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Barry Strauss, *The Spartacus War*. New York: Simon and Schuster 2009. Pp. xvii + 264.  
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Review by Arthur M. Eckstein, The University of Maryland (amekst1@umd.edu).

Spartacus, the gladiator and slave who led an enormous slave rebellion in Italy against the Republic of Rome in 73-71 B.C., was a figure of interest to ancient writers, and has been even more so to modern ones. The ancient writers sometimes admired Spartacus' military skills, but shuddered at the prospect of the slaves' success, and were happy to see them defeated and social "order" restored. To many moderns, however, Spartacus has been an outright inspiration. There is a compelling and tragic appeal about an armed rebellion of the utterly downtrodden, which aimed (in some fashion) at human freedom, and achieved much against its ferocious slave-owning society but ultimately failed as that society mobilized its tremendous resources. This appeal is obvious in the great and influential Stanley Kubrick film *Spartacus* (1960), starring Kirk Douglas as Spartacus and Sir Laurence Olivier as the Roman general Marcus Licinius Crassus, who destroyed him. The screenplay was written by the black-listed Communist Party writer Dalton Trumbo (his name appeared as a credit for the first time in almost ten years);<sup>1</sup> the pamphlet handed out at the film's gala premier was red. *Spartacus*, then, served as a signpost to the rebellious 1960s. But Spartacus the person was also a hero to Voltaire, to Garibaldi, to Ze'ev Jabotinsky, one of the founders of Zionism, and even to Ronald Reagan, who, speaking to the British Parliament in 1982, employed Spartacus as a symbol of sacrifice in the struggle of freedom against totalitarianism (4-5).

The power of Spartacus as a symbol is clear enough; but what was the reality? Barry Strauss is a historian of the ancient world at Cornell University with a fine scholarly reputation who at the same time has made a name for himself with popular works such as *The Battle of Salamis* and *The Trojan War*.<sup>2</sup> He is just the writer to take on this subject in both an entertaining and an instructive way. And to a great extent he succeeds.

It is easy for moderns to fantasize about Spartacus. But the main problem in writing responsibly about the slave leader is the lack of ancient sources about him. The sequence of his extraordinary actions is fairly clear, but his motivations are not. Spartacus himself left no autobiography (we do not even know if he was literate); most if not all of his followers were certainly illiterate, and the few who survived Spartacus' destruction left no record. Thus the only evidence about Spartacus comes from those his rebellion threatened, the slaveowning elite. The Roman and Greek writers who discussed the Spartacus revolt were, by the nature of the social structure of the ancient world, wealthy aristocrats, for only they could afford the education and leisure to write long prose works; most of them focused on the threat that Spartacus' army posed to what they saw as civilization, rather than objectively assessing the man and his movement. And even the biased assessments of these writers exist now only in fragments (as is the case with the Roman historian Sallust, a cynical writer who evidently had much to say on this topic).

We do at least have an outline of what happened, though little else. Spartacus was from Thrace, today a region in far northeast Greece, but then barbarian. In fact, "Spartacus" is a Roman corruption of his true Thracian name, Sparadokos. He led a rebellion by slave-gladiators who escaped from a gladiator school near Capua in Campania, south of Rome, in 73 B.C. Spartacus' band originally numbered only seventy-four (38); they encamped on the rocky heights of Mt. Vesuvius (the volcano that exploded 150 years later, famously destroying the city of Pompeii), and they somehow withstood local efforts to eradicate the disturbance. Spartacus' initial success produced an extraordinary phenomenon: thousands of slaves from the Campanian

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1. See Bruce Cook, *Dalton Trumbo* (NY: Scribner, 1977).

2. NY: Simon and Schuster, 2004 and 2006, respectively.

countryside abandoned their hated regimen of forced work and joined the revolt. Spartacus somehow transformed this hodge-podge of fugitives into a force capable of defeating the larger and larger Roman armies sent against him. His army, grown to tens of thousands, devastated large sections of southern Italy that autumn and then spent the winter of 73/72 encamped on the Plain of Sybaris (Thurii) in the far south. The choice was shrewd: the Plain of Sybaris was famous in antiquity for its agricultural richness and mild climate (hence the modern adjective “sybaritic” means luxurious), yet it was surrounded by mountains that made for easy defense; the Roman name for the town was *Copia*: “Abundance” (84).

Against the odds, then, Spartacus’ slave army survived the winter. But in 72 the army split in two, most of it going north with Spartacus, but about a quarter remaining in the south under another leader, a Celtic gladiator named Crixus. Spartacus marched north through the entire length of Italy, devastating the countryside as he went, evidently planning to escape Italy over the Alps (so Sallust thought). What he intended to do once over the Alps is uncertain: set up an independent kingdom? Return home to Thrace? The summer of 72 saw the high point of the rebellion. While a Roman army annihilated Crixus in the south, Spartacus defeated both Roman consuls of the year—a stunning achievement—and reached the Po Valley. For some reason, however, the slaves then turned back, marching all the way to the far south of Italy. There they were frustrated in an attempt to cross to Sicily, betrayed by pirates who had promised them safe passage in exchange for a large share of the slaves’ collected booty but never showed up.

Important in Spartacus’ failure were the efficient military actions of the Roman governor of Sicily, Gaius Verres. Though Cicero later vilified him in a famous series of speeches (70 B.C.), Verres was in fact a competent commander (133–34). Meanwhile, after Spartacus defeated the consuls, the Senate appointed Marcus Crassus to a special command to deal with the crisis. Crassus, the richest man in Rome, was also a capable commander. He whipped his army into shape by severe discipline, including “decimation” (execution of every tenth man) of units that ran away when confronting Spartacus’ forces. After much maneuvering through southern Italy, he eventually cornered and destroyed the rebel army in late spring 71 in the foothills above Campania, where the rebellion had originated. Spartacus died in the fighting, futilely charging personally against Crassus and seeking a duel. Crassus crucified six thousand survivors along the highway from Capua to Rome, as a (very effective) warning to the rest of Italy’s slave population (189–94).

Spartacus was certainly both a talented tactician and an insightful strategist. His tactical skills showed in the startling victories of his ill-equipped irregulars over the far better equipped and trained Roman troops. All along, the slave leader sought to avoid set-piece battles with the heavy Romans infantry, preferring maneuver and ambush. Spartacus’ strategic skill is evident in his desire to escape Italy, where he knew no rebellion of slaves could long withstand Roman power. He also knew that the discipline and obedience necessary for survival would be difficult to instill in an army of rebels and fugitives. The break with Crixus and the turning back from the Alps are indicative of the army’s indiscipline. There is also a tradition that Spartacus tried—but failed—to prevent his men from committing horrible atrocities; but the rebel slaves had much to avenge (75–76). In general, though, Spartacus did exercise reasonable control over his diverse force of fugitives, maneuvering them up and down Italy with great skill and often outwitting Roman forces. The source of his authority seems to have been enormous personal charisma, based partly on his victories over the Romans but also somehow on religion: he encouraged an identification with the god Dionysus/Bacchus. Spartacus’ seeking to fight Crassus *mano a mano* as fate closed in reveals a man with a “heroic” world-view typical of the semi-barbaric Thracians, who had a ferocious reputation as fighters, rather than an enlightened socialist.

Beyond this is only speculation. Was Spartacus an ordinary Thracian or actually a noble who had somehow fallen on hard times and ended up a slave? The name is found in a Thracian royal family, and two Roman sources credit him with the sort of “greatness of soul” normally viewed as an aristocratic virtue (25–26), but this proves little. Had Spartacus at some point served in an allied unit of the Roman army, as one tradition holds? Clearly he knew from the beginning how to exploit potential weaknesses in the slow-moving Roman military machine; but the evidence is thin. In one tradition, Spartacus was a *latro* (“bandit”), sentenced to the arena as punishment. *Latro* was a broad term, which could denote a guerrilla insurgent

against Roman hegemony (like the two “thieves” crucified alongside Jesus). Strauss leans towards this reconstruction of Spartacus’ early career. But the term could as easily designate a simple highway robber. In any case, Marcus Terentius Varro, an excellent scholar and contemporary of the rebellion, says Spartacus was innocent of any crime when he was condemned to the arena. Was Spartacus aided by female priestesses, including his Thracian consort, who became widely influential in his army? Much is made of this story in the 1960 film (with the luscious British actress Jean Simmons as the consort), and the female prominence in Thracian religion lends the story some plausibility; but Spartacus’ famous Thracian Lady appears in a single source—Plutarch—and then only briefly (*Life of Marcus Crassus* 8.4).

Above all, did the rebellion have any purpose broader than revenge, plunder, or an escape from Italy? Did Spartacus have an ideology and even a broad vision of human equality? This has been part of the inspiring image Spartacus has acquired in the modern world, but it may be a projection backwards of ideas unknown to him. He did divide the vast loot from raids in the Roman countryside into equal shares—but many Roman generals (for instance, the formidable conservative Cato the Elder) did as much (Cato, *Orations*, fr. 203). And, too, we know that Spartacus’ army engaged in a savagery towards individuals to match the Romans, including mass execution of prisoners, and that the Romans themselves believed the rebels were only after plunder. While Sallust asserts that Spartacus sought to prevent atrocities, both Cicero and Livy offer a darker picture of the slave leader. In short, we should be cautious about making Spartacus a standard-bearer of human freedom.

Strauss is more open to the idea of Spartacus as an idealist than I am, but he is in general cautious and judicious with the evidence. His engagingly-written book follows a very dramatic and compelling narrative trajectory. In addition, he offers excellent insights on a wide variety of subsidiary topics. In gladiatorial combat, for example, the shield (used as a bludgeon) was as important a weapon as the sword—and thumbs *down* meant that a gladiator lived, while thumbs *up* meant death. The key to the survival of Spartacus’ army was its greater mobility than the heavy Roman infantry pursuing it. But the slave army faced constant dire problems of supply. With no secure base of operations and no commissariat, it had to live by foraging, and that in itself meant constant movement. The larger the army became—eventually reaching perhaps 60,000 fighting men plus women and children—the more difficult its logistics became. This is why Spartacus’ occupation of the Plain of Sybaris stands out. But even that region’s resources eventually gave out and so Spartacus had always to keep moving, with inevitable losses owing to both exhaustion and starvation. Strauss shows in his discussion of logistics one of the fundamental advantages of the Romans in suppressing the rebellion: for them, but not for Spartacus, Italy was filled with bases of operation and supply, in the form not merely of cities but also military colonies established long ago for exactly this purpose. Because Spartacus’ irregular army of light-armed infantry and cavalry lacked the equipment to take large cities by assault, the rebellion was always a phenomenon of the countryside, and especially of slave-shepherds, who led a miserable life but—far off in the fields and always on the move—were under only light control. These shepherds, not gladiators, who never numbered more than a couple of hundred, formed the military core of Spartacus’ forces (68). But without cities available for bases, and with his forces on the move and facing constant logistical crises, Spartacus’ strategic position was always weak.

Above all, Strauss consistently gives the reader a strong sense of place, which sets his book apart from all others about the Spartacus War. The sudden agricultural wealth amid bleak mountains of the *Campus Atinas* south of Salerno, which provided the slave army with its first great source of supply and plunder as it escaped south from Campania; the green waves of hills that make up inland Lucania, broken by upland plains and thick forests, with only a few isolated towns; the richness and beauty of the Plain of Sybaris; the harshness of the mountains of Calabria, where Spartacus waged a desperate, ultimately successful fight to escape the trap Crassus set for him along the bleak Melia Ridge after his failure to cross to Sicily; the dramatic canyons of the Upper Silarus River, opening up onto the plain where the final battle was fought—all this is lovingly presented by Strauss, an eyewitness who has clearly spent considerable time, as ancient history-writers advise, on the site of the events he describes. The book closes with an extraordinarily useful

survey of the latest scholarship on the many aspects of the Spartacus War, from gladiatorial combat to Thracian religion to crucifixion (217–32).

As Strauss points out, Spartacus—whatever he was in reality—even after his destruction was not forgotten in antiquity. It is not only that Sallust used Spartacus as a symbol of the noble savage with which to bludgeon the (in his view) corrupt senatorial class (204). He lived on in popular memory as well. At Pompeii, a striking fresco from the entranceway of a (probably mid-first-century B.C.) house depicts Spartacus on horseback, fighting a duel with another horseman, in a context that suggests gladiatorial combat, and with Spartacus specifically named (“Spartaks” in the local Oscan dialect of Pompeii). The Thracians were famous horsemen, and this amazing fresco, as Strauss says, is a moment where history is turning into legend (205–7). Nor is there any danger of the Spartacus myth fading away in the modern world: Hollywood has produced two major Spartacus epics since 2003 alone, and a television series (“Spartacus: Blood and Sand”) begins this year.

One of the failures of modern university life is that professional historians with a profound knowledge of their subject write mostly technical works for an elite coterie of similar scholars, ignoring the large popular appetite for accessible works on many historical topics of inherent drama—from the fall of Troy to the Persian invasion of Greece, the fall of the Roman Republic, and the rebellion of Spartacus. Barry Strauss has once again skillfully bridged the gap between the latest professional research and the broader public in his new book on Spartacus. The story is fascinating, the writing very clear even on technical matters (e.g., the source problem, or the experience of ancient battle), and the discussion of moral issues quite eloquent. Any reader will emerge from *The Spartacus War* with much new knowledge easily obtained.