BONUS MATERIAL

WITH A REBEL YELL

Turns out not everyone liked Rome or wanted to be part of it. Resisting Rome was tough because the Romans were very good at putting an army in the field, but this chapter details some brave folk who stood up to Rome. They went down in the history books for their courage.

The Man, the Myth, the Legend: Spartacus

Let's kick this chapter off with a bold statement: Spartacus is the most famous rebel in Rome's history. Nowadays, part of his fame may be down to the 1960 movie starring Kirk Douglas, the man with a jaw of marble and a chin cleft as deep as the Grand Canyon. But where did his legend begin, and why did he become so notorious?

Ancient Rome was a slave state. Whilst we will never know for certain how many enslaved people there were, there were a lot of them and they were everywhere. If you could afford it, you owned a slave. The Richie Rich's of the Roman world might own hundreds. The state itself owned slaves. This meant that it was quite common for enslaved people from all over the known world to be living alongside free people. The Romans were aware that this could be risky. What if your slaves abused their insider access? What was stopping them from murdering their owners? This sounds like a horror movie in the making. *"The call is coming from inside the house!"*

This is all to say that the Romans were always slightly on edge about the possibility of disobedient, or scarier still, rebellious slaves. They were allowed to dish it out, but slaves were never supposed to retaliate.

If written histories can be believed, slaves had been part of the fabric of Roman society since the regal period. However, our records indicate that there were not that many large-scale slave rebellions, particularly after the fall of the republic. The reasons why are complicated, and if we ever want to get to Spartacus, we will just have to accept that and move on. In the late republic, there was a series of slave uprisings in short succession. The first two took place in Sicily, but the last originated on the mainland and the rebels were very close to Rome itself at one point. This was the revolt led by Spartacus.

Spartacus is not an easy man to get to know. This is not because he liked to play hard to get or worked to cultivate a brooding masculine quality. He just was not important enough to have much recorded about him until he struck back in 73 BCE. Even after he did become significant, neither Spartacus nor his followers thought to keep a detailed journal of their adventures, or if they did, it disappeared somewhere along the way. A thoughtless oversight on their part![1] We have to rely entirely on pro-Roman accounts to piece together the activities of the escapees.

Let's return to the origin of the whole shebang. We know that it all began in a *ludus* (gladiatorial school) in Capua. Capua was a prominent city with its own amphitheatre, not too distant from Rome. Spartacus was one of the gladiators, and therefore a slave.

1 All jokes aside, slavery in the Roman world was a bit different to the image of slavery that many may have from the United States of America. There were no blanket laws about enslaved people and literacy, probably because it was so impractical. People could be enslaved for so many reasons and at different stages of life. A common way to become enslaved at this point in Rome's history would have been to be taken prisoner in a war, so educated people were just as vulnerable as the next in this scenario. In fact, some enslaved persons were prized because of their high level of education and were used for administrative persons in households and even by the state. One of the most infamous examples of this is Claudius and the various freedmen (freed slaves) he relied on during his rule.

How did he wind up as a gladiator? There are indications that he was originally from Thrace (think Bulgaria), and he may have served in an auxiliary unit for the Roman army and deserted, perhaps making his living as a brigand until he was apprehended. He could also have been a prisoner of war. Thrace had a history of getting punchy with Rome. Most shockingly, a fragment from Varro claims that Spartacus was "an innocent man" who nonetheless was sentenced to this cruel fate. Whichever way you look at it, it was not his choice to be in this *ludus*. (Believe it or not, some people did volunteer to become gladiators.)

Gladiators held an interesting position in Roman society. Their feats in the arena could win them admiration, but in terms of the social pyramid, they were right at the bottom alongside sex workers. It was kind of a love-hate relationship. Like how we all feel about the Kardashians.

The *ludus* was owned by a *lanista* named Lentulus Batiatus.[2] This man may have been particularly strict or cruel, and this provoked a rebellion. But maybe being a gladiator was enough. Sure, you might win some renown for your skills in the arena and get decent medical treatment, but you were still a slave in a spectacularly dangerous job at the end of the day. You may not be forced to fight to the death in this era, but serious injuries and infections might still finish you off. The historian Appian records the most interesting (and relatable) motivation. Spartacus convinced the other gladiators to fight for their freedom, rather than the entertainment of others.

Was Spartacus a star of the arena who had managed to evade death in numerous death-defying duels? We don't know. Plutarch's description implies that Spartacus and his fellow escapees were fighters, not new recruits, but how experienced is anyone's guess. To be chosen as a gladiator, Spartacus was most likely still a young man. It would not have made good business sense to train a fifty-year-old.

Gladiators did not have easy access to the weapons they would have used in fights. Spartacus and co. had to break out of the ludus using whatever they could grab in the kitchen before they could secure more traditional weaponry.

The rebels initially numbered anywhere between 30 and 200, but most sources agree that around 70–80 actually escaped. (Yep, those sources again.) Time to make an important distinction. These guys may have been rebels, but they were not a rabble. They knew that they needed to introduce some organization into this caper. Three leaders were chosen, one of which was Spartacus, the others being gladiators named Oenomaus and Crixus.

Here's where we can finally introduce one of the most intriguing details about Spartacus. He was married to a woman from his tribe, and his wife escaped with him. Only one source (Plutarch) includes this detail about Spartacus's wife, but a lot of adaptations of his story have latched onto the hint of romance and run with it. And it IS romantic to imagine Spartacus and his wife managing to stay together when they were sold to Batiatus and her fighting for freedom by his side. Very unusual, though. The Romans did not prioritize keeping families together where slavery was concerned. Plutarch mentions her when relating a prophecy about Spartacus. Conveniently, she was a prophetess and a follower of Dionysus, so when a snake gave Spartacus's face a cuddle whilst he was napping, she knew it meant he was destined for great fortune and power.[3] This allegedly happened when the two were up for sale in Rome, so it must have seemed like wishful thinking at the time, although people in the ancient world did take omens very seriously. Unless this is all Plutarch's fantasy and a way to foreshadow that Spartacus was no ordinary dude. But why erase her from history? Women have had that happen too often, so let's run wild with this maenad.

Wife in tow, Spartacus and his followers managed to fend off some Capuan soldiers who were sent after them. That might not have been super hard for trained fighters. These guys may have been more like army reserves. It's what they did next that is pretty amazing. A force of three thousand men, led by the praetor C. Claudius Glaber, was dispatched from Rome. The slaves took refuge on Mt. Vesuvius (still over a century away from the monster explosion that would devastate the area), and it must have seemed to the Romans that they were well and truly trapped. There was only one viable way to descend from their refuge, so all the Romans had to do was wait.

WAIT JUST A DARN SECOND, ROMANS. This is SPARTACUS we're dealing with. He may be just a slave to you, but Sallust praised him for his "strength and courage." Even Plutarch, a pro-Roman source, said that Spartacus was "...possessed not only of

2 The *lanista* was the owner and possibly also trainer of the gladiator school.

3 This makes sense for a Thracian lass. Dionysus may actually have originated in Thrace, not Greece, and he remained an important deity for these people. In the Thracian understanding of Dionysus, he was very much connected with prophecy. He also tended to be a popular god for those lower down the social scale and was linked to several uprisings against Rome. For a succinct overview on Thracian culture, you can check out the *Ancient History Fangirl* podcast series on Spartacus.

great courage and strength, but also in sagacity and culture superior to his fortune, and more Hellenic than Thracian." There is no higher compliment from a Greek like Plutarch than to call someone kind of Greek.

Being exceedingly clever, the slaves fashioned rope-ladders out of the vines that grew on Vesuvius. They used these to lower themselves and their weapons down in a location that was not being surveilled by the Romans. This allowed the rebels to catch the Romans by surprise and capture their camp. We know, we know. Sounds like something out of a bad action movie, right? Yet this story is attested in multiple sources. We're leaning toward true for this one. The slave army continued to defeat the Roman forces sent against them. Actually, defeat does not quite capture it. They humiliated them. One praetor, Cossinius, was literally caught with his pants (and everything) down as he indulged in a spot of bathing.

From the start, the rebels had attracted new followers in their travels. The official term would be "randos"—slaves, shepherds, even some free people (but poor ones). The disenfranchised. All of this success can only have made the prospect of running away to join Spartacus more attractive. If what Appian says about Spartacus dividing booty equally amongst his followers is true, this would only have increased the appeal.

Spartacus also had a certain strategic flair, perhaps combining what he knew of both Thracian and Roman warfare. He didn't peak with the vine-ladders. Spartacus gets credited with trying to fashion a "proper" army. His followers fashioned their own armor, shields, and weapons. They captured horses and formed cavalry units. During one of his earlier victories, Spartacus may even have captured some of the insignia from the defeated Roman magistrate, such as the *fasces*.[4] (The Romans would have just collectively rolled over in their graves if they didn't prefer cremation.) The camp was guarded by sentries and organized regular patrols. The slaves once managed to sneak away from their camp after propping dead bodies up to look like their usual guards.

More disturbingly for contemporary audiences, he may have used captured Romans to stage his own gladiatorial displays to honor his fallen comrades. We may not love that last part, but we should not delude ourselves into seeing the two sides here as the goodies vs. the baddies. Most of Spartacus's followers would have led tough lives, if not violent ones. Their pillaging and plundering involved arson, theft, rape, and murder. Spartacus may have crucified a prisoner (as a warning of what might befall them if they failed), killed people and animals that were slowing down his movement, and forced others to fight to the death. Few people in this story would have been chosen as the spokesmen for fabric softener.

What was the game plan? This is where a slave diary or two would really help us out. The sources are conflicted about what the rebels were actually trying to achieve in the long-term. Perhaps we should look no further than FREEEEEDOOOOM! Get out, get out of Italia/ this nightmarish boot right now! That in itself is an understandable goal for a bunch of ex-slaves and disaffected poor. But after a series of wins and an influx of newbies, their plans might have started to change.

With thousands, or perhaps tens of thousands, of followers, a unified goal was hard to achieve. Spartacus wanted to escape from Italy, but we're told most of the rebels wanted to just ravage their way around the country (or is that classic Roman bias at play?) How long could their luck hold if they remained? The Romans had not been too concerned at first by this small band of renegade gladiators. Now, their numbers had grown and it was not a good look for a collection of slaves and peasants to be defeating a premier power like Rome.

Spartacus himself was either an exceptional commander or very intent on proving his wife right (bless). The Romans threw the consuls and yet more soldiers at the rebels. Whilst the consul Gellius enjoyed some success against the Gallic-Germanic contingent, which had split from Spartacus's crew, Spartacus remained undefeated.

It was time to call in the big guns, or rather, the deep pockets. Enter Marcus Licinius Crassus, very ambitious, very very wealthy. Crassus agreed to take charge of a situation that had spiralled out of control, even paying for six fresh legions himself. It is thanks to Crassus that we have one of our more detailed account of Spartacus. He shows up in Plutarch's biography of Crassus (perhaps as a way of showing Crassus up. Plutarch was not a fan).

4 The *fasces* were a bunch of rods bound together with an axe. They were the symbol of power for a Roman magistrate (like a consul) and were carried around by his attendants (*lictors*). The essential message was that this man had the power to beat someone to death with the rods or cut their heads off with the axe...so pretty intimidating. In the early-twentieth century, Mussolini would start calling his followers the Autonomous Fasci of Revolutionary Action, which came from the Italian *fascio,* or "bundle." When Mussolini won control of Italy, his party became known to English speakers as fascists. He did incorporate the symbol of the Ancient Roman *fasces* into the iconography for his party. Not really anything to do with Spartacus, but pretty fascinating, right?

At first, Crassus did not have much more luck than those before him. He was so furious with the loss, he decimated part of the army. This literally means that you kill every tenth man.[5] In case you're wondering, no, this was not a super-common penalty. Crassus just had that classic dilemma: How best to show my displeasure with my troops?

The decimation seems to have suitably scared the oatmeal out of the soldiers as Crassus's performance started to improve after this rocky start. Unfortunately, this means that our hero's star was starting to flicker. With Crassus's force on his tail, Spartacus struck a deal with Cilician pirates to transport his followers to Sicily, which had a recent history of slave revolts. Presumably Spartacus intended to stir up the old troubles there. He never got the chance as the Cilicians betrayed him. Yaaaarrrr matey!

The Beginning of the End

The slaves moved on Rhegium (think the toe of the boot), where Crassus quickly followed. He ordered his men to build fortifications to try and trap the rebels in the "shoe." We hate to give credit to the Romans here, but this was their vine-rope-ladder moment. This barricade was wide, tall, and long and involved a ditch, although probably nowhere near as long as Plutarch implies. It was definitely an obstacle and a gigantic pain in Spartacus's ass. Luckily, our slave commander still had a few tricks up his sleeve. On a stormy, snowy night, the slaves filled in part of the ditch with sticks, earth, and dead bodies (yum) and managed to get across.

There are hints of tensions within the slave camp throughout their rebellion, starting with the supposed disagreements over their goals. The fragmentary but early account from Sallust mentions Spartacus begging his army to stop their violent assaults on the people in the area and them taking zero notice. At this later point in the war, the division seemed to be manifesting itself physically, with the rebels camping separately. There may have been practical reasons behind this decision (food supply, water), but it may have been tied to the ethnicity of the slaves. Slaves and gladiators would have been from a variety of backgrounds, and the leaders (Oenomaus, Crixus, Canicus, and Castus) may have taken charge of the people who shared their culture.

Camping apart exposed the slaves to more danger. Crixus had perished, along with many others, when they fought without Spartacus. After their escape from Rhegium, Crassus took advantage of another split to make an attack that probably would have been successful if Spartacus hadn't arrived just in the nick of time. Canicus and Castus following were less fortunate when the Romans launched an assault on their detachments.

Even with this loss, Spartacus's contingent was still capable of dealing the Romans a devastating blow. Plutarch paints this final victory as a turning point. Confidence infected the slaves like a disease. They weren't willing to play it safe and avoid battles. They weren't listening to their leaders any more—they were calling the shots!

But their next battle would be their last. There was an epic final clash in 71 BCE between the slave army and Crassus's forces. The rebels did not prevail, and many were slaughtered. Some of the survivors managed to flee into the surrounding areas, but six thousand were taken prisoner and crucified along the road from Capua to Rome. A grisly end and a strong warning.

What of our valiant leader? Spartacus's end is as murky as his beginning. We will never know for sure what happened to him, but the sources indicate that he perished during the battle. Plutarch provides the most cinematic account of last moments. Spartacus was trying to fight his way through the melee to reach Crassus, who was bravely putting his life on the line as well. Two centurions tried to take him on, but Spartacus killed them, continuing his quest to find the Roman commander. Gradually, Spartacus's comrades were slain or fled. He stood alone, surrounded by his enemy. He fought them all to the bitter end, until finally, one of them dealt the fatal blow. Spartacus's resistance was at an end.

Rome obviously had more forces at their disposal in a conflict like this, making the slaves the underdogs. When you add in that tantalizing hint from Varro that Spartacus should never have even been condemned in the first place? GOOSEBUMPS, literal goosebumps. And there's something many of us LOVE about rooting for the underdogs, especially when all they seem to want is something we now regard as fundamental: freedom. If we come back to the sizable slave population in Italy, the possibility of slaves everywhere uniting with Spartacus to fight…well, it sends our imaginations a little wild.

The fact remains that not all of the slaves rallied behind Spartacus against the Romans. Some did, the vast majority did not. Romans continued to own slaves and train gladiators. The system remained, little had changed.

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5 You'll never look at THAT word the same again. To be very precise, *decimatio* was not ALWAYS exactly a tenth of the army, but that amount was common and is reflected in the etymology (*decem* = ten, like December, which used to be the tenth month of the Roman year.) Our sources all provide different numbers for this incident, so it is hard to know exactly how many men Crassus put to death.

The only way the slaves could have really won was to evade recapture or death. We can still see the genuine concern aroused by this rebellion. The Romans sent increasingly higher-ranking people to deal with Spartacus, and when Crassus had taken over, either he or the senate (probably the latter) sent for reinforcements in the form of Pompey the Great and Lucullus. Even the positive comments made about the slaves say something. For instance, their bravery in battle. The Romans go nuts for a solider that only gets wounded in the front. Spartacus is not universally demonized; indeed, he is praised in some accounts. Did the pro-Roman accounts feel the need to build their enemy into a suitably impressive foe? We cannot be sure, and we certainly don't want to take away any of the real accomplishments of these enslaved people. The Romans weren't the only culture to faint at the feet of manly warriors. Nonetheless we need to be wary, as the Greco-Romans were not averse to twisting the occasional detail to suit themselves, and the rebels would never have been their main priority in whatever story they were telling.

Spartacus was gone but not forgotten. How could the Romans forget a man like this? It challenged their understanding of the social order that someone with such a lowly pedigree could triumph against Roman forces. A slave, commanding an army against them? Plundering villages? Defeating praetors, consuls, and proconsuls? Evading capture for years? Rampaging through Italy, even coming close to Rome itself? It shamed them, deeply, and their war against him continued to be referred to for centuries to come. Does deep psychological trauma count as a victory? We like to think so.

From one perspective, Spartacus's life was brutal and short. However, from another perspective, his journey was epic: "the man who, from being a Thracian mercenary, had become a soldier, and from a soldier a deserter, then a highwayman, and finally, thanks to his strength, a gladiator" (Florus).

Last Man Standing: Masada

The Romans are well-known for their relentless conquest of various territories. However, it is one thing to capture, another to keep. In 66 CE, the Emperor Nero's reign was imploding, and whilst the Romans did not know it, civil war was not far away. The last thing they needed was a serious revolt, but that is exactly what they got.

Welcome to Judea, part of Rome's holdings in the East. Judea had been administered by Rome from 63 BCE. Thanks to some timely assistance from the local elite of Judea to Julius Caesar during the Alexandrian War (better known as his meet-cute with Cleopatra), the Jews of the empire had been given special privileges, including religious freedoms.

Masada today
Photo by Orlov Sergei/shutterstock.com.

After the death of Caesar and an ever-so-slightly concerning invasion by the Parthians in 40 BCE, the Romans decided to appoint the ruler of Galilee, Herod, as monarch of Judea (so he was a client-king of Rome). Yes, THAT Herod. The one from the Bible with the grudge against male babies.[6] Herod had Rome's support, but he still had to fight a rival before ensconcing himself on the throne.[7] The blood spilled in his quest for power did not endear him to all of his subjects. Herod's ongoing ties to Rome ("the man") also did not help, although there were ups and downs in that relationship.

What better way to make yourself feel secure than with a home makeover? Herod embarked on a few building projects in his time, but our focus is his overhaul of the existing fortress of Masada. It was constructed on a plateau in the desert, located to the west of the Dead Sea (the lowest point on Earth!) and completely surrounded by cliffs. On the eastern side, it was around 350 meters above ground level, and it is 400 meters above the Dead Sea. Perfect for yoga retreats, James Bond films, and military purposes. Herod's renovation project here resulted in palaces, bathhouses, storage areas, cisterns—everything you could need in a desert fortress-palace.[8] Words cannot really capture how breathtaking this site is, so please look it up right now. We'll wait.

However, Masada did not become infamous during Herod's reign. The king died in 4 BCE, and his territory was divided between three of his sons. Archelaus received Judea, Samaria, and Idumea but was not as successful in lording it over others as his dad and the Romans had to step in and send him to the naughty corner for ticking off too many of the local elite. The result of this was that Judea became more enmeshed in the fabric of the empire, finally being incorporated into the Roman empire as a province in 6 CE and administered by a Roman governor (prefect), who answered to the legate in Syria.[9]

Over the next sixty years, some notable problems arose in Judea. First, there was that whole Jesus thing that the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilatus, ended up having to deal with. The atmosphere also became pretty toxic during the short reign of Emperor Gaius (Caligula). Competition between factions thrived due to his policies about client-kings, and the erection of altars to the emperor did not please everyone in Judea. "Erm, excuse me, Mr. Emperor? Yeah, I have a note that says I don't have to worship the emperor. Like, it's literally against my religion. I'll totally sacrifice in the temple for Rome and for your well-being instead, like twice a day." The tension over this issue between gentiles and Jews quickly escalated into violence against the latter. As Gaius spiraled more out of control, it was perhaps fortunate that he was assassinated before the situation became an armed conflict. Claudius, his successor, proved to be more adept, but that did not mean there weren't still incidents, like the time a Roman soldier flashed a crowd of Jews during Passover. It didn't end well.

In spite of these hiccups, most civilians lived peacefully (if not always happily) under Roman rule. Insert the *Monty Python* "What have the Romans ever done for us?" scene here. If you haven't seen that, you must put this book down immediately and Google *Life of Brian* (1979) . This is a gaping hole in your education that must be corrected immediately. Most of the tension in early first century CE Judea was caused by local disputes and factionalism. The Romans had more of an "I want as much as possible with as little effort as possible kind" attitude at this point.

The catch was that people who were unhappy in Judea were REALLY unhappy. Think about how you feel when you get a terrible haircut then multiply that by a million. Back in 6 CE, the Romans had tried to conduct a census, and there had been strenuous objections from men like Yehuda from Gamla (or Galilee) and Zadok Haprushi. The beginning of the resistance that would lead to the events at Masada is often dated from this moment, and then you add on people becoming fed up with the taxation and the power Rome exerted over the position of high priest and so on and so on.

Groups formed around the ideas of Yehuda (known as the "fourth philosophy"), such as the Zealots and the shadowy Sicarii.[10] This meant that they were mostly concerned with Roman rule as they were fierce believers in God having absolute power in Judea, and freedom from imperial overlords was tied to that (*Darth Vader breathing*). Their religion and political aims could not be

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6 You may be relieved to know that this event is probably not historical, although this does not make him a warm and fuzzy teddy bear. He had quite a few family members put to death.

7 Herod was not from a priestly family, and he wasn't Judean. That's two strikes, pal! His dad was an influential man with a Semitic background who had converted to Judaism.

8 Masada is a Greek word that stems from the Hebrew word *Metzada*, used for both the "mountain" and "fortress." This comes from *metzad* or *metzuda*, meaning "fortress" (*Mezada*). It was positioned to protect the territory of Herod and the Hasmoneans (a priestly dynasty of Judea, which had been deposed by Mark Antony).

9 The exact status of Judea is actually a hot topic amongst academics. Some think it became an independent province in 6 CE and some think it was made part of Syria. As you can see, we're running with province. Controversy!

10 This was distinct from the philosophies of the other sects, like the Essenes, Sadducees, and the Pharisees. "Zealots" in English makes them sound like extremists, but that's probably not the right vibe. Our main source, the historian Josephus, is probably having a dig at them for the types of leaders they followed. Not good enough, in his book!

separated from each other, and the leaders of the Zealots commonly had messianic ambitions.[11] Again, please see *Life of Brian* (1979) for the amount of messiahs that sprang up in the early first century CE.

The Sicarii start to be mentioned during the increasingly problematic period in the 50s BCE. Their name came from the sica or curved dagger that they secreted under their clothing and used to assassinate their enemies, which could include the Romans, but was more likely to be someone local. Yep, even their fellow Jews. To be honest, they are a super confusing group to talk about. Some historians don't even think we should call them a group. Maybe they were just lone wolf assassins with a penchant for daggers. IF they were a genuine faction, they were closely connected to the Zealots. Depending on your perspective, that made them either terrorists or freedom fighters.

Local problems, religious tensions, random assassins, imperial overlords… you can see the potential for things to go seriously wrong in this part of the world. Perhaps the right kind of governors or a wise emperor could have steered clear of disaster, but we're moving into the age of the Emperor Nero. Neither he, nor the men he placed in charge managed to calm the farm.

Those Revolting Romans

The First Jewish Revolt started in Caesarea Maritima, where the relations between Jews and gentiles had seriously deteriorated. A dispute over land next to a synagogue got ugly, and after a scuffle, the Romans arrested the Jews involved. Word of this reached the Jews in Jerusalem. The prefect, Florus, decided this was the moment to take money from the temple. When the Jews mockingly passed around a collection basket for their poor governor, he let some soldiers loose in the city. Jewish people were killed and property was damaged. Things were getting out of hand. Again. The rebellion would soon spread throughout the region. Even the intercession of the great-grandchildren of Herod the Great could not stop things from unraveling.[12]

This is where the Sicarii enter our story. Their leader, Menachem (son of the Yehuda from 6 CE), rebuked the Jews for allowing the Romans to rule over them instead of only recognizing God as their master. Some of the Sicarii captured Masada and raided it for any useful weaponry. Armed to the teeth, they headed back to Jerusalem and managed to secure the upper part of the city. They unleashed chaos, killing Roman soldiers, the high priest and destroying the main archives (No! Not the paperwork!). The revolt was officially underway.

EXCEPT not everyone was in the mood. Menachem and several other Sicarii were murdered by members of a rival group. The remnants of the Sicarii, now led by a relative of Menachem, Elazar Ben-Yair, retreated to Masada and set up camp there for the rest of the revolt, and then some. So you could say that they DID start the fire, Billy Joel…but then they exited, stage left, only to return in the final act at Masada.

Our only written account for the events at Masada, and a major source for Jewish affairs generally in this period, is from a Jewish writer from Jerusalem, Flavius Josephus. We know what you are thinking. Hold the phone—that's a weird name for a Jewish boy from an elite priestly family—and you are quite correct. Within his name lies some important history.

Josephus was originally Yosef ben Matityahu. He learned about the different Jewish sects (the Essenes, Sadducees, and Pharisees) whilst a teenager. He became a Pharisee and was caught up in the First Jewish Revolt when it broke out. The Jews set up a provisional government and Josephus was put in command of Galilee, which was the district targeted first by the Romans. It was an unequal fight and Galilee was soon captured. The final fortress (Jotapata) to be taken only surrendered after a siege that lasted for forty-seven days. Josephus was one of only forty survivors from Jotapata, who tried to hide from the Romans in a cistern. The Romans figured out where they were, so the survivors allegedly decided on a suicide pact. Josephus claims that he was not keen on the idea, but who was he to say no? He talked the others into drawing lots to determine how this pact would play out, and wouldn't you know it? Josephus drew the last lot, which meant that he and one other man were able to change their minds about the whole suicide thing and surrender.

As a prisoner of war, Josephus was brought before the commander, who happened to be Titus Flavius Vespasianus (Vespasian). In around two years, Vespasian would be emperor of Rome, but of course, no one knew that yet. To anyone paying attention, it WAS common knowledge that Nero's reign was in serious trouble, and Josephus, showing his political savvy, told the commander

11 There are some who believe that figures such as John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and other early Christians might have been somehow connected to the Zealot movement, but this is highly contentious.

12 Marcus Julius Agrippa & Berenice. We wish we had more time for these two, particularly Berenice! Talk about scandal. We recommend looking further into her story.

that he was destined to be emperor. Flattery gets you anywhere! Vespasian kept Josephus as his prisoner rather than sending him to Rome for a trial. Not long after this encounter, Vespasian had to press pause on his part in the Jewish Revolt, whilst he went off and secured a slice of world domination in the civil war that raged after Nero's death. When Vespasian finally triumphed, he freed Josephus. Boy, did that prediction pay dividends!

With Vespasian off being emperor, his son Titus took over the squelching of the Jewish Revolt. UNPAUSE. In 70 CE, Jerusalem was placed under siege, which was truly horrific. People were just as likely to die from famine as anything battle-related. Josephus was present with Titus, playing a key role by walking around the city walls and telling the citizens to capitulate. Did we mention that Josephus was not super popular in Jewish circles after 67 CE?

After Jerusalem had been taken, Josephus returned to Rome. He was granted Roman citizenship (membership in the club) and was made a client of the Flavian family—not a bad place to be! Josephus incorporated the clan name of his patrons into his new name, becoming Titus Flavius Josephus. His patrons requested that he compose histories about the First Jewish Revolt and the Jews, and thank god they did, or we would have much less to go on. Obviously, it's a huge advantage to have a source written by someone who was part of the revolt, BUT Josephus was not at Masada. He may have had access to the *commentarii* (reports) composed by the Roman officers who were present, but we can't be sure. We certainly don't have any such account ourselves. Let's see what he said about the last stand.

Besieged!

The Sicarii had not just been twiddling their thumbs since their move to Masada. They had been conducting raids, the most well-known being the one on the nearby village of Ein Gedi. Josephus records that this raid involved the slaughter of seven hundred women and children, and the men were forced to abandon the city. However, they would not be left to do as they pleased for long.

Once Jerusalem had been decimated (just a figure of speech this time), the Romans decided to do what they do best: crush the enemy completely. Lucilius Bassus, the governor of Judea, trotted off with his army in tow and took the various fortresses that had been occupied back one by one. Although the rebels put up valiant resistance, the Romans always won. In either 72 or 73 CE, only Masada was left. Bassus did not survive to oversee this last campaign and was replaced by Flavius Silva, who also thought that taking down the fortress was a grand idea.

Around eight thousands Roman troops were involved in the siege of Masada (the Tenth Legion, Legio X Fretensis) and some auxiliaries. At this point of Rome's history, their troops were pretty formidable. Soldiers were well-trained and usually would stay in the army for their whole career.

The Romans sent the Jewish rebels a clear message by constructing a stone wall around Masada. This was about 4,500 meters long, with guards posted at regular intervals, 3 meters high, and 10–12 feet wide. Eight camps were built around the base of the mountain, right at the places someone might try to escape. (Incidentally, you can still hike along the trail that connected all the camps, should you be into punishing outdoor activities.) No one was getting through, and no one was getting in. They were on their own.

This was not an operation that the Romans would have undertaken lightly. The desert location and isolation made it difficult to secure enough food and water for the men and animals living in the camps. The remains of some of the storage jars used to transport their foodstuffs have been found by archaeologists. Who needs plastic for packaging that will last thousands of years?

As for the rebels inside Masada, they did not have to worry as much, as there was enough food and water on hand. This posed a problem for the Romans, as they could not just sit around and wait for hunger or thirst to do its thing. They had to figure out how best to apply additional pressure. The two existing pathways to the palace were not ideal for an assault. The soldiers would have to march up in single file, all whilst trying to carry any equipment needed, like a gigantic battering ram. We're no military experts, but that seems…risky, and not in a fun way.

Lightbulb moment! Silva ordered his men to build a ramp that would allow for a less suicidal attack. This sounds like a lengthy construction project, but they may have built it on top of a natural spur—far less effort. The Romans were able to get up to the walls of the fortress with their battering rams. Josephus says that the Romans managed to break through the defensive wall, only to discover that the Jews had built a second wall made from wooden beams and earth, which could not be penetrated using the battering ram.

Never fear! The master of destruction was on hand. Silva ordered for the second wall to be set on fire. The Jewish people may have been hopeful, as initially the wind was against the Romans and their battering ram was at risk of incineration. Soon the wind changed direction and the wall was set alight. Victory was in reach at last! It is unclear how long the siege at Masada lasted, but it probably took between three and six months to get to this point.

The rebels must have known their options were now extremely limited. Fighting the Romans was only going to end in defeat. Differing skill levels aside, they were vastly outnumbered. Supposedly there were 967 people in the fortress, but not all were soldiers. The Sicarii (and whichever other rebels had joined them over the years) had their families with them. Whether they lost in battle or surrendered, their female relatives and children would be sold into slavery. The men would probably be killed, and the Romans sometimes got creative with executions.

Elazar Ben-Yair (one of the leaders of the Sicarii) talked the group into a kind of scorched earth, murder-suicide pact. No one would be taken alive and nothing of value would be left for the Romans to find. It took two impassioned speeches to convince everyone that this was the best plan. Although when we say "everyone," Josephus is a little fuzzy on exactly who got to make this call. It seems like the men decided on this extreme plan. On the same evening that the walls had been compromised, the massacre took place. With the heaviest of grief in their hearts, men killed their families, and then the men themselves were slain, until only one remained. Setting fire to the palace, the last man left standing committed suicide.

This must have been a horrific scene for the Roman soldiers when they entered the fortress. The silence they encountered instead of the battle they expected was eerie. Josephus reports that the Romans were impressed by the bravery and resolve involved in such an act.

Given the fierce resistance that the Romans encountered at other fortresses, it is intriguing that we don't get a heroic battle at Masada, especially considering that this is the end of the road for the Great Jewish Revolt. The archaeology supports the idea that there was not a huge battle at Masada. Were they just not the best warriors? Or were they indeed just too few?

In spite of the no survivors plan, Josephus claims that there were seven survivors who had managed to hide whilst the killing took place: two women and five children. It was them who bore witness to what had happened that final night.

The tragedy of Masada is breathtaking. However, as is so often the case, there is more to it than meets the eye. Many questions have been raised about the veracity of the account provided by Josephus. Some have even speculated that he made the whole thing up. In the absence of any other account, this is probably going too far, but it is worth highlighting some of the bigger questions.

Josephus and the Jewish Wars

Josephus had finished the *Jewish Wars* sometime in the late-'70s CE, so not long after the events at Masada. There is no doubt that his complicated backstory influenced his account of the entire conflict. There's a certain pro-Roman perspective to it. He had to be mindful of his patrons, and so they are presented relatively sympathetically. Josephus may have been trying to warn people about the dangers of rebelling against Rome, and the way things unfolded at Masada underlined that futility. However, on a more personal note, Josephus wanted his Roman audience to respect the Jewish people and their ancient faith. It is interesting that Josephus places the blame for the revolt on these small, quite extreme (even criminal?) groups within the Jewish population for starting the revolt, possibly trying to divert blame, especially from elite Jews like himself. This does not stand up, as this is just not how long rebellions work. He must have wanted to defend his own behavior *during* the revolts as well. #nohatersfortraitors

As if his own context were not enough, we also have to consider that Josephus's account was preserved by Christians. Partly, this is because he was alive at a pretty crucial time and in a very important place for the Christian faith, so his perspective was useful. However, it is possible that parts of his works have been…tweaked. Unfortunately, later Christians saw the events that Josephus documented, like the destruction of the second temple, as God's punishment for their part in the death of Jesus Christ.

How did Josephus learn about the events at Masada? Was it from the survivors? Did he hear it from them, or was it repeated to him via the Romans? How did the survivors know what happened if they were hiding? Annoyingly, most ancient writers did not cite their sources of information, and Josephus was no exception. It was also not frowned upon to compose big set-piece speeches, like the ones supposedly given by Ben-Yair.

Would Jewish people really have violated the Ten Commandments and committed murder, even in a desperate situation? Would a Jewish person have committed suicide? Suicide was considered an honorable death in Greco-Roman circles; the Jews did not feel

the same way. It was not forbidden, but it was also not desirable, so this is a tricky one, especially given Josephus's own involvement in a suicide pact.

Does archaeology support Josephus's account? Again, there is no easy answer to this question and we should remember that the Romans occupied Masada after it had fallen, so we're not dealing with a pristine site. Some finds appear to back up what he relayed, but not definitively. For example, *ostraca* (broken pottery) have been found, one of which bears the name "Ben-Yair." Were these pieces used to draw lots on that final night? Approximately ten percent of the buildings on Masada show that they were set on fire, and they were not all next to each other. This unusual find may indicate that the wooden ceiling beams had been removed to form that second line of defence, just like Josephus said. On the other hand, where are the bodies? Nowhere near 960 bodies have been found, but perhaps they were disposed of or destroyed. It does not help that some of the archaeologists who have worked on the site in recent times had their own political agenda, which coloured their interpretation of the evidence. We see what we want to see sometimes.

Clearly, Josephus is an immensely complex source, and it is important to understand his limitations. Yet, he is the best that we have, so we are not going to entirely discount what he has relayed. Archaeological studies of the site are helpful but can only take us so far. It's puzzles like these that make ancient history endlessly fascinating.

The fall of Masada closed the book on the Great Jewish Revolt, also known as the First Jewish Revolt, but the impact for the Jewish people and Judea was significant. As well as those who perished in the conflict, many Jews were dispersed throughout the empire in what is known as the Diaspora. Jerusalem had been sacked, the second temple had been destroyed; this was a new era in Jewish history and religious practices. The Romans now kept a strong military presence in the area and set up *coloniae;* Judea itself had less of a specifically Jewish identity. Christians also left Judea and spread over the empire, taking their new religion with them, which *might* be important later on.

As for the Romans, Vespasian and Titus were able to use the spoils that they gained from the campaign to pay for some of their building programs in Rome. Hey, Colosseum![13] If you ever visit the Arch of Titus, look carefully at the scenes depicted on the inside. You will see reliefs that show the sacking of Jerusalem. This whole monument was designed to commemorate the Flavian-led victory in Judea. Ah… imperialism.

The story of the First Jewish Revolt clearly deserves to be more widely known. And like Spartacus's revolt, Masada can no longer be considered just one of the rebellions against Rome. It has been given a much larger meaning in modern times due to its connection with the Zionist movement and national identity after the founding of the state of Israel.[14]

Zenobia's Winning Strategy

Many of the rebels that pop up in the history of Rome are what you might call "classic" rebels. Little guys taking on the imperial machine, fighting to overthrow the system, break out of this prison cell! If you look at our stories of Masada and Spartacus, you can see the connection. Our final example is an exception to this rule. Get ready for the amazing tale of Septimia Zenobia.

Zenobia became famous, or infamous, for declaring herself empress during the troubles of the third century CE. She went from the consort of the most important man in the Palmyra, to regent for their son, to empress, to exalted exile in Rome.

However, the origins of this rebellious minx are largely unknown. Much like Spartacus, we know precious little about the early life of Zenobia, or Bat-Zabbai (her Palmyrene Aramaic name). Who bothers to keep track of women and enslaved people? They're so clearly unimportant!

Even when Zenobia stepped into the spotlight, the source material for her life is massively dodgy, patchy, and downright unreliable. The main source is the *Historia Augusta*. But, as always, we shall press bravely on into the darkness and do the best we can.

She was born around 240 CE in Palmyra (a very ancient city located in the province of Syria), which probably meant she had Aramaic and Arabic roots. This means that she was born during one of the lowest points for the empire, when emperors were as disposable as yesterday's newspaper. Seriously. 238 CE has been dubbed the Year of the Six Emperors. It was a PW (personal worst). To add to the internal chaos, external pressures were coming from multiple directions: the Goths and the Huns at the borders of

13 Actually, the Flavian Amphitheatre. Got to keep that original Flavor Flav.

14 If you are interested in exploring Masada's afterlife in modern times, check out studies of the Masada Myth.

Gaul and Dacia, the Alemanni on the frontiers of Germania, and the Sasanians causing problems along the eastern border. Throw in a plague and you have got yourself a political crisis! Ah, it's positively reminiscent of America in 2020–21.

Emperors could not hope to fix all of these problems at once, especially since they were working in twenty-four-hour shifts. The parts of the empire that seemed most at risk absorbed their attention. As for the rest, the grasp of the central government became looser and paperwork was at the bottom of the to-do list. This could be dangerous, if some ambitious general was able to convince the local legions that he could be the next big thing.

Imperial Ambitions

The province of Syria was hot property and both the Romans and Sasanians wanted it to be in their club. And not just because size matters when it comes to empires; it also had desirable trade routes. The Romans were therefore lucky that the most powerful man in a significant city like Palmyra was incredibly loyal.

Odaenathus (Odainath in Aramaic) was rich, politically influential, AND a talented military general from a noble family in Palmyra. An ancient triple threat. His family had been granted citizenship early in the third century (and not long after, everyone else was too, thanks to a law passed in 212 CE). As the Romans could no longer use citizenship as a reward, Odaenathus had been granted senatorial status. Just the status, he did not actually go to the meetings (jackpot!) At some point in around 257–58, he was upgraded to consular status. With that card in his back pocket, almost no one in Syria had higher status than him. That oughtta keep him interested in this system, right?

Who would be the lucky lady to snag this highly eligible bachelor? A knockout seventeen- or eighteen-year-old named Zenobia, that's who! This might have been a May-December match, although we can't be sure about Odaenathus's age. He was old enough to have a fully grown son named Herodian from his previous wife, but age gaps were not unusual in ancient marriages.

Not long after their marriage, Rome was rocked by one of the WORST defeats it ever endured: the capture of the Emperor Valerian during a war with the Persians. See Chapter 1: Armed and Dangerous for more on that. All we need to know is that this disaster left Rome exposed. Syria was under attack. It's Odaenathus and Zenobia to the rescue! (*trumpet fanfare*)

Whilst the exact details are iffy, it seems that Odaenathus assumed control of the armed forces and the government in Palmyra, and possibly much further. He was putting out fires left and right. Persian king on the rampage? Piece of cake! Usurpers? No problem! Lost the province of Mesopotamia? Forgeddaboutit! The shocking thing about all of his success in this context is that Odaenathus did not try to claim imperial power for himself.

However, there was no doubt that Zenobia had hitched her wagon to the right star as Odaenathus's stock only went up due to these efforts. He may have been awarded a title that meant something like "restorer of the east" because he had done such a bang-up job fighting the Persians, or some sort of impressive official position. It would be super helpful to know exactly WHERE he was active but we just can't be sure. Odaenathus may have been overseeing multiple provinces, or it may just have been Palmyra. Wherever he roamed, the honors received gave him enviable status.

Odaenathus's continued campaigns against the Persians led to him dubbing himself and his eldest son "King of Kings," a title used in the Persian Empire. If this sounds suspiciously grand, just remember that by taking a Persian title, Odaenathus was taking aim at their king, not the Roman emperor. This was a challenge to the east. Together with Herodian, Odaenathus held sway in the eastern provinces with the blessing of the very busy Roman emperor. And Zenobia was right by his side, even accompanying him on campaign, which won her much admiration.

Zenobia Steps into the Breach

The good times did not last. Odaenathus and Herodian were suddenly assassinated (c. 267–268 CE), and our sources are extremely uncertain about who dunnit. Was it a petty dispute taken way too far? Was it King Shapur? Was it Zenobia, perhaps scheming for her own son with Odaenathus? Was it a jealous emperor? We'll have to leave this one for Nancy Drew to solve one day. Whoever it was left Zenobia and her son conspicuously alive…

The last thing this area needed was another power vacuum. Zenobia threw herself and her son into the vortex. You may think, well that makes sense. Her son, Vaballathus (or Wahballath in Aramaic), was the oldest heir left standing. (She may have had more

children with Odaenathus, but as Zenobia only mentions one, we'll assume she had one and was done.) However, it was not a given that this child would step into his father's much larger sandals. The emperor got to make the call.

Not in Zenobia's world! She was living her best life, which was imagining that she could be regent for Vaballathus in a somewhat autonomous client kingdom that encompassed the provinces of Syria and Mesopotamia. Her son was given Odaenathus's titles and Zenobia assumed his powers, but of course, we aren't sure what those were. Perhaps she stuck to the more eastern titles which wouldn't annoy Rome and were from a tradition which was more accepting of hereditary power. Actions might speak louder than words. We know that Zenobia quickly started receiving official delegations. She surrounded herself with capable men, including Cassius Longinus (a philosopher, rhetorician, and tutor to her son), Septimius Zabdas and Septimius Zabbai (generals).

How did the Romans feel about all this? They may not have minded at first. Odaenathus's death threatened the tenuous stability of the east. If they were worried, once again, there were just more pressing issues to address. The emperor Gallienus had been assassinated at a similar time to Odaenathus and Herodian. His successor, Claudius II (or Claudius Gothicus) was tied up fighting the Goths in Serbia AND the Alemmani in Italy. Zenobia might me a concern, but she wasn't a "barbarian" horde.

There's also no evidence that Zenobia immediately interfered in the normal government of the provinces. Governors were still appointed, taxes were still collected. Zenobia may have been concerned with more of the big picture stuff, like that pesky Persian threat.

Zenobia continued to campaign against the Parthians in 269 CE, which included an overhaul on some fortresses along the Euphrates. She started using the title Persicus Maximus for her son Vaballathus, a Roman way of recognizing success in battle. Claudius II also adopted the title of Parthicus Maximus at this time. He definitely was NOT fighting the Sasanians, so either this title was his way of showing Zenobia who was boss, or they were in cahoots.

Regardless of their relationship, Claudius was carried off by plague the following year. This was a total shock and led to EVEN MORE internal problems. The senate had chosen Claudius's brother as the next emperor, but the legions stationed on the Danube had other ideas. Whilst they were busy securing the throne for Aurelian, Zenobia thought to herself, "Would the Romans really notice if I took Arabia?"

With astonishing speed and efficiency, Zenobia and her army of seventy thousand men captured Arabia. This was a break from the role that she and her husband had previously played, where they were kind of like emperor assistants. But taking a province without asking? Not only is that RUDE, but it's a sure way to look aggressively expansionist. Just ask Hitler.

Zenobia had no intention of stopping with Arabia. Wealthy Egypt would be a real feather in her cap. It had always held a special place for emperors. Once again, she was able to seize control with relative ease, and by December of 270 CE, she posed a real threat as she controlled the supply of vital resources and revenue. To be blunt, she had the empire by the balls.

Previously, whilst she was battling with the Persian Empire, she had not prevented the usual imperial business, like the collection of taxes or the production of coins for Gallienus and Claudius II at the mint on Antioch. Now we start to see coins that feature Aurelian and Vaballathus. Some designs position him on the reverse, which would imply he was the junior ruler, but others from Antioch show Vaballathus on the obverse. Even though Zenobia did replace the Roman governor that she had killed during the takeover with another one and she was not cutting Egypt off from the rest of the empire, her actions were too concerning to overlook any more. Aurelian had to tear himself away from the Goths that were skipping all over the province of Dacia.

What was Zenobia trying to do? What did she think would happen? It would be a lie to say we knew what her goals were with any certainty. However, it does not seem like Zenobia was initially trying to take down the empire nor was she attempting to take Aurelian's place. It seems more likely that Zenobia was staking a claim to power in her corner of the world and secure prosperity for her people. This was no comfort to Aurelian, of course. Oh, you just want *a slice* of imperial pie?

Now that Zenobia was in the sights of Aurelian and his legions, the pressure was on. In typical Zenobia fashion, she opted to commit fully to a power grab. What the hell, I'll take the whole damn pie for my son and myself! Vaballathus and Zenobia were crowned as Augustus and Augusta in Alexandria. Coins were produced with Vaballathus on the obverse and unambiguous titles: "Victorious Augustus," and "Eternal Augustus." Both Zenobia and Vaballathus had coins issued that connected them to traditional gods of Roman power, such as Jupiter and Juno. Message received, guys!

The Jig Is Up

Team Zenobia decided to prepare for battle in Antioch, so they removed their troops from Egypt and Arabia - just temporarily! Or so they thought. Unluckily for them, after a run of underachievers before him, Aurelian was an exceptionally capable leader. Charisma? Check! Nerve? Check! Talent? Check! He secured victory over Zenobia in three battles. After sixteen months, her play for ultimate power was over.

In 272 CE, Zenobia was caught as she tried to make a run for it. She may have been hoping that as long as she was free, she could regroup. As crazy as it seems, we can't be certain about what happened to Zenobia. She may have died not long after she was taken prisoner, but most of the sources think she survived.

Zenobia was put on trial for her attempted usurpation. Whilst Cassius Longinus was executed and general Zabdas dropped out of the records, Zenobia did not have to pay the ultimate price. She apparently wept and pointed the finger at the men around her. She would never have rebelled against Aurelian on her own! They fell for it. Well, Aurelian did tend to be a forgiving kind of guy.

Zenobia had to appear in Aurelian's triumph as his star prisoner, but after that she was set up with a house and a stipend. She was exiled from Palmyra forever but got to live as a citizen in Rome until her death. It is unclear what happened to her son, but there are hints in the sources that he survived this final showdown. Her other children that may or not have been fictional, possibly joined her in Rome.

Cleopatra 2.0

Usually women in power in the Roman world get royally trashed in the source material. A boy without a winkle trying to run things? Absurd. However, the super-problematic *Historia Augusta* has sections that are often quite positive about Zenobia. She is portrayed as a gorgeous, wise, strong leader, able to be merciful but also able to use a little muscle when needed. It's tricky to know how genuine this is, as it may be a ploy to shape the way we see the emperors. Aurelian could look even more glorious, because he was victorious against this modern-day Cleopatra VII, and Gallienus would look terrible because a woman was a better ruler than him in almost every respect. True, once you get into the *Life of Aurelian* section, things take a sharp turn for the worse, but at least she gets a moment.

Zenobia's life reveals much about her time. It would have been much harder for her family to rise to such heights in a less-troubled period. However, the fact that she and her husband saw themselves as elite Romans as well as Palmyrenes and were invested in working within the Roman system makes her a different kind of rebel. What she does have in common with Spartacus and the rebels of Masada is that her story has often been told by her enemy and reimagined to suit later generations. In Zenobia's case, these interpretations span the globe and can be found in Anglophone and Arab nations.

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