

From slaves to conquerors: how the 20th century movies ben-hur, spartacus and gla...

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From slaves to hero's: Slaves in Roman films

Slaves in Roman films of the 20th century showed them in a new light.

Instead of just being pushed to the side their characters actually had a sense of meaning and became the main characters of some movies, for example, Ben-Hur and Spartacus. This growth even went into the 21st century with movies like Gladiator. The slaves in these movies showed character, growth, and justice but with elements of revenge as well.

The 1959 film Ben-Hur is a great example of a rich man being sent into slavery by a power hungry, cruel dictator. Ben-Hur is sent to work in the galleys by new Governor of Judaea, Valerius Gratus, because accidentally a loose tile fell from his roof and startled the horse Gratus was riding in on so he fell and almost got killed. Even though he knew what happened was an accident but to intimidate his new Jewish community he uses Ben-Hur as an example of his new power and makes him into a slave and sends his mother and sister to jail; this makes Ben-Hur vow for revenge.

Maximus from the 2000 movie Gladiator and Ben-Hur from the 1959 movie Ben-Hur are similar in the sense that they are both well-respected men of their society that are sent into slavery by insecure, power ravenous men that just got into power. They both gain their freedom by doing brutish work, Maximus as a gladiator and a Ben-Hur as a slave in the galley's and then to a charioteer. The two meet people that help them along the way and can sense their determination and strength and the fact that they are not like the other slaves that are uneducated, poor, and born into their stature

Thankfully at the end of both movies their revenge is sought by death of both of their horrible rulers by their own hands in a one-on-one style combat and they both gain their freedom except Maximus dies at the end of his tale.

Throughout the movie one can see that Ben-Hur is a good, religious man that is determined to make things right. Arrius offers to make him a champion gladiator or charioteer but Ben states that God will help him throughout his journey for vengeance. His good side is put on the spot when Arrius makes all the rowers be chained to their oars except Ben-Hur during an encounter with Macedonians. Arrius' rowers are hit and are sinking but while this is happening Ben manages to unchain and save all of them. Arrius feels that he lost this battle and wants to commit suicide but Ben stops him before he can "fall on his sword." This was all done just so Arrius could test Ben-Hur's strength and dedication.

After watching Ben-Hur and Gladiator one will sympathize with the slaves because they are shown as the "god guys" and men just trying to get through life and do their time while working hard and basically have no other choice. They also all do this, in many cases, as a united team and at times have each other's backs.

The gladiator slaves from Spartacus and Gladiator are both told that if they outlive these fights that they will live 5-10 years after they serve their time. In both movies the slaves decide to band together to help each other out and make sure they outlive their unfortunate doings. In Spartacus this is shown evidently when after most of the slave's escape, after a riot that was started

by Spartacus, there is a combat between them and Crassus' men. The leftover men are interrogated but they all refuse to name their leader, Spartacus. They instead all choose to stand and say " I am Spartacus" when asked he who is Spartacus must stand even though they know that doing this will result in their death which is crucifixion along the Via Appia.

In Gladiator all the gladiators join together during their fights against trained fighters and archers for 150 days of games to honor the recently deceased king. They have a system where they all do things at once to protect them all when they are being attacked. With Maximus' knowledge of combat, since he used to be an Army General, teaches them defensive skills to help shield themselves and ways to strike their opponents. This helps save many more lives than when they all did their own things individually.

In the movie Spartacus, the lead character Spartacus is a slave who is uncooperative, hard headed, and tenacious. Roman businessman, Lentulus Batiatus, decides to make him into a gladiator and puts him in his gladiator training school. He is shown to make very good progress and seems to have a nice future in the world of gladiator fighting.

Even though Spartacus is shown to be hard headed and unwilling to cooperate most of the time he is shown to be a good man when a woman Varinia is sent to his room as his " prize." Instead of raping her he decides to treat her with respect and form a secret relationship with her. She eventually becomes his lover and has his son by the end of the movie.

The slaves seem to have good hearts, this is shown during a double gladiator fight between a Spartacus and Draba, an African slave. During their fight Draba shows compassion to an unarmed Spartacus and attacks the crowd instead of his opponent. During this is he sadly killed by a guard and Crassus.

These three movies have one thing in common, they are all lead by men who want to seek revenge and justice against their superiors. One way or another they were forced into slavery and to do things that they never would have thought possible. All of these movies are also Academy Award winning movies that completely changed the view of Roman movies in their time. They may not have had fairy tale endings but the fact that all the lead characters were able to seek their revenge and find justice is a happy enough conclusion.