

## Gladiators, Soldiers and the Blurring of Identity in Tacitus' *Historiae*

Writing at the beginning of the second century CE, the Roman historian Tacitus noted with disapproval the inclusion of “*dua milia gladiatorum*” among the soldiers dispatched from Rome to reinforce the armies of the soon-to-be-displaced emperor, Marcus Salvius Otho (Tac.*Hist.*2.11). Tacitus appears to criticize the attachment of this “*deforme...auxilium*” to the Roman legions, lamenting that such an arrangement had become commonplace even among the strict commanders of the age.

I will argue that this apparent criticism on the part of Tacitus reveals a general anxiety exhibited by the Roman elite with regards to the blurring of traditional social boundaries in that such circumstances provided members of a servile class the opportunity to win glory on the field of battle and thereby engage in the typically Roman practice of cultivating *virtus* outside of the more traditional confines of the arena. As we shall see, from Tacitus' perspective the provision of such opportunities to gladiators was antithetical to his deeply-held views regarding the *res publica* and represented in his mind a wider Roman break with the military and class traditions of the *mos maiorum*. Such feelings of uneasiness were further bolstered by fears that the newly-armed gladiators (who were often themselves ex-soldiers) might revolt and wreak havoc on a Roman state already riven with internal discord and civil conflict.

Beginning with an examination of Late Republican accounts of Roman use of armed slaves in war I will proceed to a discussion of the manner in which the internecine struggles of the Triumviral period provided the historical precedent for fielding gladiator/soldiers during the ‘Year of the Four Emperors’ and the impact which such actions had on both the military outcome and Tacitus' interpretation of this disastrous and destructive period of Roman history.

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