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PREFACE

When I was young my mother and I used to go, once a week, to my mother's grandparents who lived on the other side of Rome. We were living in the suburbs and that made for a real exciting trip - even more so for me - considering that the average journey for a child of six or seven years was from his house to his school and was very limited and restricted - the school was quite close to my home too. Moreover, when I was a child, almost 40 years ago, the internet did not exist and what was the most fun was to connect to the television, still in valves and black and white, a device that allowed you to make a white ball bounce between two bars, which you could make move up and down! Well, on this trip, which my mother and I did in the mid-1970's, there was a kind of ritual. In Piazza Venezia we used to wait for a bus, the 86. I remember it perfectly and it was often a double-decker, a rarity at that time, and something which has disappeared in Rome long since. While my mother was buying tickets I would run up the ladder to the top floor to take the seats in the front row to enjoy the show. The bus ran along Via dei Fori Imperiali heading to the Colosseum which loomed majestically in front of us at the end of the street. My mother took a seat next to me and every time told me the same story: the gladiators once fought in there, strong, fearless, feared, heroes who lived at the time of the ancient Romans. They fought each other and against the beasts with nets, tridents, swords and helmets on their heads. For me it was like a fairy tale, I could not see the bloody side of this tale.

As we drove closer to the Colosseum I thought of the gladiators who fought just like in the fairy tales, fighting the villainous anti-heroes. Even at that age I believed that heroes existed only because there were anti-heroes to be fought but I never wondered who these anti-heroes were if the gladiators were the heroes and I would not have found the answer since I never asked myself that question; I was only seven years old. Then the bus would pass right next to the Colosseum and at that age it seemed even bigger and more impressive than it does now. Then it passed along the Via Labicana passing close to the Ludus Magnus. And my mother was still telling her “archaeological fairy tale”: “Did you know? The gladiators were trained there, in that place, which was called the *Ludus Magnus*... And then”, she continued, “they went through a secret underground passage which delivered them right into the Colosseum ...”. All this was enough to make a child of that age dream, to make him close his eyes and imagine the Colosseum full of people and those heroes coming out of a secret passageway and performing amazing feats. My mother obviously gossiped over the tragic appearance of the monument since her main purpose was to tame a rowdy kid, who in those few minutes remained glued to the glass of the bus, to dream.

As an older boy in 1989 every time I went back to look at the Colosseum I would think back to those childhood days and when I looked at the Roman Forum I wondered why nobody was organizing costumed historical re-enactments in the Forum, to relive those ancient moments and environments. I would never have thought that thirteen years later I would become just the first to organize such a thing in the Roman Forum. But that’s another story. So

why am I writing this book? Why write yet another book about gladiators? So many books have been written on this subject but have we really shed light on these historical figures? This is the real question. I have asked myself this question many times and I can unequivocally say that there has been so much to discover, so much still to be read, not only in the written sources, but also in the epigraphs, and the tombstones. There have been things that maybe did not immediately spring to the eye, others which still needed to be noticed, noted and placed in the right context, interpreted and explained. I had to do an archaeological dig only this time the excavation was not being conducted in the ground but in the literary sources from the period and in what we had already uncovered and was available, in the museums, collections, warehouses and archives.

All this research, lasting years, is summarized in this volume, written with great humility. The purpose of this book is to summarize this study and give some 'clarity' and order among the various ideas that have always been known about gladiators and also to correct some interpretations of these phenomenal heroes which are purely cinematic.

At certain points in this book I will address some particularly influential scenes taken from various films which have contributed to the spread of incorrect information about the gladiators and correct the inaccuracies. A film, which is made willy-nilly to make money, has the power and influence to educate the masses either correctly or incorrectly; a historical film will always be a movie for entertainment, and not a documentary.

For example we can see that Barabbas, in the movie of the 1960's, in a single film (and we could say, in a single life!), can get the better of Christ during the famous confrontation with Pilatus, he is arrested again after the crucifixion of Jesus, he is brought back to Rome, condemned to become a gladiator, released, once again arrested, - this time on suspicion of having set fire to Rome in the famous fire attributed to Nero in AD 64 - and finally, ("finally" viewers say but probably also Barabbas), he dies crucified. And thank goodness, otherwise he would surely also be leading the huge tragic brawl between the Nucerini and Pompeians as told by Tacitus, involved in some conspiracy against the emperor and who knows what else! Or take as another example the movie "The Robe" where you can clearly see the Colosseum in spite of the opening statement of setting which establishes that the story takes place in the 18th year of the principate of *Tiberius* which was in AD 32; and the Colosseum wouldn't even begin to be built for another thirty-eight years. Where the Colosseum stood in the film there really stood a grove of trees and a swamp in those years. Or how about the more famous "Spartacus", where you see a gladiator armed as a *retiarius* who fights against the star Kirk Douglas; too bad that the *retiarius* first appeared with the advent of the Empire nearly 100 years after the story of Spartacus.

The creative licenses which create misinformation are not limited to the blockbusters of the 1950's and 1960's either. In the movie "Gladiator" by Ridley Scott, in 2000, you can see elements of pure creative fiction which remind us that Scott was also the director of blockbusters like "Alien", which was correctly based in science fiction. In Scott's rei-

magination of history in “Gladiator” Marcus Aurelius was killed by Commodus when in fact he died of plague at *Vindobona* (or *Sirmium*) and indeed he continued to reign for a period jointly with Commodus (from 177 after the death of his adoptive brother *Lucius Verus*). But on the historical mistakes of “Gladiator” one could write another book. Unfortunately, the latest productions do not make any fewer mistakes. Even the T.V. drama “ROME”, a big-budget HBO production, despite being very entertaining and intriguing, once again shows a *retiarius* in the era of *Julius Caesar*. And finally, the most recent “Pompeii”, where you see Vesuvius exactly as it is today with the conical shape and the flat crater. Too bad the Romans were never told that it was a volcano. Vesuvius did not originally have a crater - like it suddenly appeared – and it appeared, as reported by many Pompeian frescoes, like a hill hoisted by the gentle slopes.

And this is not to mention the chariots, another terrible stereotype of ancient Rome, which during the eruption sped off at a gallop desperate to escape. Only those who have never set foot in Pompeii (or have never taken a history book in hand, I might add) can assume that chariots can go at a gallop through the streets of Pompeii!

In this book I have tried to sort out the true story of gladiators and historical information relating to them from the fiction and I have dealt with clichés that I hope to have finally debunked. I have also tried to add a bit more to what has already been said and written.

I sincerely thank Dr. Andrea Alesiani, dear friend and collaborator for ten years now for the long night chats on Skype to discuss my research and my ideas. If this book has a real logical conductor it is him and without him the huge repository of information that I have gathered certainly would have been more chaotic and difficult to follow for you, the readers.

Writing this book was a little bit of “go back to those days in the mid-1970’s”, to finally investigate the stories of those heroes, and to understand, for myself, who they really were and to be able to narrate my time with my kids, with true stories of real gladiators just like my mother did for me.

This book comes from that place of desire because every time I pass in front of the Colosseum I am surprised to still watch it with those eyes of a child.

Because everyone, even today, feels a thrill and an attraction to those stories, to the gladiators. We imagine their triumphal entry and the many emperors who entered that building to admire them.

Because the Colosseum has seen many men and women fight, survive and die, and many men and women watch, applaud or mock them...

Because, perhaps, I never stopped thinking about those heroes...

Giorgio Franchetti