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Huge Gladiator School Found Buried in Austria

"Important" find boasts amphitheater, was nearly as big as two Walmarts.



Digital reconstruction of the newfound Roman gladiator school outside Vienna.

Illustration courtesy LBI ArchPro

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Archaeologists working outside Vienna, Austria, have discovered the remains of a huge school for ancient Roman gladiators—a complex so extensive that it rivals the training grounds outside Rome's Colosseum.

The newly located facility includes features never before seen at a Roman gladiators' school, or *ludus*, such as traces of a wooden training dummy. And outside the gates, the researchers discovered what they call the first known gladiators' cemetery on the grounds of a *ludus*.

The complex "is absolutely huge," said Franz Humer, scientific director of Carnuntum Archaeological Park, where the gladiator school was discovered—and where much of the ancient city has been reconstructed, a la Colonial Williamsburg.

The discovery, near the River Danube, is "one of the most interesting things I can imagine here in my career," Humer added.

The newfound school "is important," added the University of Buffalo's Stephen Dyson, an expert on the history and archaeology of the Roman Empire.

"It's the only one of this size and scale to be found anywhere in the Roman provinces," said Dyson, who wasn't involved in the discovery.

And though the Carnuntum ludus may not change historians' fundamental image of gladiators, "it's an important addition to our evidence."

(Related: "Headless Romans in England Came From 'Exotic' Locales?")

Gladiator School Linked to *Gladiator*?

The school was probably built at the same time as the adjacent 13,000-person amphitheater, which was erected around A.D. 150, during the reign of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, and excavated in the 1920s and 1930s.

Aurelius is known to have spent time in Carnuntum, and it's possible his son Commodus—the namesake of the villainous emperor in the 2000 blockbuster *Gladiator*—saw his first gladiator matches in the town.

"Maybe he got an appetite" for the bloody sport at Carnuntum, Humer said. "We can't prove it ... but from the chronology, it would be possible."

(Also see "Ancient Gladiator Mosaic Found in Roman Villa.")

Gladiator School Twice the Size of a Walmart

Archaeologists detected the school with tractor-mounted radar equipment that penetrates the earth to produce three-dimensional images of buried objects.

The radar revealed a range of subterranean structures around a central courtyard, from tiny dormitory rooms to a large room with heated floors—collapsed flooring suggests hollow areas for underfloor heating, the researchers say.

Within the courtyard, a mini-amphitheater—complete with the Roman equivalent of spectators' bleachers—allowed gladiators to practice their moves. Perhaps gladiators, who were mostly slaves, performed there for potential purchasers, Humer speculated.

Next to the training complex stood a walled field, or campus, which may have been used for housing wild animals intended for gladiatorial combat or for exercising horses—a feature never before found at a ludus, Humer said.

The entire complex occupies some 200,000 square feet (19,000 square meters)—nearly twice as big as the average Walmart.

The central buildings of the Carnuntum gladiator school do, however, closely resemble the remains of known gladiator schools uncovered at Rome and Pompeii. That similarity gives the researchers confidence that the Carnuntum find is indeed a gladiator school, even though it hasn't been excavated.

(See pictures of Rome's ancient underground.)

Rivaling Rome

Excavation of the cemetery and other structures could add detail to historians' understanding of gladiators' lives, said Newcastle University's Ian Haynes, an archaeologist who specializes in the Roman Empire.

Bones from a gladiators' cemetery in Turkey, for example, revealed physical trauma suffered during bouts.

Even if excavators never turn over a single shovelful of dirt at the site, the Carnuntum ludus "is a powerful reminder of how the cultures of the empire's urban centers are linked together," said Haynes, who isn't part of the Carnuntum research.

"The work that is found here on the Danubian border stands in direct comparison with finds from the center of Rome itself. ... [That] brings home quite forcefully that cities like Carnuntum were absolutely brimming with aspects of this Roman, cosmopolitan culture."

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