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By: Stefan Anitei, Science Editor



The retiarius gladiator
Riccardo Frontoni

[Gladiator Mosaic Found on the Villa of Russell Crowe's Enemy Emperor](#)

A super-hero fighter

If you enjoyed the 2000 movie "Gladiator", you should know that some of its facts were real.

A "superstar" gladiator, like Maximus, the general-turned-fighter character of Russell Crowe, has been found on a newly discovered mosaic at the residence of the infamous Emperor Commodus, played in the movie by Joaquin Phoenix, just outside Rome. The fighter on the mosaic was probably a star gladiator fancied by the real Commodus, a great amateur of gladiator fights. The mosaic was discovered in a field close to the remains of the Villa dei Quintili, Commodus' countryside residence, along the Via Appia Antica, an old way that bound Rome to southern Italy. "It's a rather poor piece on the artistic side, black and white and not too detailed. Historically it's noteworthy because it doesn't depict a fantasy or mythological scene, but real people from everyday life: a gladiator and a referee in the act of proclaiming him winner. The inscription in the mosaic informs that the fighter's name was Montanus, probably a nickname, and the referee's name was Antonius." said mosaic's discoverer Riccardo Frontoni, an archaeologist at Rome's Department of Cultural Heritage. The gladiator wears light leather armor over his left arm and shoulder, his neck and the back of his head and also has a trident and a net. "It's the typical equipment of gladiators called retiarii. In combat games usually a retiarius fought against a secutor, a gladiator armed with a sword and a shield. The presence of the inscription with the name—a quite unusual feature—suggests that Montanus was a famous gladiator, beloved by ancient Romans like [how modern sports fans idolize] today's football stars," explained Frontoni. "Gladiators were living social contradictions. They shared a dangerous and humiliating job, but, on the other hand, low-class Roman people and even noblewomen hero-worshipped them." added Luciano Canfora, a historian and professor of classical philology at Italy's University of Bari. Commodus (A.D. 180 - 192) liked so much the gladiator fights that sometimes he entered the arena himself as a secutor, scandalizing the Roman noble families. "Members of Roman Senatus disapproved of him for such an inconvenient behavior. On the contrary, the plebs—the low class people—showed appreciation for the emperor's peculiar interest and loved to see him fighting." said Canfora. But that was a bluff, as his opponents were always intimidated by Commodus's rank and the unbalanced emperor, very proud of his physical strength, believed he was the reincarnation of Hercules. But the precious mosaic was not commissioned by the Commodus. "Commodus was born in 161 A.D. The picture covers the floor of a bathhouse built around 130 A.D., and we think the mosaic is the same age of the building, so it was there before Commodus' birth. At the time, the Quintilii family owned the villa. They were friends of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, Commodus' father. I imagine that Commodus as a child used to visit Quintilii's residence and to admire the mosaic of Montanus. He probably knew and fancied the fighter." In 182, Commodus fabricated treason accusations against Quintilii to execute them and confiscate the villa. Just like in the movie, Commodus was killed by a gladiator and without any glory; only this time it was his training and gladiatorial sparring partner, name Narcissus, not Maximus, and the murder occurred in the bathroom, by suffocation, due to a plot planned by a group of senators.