

# Calendar

## The Roman Army Was Mean

*Clarifying Hollywood's Distortions*

**I**f Julius Caesar's army suddenly marched into your living room, you wouldn't recognize them," says Jack Williams, archaeologist and military historian. The soldiers would be wearing long chain-mail shirts that would look medieval to a contemporary eye, rather than the Roman banded-armor that one often sees them wearing in films. "Their helmet styles you've probably never seen in a movie, either." The trouble is, Hollywood tends to dress all of its casts of thousands as if the Roman empire existed only between the First and Third centuries A.D. In fact, it spanned from the Third century B.C. to nearly 1500, by which time chain-mail — never out of fashion with Roman troops — had taken precedence again.

### LOCAL EVENTS

"The other thing Hollywood has done a poor job of showing is how the Roman army

fought as a cohesive whole," says Williams. "It sees Roman warfare as a conflict between individuals. It thinks you had these great masses of people who got together and had duels. What actually happened was that groups stayed together in clusters and fought as teams. From the practical aspects of military control, you wouldn't have anything that looked like what Hollywood portrays."

The recent movie *Gladiator* is a good example of misguided image-making, Williams says. It shows cavalry wielding long swords during the time of Marcus Aurelius (121–180 A.D.). But the metallurgy to make "a nice, long, strong sword" didn't yet exist. Instead, the men would have used what are called gladia, short swords adopted from the Spaniards.

The mindset of Roman warriors is another aspect of reality that Williams faults Hollywood for failing to portray. True, it took a certain kind of raw courage to participate in those battles. But the Romans managed it by inventing the modern concept of the military drill system — "which drills men so much that when the time finally comes for them to show courage they largely do so because they're acting on autopilot."

The Romans also had the capacity — and the willingness — to see people suffer. "One of the things they aspired to was an absolute lack of pity. The idea of mercy and the goal of treating other nations equitably is not something a Roman would understand. This is revealed in the drama of the gladiatorial games as well as their military engagements. They worshiped power in



From *Gladiator*

a very real way. They believed it was somehow glorious to enslave others. They also had a phallic cult that put great value on maleness at the expense of women and children. They surrounded themselves with phallic images to the point that most people today would find either comical or offensive. Every home had its little household gods that didn't leave much to the imagination. I don't think we need to go around making moral judgments on history, but it would be a mistake to candy-coat the Roman empire."

Hollywood images aren't the only ones distorting our sense of the Romans. According to Williams, archaeologists of the classical period are partly to blame. "They have tended to emphasize the beauty of the sculpture, magnificence of the buildings, and engineering accomplishments, when in fact what held the Roman empire together wasn't those things. It was the blood of the Roman army and of the soldiers that they confronted and destroyed."

For his part, Williams has worked on only one site with a Roman component, in Yorkshire, England. The principal investigator at San Diego's Presidio excavations, he has spent most of his professional life studying warfare in the Americas and the Spanish military response to native peoples. Current projects he leads are at Mission San Luis Rey and Mission Santa Barbara. Yet he sees such similarities between colonial Spaniards and ancient Romans — "and structural similarities in their military situations" — that the Romans are a serious "hobby-interest." Over the years, Williams has kept track of important Roman excavations being done by archaeologists in Europe and the Near East. "One of the most extraordinary finds," he says, "was a hippopotamus-skin Roman shield from Egypt." Experimental archaeology is being done too. "Believe it or not, there are groups in England who put on Roman armor and wander around, partly for the fun of it, but partly because they learn things about the equipment by using it."

At the next meeting of San Diego's chapter of the Archaeological Institute of America, Williams will speak about this scholarship, contrasting the new discoveries with the popular misconceptions of the Romans, who, despite their moral shortcomings, continue to amaze their scrutinizers.

"They developed a number of what today we would call high-tech weapons, including flame-throwers. By about the Seventh-century A.D., they had come up with a substance they called Greek Fire, which apparently mixed with water and burned. It may have been like naphtha. They sank a couple of whole fleets, with their old ships, using it."

— Jeanne Schinto

**"Making Sense of Roman Warfare"**  
Slide Talk by Jack Williams  
Friday, July 21, 7:15 p.m.  
Palisades Presbyterian Church  
6301 Birchwood Street,  
San Diego  
Free  
Info: 619-465-3841

**Local Events**  
page 57

**Classical Music**  
page 71

**Art Museums  
& Galleries**  
page 73

**Theater**  
page 74

**Pop Music**  
page 78

**Movies**  
page 107

**Restaurants**  
page 114