

Plutarch on Spartacus

Plutarch of Chaeronea (46-c.122): influential Greek philosopher and author, well known for his biographies and his moral treatises. His biography is [here](#); the following fragment is from his [Life of Crassus](#).

[Spartacus](#) was the leader of an army of runaway slaves that shook Italy in 73-71 BCE but was ultimately defeated by the Roman general Crassus. There are two important sources about this revolt: the story is told in the [Life of Crassus](#) by [Plutarch of Chaeronea](#), and in the *Civil Wars* by [Appian of Alexandria](#). Both authors lived in the second century CE, but used older accounts, such as the *Histories* of Sallust and [Livy's History of Rome from its Foundation](#).

Here, we find the story by Plutarch of Chaeronea ([Life of Crassus](#), 8-11). The translation was made by Rex Warner.

Spartacus

[8.1] The rising of the gladiators and their devastation of Italy, which is generally known as the war of [Spartacus](#), began as follows.

A man called Lentulus Batiatus had an establishment for gladiators at Capua. Most of them were Gauls and Thracians. They had done nothing wrong, but, simply because of the cruelty of their owner, were kept in close confinement until the time came for them to engage in combat.

[8.2] Two hundred of them planned to escape, but their plan was betrayed and only seventy-eight, who realized this, managed to act in time and get away, armed with choppers and spits which they seized from some cookhouse. On the road they came across some wagons which were carrying arms for gladiators to another city, and they took these arms for their own use.

They then occupied a strong position^{note} and elected three leaders. The first of these was Spartacus.^{note} He was a Thracian from the nomadic tribes and not only had a great spirit and great physical strength, but was, much more than one would expect from his condition, most intelligent and cultured, being more like a Greek than a Thracian.^{note}

[8.3] They say that when he was first taken to Rome to be sold, a snake was seen coiled round his head while he was asleep and his wife, who came from the same tribe and was a prophetess subject to possession by the frenzy of [the god of ecstasy] Dionysus, declared that this sign meant that he would have a great and terrible power which would end in misfortune. This woman shared in his escape and was then living with him.

[9.1] First, then, the gladiators repulsed those who came out against them from Capua. In this engagement they got hold of proper arms and gladly took them in exchange for their own gladiatorial equipment which they threw away, as being barbarous and dishonorable weapons to use.

Then the [praetor](#) Clodius.^{note} with 3,000 soldiers, was sent out against them from Rome. He laid siege to them in a position which they took up on a hill. There was only one way up this hill, and that was a narrow and difficult one, and was closely guarded by Clodius,

[9.2] in every other direction there was nothing but sheer precipitous cliffs. The top of the hill, however, was covered with wild vines and from these they cut off all the branches that they needed, and then twisted them into strong ladders which were long enough to reach from the top, where they were fastened, right down the cliff face to the plain below. They all got down safely by means of these ladders except for one man who stayed at the top to deal with their arms, and he, once the rest had got down, began to drop the arms down to them, and, when he had finished his task, descended last and reached the plain in safety.

[9.3] The Romans knew nothing of all this, and so the gladiators were able to

get round behind them and to throw them into confusion by the unexpectedness of the attack, first routing them and then capturing their camp.

And now they were joined by numbers of herdsmen and shepherds of those parts, all sturdy men and fast on their feet. Some of these they armed as regular infantrymen and made use of others as scouts and light troops.

[9.4] The second expedition against them was led by the praetor Publius Varinus .^{note} First they engaged and routed a force of 2,000 men under his deputy commander, Furius by name, then came the turn of Cossinius, who had been sent out with a large force to advise Varinus and to share with him the responsibility of the command. Spartacus watched his movements closely and very nearly captured him as he was bathing near Salinae.

[9.5] He only just managed to escape, and Spartacus immediately seized all his baggage and then pressed on hard after, him and captured his camp. There was a great slaughter and Cossinius was among those who fell. Next Spartacus defeated the praetor himself in a number of engagements and finally captured his [lictors](#) and the very horse that he rode.

By this time Spartacus had grown to be a great and formidable power, but he showed no signs of losing his head. He could not expect to prove superior to the whole power of Rome, and so he began to lead his army towards the Alps. His view was that they should cross the mountains and then disperse to their own homes, some to Thrace and some to Gaul.

[9.6] His men, however, would not listen to him. They were strong in numbers and full of confidence, and they went about Italy ravaging everything in their way.

There was now more to disturb the [Senate](#) than just the shame and the disgrace of the revolt.

[9.7] The situation had become dangerous enough to inspire real fear, and as a result both [consuls](#)^{note} were sent out to deal with what was considered a major war and a most difficult one to fight. One of the consuls, Gellius, fell suddenly upon and entirely destroyed the German contingent of Spartacus' troops, who in their insolent self-confidence had marched off on their own and lost contact with the rest; but when Lentulus, the other consul, had surrounded the enemy with large forces, Spartacus turned to the attack, joined battle, defeated the generals of Lentulus and captured all their equipment.

He then pushed on towards the Alps and was confronted by Cassius, the governor of Cisalpine Gaul, with an army of 10,000 men. In the battle that followed Cassius was defeated and, after losing many of his men, only just managed to escape with his own life.

[10.1] This news roused the Senate to anger. The consuls were told to return to civilian life, and Crassus^{note} was appointed to the supreme command of the war. Because of his reputation or because of their friendship with him large numbers of the nobility volunteered to serve with him.

Spartacus was now bearing down on Picenum, and Crassus himself took up a position on the borders of the district with the intention of meeting the attack there. He ordered one of his subordinate commanders, Mummius, with two [legions](#) to march round by another route and instructed him to follow the enemy, but not to join battle with them or even to do any skirmishing.

[10.2] Mummius, however, as soon as he saw what appeared to him a good opportunity, offered battle and was defeated. Many of his men were killed and many saved their lives by throwing away their arms and running for it. Crassus gave Mummius himself a very rough reception after this.

He re-armed his soldiers and made them give guarantees that in future they would preserve the arms in their possession. Then he took 500 of those who had been the first to fly and had shown themselves the greatest cowards, and,

dividing them into fifty squads of ten men each, put to death one man, chosen by lot, from each squad. This was a traditional method of punishing soldiers, now revived by Crassus after having been out of use for many years.^{note}

[10.3] Those who are punished in this way not only lose their lives but are also disgraced, since the whole army are there as spectators, and the actual circumstances of the execution are very savage and repulsive.

After employing this method of conversion on his men, Crassus led them against the enemy. But Spartacus slipped away from him and marched through Lucania to the sea. At the Straits^{note} he fell in with some [pirate](#) ships from [Cilicia](#) and formed the plan of landing 2,000 men in [Sicily](#) and seizing the island; he would be able, he thought, to start another revolt of the slaves there, since the previous slave war had recently died down and only needed a little fuel to make it blaze out again.^{note}

[10.4] However, the Cilicians, after agreeing to his proposals and receiving gifts from him, failed to keep their promises and sailed off.

So Spartacus marched back again from the sea and established his army in the peninsula of Rhegium. At this point Crassus came up. His observation of the place made him see what should be done, and he began to build fortifications right across the isthmus. In this way he was able at the same time to keep his own soldiers busy and to deprive the enemy of supplies.

[10.5] The task which he had set himself was neither easy nor inconsiderable, but he finished it and, contrary to all expectation, had it done in a very short time. A ditch, nearly sixty kilometers long and five meters wide, was carried across the neck of land from sea to sea; and above the ditch he constructed a wall which was astonishingly high and strong.

[10.6] At first Spartacus despised these fortifications and did not take them seriously; but soon he found himself short of plunder and, when he wanted to break out from the peninsula, he realized that he was walled in and could get

no more supplies where he was. So he waited for a night when it was snowing and a wintry storm had got up, and then, after filling up a small section of the ditch with earth and timber and branches of trees, managed to get a third of his army across.

[11.1] Crassus was now alarmed, thinking that Spartacus might conceive the idea of marching directly on Rome. But he was relieved from his anxiety when he saw that, as the result of some disagreement, many of Spartacus' men had left him and were encamped as an independent force by themselves near a lake in Lucania.

[...]

Crassus fell upon this division of the enemy and dislodged them from their positions by the lake, but at this point Spartacus suddenly appeared and stopped their flight, so that he was prevented from following them up and slaughtering them.

[11.2] Crassus now regretted that he had previously written to the Senate to ask them to send for Lucullus from Thrace and Pompey from Hispania.^{note} He made all the haste he could to finish the war before these generals arrived, knowing that the credit for the success would be likely to go not to himself but to the commander who appeared on the scene with reinforcements.

In the first place, then, he decided to attack the enemy force under Gaius Canicius and Castus, who had separated themselves from the rest and were operating on their own. With this intention he sent out 6,000 men to occupy some high ground before the enemy could do so and he told them to try to do this without being observed.

[11.3] They, however, though they attempted to elude observation by covering up their helmets, were seen by two women who were sacrificing for the enemy, and they would have been in great danger if Crassus had not quickly brought up the rest of his forces and joined battle. This was the most

stubbornly contested battle of all. In it Crassus' troops killed 12,300 men, but he only found two of them who were wounded in the back. All the rest died standing in the ranks and fighting back against the Romans.

[11.4] After this force had been defeated, Spartacus retired to the mountains of Petelia. One of Crassus' officers called Quintus, and the [quaestor](#) Scrophas^{note} followed closely in his tracks. But when Spartacus turned on his pursuers, the Romans were entirely routed and they only just managed to drag the quaestor, who had been wounded, into safety. This success turned out to be the undoing of Spartacus, since it filled his slaves with over-confidence.

[11.5] They refused any longer to avoid battle and would not even obey their officers. Instead they surrounded them with arms in their hands as soon as they began to march and forced them to lead them back through Lucania against the Romans.

This was precisely what Crassus most wanted them to do. It had already been reported that Pompey was on his way, and in fact a number of people were already loudly proclaiming that the victory in this war belonged to him; it only remained for him to come and fight a battle, they said, and the war would be over. Crassus, therefore, was very eager to fight the decisive engagement himself and he camped close by the enemy. Here, as his men were digging a trench, the slaves came out, jumped into the trench and began to fight with those who were digging.

[11.6] More men from both sides kept on coming up, and Spartacus, realizing that he had no alternative, drew up his whole army in order of battle.

First, when his horse was brought to him, he drew his sword and killed it, saying that the enemy had plenty of good horses which would be his if he won, and, if he lost, he would not need a horse at all. Then he made straight for Crassus himself, charging forward through the press of weapons and wounded men, and, though he did not reach Crassus, he cut down two

centurions who fell on him together.

[11.7] Finally, when his own men had taken to flight, he himself, surrounded by enemies, still stood his ground and died fighting to the last. Crassus had had good fortune, had shown excellent generalship, and had risked his own life in the fighting; nevertheless the success of Crassus served to increase the fame of Pompey. The fugitives from the battle fell in with Pompey's troops and were destroyed, so that Pompey, in his dispatch to the Senate, was able to say that, while Crassus certainly had conquered the slaves in open battle, he himself had dug the war up by the roots.

[11.8] Pompey then celebrated a magnificent triumph for his victories against Sertorius and for the war in Hispania,^{note} while Crassus, much as he may have wanted to do so, did not venture to ask for a proper triumph; indeed it was thought that he acted rather meanly and discredibly when he accepted, for a war fought against slaves, the minor honor of a procession on foot, called the "ovation".

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