first artistic creation to portray the slave rebel as a symbol of the age's assertion of the individual citizen's freedoms.<sup>33</sup>

Rousseau, Voltaire, Saurin, and even historians such as De Burigny and De Brosses took notice of Spartacus not only because of the drive for political freedom in Europe but also because of the persistent recurrence of slave rebellions in Europe's overseas colonies. For the French, the most striking case was furnished by the island of Saint Domingue (Haiti), where rebel slaves and freedmen led by Boukman and Toussaint L'Ouverture achieved a kind of revolutionary freedom. In the end, the plays, operas, and other theatrical representations of Spartacus were far less about the man who lived in the 70s B.C., or even about Roman slavery, than they were about freedom and liberty in the modern age.

Men who were not themselves slaves and had never been slaves used the image of Spartacus to think about, debate, and promote their own ideas of liberty for the citizens of the newly risen nation-states. The pattern was the same both in Europe and in the Americas. In Italy, the ideals of the independence movement led by Giuseppe Garibaldi in the mid-1800s are reflected in Raffaello Giovagnoli's huge epic novel, *Spartaco*, which was frequently reprinted and serialized after its publication in 1874 (see Figure 2).<sup>34</sup> The novel's "revolutionary imagery" was not accidental; it was prefaced by a glowing letter of

<sup>31</sup>Bernard Joseph Saurin, *Spartacus, tragédie. En cinq actes, et en vers. Représentée, pour la première fois, par les Comédiens ordinaires du Roi, le mercredi 20 février 1760*, in *Répertoire Générale du Théâtre français* (Paris, 1818), 32:71–134. On Saurin, see Martin Mühlle, "Spartacus," in *Bernard-Joseph Saurin: Sein Leben und seine Werke* (Dresden, 1913), 44–82, who notes the direct links with Voltaire's *Brutus* (1730) in a tradition of "anti-tyrannical" literature (p. 74f.).

<sup>32</sup>Rubinsohn, *Spartacus' Uprising*, 31, quoting from pp. 43 and 52 of Saurin's later introduction to the published text of his play.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>34</sup>Raffaello Giovagnoli, *Spartaco: racconto storico del secolo VII dell'era romana* [Spartacus: An historical story from the seventh century of ancient Rome], illustrated by Nicola Sanesi (Milan, 1874). Translated into many other languages; the fourth edition (1882) featured a dramatic pictorial advertisement for *La capanna dello zio Tom* [Uncle Tom's cabin], sold by the same publisher.



**Figure 2. Spartacus Spares Crixus.**

This illustration is from Raffaello Giovagnoli's popular nineteenth-century novel *Spartaco*. It portrays Spartacus as a brave yet compassionate gladiator, sparing the life of his friend Crixus in the arena. R. Giovagnoli, *Spartaco*, Rome, 1874.

recommendation from Garibaldi himself, written from his retreat on the island of Caprera. This novel also provided the basis for the first cinematic portrayals of Spartacus, produced in Italy during World War I.

The American play *The Gladiator* by Robert Montgomery Bird was yet another replay of the Spartacus rebellion. First produced in New York in 1831, *The Gladiator* played out the hopes and concerns of the newly confident "middle classes." Bird also was the author of plays and novels that contrasted the savage "Other"—whether Native Americans, Latin American aristocrats, or Inca princes—with the democratic ethos of the free American citizen. Bird's version of Spartacus was *the* stage success of American theater in the nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup> By 1854, it had been staged more than a thousand times, and it continued to play a leading role in the repertoire of the American stage for seventy years after the first production.<sup>36</sup>

The massive popular response to this and other such works was provoked not by any concern for the slaves themselves or for slavery as a living social institution of the time, but rather by the clarion call to liberty and freedom made to citizens who were already free. The writers who deployed these images of Spartacus were debating the legitimate status of the modern nation-state, the peculiar freedom of its citizens, and the type of liberty enshrined in its political ideals.

For all of the novelists, poets, playwrights, and filmmakers whose works appeared after the mid-1700s, the rebel slave Spartacus was a rather crude symbol for political freedom set in contrast not with real chattel slavery, least of all in nineteenth-century America, but with the fear of political tyranny, especially resurgent aristocratic forces, which might threaten democracy. In one of those odd ironies of history, Bird wrote his play the same year that Nat Turner led a slave rebellion in Virginia. Bird not only did not approve of any connection between Spartacus's drive for freedom and the rebel slaves of his own time, but he also took the opportunity to give vent to his own considerable fears:

At this present moment there are 6[00] or 800 armed negroes marching through Southampton County, Virginia, murdering, ravishing and burning those whom the Grace of God has made their masters—70 killed, principally women and children. If they had but

<sup>35</sup>Robert Montgomery Bird, *The Gladiator: A Tragedy in Five Acts*, in *The Life and Dramatic Works of Robert Montgomery Bird*, ed. Clement E. Foust (New York, 1919), 299–440.

<sup>36</sup>Curtis Dahl, *Robert Montgomery Bird* (New York, 1963), 56–61. "It was said to be the first play in the English language to be performed so often within the lifetime of the author. . . . It was one of the greatest hits America has ever seen" (p. 56).

a Spartacus among them—to organize the half million of Virginia, the hundreds of thousands of the states, and lead them on in the Crusade of Massacre, what a blessed example might they not give to the excellence of slavery! What a field of interest to the playwrights of posterity!<sup>37</sup>

Clearly, Bird saw the real-life slaves in American society who struck out for freedom as little more than violent criminals who were immorally protesting against a station appointed to them by God and who were therefore deserving of brute repression.

In the long, creative stream of romantic modern sentiments attached to the freedom of the individual citizen in the West's democratic states from the 1760s to the 1960s, one can count no less than half a dozen long poems, most of them heroic epics; a dozen dramas (tragedies, predictably); six operas; many paintings, intensely romantic in hue; and a score of children's books devoted to Spartacus.<sup>38</sup> In the twentieth century, we have seen at least six important historical novels, a ballet score by Aram Khachaturian, and several movies, mainly Hollywood-style epics.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, the post-1960s production of adult comic books; new wave musical forays such as Farm's 1991 "Spartacus"; and numerous jazz improvisations on the 1960 film score's theme, including Branford Marsalis's "Spartacus," also of 1991, seem only to mirror marginal discursive reflections on an icon in decadence and decline. It seems that the romantic myth of Spartacus has had its day. In a final movement of these symbols back, perhaps, to romance, the images of resistance from a position of servitude and of the bodily display of the nude male physique of the gladiator have merged to make Spartacus an icon of resistance to mainstream sexuality in the gay nightclubs of Amsterdam, in handbooks and guides to gay sex, and on similar Web pages. In the end, we are left with the modern-day historian's questions of research and inquiry: Who was Spartacus?

<sup>37</sup>Richard Harris, "A Young Dramatist's Diary: *The Secret Records of R. M. Bird*," *Library Chronicle: University of Pennsylvania*, 25 (Winter 1959): 16–17. Bird concludes his comments on Nat Turner's rebellion with the remark, "I had sooner live among bedbugs than negroes."

<sup>38</sup>Anton J. Van Hooff, *Spartacus: De vonk van Spartacus: Het voortleven van een antieke Rebel* (Nijmegen, 1993), offers a guide to the formation of the modern myth.

<sup>39</sup>Spartacus has been the peripheral, and sometimes rather odd, subject of films with Roman themes. Of the major films, there have been three Italian versions (1913, 1914, 1953), one American one (1960), and one Russian one (1975). See Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema* (New York, 1978), 34–48; Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (Boston, 1984), 109–14; Maria Wyke, "Spartacus: Testing the Strength of the Body Politic," chap. 3 in *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History* (New York, 1997), 34–72.