

# An analysis of ridley scott's movie the gladiator

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## **Gladiator Real World Comparisons**

Movies, almost exclusively, are made for the purpose of entertaining an audience. Even nonfiction movies, especially if released in the theater-to-DVD format common among big name studios used entirely to augment profits, are made in such a way that people will enjoy watching them. The truth, an often complicated, convoluted mush of reality that isn't always cut-and-dry, is not always as entertaining as a carefully engineered story or even slightly stretched realism. Therefore, with ticket sales and salary dreams in mind, directors sit down to present false or true information in the most easy-to-sell way. One should naturally not be surprised, then, when movies, like Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, are not entirely truthful and transparent. Now, it should be expected that there will almost unavoidably be some discrepancies between the actual historical facts and the made-for-entertainment movie, even if unintended or benevolent. For example, Romans didn't speak English, and they weren't as racially universal as they were depicted in the movie *Gladiator*. The big deal arose when they altered the actual story of history, like Scott did in his mainstream entertainment composition, something that he certainly had to do to make the movie as successful as it was. Much of the plot of the movie is stretched truth or a flat out lie, as the real story of Commodus is much different than one would take away from the movie.

The movie outlines Marcus Aurelius' death, and his son Commodus' rise to power following it, a series of events that did actually occur in real Roman history. However, a complete side-story is introduced that has no basis in the

actual classical past. Maximus, a supposed friend of the late Marcus Aurelius, is portrayed as the “real” heir to the Roman throne, having been chosen by Aurelius over his son Commodus. Commodus then proceeds to get jealous, killing the family of Maximus and getting him sold into slavery, where he becomes a gladiator. While this makes a great plot for a movie, full of drama, feuds, and suspense, it was not what actually happened. Maximus was not a real person. Commodus was selected by his father to be heir to the throne from the beginning. He was, however, insane, reckless, and made bad decisions, a part of Roman history that the movie gets right.

Commodus was later looked at by historians as an egotistical military and political outsider who had no experience leading. He was not a good choice for emperor, and Aurelius’ choice to appoint him as his heir brought an end to the line of adoptive emperors that had been maintained to this point. In *Gladiator*, Commodus is portrayed as an insane, incestualizing, ruthless man who has only his own interests in mind, not those of Rome and its citizens. He is shown to be power hungry not only by the fact that he killed the family of Maximus to retain his “earned” seat as emperor but also by his eagerness to dissolve the senate, making him a tyrannical despot for Rome. This is a time of great political and economic discord, an element that the movie seems to get, at least in part, correct. The real Commodus served during a time of chaos, and caused a massive devaluation of the Roman currency during his reign. His ruthlessness to continue to rule in this most unethical fashion is exaggerated in the movie. He attempts to fight this fictional Maximus character in the gladiator ring, first stabbing him and then narrowly being defeated moments before Maximus dies.

There are, however, a lot of things the movie got right about Commodus' reign. In the movie, he decides to host an extended period of fighting games. The real Commodus attempted to do something like this, in November of 192. By this point, Commodus had mostly gone crazy and began something called the Plebian Games. In them, he shot animals by morning and fought as a gladiator by night. By December, he announced his decision to be inaugurated the year following as both a consul and a gladiator. Also like in the movie, Commodus was then assassinated when he began to go crazy. The prefect Laetus, around year 193, began to hatch a plan to assassinate Commodus and replace him with Pertinax. This assassination, however, did not happen violently and in front of an audience as it did in the movie. First, Commodus was poisoned, and when he was able to avoid death from that, he was strangled. Once he was dead, his statues were all taken down and he was declared a public enemy and disgraced.

The movie Gladiator does much better than most, roughly introducing us, in a general fashion, to what happened in history and who the major players were, in a way that is entertaining, adventurous and sells well. It is, however, because of movies like this one that we often have mass misunderstandings of how history actually happened, so we must be careful about just believing what is on the movie screen. These movies also serve to provide an enormous misconception about how culture actually was in this time period. Not all of the absurd styles, buildings, and going-on's present in Gladiator were actually present in Ancient Rome. Whatever makes the most profit, however, is the goal of directors, a philosophy which is perfectly fine. These movies would be much better and more useful, however, if they came with a

warning: Didn't actually happen this way. Good for entertainment, not for education.