

0. COMMODUS IN THE ARENA - Story Preface

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Edwin Howland Blashfield (an American artist who lived from 1848 to 1936) created this impression of how Commodus may have looked in the gladiator arena. The painting is entitled, "The Emperor Commodus Leaving the Arena at the Head of the Gladiators." The oil-on-canvas measures 48.5 x 91 inches. It is part of the Sloane Collection at the Hermitage Museum and Gardens in Norfolk, Virginia.

Losing a fight in the Colosseum didn't guarantee death for a fearless gladiator. Even the words *Habet Hoc Habet* (he's had it!) didn't necessarily mean death. Life - or death - depended on the direction of the spectators' thumbs.

If thumbs were flicked away from the spectators' bodies - as though in disgust - the gladiator would die. (Today people often refer to that action as "thumbs down.")

Sometimes even courageous fighters couldn't please the crowd. A man dressed as *Charon*, the ferryman of the underworld, would finish off the gladiator if the verdict were *Pollice Verso*. Men, dressed as Mercury, would remove the slain body from the field.

If thumbs were thrust toward the spectators' chests - as though in approval - the gladiator would live to die another day. (Today people often refer to that action as "thumbs up.")

But ... what discretion did the spectators have for an *Emperor* who played at being a *gladiator*? What kind of impression did that emperor make on Herodian, the historian, who watched from the stands?

[Commodus] *took off the dress of a Roman emperor and took to wearing a lion skin and carrying a club in his hand.* (Herodian, *History of the Empire Since the Death of Marcus Aurelius*, Book One, Section 1.15)

People from Italy and nearby provinces came to Rome to see the Emperor who

(P)romised he would kill all the wild animals with his own hand and engage in gladiatorial combat with the stoutest of the young men. (Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire Since the Death of Marcus Aurelius*, Book One, Section 1.15)

From the safety of a protected, raised enclosure, Commodus carried out his promise. He slaughtered so many animals that 1600 years would pass before some of the species he killed were once again seen in Europe.

On the last day of 192 AD, the killing stopped. After twelve years of rule by a madman, people close to the Emperor had a plan of their own.

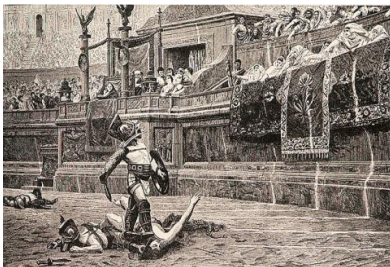
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Media Stream



Awaiting the Verdict - Gladiator Illustration

Image online, courtesy [VRoma](#).

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Charon - Ferryman of the Underworld

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