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BLOOD, SWEAT, AND SEX: A NOTE ON THE EROTIC POWER OF GLADIATOR SWEAT

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ABSTRACT

There is no ancient evidence that corroborates the frustratingly popular claim that Romans collected and sold gladiator sweat as an aphrodisiac, and the claim itself only exists as an amalgam of the following facts: (1) athletes' gloios was collected and sold for medicinal purposes, (2) gladiators were objects of erotic desire, and (3) gladiator-themed Roman vessels were fairly popular. Any attempt to construe those observations into support for aphrodisiac gladiator sweat is countered by the fact that (1) the collection and use of gloios was viewed by Pliny as a disgusting Greek (not Roman) practice, (2) no source records the collection of gloios from gladiators, (3) gloios has no recorded aphrodisiac usages, and (4) the only evidence for magico-medical uses of gladiatorial fluids are not erotic and call for their blood, not sweat. Moreover, the claim that Romans collected and sold gladiator sweat does not predate the early 2000s and may have its origins in an article from Sports Illustrated.

KEYWORDS

gladiator, sweat, gloios, rhypos, aphrodisiac, Roman Empire, ancient magic

It is an oft-repeated fact that gladiator sweat was collected and sold to elite Roman women as an aphrodisiac. Variations of it appear, unsurprisingly, in online listicles with clickbait titles like “These 10 Truly Bizarre Beliefs from History Will Keep You Laughing All Night” (Elhassan 2018) and in children’s books like *X-treme Facts: Ancient Rome* (Finan 2021: 19).¹ One can also find this fact repeated in popular history books (e.g., *A Monument to Dynasty and Death* and *How to Survive in Ancient Rome*) as well as in health books (*Aromatherapy Science*), and it has even made its way into articles from the *Guardian* and BBC News UK.²

The only problem is that there is no evidence from antiquity to support the idea that Romans ever collected gladiator sweat, let alone sold it as an aphrodisiac. There are numerous tangential pieces of evidence that lend an air of

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plausibility to the claim, but this idea that Romans used gladiator sweat as an aphrodisiac remains an entirely fanciful one, despite its popularity. Thus, we will here examine the extant evidence (such as it is) before assessing why that evidence does not support this claim. We will conclude with a potential explanation for how this factoid became so widespread.

In the first place, there is a long history of collecting sweat from athletes' bodies. The ancient Greeks and Romans would coat themselves in oil before exercising, then use a *strigil* (a curved metal scraping tool) to later remove the combination of oil, sweat, dead skin, and dirt from their bodies.³ These tools often featured a groove or channel into which that oily mixture—known variously as *strigmentum*, *gloios*, or *rhypos*—would gather and could thus be easily scraped out. We are even told by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* (*NH* 15.19; 28.50–52) that the Greeks collected and sold this mixture from the gymnasium for substantial sums of money, and an inscription from the Macedonian city of Beroia (*SEG* XXVII 261) indicates that sales of *gloios* were important enough to necessitate the hiring of a *palaestrophylax* (“palaestra guard”) to oversee and guard its collection.⁴ We are also told by the physicians Galen (*Mm* 2.115k) and Dioscorides (*De mat. med.* 1.34–36) that this *gloios* was used for medicinal purposes.⁵

All of this seems like rather supportive evidence for the collection of sweat from gladiators. However, claims of sweat's aphrodisiac properties are quickly undercut by the specificity of our sources regarding the usage of *gloios*: for while *gloios* can be put to quite a number of purposes including the treatment of joint inflammation, tears in the perineum, and abscesses, no ancient source indicates it was used as an aphrodisiac, and Pliny (*NH* 28.50) in fact finds the material so disgusting that he attributes its use solely to the “profit-seeking” (*quaestuosi*) Greeks rather than his fellow Romans.⁶

Contrary to Pliny, Dioscorides (*De mat. med.* 1.34–36) does not relegate the use of these scrapings (which he calls *rhypos*) to the Greeks, but when he details the three places from which *rhypos* can be collected, he names only the baths, the gymnasium, and the palaestra. Notably absent here (and from all our sources on the use of *gloios/rhypos*) is any mention of gladiators, gladiatorial games, or gladiatorial schools—yet another significant blow to the claim that gladiator sweat was gathered and sold as an aphrodisiac.

Gladiators were, to be sure, objects of sexual desire, as numerous literary and epigraphical evidence suggests. Faustina, wife of the emperor Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180 CE) supposedly lusted after one (*HA Vita Marci* 19), as did the wife of a Roman senator who ultimately left him for a gladiator, ugly though he

was (Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.82–114), and a pair of inscriptions from Pompeii record the apparent widespread sexual popularity of two gladiators: Celadus the Thracian and Crescens the *retiarius*.⁷ Thus it is not inconceivable that Romans' erotic fascination with gladiators would have created a market for their sweat to be used as an ingredient in sympathetic erotic magic, but there is simply no evidence to support this idea.⁸

There are, however, two erotic instances in which *materia gladiatoris* ("gladiatorial matter") is called for, and neither supports a claim of aphrodisiac sweat. The first is the obscure *coelibaris hasta* (literally the "celibate spear"), so named only by the Latin grammarian Festus (55.3 L) who tells us that new brides would have their hair combed with a spear that had been stuck in a gladiator's corpse. The logic, Festus explains, is that just as the spear clung to the gladiator's body, so too would the bride cling to her husband.⁹ While Festus does not specify any particular effluvium on the spear as being magically potent, we can readily infer that if any fluid were expected to have been imbued with magical power in this context, it would have been the gladiator's blood, not his sweat. The second instance of erotic *materia gladiatoris* comes from the story of Marcus Aurelius's wife Faustina and her lust for a gladiator (*HA Vita Marci* 19.), a lust that was satisfied (following the advice of the Chaldeans) only after she bathed in the blood of a murdered gladiator and then had sex with her husband.¹⁰ Unfortunately, it is not clear whether the Chaldeans' advice required her to bathe in just *any* gladiator's blood or in the blood specifically of the gladiator of whom she was enamored.¹¹ If any gladiator would have sufficed, this anecdote then suggests that gladiator blood in general was held (at least by the Chaldeans) to have an *antaphrodisiac* property, which again runs counter to the claims we are addressing. If this ritual instead called for the blood of the specific gladiator Faustina had desired, this anecdote is less a demonstration of the magical (and still *antaphrodisiac*) qualities of gladiator blood and more a horrifying scene of a woman's extramarital lust being punished through murder, humiliation, and corrective rape by her husband.

There is one other instance in which gladiatorial fluids are explicitly sought after, and again the need is for blood rather than sweat and the context is medical rather than erotic: Pliny (*NH* 28.2) and Celsus (*De med.* 3.23), each with some level of revulsion, record that drinking the warm blood of a gladiator, sometimes even directly from the wound, was a treatment for epilepsy.¹²

The final piece of evidence that could be construed in support of the claim that gladiator sweat was collected and sold as an aphrodisiac is the large

number of Roman pottery and glassware vessels that feature gladiators.¹³ To be fair, vessels with gladiator-themed decorations were quite popular throughout the Roman Empire, and many of them were *unguentaria*, small ceramic or glass bottles meant to hold perfume or other oils. But none of that proves that these vessels actually contained gladiators' sweat or *gloios*, and zero physical evidence has been found to suggest that this was the case. If the gladiatorial imagery on these vessels had a deeper significance and was meant to evoke some similitude between gladiators and the substance therein, its function more likely would have been in the treatment of injuries or ailments rather than as an aphrodisiac.¹⁴

In sum, no ancient evidence exists to corroborate the claim that Romans collected and sold gladiator sweat as an aphrodisiac, and the claim itself exists only as an amalgam of the following facts: (1) athletes' *gloios* was collected and sold for medicinal purposes, (2) gladiators were objects of erotic desire, and (3) gladiator-themed Roman vessels were fairly popular.¹⁵ Any attempt to construe those observations into support for aphrodisiac gladiator sweat is countered by the fact that (1) the collection and use of *gloios* was viewed by Pliny as a disgusting Greek (not Roman) practice, (2) no source records the collection of *gloios* from gladiators, (3) *gloios* has no recorded aphrodisiac usages, and (4) the only evidence for magico-medical uses of gladiatorial fluids is not erotic and calls for their blood, not their sweat. Despite all of that, the myth of aphrodisiac gladiator sweat remains remarkably prevalent, especially in popular culture, and I would here posit a hypothesis regarding its points of origin and the trajectory of its growth.

The primary academic source is likely R. J. Forbes, the first author—so far as I am aware—to write about *gloios/rhypos* in a way that could be later misconstrued to support this myth of aphrodisiac gladiator sweat. In his chapter “Cosmetics and Perfumes in Antiquity,” Forbes (1965: 40) writes: “Thus in ancient Rome the olive-oil mixed with dust and sweat which the gladiators and athletes scraped from their body with strigils was collected and sold as ‘rhypos’ for the manufacture of unguents, believed to confer something of the energy of these fighters to the Roman ladies.” There are three things here that deserve our notice: (1) Forbes makes the well-supported claim that athletes' *rhypos* was collected and sold, but he expands upon it to include gladiators—a separate claim for which, as we have seen, there is no evidence; (2) Forbes correctly observes that *rhypos* was used in unguents to treat gynecological problems (as per Pliny, *NH* 28.50), but by listing only that treatment and obscuring the broader use of *rhypos* in treating ailments like joint inflammation (also attested by Pliny), Forbes gives the false impression that *rhypos* was used exclusively by women;

and (3) by describing the efficacy of *rhypos* as the transference of “something of the energy of these fighters to the Roman ladies,” Forbes makes a vague conjecture that leaves open the door for those who would later understand *rhypos* as conferring an erotic potency.

While Forbes thus probably laid the groundwork for later academic endorsements of aphrodisiac gladiator sweat, I can find no mention of this claim again until the early 2000s, shortly after Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator* (2000) was released, and the source that likely brought this myth to the broader public was the *Sports Illustrated* article by Franz Lidz entitled “Sudden Death Gladiators Were Sport’s First Superstars,” and it constitutes the first mention of aphrodisiac gladiator sweat in popular media. Writing in February of 2001, Lidz does not mention *Gladiator* by name, but the article’s content was surely designed to capitalize on the popularity of the film, which had earned over half a billion dollars at the box office and would win five Oscars at the next month’s Academy Awards.¹⁶ Lidz peppers his article with research on the potential Etruscan origins of gladiatorial combat and the extravagance of the games celebrating Trajan’s Dacian campaign, but he also claims—with no support from ancient sources—that “Gladiator sweat was considered such an aphrodisiac that it was used in the facial creams of Roman women.” This quote is reminiscent of Forbes’s characterization of *rhypos*, but it is far from certain that Lidz would have come across Forbes’s work in the course of his research. Curiously, Terry Jones (of Monty Python fame) may bear responsibility for this inclusion, as Lidz quotes him extensively, including immediately after this remark, and introduces Jones by mentioning his role as narrator of the 2000 BBC production of *Gladiators: The Brutal Truth*.¹⁷

If it is not because of Lidz’s article and the gladiator-mania that followed in the film’s wake, then it is at least shortly thereafter that the myth of gladiator sweat as an aphrodisiac picked up traction in the popular sphere. Author C. Lawrence reported hearing it from tour guides in Pompeii in the early 2000s, and she herself included this fact in her 2010 children’s novel *The Twelve Tasks of Flavia Gemina*, only to realize later that there was no supporting evidence for it.¹⁸ By 2006, the claim had made it to the BBC and by 2007 it appeared in the popular history book *The Dirt on Clean: An Unsanitized History*,¹⁹ whose author included this fact in a promotional listicle (Ashenburg 2008: “A History of Being Clean”) the following year. In 2012 the myth experienced a massive boost when the History Channel aired the miniseries *Mankind: The Story of All of Us* (dir. N. Brown and D. Clifton, 2012), in which it stated unequivocally that “gladiator sweat [was] collected, bottled, and sold as an aphrodisiac” (“Empires,” 22:25). By 2014 the myth had become so popular that in a blog post where readers were

encouraged to share obscure facts about ancient Rome for the chance to win an advance copy of Jennifer Nielson's then-upcoming Roman historical novel *Mark of the Thief*, five separate users brought up the aphrodisiac properties of gladiator sweat, one of whom quoted Forbes almost verbatim (Nielsen 2014).²⁰ As of 2023, the claim has been firmly entrenched in popular culture and can be found in dozens of online articles written within the past twelve months.

Yet, for all of its current popularity, this claim is no more than a few decades old, and when asked for comment, several of the scholars who had made these claims in print responded graciously but ultimately acknowledged that the idea of gladiator sweat being sold as an aphrodisiac has no supporting evidence from antiquity.

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Abbreviations

<i>CIL</i>	Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum. Berlin, 1863–
<i>De mat. med.</i>	Dioscorides, <i>De materia medica</i>
<i>De med.</i>	Celsus, <i>De medicina</i>
<i>HA</i>	Historia Augusta
<i>Mm</i>	Galen, <i>Methodus medendi</i>
<i>NH</i>	Pliny the Elder, <i>Naturalis Historia</i>
<i>PDM</i>	Papyri Demoticae Magicae. H. D. Betz, ed. <i>The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, including the Demotic Spells</i> . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996
<i>PGM</i>	K. Preisendanz, et al., eds., <i>Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die griechischen Zauberpapyri</i> , 2 vols., 2nd ed. Stuttgart: Teubner, 1973–1974
<i>Sat.</i>	Juvenal, <i>Satirae</i>
<i>SEG</i>	Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum. 1923–

NOTES

1. This particular children's book was itself cited as evidence of the sale of gladiator sweat as an aphrodisiac in Tiller and Phillips's 2023 article in the *International Journal of*

Sport Nutrition and Exercise Metabolism entitled “How Skepticism (not Cynicism) Can Raise Scientific Standards and Reform the Health and Wellness Industry.”

2. Elkins 2019: 102; Trafford 2020: 74; Lis-Balchin 2005: 10; Kennedy 2000; and “Ancient Cosmetics Brought to Life” (2006). Kennedy claims that gladiator *blood* (not sweat) was an aphrodisiac, but there is no supporting evidence for this, either.

3. On the widespread use of the *strigil*, see (inter alia) Osborne 2018, Reid 2022, and Sansone 1992: 95, 123–24. For images, see Harvard Art Museums, 1960.484: Strigil (scraper), <https://harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/304007>.

4. The *palaestra* is a Greek wrestling school, often associated with gymnasia. Kennell (2001: 127–32) provides a detailed assessment of the collection and use of *gloios* from Greek gymnasia, and Gauthier and Hatzopoulos (1993: 128–9) discuss the use, collection, and sale of *gloios* in SEG XXVII, as do Robert, Robert, and Marcillet-Jaubert (2010: 434–35).

5. Gaius Plinius Secundus (Pliny the Elder), 23–79 CE; Galen of Pergamum, 129–199 CE; Pedanius Dioscorides, 40–90 CE.

6. Pliny’s anti-Greek sentiment is on full display here. For more on the broader Roman distrust of Greeks (especially their medicine), see Henrichs 1995: 246–50.

7. CIL 4.4397 (*suspirum puellarum Celadus Tr[ax]*; “Celadus the Thracian makes the girls sigh”) and 4.4353 (*Cresces retia[r]ius puparum nocturnarum matti[n]ar[um] aliarum ser[at]atinus [] medicus*; “Crescens the *retiarus*: doctor to the girls at night, in the morning, and any other times”). A *retiarus* is a specific type of gladiator who fought with a net (*rete*) and a trident. All translations are my own.

8. Interestingly, sweat features only once as an ingredient in the *PDM* (col. XXI), and there it is explicitly sweat that is not to be mixed with oil, which sets it purposefully apart from *gloios*. Gladiators, too, are rarely invoked in the Greek magical papyri (a collection of spells and ritual texts from the second century BCE to the fifth century CE), and when they are, it seems to be for their status as one of the *āōroi* (those who met an untimely and/or violent death), rather than as symbols of erotic power or desire. For example, in a love spell (PGM IV.1390–1495) gladiators are named with heroes, the violently dead, and numerous chthonic deities (e.g., Hecate, Demeter, Persephone) as one among many numinous entities enlisted to bring the practitioner success in his erotic endeavors, yet gladiators are not designated here as being at all sexually charged, and the fact that they are named twice in the spell immediately alongside the violently dead strongly suggests that their role is merely that of a chthonic agent. My sincere thanks to Britta Ager for directing me to this example.

9. This ritual of combing or parting a bride’s hair with a spear is attested also by Ovid (*Fasti* 2.559–60) and Plutarch (*Quaestiones Romanae* 87), neither of whom mentions that the spear should have come from a corpse, let alone that of a gladiator. For a brief discussion of the *coeliberis hasta*, see also La Follette 2001: 60.

10. The Chaldeans were a people of ancient southwest Asia who were often associated with esoteric knowledge.

11. The gladiator is unnamed in the *Historia Augusta*. We are told only that Faustina saw gladiators passing by and lusted after “one of them” (*unius ex his*). The Chaldeans then suggest that “after the gladiator was killed, Faustina bathe herself in that man’s blood” (*occiso gladiatore sanguine illius sese Faustina sublavaret*). Based on “that man’s blood” (*sanguine illius*)

I would be tempted to understand this as a reference to the man indicated by “one of them” (*unius ex his*), but this reading is not absolutely certain.

12. Aulus Cornelius Celsus wrote an encyclopedia detailing, among other things, Roman medical practices in the first century CE during the reign of the Roman emperor Tiberius. For further discussion of the medicinal uses of blood in Roman antiquity, see MacKinney 1946.

13. On the popularity of gladiatorial imagery on pottery and glassware, see Cassibry 2018; Derrick 2018: 35; Grose et al. 2017: 101–3; and Wiedemann 2002: 23.

14. Derrick (2018: 35) suggests that a visual connection with gladiators might have indicated a material used to treat “physical aches, cuts, and bruises, all things to which the seasoned fighter was accustomed.”

15. Willberg (2017) reaches a similar conclusion.

16. “Gladiator,” Box Office Mojo, accessed 4 January 2024, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0172495>.

17. Although Jones was awarded an honorary fellowship at St. Edmund Hall, Lidz is perhaps overly generous in also naming him “an Oxford don in history.”

18. Lawrence (2012) remarks, “I have been trying to find hard evidence [of the aphrodisiac power of *gloios*]. So far I have failed. A few years ago my hopes were raised when visiting some Roman glassmakers in Salisbury, I saw a little blue bottle labeled *For Gladiator Scraping Love Potion*. ‘What’s your source?’ I asked excitedly. ‘You,’ they replied.”

19. Ashenburg 2007: 38; “Ancient Cosmetics Brought to Life” 2006.

20. “Mark of the Thief Arc Giveaway,” Jennifer A. Nielsen, author website, 30 November 2014, <https://jennielsen.com/archives/1321>.

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