

Female Gladiators of the Ancient Roman World

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IN September of 2000, the Museum of London announced a surprising archaeological discovery that garnered world-wide media attention and subsequently sparked intense debate within the academic community. Scholars revealed that the grave of a purported gladiator, dating back to the first century A.D., had been unearthed in the greater London area. The museum's scholars suggested that only one other similar gravesite, in Trier, Germany, had ever been found,¹ making this a very special find indeed. However, it was not the rarity of the find that captured the world's attention nor the fact that the grave was supposedly that of a gladiator. To the surprise of all, the broken and burnt remains of this grave proved to be those of a woman (see Fig. 1). Accordingly, the Museum of London suggested that these remains were the first ever found of a female gladiator. The discovery was unprecedented, both in terms of its physicality and interpretation. Classical scholars have long known that female gladiators existed because of selected references in the ancient texts and inscriptions; the literary and epigraphical evidence is quite convincing. However, if the museum's scholars were correct, the world now had the first human forensic evidence supporting the existence of female gladiators. Traditional textual and archeological sources that depict female gladiators are well known to classical scholars, but these same sources may be unknown to the typical sport scholar who is less schooled in classical languages and ancient history. Sport scholars, therefore, would find it beneficial to have the pertinent information distilled into one readily-available source. The purpose of this paper is to provide that source by presenting the evidence for the existence of female

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At the press conference of the opening of the exhibit displaying the contents of a purported gladiator's grave, Jenny Hall, the curator of early London history at the Museum of London, stated that the only other purported gladiators' graves of which she was aware were those excavated in Trier, Germany as reported by the Associated Press by Barr, R. (2000, September 13). Woman gladiator's remains discovered. *The Charleston Gazette*, p. P4C. (Note: The story was issued by the AP and published throughout the nation by many newspapers; the article cited here is readily available on LexusNexis™ Academic.)

gladiators found in the ancient texts coupled with attendant scholastic and archaeological exposition, surmising the details of their life in and out of the arena, and exploring whether or not the gravesite excavated by the Museum of London is in fact one of a female gladiator.



Figure 1. The broken and burnt remains of the London grave were of a woman.
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The Evidence for Female Gladiators

As previously mentioned, classicists have long believed that women participated in the ancient Roman arena. David S. Potter, a leading scholar on ancient Roman entertainment, states:

There were female gladiators. They were regarded as absolutely a special treat. They were sufficiently rare that you would advertise them up front as something spectacular that you were going to have in the show. (Pattysen, 2000)

The conventionally cited historical evidence for the existence of female gladiators is found in the writings of ancient Roman authors. This written evidence is tantalizingly scarce, but convincing nonetheless.

Compelling proof that women participated in the arena is evidenced by several governmental edicts that limited and even barred the participation of women in the arena. In A.D. 11, a *senatus consultum* forbade freeborn females under the age of twenty from appearing on the stage or in the arena (as well as freeborn males under the age of twenty-five); this edict was replaced, in A.D. 19, by the

senatus consultum of Larinum, which placed additional penalties outside of the opprobrium of *infamia* to any man or woman of equestrian or senatorial rank who participated on the stage or who fought in the arena (Coleman, 2000; Levrick, 1983; Vesley, 1998). Specifically, this edict was inscribed on a bronze tablet, now called the *Tabula Larinas*, and “prohibit[ed] the gladiatorial recruitment of daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughters of senators or of knights, under the age of [twenty]” (Vesley, 1998, p. 91). Ultimately, in A.D. 200, Emperor Septimius Severus outlawed such female demonstrations when he issued a decree banning single combat by women in the arena, for “[a] recrudescence among some upper-class women, and the raillery this provoked among the audience” (Gardner, 1986, p. 248). Legal proclamations proscribing activities are rarely preemptive or prescient. They most usually represent a desire to curb socially unacceptable behavior that has actually occurred or is currently being practiced. Thus these edicts against female gladiatorial exhibition strongly suggest women actually participated in the Roman gladiatorial games, up to the time when lawmakers’ sensibilities came down against the practice.

In addition, many ancient writers provide “numerous passages... attest[ing] to female athletes and gladiators” (Vesley, 1998, p. 90). Indeed, they often give specific instances and detailed accounts of the actual combats. The Roman historian, Dio Cassius (trans. 1925/2000), writes of a festival that Nero held in honor of his mother that lasted for several days and featured women who appeared as entertainers, including gladiators.

In honour of his mother he [Nero] celebrated a most magnificent and costly festival, the events taking place for several days in five or six theatres at once...There was another exhibition that was at once most disgraceful and most shocking, when men and women not only of the equestrian but even of the senatorial order appeared as performers in the orchestra, in the Circus, and in the hunting-theatre, like those who are held in lowest esteem...; they drove horses, killed wild beasts and fought as gladiators, some willingly and some sore against their will. (62.17.3)

Dio Cassius further describes a gladiatorial event that was sponsored by Nero in A.D. 66 which included Ethiopian women.

Nero admired him [Tiridates] for this action and entertained him in many ways, especially by giving a gladiatorial exhibition at Puteoli. It was under the direction of Patrobius, one of his freedmen, who managed to make it a most brilliant and costly affair, as may be seen from the fact that on one of the days not a person but Ethiopians—men, women, and children—appeared in the theatre. (62.3.1)

Suetonius (trans. 1957/1973), the Roman biographer and historian, tells of extravagant games given by the Emperor Domitian in A.D. 88, where women actively participated.

Domitian presented many extravagant entertainments in the Colosseum and the Circus. Besides the usual two-horse chariot races he staged a couple of battles, one for infantry, the other for cavalry; a sea-fight in the amphitheatre; wild-beast hunts; gladiatorial shows by torchlight in which women as well as men took part. (4.1)

Domitian is purported to have had female gladiators fight dwarfs in the arena as noted in the writings of Dio Cassius:

Often he would conduct the games also at night, and sometimes he would pit dwarfs and women against each other. (67.8.2)

Interestingly, just as is the case with sporting events today, the ancients conducted the more popular attractions later in the day and usually saved the key events as a capstone for the day's festivities. Accordingly, holding the female events at night indicates that these contests were probably not just "a mere sexual sideshow," but "among the day's main attractions" (Zoll, 2002, p. 27). Pitting dwarfs against women can be viewed as the ultimate in martial sensationalism, a shocking juxtaposition of the maternal expectations of women in Roman society with the adulation of warriors and the death that accompanies them. Such displays also demonstrate Domitian's extremes—a "lethal sense of humour" accompanying a ravenous hunger for novelty (Grant, 1967, p. 33). Such extremes were mirrored to some degree in the Roman masses, and Domitian, knowing that these atypical events would titillate the populace of Rome, obviously hoped to barter spectacle for the fulfillment of his own political ambitions, the mores of good society notwithstanding (Baker, 2000).

Though the written record of the ancients attests to the existence of female gladiators, that record is quite sparse. Indeed, this scarcity of written references "has led some scholars to consider [female gladiators] a novelty act..."; yet the fact that many of the references are made "casually" throughout the ancient writings suggests that female gladiators were "more widespread than direct evidence might otherwise indicate" (Zoll, 2002, p. 27).

In addition to written references, direct archaeological evidence also supports the existence of female gladiators. Three main items exist: an inscription at the Roman port of Ostia; a shard of inscribed pottery found in Leicester; and a carved relief, from Halicarnassus, depicting two female gladiators.

The inscription at Ostia about the local magistrate, Hostilianus, reads as follows: *QUI PRIMUS OM[NI]UM AB URBE CONDITA LUDUS CUM [--] OR ET MULIERES [A]D FERRUM DEDIT*, which translates as “[Hostilianus] was the first since the city was founded...to set women fighting”² (Vesley, 1998, p. 91). The inscription is believed to date from the third century A.D., meaning that female gladiatorial fights did not end with Septimius Severus’ ban of A.D. 200; furthermore, the diction used is important as “these were ‘women’ (*mulieres*), not ‘ladies’ (*feminae*)” competing in a legitimate event because “the wording does not betray any parody” (Coleman, 2000, p. 498).

The second piece of evidence is a shard of red pottery with a hole drilled into it so that it could possibly be worn as a necklace. It is inscribed as follows: *VERECVND A LV DIA LVCIUS GLADIATOR*, and Jackson (2000) translates this as “Verecunda the dancer (or woman gladiator), Lucius the gladiator” (p. 18). No one knows for sure what the intended use of the item was, but the inscription leads one to believe that Verecunda may have been a female gladiator, perhaps fighting with the same troupe as Lucius.

The last piece of direct physical evidence is a marble relief dating from the first or second century A.D. (see Figure 2).³ The relief, found in Halicarnassus and currently displayed in the British Museum, is the most compelling piece of evidence for the existence of female gladiators, as it specifically depicts two female gladiators facing off in combat (Coleman, 2000; Ewigleber, 2000). The combatants are shown clothed and equipped similarly to male gladiators—specifically a *provocator*—with each wearing a loin-cloth (*subligaculum*), greaves, and an arm protector (*manica*) extending from the wrist to the shoulder of the sword-wielding arm. Both women are armed with a shield and a sword; neither is wearing a helmet nor a shirt. The women are facing

² Vesley (1998) cites Cebeillac-Gervasoni, M. & Zevi, F. (1976). Revisions et nouveautes pour trios inscriptions d’Ostie. *MEFRA*, 88.2, 612-618 for the inscription and states that “[a] newly found stone supplied missing text from two previously know inscriptions, *CIL* 14.5381 and 4616” (p. 91). He further asserts that Hostilianus was the editor of the gladiatorial games for women in the neighboring arena and that he was also the patron who conducted “the local edition of the *Iuvenalia*, the games of the Ostia *collegium iuvenum*” (a sort of paramilitary training organization), and that the female combatants received their gladiatorial training in the local *collegium* (p. 91).

³ Coleman (2000) details the relief extensively and states that the female combatants for whom this relief was carved were granted *stantes missi*. Potter (1999), describes *missio* as the technical term meaning release and explains *stantes missi* as “released standing” and occurring when “two fighters fought long and hard without either being able to obtain the conditions for a victory, the fight would be a draw” (p. 307).

each other with their names, AMAZON and AXIΛΛIA, inscribed in Greek beneath them indicating “incontrovertibly that these are both women because they are named ‘Amazon’ and ‘Achillia” (Zoll, 2002, p. 36). These are not their real names, but were “singularly appropriate” *noms de guerre* for female combatants (Coleman, 2000, p. 487). Listed above the two fighters is inscribed ΑΠΕΛΥΘΗΣΑΝ, which translates as *missae sunt*, meaning the combatants received an honorable discharge (*missio*) from the arena (not “discharge from service as a gladiator”); essentially, the relief is a monument to the valiant effort displayed by these two female gladiators, and “[it] marks an engagement that is worthy of commemoration both for the rarity of its outcome and for the fact that its protagonists were women” (p. 495). Furthermore, the existence of the relief indicates that, at least for these two combatants, female gladiatorial combat was taken seriously enough to warrant “commemoration in an expensive and durable medium” (p. 499).



Figure 2. Marble relief from Halicarnassus depicting two female gladiators
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The ancient written references and physical evidence answer, rather convincingly, the question of female participation in gladiatorial combat in the ancient Roman world. Equally importantly, however, is another question: What was life like for these female gladiators?

The Life of the Female Gladiator

In order to answer this question, one must make two assumptions based upon the evidence given. Firstly, if women participated as gladiators, and dressed and fought the same as the men—as the relief from Halicarnassus suggests—one must assume that female gladiators followed similar rules in the arena as male gladiators. Secondly, if women were following the same practices inside the arena as their male counterparts, it stands to reason that they too might try to follow the same lifestyle practices outside the arena, further challenging the accepted societal norms of the day.

The majority of gladiators in the ancient Roman world were slaves, but some were actually volunteers (*auctorati*) who willingly took the gladiator's oath of submission "to be burnt with fire, shackled with chains, whipped with rods, and killed with steel (*uri, uinciri, uerberari, ferroque necari*)" (Grant, 1967, p. 31). Essentially, the individuals taking this oath relinquished all ownership of their own lives, forfeiting their rights as freemen (or freewomen) to their new owner, who could do with them as he pleased. The reasons for Roman citizens voluntarily swearing the oath to become gladiators were that "they could be released from debt; they might win fame and following; and they would be guaranteed subsistence" (Coleman, 1998, p. 70). But, in the end, it seems that many who volunteered did so out of financial gain, as their owners could demand higher fees for them "presumably because they showed greater enthusiasm" (Grant, 1967, p. 31); the gladiators, in turn, could profit more with their share of the higher earnings. Potter (1999) states that "even slave gladiators kept all or portions of the monetary prizes that they won in the arena" (p. 312). Ex-gladiators who were enticed to come back to the arena were heavily paid, as Tiberius had to offer 1,000 gold pieces to attract one freed gladiator back into the arena (Grant, 1967).

Interestingly, the females who appeared in the arena were not all slaves or women of low social status simply in need of money. Tacitus (trans. 1989) reports that women of considerable social standing participated in gladiatorial events, evidently for excitement and notoriety, not money, since they were already members of the wealthy class.

The same year witnessed shows of gladiators as magnificent as those of the past. Many ladies of distinction, however, and senators, disgraced themselves by appearing in the amphitheatre. (15.32)

In fact, the number of women “rush[ing] to disgrace themselves in the amphitheater” was so great, laws were enacted to prevent it (Zoll, 2002, p. 103). Though the mob of the Roman arena appreciated the efforts of female gladiators as one of novelty; society, as a whole, deemed these efforts unacceptable. Gladiators were unique in this respect. While they were considered “the superstars of their day, lusted after by both men and women,” at the same time, paradoxically, they were considered the lowest of the low in the eyes of Roman society and were held in the “greatest contempt” (Baker, 2000, p. 3). It was one thing for a man of high social status to disgrace himself by appearing in the arena, but “for a noblewoman to do so was utterly beyond the pale” (p. 28). In what is perhaps the most condemning statement of female gladiators found in the writings from ancient Roman world, Juvenal demonstrates his absolute disgust at these women and “brought the full force of his scathing ridicule to bear on” them (Grant, 1967, p. 34). Juvenal writes:

Who has not seen the dummies of wood they slash at and batter
Whether with swords or with spears, going through all the manoeuvres?
These are the girls who blast on the trumpets in honour of Flora.
Or, it may be they have deeper designs, and are really preparing
For the arena itself. How can a woman be decent
Sticking her head in a helmet, denying the sex she was born with?
Manly feats they adore, but they wouldn't want to be men,
Poor weak things (they think), how little they really enjoy it!
What a great honour it is for a husband to see, at an auction
Where his wife's effects are up for sale, belts, shin-guards,
Arm-protectors and plumes!
Hear her grunt and groan as she works at it, parrying, thrusting;
See her neck bent down under the weight of her helmet.
Look at the rolls of bandage and tape, so her legs look like tree-trunks,
Then have a laugh for yourself, after the practice is over,
Armour and weapons put down, and she squats as she used the vessel.
Ah, degenerate girls from the line of our praetors and consuls,
Tell us, whom have you seen got up in any such fashion,
Panting and sweating like this? No gladiator's wench,
No tough strip-tease broad would ever so much as attempt it. (Satire
6.246-267 as cited in Grant, 1967, p. 34)

Life for the typical gladiator involved living in a gladiatorial school (*ludus*) that was run by a *lanista*. The gladiators of the school

formed a troupe (*familia*), and received training in the art of fighting by *doctores* and *magistri*, who in all probability were former gladiators (Junkelmann, 2000). The training generally involved wooden weapons—as arming numerous trained warriors with sharpened metal weapons was deemed to be unwise, especially after Spartacus’ famed revolt of 73 B.C. One scholar suggests that the *auctorati* received their training, not in the *ludi*, but through “private instruction or enrolled in the *collegia iuvenum*” (Zoll, 2002, p. 33).⁴ Another believes that some females who entered the arena received their training from their fathers, who were freed gladiators (Evans, 1991). No matter how they were trained, numerous types of gladiators, e.g., *murmillo*, *thraex*, *retiarius*, and *secutor*, fought in the arena, each having specialized armor and weaponry (Grant, 1967; Junkelmann, 2000; Widemann, 1992). Gladiators were specialized combatants. Rarely did individuals receive training in more than one gladiatorial style, and they normally did not compete very often, usually fighting only two to three times a year, much like a modern-day boxer (Coleman, 1998). Additionally, contrary to popular opinion, gladiators did not typically fight to the death; in fact, it was relatively rare for a gladiator to be killed in the arena (Potter, 1999).⁵ The rationale for this is simple: Gladiators were worth a lot more alive—earning appearance fees in the arena—than dead.

The evening before fighting in the arena, gladiators were fed at a public banquet (*cena libera*), where the local populace was admitted. In all likelihood, the banquet served as a form of advertising for the next day’s event instead of a symbolic gift from the sponsor (*munerarius*) of the games, especially since the condemned prisoners, who were to be executed the following day, were included. The next morning began with a parade through the amphitheatre to rouse the attention of the spectators. Generally speaking, the day’s activities followed a specific pattern: the morning involved the beast hunt (*venatio*); executions of condemned prisoners were conducted during

⁴ Zoll (2002) quotes the work of Vesley (1998) that aristocrats sought training in the “*collegia iuvenum*, organized social clubs where young men and women could pursue all manner of physical activity, from gymnastics to martial arts” (p. 33).

⁵ Potter (1999) states flatly that, “[t]here was no such thing as a mandatory fight to the death between gladiators” (p. 307). The confusion lies in the misunderstanding of the term *sine missione*, where a clear victory must be present in order for a gladiator to earn *missio*. “The phrase does not mean, as it has unfortunately been taken to mean in many studies of gladiators, a fight to the death” (p. 307). Potter (personal communication, September 18, 2002) stated that based on his research, he estimates that only 5-10 percent of gladiators actually died in the arena, placing more emphasis on the lower number.

midday, generally by animals (*ad bestias*); and gladiatorial fights, the highlight of the day's events, were offered during the afternoon hours. The number of fights would depend entirely on the number of pairs of gladiators scheduled, but generally speaking, if gladiatorial combat was to last the rest of the day, between ten and thirteen pairs would fight, with a single bout lasting around ten to fifteen minutes (Potter, 1999).

The bouts were simply hand-to-hand combat. In the end, generally one of the combatants would tire or become wounded, lay down his (or her) shield, and signal capitulation by raising one finger (*ad digitum*). At this time, the umpire would step in and stop the combat and defer the decision of the defeated gladiator's fate to the *munerarius*; he could, with much influence from the crowd, grant *missio*, have the gladiator slain, or free one or both of the gladiators (albeit at a great financial cost, as the *munerarius* had only rented the gladiators from the *lanista*; freeing someone else's slave would cost him heavily). With the turn of the thumb (*pollice verso*)—no one knows for sure if the true meaning were “thumbs up” or “thumbs down”—the decision of the defeated gladiator's fate was taken. If the gladiator were to receive *missio*, he (or she) returned to the *ludus* to fight another day; if death were to be the result, the winning gladiator simply delivered the *coup de grâce*. The granting of freedom, however, was more elaborate as the *munerarius* would go to the floor of the arena and hand deliver a wooden sword (*rudis*) to the fortunate gladiator, signaling that the gladiator was no longer a slave, but a freeman (or freewoman) (Potter, 1999).

The Remains of Great Dover Street Woman

In 1996, construction workers in London unearthed an ancient walled cemetery dating back to the first century A.D. Excavations of the site at Great Dover Street in Southwark, near the south bank of the river Thames, resulted in the discovery of several cremation burials, but one quickly got the attention of archaeologists at the Museum of London. The burial in question was outside the walls of the cemetery and unique in that the deceased had been cremated on an elaborate funeral pyre (*bustum*), indicating the person was held in high esteem.⁶ More importantly, however, was the assortment of ceramic vessels that

⁶ Zoll (2002) contends that the use of a *bustum* was “usually reserved for the death of an important individual” and that there are “only about twenty known examples of this custom from Britain” (p. 13) She cites Mackinder, A. (2000). *A Romano-British Cemetery on Watling Street*. London: Museum of London Archaeological Service.

had been placed in the burial after the cremation was complete; numerous bowl-shaped vessels (*tazze*), believed to be used for burning aroma-producing pinecones, along with eight oil lamps were found (see Figure 3). The bone fragments and artifacts of the grave would lead the museum’s scholars to believe the remains of this burial belonged to a female gladiator (Zoll, 2002).



Figure 3. Funerary items found in the grave of Great Dover Street Woman included numerous *tazze* and eight oil lamps.
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The Great Dover Street grave was quite elaborate. Everything—from the construction of the *bustum* to the contents of the grave—indicated that the funeral “spoke of wealth, power, and refinement” (Pringle, 2001, p. 51) A forensic examination showed that cremated bone fragments found in the grave, specifically the pelvis, indicated that the occupant was a female, probably in her twenties.

Three of the lamps portrayed the image of the jackal-headed Egyptian god Anubis (see Figure 4); another lamp pictured a fallen gladiator (see Figure 5). Because Anubis was equated to the Roman god Mercury, who was closely linked to gladiatorial sport in the ancient Roman world,⁷ and the other lamp depicted a gladiator, archeologists

⁷ Pringle (2001) cites Hedley Swain, the head of the early history department of the Museum of London, as saying, “[Anubis] was the Egyptian counterpart of the Roman god Mercury, who conducted the soul of the dead to the next world and

asserted that the remains possibly could be those of a gladiator. Additional evidence that the woman buried at Great Dover Street was a gladiator is the fact that within the grave were the remains of burnt pinecones belonging to the stone pine, a conifer native to Italy.



Figure 4. Oil lamp depicting the jackal-headed Egyptian god Anubis
© Museum of London, used with permission.

played a key role in Rome's amphitheaters. 'Slaves dressed as Mercury would actually be present in the gladiatorial ring and remove the dead gladiators'" (p. 53).



Figure 5. Oil lamp depicting a fallen gladiator
© Museum of London, used with permission.

The stone pine was known to grow only in Roman London around the local amphitheater (an oak structure believed to seat up to 7,000 and located in London's Guildhall section a few miles from the Great Dover Street grave), as the cones were often burnt to mask the smell associated with the arena. Finding the *tazze* and burnt pinecones in the grave, links, rather interestingly, the deceased back to the amphitheater and the gladiatorial sport that was conducted there. Further, organic matter found in the grave hinted of an expensive and elaborate funeral feast; figs, dates, and white almonds as well as the bones of a butchered

chicken and possibly a dove were found in the grave; moreover, flecks of gold, possibly from a garment, iron nails, and molten glass fragments were found in the grave, signaling that this was not the grave of an unknown pauper, but rather someone who was revered. Lastly, the grave was outside of the walled cemetery, indicating the deceased was probably an outcast of normal society. This evidence led the scholars at the museum to speculate: Why was such an elaborate and expensive funeral held for a woman who was buried in an area designated for social outcasts? Their answer was simple. The woman buried in this grave was “respected, yet not respectable” (Zoll, 2002, p. 231); she was a gladiator. Jenny Hall, the curator of early London history at the museum, states it is “70 percent probable” that Great Dover Street Woman was a gladiator (Barr, 2000, p. P4C).

Not surprisingly, the museum’s conclusion shocked the academic world, and several scholars question the validity of the announcement. Kathleen Coleman, the renowned Harvard Latin professor and expert of Roman gladiatorial games, doubts that Great Dover Street Woman was a gladiator. Firstly, she believes that gladiatorial lamps were “popular household items” in Roman London, and that “the very most you could say is the presence of gladiatorial images on some grave goods might suggest that the deceased or a member of the deceased’s family was a gladiatorial fan” (Pringle, 2001, p. 53). Secondly, Coleman has serious doubts that a gladiator would receive such an elaborate burial, “We know that Roman charioteers could often amass enormous fortunes, but we don’t have any hard evidence for a specific patrimony associated with a gladiator” (p. 53).

Another scholar, historian Martin Henig, believes that the evidence found in the grave points to the religion of the deceased, and not her profession. The oil lamps, *tazze*, and pinecones make him postulate that the grave’s occupant was a “devotee of Isis,” and he asserts that the oil lamps depicting Anubis, a close companion of Isis, indicate that Great Dover Street Woman was a member of a well-known Egyptian cult (Zoll, 2002, p. 172).

Scholars at the Museum of London reject the notion that the faith of Great Dover Street Woman dismisses her from being a gladiator. They note that followers of Isis were not social outcasts; moreover, Hall believes that one interpretation does not necessarily negate the other:

It is possible that we have here a wealthy and influential follower of the goddess Isis but who is also a female gladiator. The one possibility doesn’t rule out the other. It could be a combination of the two. (as cited in Zoll, 2002, p. 1999)

Hedley Swain, head of early history at the Museum of London, admits that the Great Dover Street grave is open to interpretation. He freely states that it is possible that Great Dover Street Woman was a devotee of Isis, who was buried most ceremoniously in that Southwark grave, but he also suggests that the argument for her being a gladiator is solid and built on the sum of all the evidence. “No single piece of evidence says that [she is a gladiator]”; rather “there’s simply a group of circumstantial evidence that makes it an intriguing idea” (Pringle, 2001, p. 53). And what an intriguing idea it is.

Conclusion

Are the remains found at Great Dover Street actually those of a female gladiator? Unfortunately, that is a question that will likely remain unanswered with certainty. The remains offer an interesting glimpse into the past and provide ample material for debate and investigation, yet they merely hint at, not prove, that this grave is that of a woman who fought in the arena. Nonetheless, the record is clear: women did participate in the Roman games and likely lived, and died, as combatants. The world of the ancient Roman arena was not the sole domain of men; women also took up the role of warrior and were a part of that most peculiar of ancient Roman traditions—that of the gladiator.

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