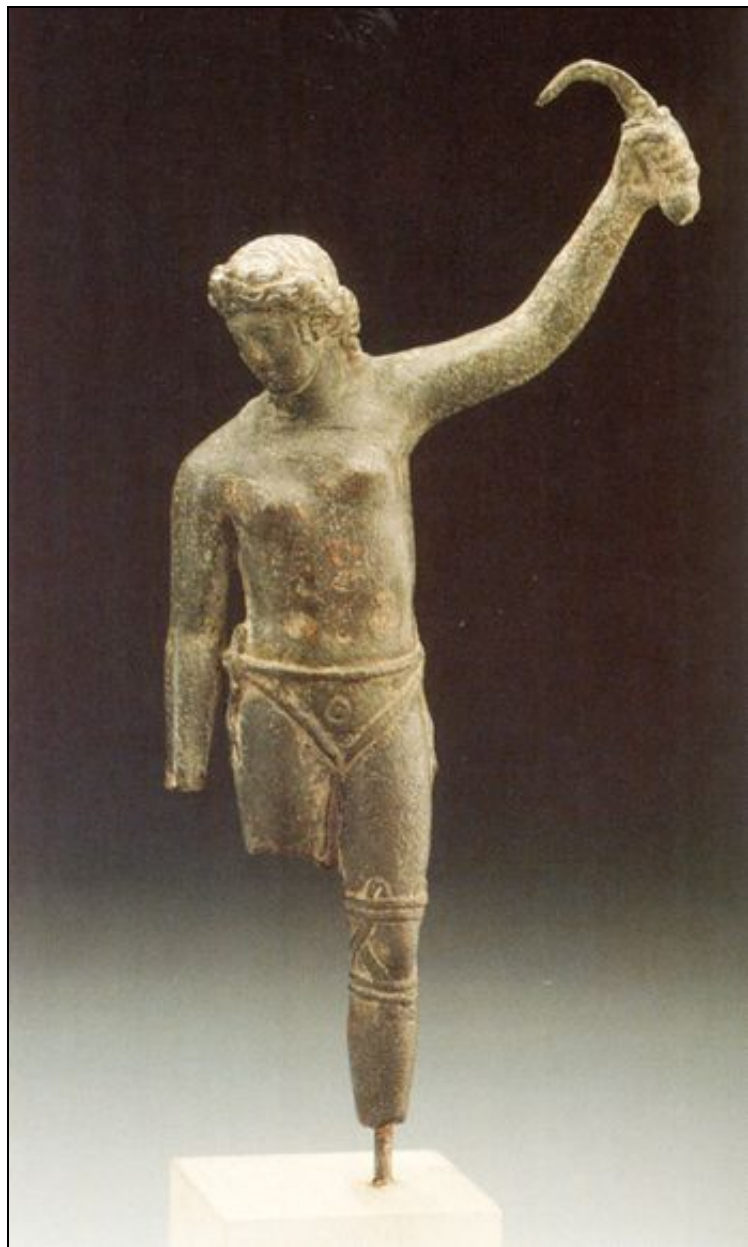


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Female Gladiators? Tantalizing New Evidence From Ancient Rome

Statue is only the second known depiction of a woman gladiator, study says.



Previously considered a cleaning tool, the statue's blade may be a weapon.

Photograph courtesy Alfonso Manas

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Female-gladiator fights appear to have been rare spectacles in the Roman

Empire. But new analysis of a statue in a German museum adds to the evidence that trained women did fight to the death in ancient amphitheaters, a new study says.

The bronze statuette is only the second known representation of a female gladiator, according to study author Alfonso Manas, of Spain's University of Granada.

(Related: "Huge Gladiator School Found Buried in Austria.")

The roughly 2,000-year-old artwork, which resides at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg, shows a bare-chested woman in a loincloth brandishing a scythe-like object in her left hand.

Manas believes the woman is holding a *sica*, a short, curved sword associated with a type of gladiator known as a Thraex, or Thracian. Thraexes typically fought in plumed helmets, with small shields and metal leg guards called greaves. Their unarmored backs were particularly vulnerable—and were likely ripe targets for *sica*.

Experts had previously interpreted the curved implement as a *strigil*, which Romans used for scraping the body clean.

The woman's pose, though, doesn't support that explanation, Manas said.

Victory Pose?

If she were washing herself, "raising the cleaning tool in her hand while she's looking at the ground doesn't make sense," Manas said.

Furthermore, "she is wearing a cloth around her genital area," he added. "If she is cleaning herself, she would be completely naked."

The figure's lowered head and raised arm—"a typical victory gesture of gladiators" in Roman art—instead suggest a gladiator standing over her defeated rival, according to Manas.

This gesture may also account for the figure's lack of a helmet or shield.

At the ends of contests, "they put down their helmet so that all the spectators could see the face of the winning gladiator," Manas said. "They also threw their shield to the ground."

(See "Gladiators Played by the Rules, Skulls Suggest.")

"An Erotic Impact"

As for being topless, that was also the gladiatorial norm. "One of the rules of a gladiatorial fight was that women or men fought with bare chests," Manas explained.

Given the largely male audience for the competitions, however, perhaps there's another reason why lady gladiators fought bare-chested.

Reporting his findings in a recent issue of the *International Journal of the History of Sport*, Manas wrote:

"No doubt the particular appearance of female gladiators would also cause an erotic impact on viewers."

The only other known visual record of female gladiators is a first- or second-century A.D. relief from a Roman site in Bodrum, Turkey (now in the British Museum).

The scarcity of such finds suggests that the ancient world staged relatively few all-female contests, although Roman writers do refer to them.

There are eyewitness accounts of female gladiators in Rome itself, and, according to the first-century historian Suetonius, Emperor Domitian made women fight by torchlight at night. In A.D. 200 another emperor, Septimius Severus, banned female contests.

Manas added that the origin of the Hamburg museum statuette isn't known, however, "it's in the style of the Italian peninsula in the first century A.D."

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