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### DO WE REALLY HAVE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR JEWISH GLADIATORS?

**Abstract:** In the past, it has been suggested that Jews were both participants and spectators in the gladiatorial games. Yet, all the materials presented to prove the existence of Jewish gladiators seem to be less conclusive than what the authors deem them to be. The present article wishes to re-examine all the archaeological evidence which was considered as proof for the existence of Jewish gladiators. The evidence will be re-examined individually, as well as the ensemble in its entirety, in order to show that such evidence cannot be used as a means to support the claim of the existence of such a phenomenon.

**Keywords:** *Gladiators, Roman Empire, Judaism, Arena, the Roman Games.*

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The arena and the shows that were performed in it were a vital part of daily life in a Roman city.<sup>1</sup> This seems to be true in large parts of the Empire.<sup>2</sup> The most famous spectacles were the gladiatorial games. Like the games, Jews were spread all over the Empire,<sup>3</sup> comprising a considerable percentage of the population.<sup>4</sup> And so, the question if Jews tended to take part in the games, and even fight as gladiators, is an appealing and obvious one.

This is not the first time that this issue is tackled. The existence of Jewish gladiators was suggested in the past,<sup>5</sup> especially in debates in the context of the land of Israel,<sup>6</sup> or of specific archaeological findings.<sup>7</sup> The most famous findings and materials that were used to make this claim included: the gladiators helmet from Pompeii,<sup>8</sup> the issue of Rabbi Reish Lakish and other Talmudic evidence,<sup>9</sup> the grave of Germanus in Beit Shearim,<sup>10</sup> and the burial cave at Tel Eton.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike previous papers, this article will try to examine whether the archaeological evidence available can support the claim that there were Jewish gladiators. Every archaeological artefact which was brought in the past to prove the existence of Jewish gladiators will be reanalysed, as well as the entire ensemble as a whole. The first part of the article will disprove

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<sup>1</sup> WEISS 1995, 2-4; NOSOV 2009, 11-43.

<sup>2</sup> WEISS 2001, 431-433.

<sup>3</sup> KRAEMER 2020; AHUVIA 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the spread and the different estimates of the percentage of Jews in the Empire, see: ISRAEL n/d; MCGING 2002.

<sup>5</sup> LOEWE 1999, 254; BEN-SASSON 2007.

<sup>6</sup> WEISS 1995 (= WEISS 2001).

<sup>7</sup> ROCCA 2006.

<sup>8</sup> ROCCA 2006.

<sup>9</sup> WERBLOWSKY/WIGODER 1986, 360; GROSSMARK 2007.

<sup>10</sup> OLSHANETSKY 2017.

<sup>11</sup> WEISS 2001, 443.

Rocca's claim regarding the Jewishness of a gladiators helmet found in Pompeii,<sup>12</sup> whereas the second part of the article will discuss the different graffiti found in the necropolis of Beit Shearim and Tel Eton, which were claimed to indicate that the deceased were gladiators.

## DID THE GLADIATOR'S HELMET FROM POMPEII BELONG TO A JEW?

In his article, "A Jewish Gladiator in Pompeii", Samuel Rocca argues that one particular find is enough evidence to determine the existence of a Jewish gladiator in the city.<sup>13</sup> The find that is supposedly evidence for the existence of this Jewish gladiator is a helmet found at the gladiators school in Pompeii (Fig. 1). This helmet is decorated with a palm tree growing seven palm fronds and two clusters of dates in the middle of the helmets visor, as well as two parma shields (a roman cavalry shield), one on each of its cheek guards. On the top of the helmet, there is a griffin with two horns, a mythological creature that Jews of the Pharisaic rabbinic line saw as a distinctly pagan symbol, and therefore would not have used it. Nevertheless, it is not a sufficient reason to eliminate the possibility that the helmet belonged to a Jew. This is because the Judaism of the period was diverse where Hellenistic Judaism, which had no religious issue with the usage of pagan symbols as a decorative element, had a prominent place.<sup>14</sup> Yet, Rocca does not make this distinction between different Jews in his own article and does not state that some parts of the decoration on the helmet, especially the griffin, are not Jewish symbols.

The main cusp of Rocca's argument is that since the palm tree is a noticeably Jewish symbol, the owner of the helmet was Jewish. Rocca bases this claim on the frequent appearance of the palm tree on some of King Herods coins. The Romans also used the same symbol for coins that were minted in the land of Israel and on the Judaea Capta coins, which were meant to celebrate the quelling of the Great Jewish Revolt.<sup>15</sup> Yet, Rocca is aware of the use of palm trees as a popular symbol by other nations, especially the Phoenicians and Carthaginians.

As the palm tree on the helmet from Pompeii has seven fronds, Rocca claimed that it could not be Carthaginian, as theirs did not always have seven fronds and its trunk was sometimes longer than the one used on coins from the land of Israel. As there is no consistency in the number of fronds in the Carthaginian palms, he insists that the palm is not Carthaginian. On the other hand, although Rocca admits there is no consistency in the number of fronds on coins in the land of Israel, he deduces that it is a Jewish palm since on the coins of Agrippa I and Antonius Felix, the palms were with seven fronds.<sup>16</sup> He does not explain anywhere in his article why the inconsistency of one should be judged differently from the inconsistency of the other. It is possible that Rocca rejects the Carthaginian option because Carthage



**Fig. 1.** The helmet from the Gladiator School in Pompeii, as appears in Rocca's article (p. 299).

had been destroyed in 146 BC, long before the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and the burying of Pompeii in 79 AD.

Rocca mentions that in the land of Israel, the palm was present not only on Jewish coins but also on Roman ones. Additionally, neighbouring pagan nations, such as the Phoenicians, used the same symbol on their own coins. Nevertheless, Rocca does not suggest the possibility of the palm being a geographical botanical symbol, but instead insists on the Jewish option. He backs this claim with a problematic argument, by using a midrash (a Talmudic legend) where the palm tree is used as an allegory for the Jewish people.<sup>17</sup> However, in the Mishna, Talmud and other Jewish texts, numerous types of plants and trees were used as a metaphor for the Jewish people. In these stories, the object or symbol used to describe the Jewish people would suit the emphasis of the narrative in that moment in time, and not as an eternal symbol of the Jewish people.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, the claim that the palm tree was a distinct symbol of the Jewish people and thus the helmet belonged to a Jew, is problematic, even for the sole reason that the Jews themselves were not the only ones who used this symbol.<sup>19</sup> Even though Carthage was destroyed more than 200 years before Pompeii, the residents of North Africa lived much closer to Pompeii than the Jews who lived in the land of Israel. Additionally, despite the destruction of Carthage, symbols of the Carthaginian culture, such as the Punic language, persisted in North Africa even 100 years after the

<sup>12</sup> ROCCA 2006.

<sup>13</sup> ROCCA 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Regarding the different Jewish attitudes to pagan symbols during the period, see: GOODENOUGH 1937 (= GOODENOUGH 2016); LEVINE 2000, 116-133.

<sup>15</sup> ROCCA 2006, 288-292.

<sup>16</sup> ROCCA 2006, 288-289.

<sup>17</sup> ROCCA 2006, 290.

<sup>18</sup> GOODENOUGH 2016.

<sup>19</sup> ROCCA 2006, 289-290.

destruction of Pompeii and more than 300 years after the destruction of the city of Carthage.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, not only did the Punic language continue to exist in North Africa, but the same goes for the presentation of the palm tree as a main symbol of the Carthaginian people, long after the destruction of Carthage.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, the Christians used the palm tree as their own symbol; this can also be seen in North Africa during the Late Empire period.<sup>22</sup> Many of the believers in early Christianity came from areas in the east, where the palm tree was a common symbol, and there was a reasonable chance for a Christian to be enslaved and to be sent to the arena, no less than any Jew.

The palm tree on the gladiator's helmet is not the only case where an artefact linked to gladiators is decorated with a palm. It is important to note that the victor in a gladiatorial fight would be given a palm frond as a symbol of his victory,<sup>23</sup> which is a valid explanation for all the different depictions of this tree and its fronds on graves of gladiators.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, it is more probable that the palm tree on the helmet from Pompeii is a symbol of the gladiator profession and not of his national roots.

Rocca also claims in his article that the phenomenon of Jewish gladiators is documented in Josephus's writings, regarding the reign of King Herod and as a Roman punishment for rebellious Jews. It seems he uses the term gladiator too freely here. His interpretation of these texts is not accurate,<sup>25</sup> as during Herod's reign, games were held in cities where Jews were a minority. Furthermore, Josephus never stated that the men he described as gladiators were Jews. The only Jews he mentioned being in the arena were sent there for execution.<sup>26</sup>

To conclude, in the case of the helmet from Pompeii, Rocca is keen to identify the owner as Jewish, thus ignoring or lessening the importance of other possible identities, which are much more probable than the Jewish one. As we have seen, there are many alternative explanations for the owners nationality. Firstly, he may have originated from Phoenicia, North Africa, or another place where the palm tree was a popular symbol. Secondly, the owner could be Christian. Furthermore, and most probably, the palm tree symbolised the victory in the arena and not any nationality.

## GRAFFITI

There is a graffito found on the wall of a burial cave in Beit Shearim which is dated to the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. This graffito says: "Germanus (son of) Yitzchak the Tadmorian" ("גרמנוס בן יצחק התדמורי"). Because of the burial place and the name of the deceased, the accepted conclusion stated that Germanus was a Jew who originated from the city of Tadmor (Palmyra), in modern day Syria.<sup>27</sup> The main question is what was



**Fig. 2.** The graffito in Germanus' grave as appears in SAFRAI 2001 (p. 74).

Germanus, profession? Near his name, there is another graffito depicting an armed man wearing an elaborate tunic with *clavii* (Fig. 2), a common dress from that period. Around his waist is either another pattern or a belt. These clothes are ornate and evidently those of a wealthy person, which is reflected in the location of his burial place. Yet, the most distinct feature in the graffito is the spear held by the man.

The fact that a name is located near the depiction of the warrior brought people to the conclusion that the warrior is Germanus himself. The image of the warrior itself hints at two main possibilities for Germanus profession: a gladiator or a soldier. The first was probably suggested by unknown scholars to the "Israel Nature and Parks Authority", who named the grave "The Grave of the Jewish Gladiator." (Fig. 3) The second possibility is that he was a soldier. We must remember that as there was no Jewish army in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, Germanus may have served in a foreign army. One of the scholars who raised this option was Pinchas Neeman, who identified Germanus as a military man and because of the date of the grave, suggested that Germanus had served in the Roman army.<sup>28</sup>

But were there Jewish soldiers in the Roman army? Even though the Jews suffered heavy casualties, great destruction and punitive actions against them because of their numerous revolts, there is ample evidence for Jewish participation and service in many capacities and roles in the Roman administration and in the army.<sup>29</sup> The Jews not only served in the army before the Great Revolt, but also during this revolt and the two others that followed (the Diaspora Revolt and the Second Jewish Revolt, more commonly known as the Bar Kokhba Revolt). Moreover, Jewish military service continued after these devastating revolts.<sup>30</sup> Evidence for this service is diverse, ranging from inscriptions to texts of ancient historians. However, there are many problems when searching for proof for the existence of Jewish soldiers

<sup>20</sup> CARTER 2006, 655.

<sup>21</sup> Which is not surprising as the Punic term originated from the Greek word for palm tree: PRAG 2006, 26-28.

<sup>22</sup> Such as the Theodoulos mosaic: PARRISH 1980, 229-239.

<sup>23</sup> CARTER 2009, 438-441.

<sup>24</sup> CARTER 2006.

<sup>25</sup> ROCCA 2006, 292-293.

<sup>26</sup> JOSEPHUS, *War*, 6.9.2 (in other versions, 6.418-419).

<sup>27</sup> SAFRAI 2001, 74.

<sup>28</sup> OLSHANETSKY 2017, 27-28 (= OLSHANETSKY 2018, 18).

<sup>29</sup> CASTRITIUS 2002; SALINERO 2003; OPPENHEIMER 2005; ROCCA 2006; SCHOENFELD 2006; ROTH 2007; CHOMIAK 2008; WEISMAN 2012; OLSHANETSKY 2018.

<sup>30</sup> OLSHANETSKY 2018, 12-24.



**Fig. 3.** The sign for the grave of Germanus which was placed by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority.

in inscriptions and archaeological artefacts. For instance, the Romans often used the same title for people who were serving either in the army or in the civil administration. Furthermore, most of the Jews of the period had Semitic, Hellenistic or Romanised names. And so, we find ourselves, again and again, grappling with the same issue in identifying someone as a Jew, and even when we identify someone as a Jew and establish that he served in the Roman administration, it is hard to definitively rule that he served in the army.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, texts written by ancient historians, like the writings of Josephus Flavius,<sup>32</sup> The Twelve Emperors by Suetonius,<sup>33</sup> the *Historia Romana* by Dio Cassius,<sup>34</sup> and the *Historia Augusta*,<sup>35</sup> give us much clearer proof of Jewish service. Even the *Codex Theodosianus* is a good example of this phenomenon. This Codex was written and signed by the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II in the year 438 AD and was approved and signed by the Western Roman Emperor Valentinianus III. It included many laws against the Jews, one of these being an earlier edict from the year 418 AD, which forbade Jews from serving in the army.<sup>36</sup> This edict is clear evidence of the existence of Jewish service until and during that period, since you do not forbid by law something that does not happen.

When asking ourselves if Germanus could have been a Roman soldier, we need to remember that a Roman legionnaire in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD was dressed and equipped differently than the most famous depictions of Roman soldiers from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD. In

the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, the Roman Empire was in a constant state of war and it suffered from economic hardships. The diverse and constantly changing enemies and warfare created new military and economic needs which changed the formation of the army and the different elements that composed it.<sup>37</sup> The most obvious elements were the gear of the infantrymen. The plate armour (*lorica segmentata*) almost totally disappeared from the ranks of the infantry. The chainmail (*lorica hamata*) returned to be the most common and widespread armour amongst the infantrymen. Still, a significant portion of the men received scale armour (*lorica squamata*). But economic hardships prevented Rome from supplying their men with armour. There were entire units who did not get any. The same could be said regarding other

expensive military equipment such as helmets and swords. Generally, a soldier of the time used to wear a tunic which in many cases had elaborate patterns, according to the fashion



**Fig. 4.** Depiction of a Roman soldier from the mosaic of Piazza Armerina.

<sup>31</sup> OLSHANETSKY 2018, 11-12.

<sup>32</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 14.202-204, 223-232, 234, 236-240; Josephus, *Ant.* 14.27-29, 60-61; Josephus, *Ant.* Josephus, 14.127-139; Josephus, *Ant.* 16.52-53.

<sup>33</sup> Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 36.

<sup>34</sup> Dio, 72.25.3-6.

<sup>35</sup> *Historia Augusta*, *Gordiani Tres*, 34.

<sup>36</sup> *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.8.24.

<sup>37</sup> SYVÄNNE 2015; SYVÄNNE 2018; SYVÄNNE 2020.



**Fig. 5.** Depiction of a Roman soldier fighting a beast from the mosaic of Piazza Armerina.



**Fig. 6.** Depiction of two Roman soldiers from the mosaic of Piazza Armerina.

of the period. When the soldier did not have armour, the tunic and the pattern on it were visible to all.<sup>38</sup>

In the Villa Romana Del Casale, a Roman villa uncovered near the town of Piazza Armerina in Sicily, huge mosaics were found.<sup>39</sup> One of them is clearly showing the dress of the Roman soldier of the period. In this mosaic, there is a scene of Roman soldiers hunting and gathering food where they are dressed in a similar tunic to the one in the Germanus graffito (Fig. 4-6). Each soldier is equipped with spears and belts on his waist, similar to the figure inscribed on the wall at Beit Shearim. And so, we can see that there is a high possibility that Germanus was a soldier. But is there any possibility that he was a professional fighter, performing in the arena?

It is important to note that a spear was not a weapon used by gladiators. Moreover, the lack of protective gear in the graffito indicates that Germanus was not a gladiator. Therefore, we must check if there were other professionals who fought in the arena and were not gladiators. And indeed, we can find another type of professional fighter in the arena.

These were the *venatores* who specialized in fighting wild beasts in the arena. They fought a different kind of game and were considered lesser than the ordinary gladiator. Yet, they were still professionals and they were proud of their profession. Most of what we know about gladiators and other types of warriors who fought in the arena is due to mosaics and statues. From them we have learned that up to the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, ordinary gladiators fought beasts in the arena. But since then, *venatores* and *bestiarii*, who used lighter weapons and equipment, replaced them in the battles against wild animals. The *venatores* seem to have used all kinds of polearms and spears. Usually, they may have not worn armour, but some of the mosaics, frescoes and stuccoes suggest that at least in some cases they wore a *manica* (armguard) on one of their arms (Fig. 7). Sometimes, the only thing they wore to battle was a type of loincloth, but the most common dress was a tunic with *clavii* (Fig. 8), very similar to the one the person engraved in the graffito is wearing.<sup>40</sup> Their elaborate tunics are proof of the respect their profession received.



**Fig. 7.** Description of a venator with a spear and a manica fighting a leopard on a mosaic from the 3rd century found in Bad Kreuznach, Germany.



**Fig. 8.** A mosaic of a fight between venatores and beasts from the 3rd century, found in El Djem, Tunisia.

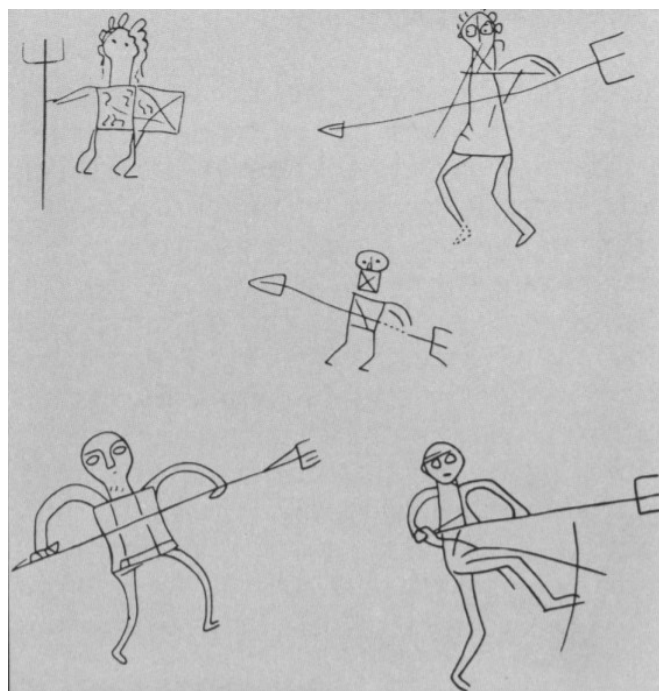
<sup>38</sup> JAMES 2003.

<sup>39</sup> MISTRETTA 1998.

<sup>40</sup> For the clothes and equipment of the *venatores*, see: NOSOV 2009, 48-54.

According to what we know about gladiators, the figure inscribed on Germanus' grave does not represent one of them. However, it could be a representation of a venator who fought wild animals. Yet, when we look at other mosaics and Roman art from the period depicting Roman soldiers, the possibility that the graffito is of a soldier becomes no less probable. The resemblance in dress between venatores and soldiers of the period will mean that we will never know for certain which of the two was Germanus.

Other graffiti in a burial complex at Tel Eton triggered the suggestion that one or more of the deceased was a gladiator.<sup>41</sup> In this cave, five graffiti were found. In each of them, there is a man holding a trident and one of the five is holding either a net or a shield (Fig. 9). In the same cave there is also another graffiti of a horse and three men who seem to be fighting each other. The original excavator of the cave defined the figures in the graffiti as gladiators or hunters (venatores). He himself thought that there was no connection between the graffiti and the profession of the deceased. He suggested that the deceased were possibly Jewish soldiers in the Roman army.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the gladiator hypothesis should be regarded as no more than a hypothesis. This is because unlike Germanus' case, the name of the deceased does not appear near the graffiti, thus the graffiti may have only been an artistic representation or decoration. Another possibility is that it was only a sport that the deceased enjoyed watching and retiarii were his favourite gladiator type. These two options are especially strong due to the fact that gladiators were a common decorative motif, appearing on domestic items such as lamps and tableware, and even on the graves of people who did not fight as gladiators.<sup>43</sup> A further option that was not suggested



**Fig. 9.** The section of the graffiti from Tel Eton of five men holding tridents appeared in WEISS 1995 (p. 17).

<sup>41</sup> WEISS 2001, 443.

<sup>42</sup> TZAFERIS 1982, 25.

<sup>43</sup> HOPE 2000, 112.

until this current article is that at least the men with the tridents could be fishermen. Fishing using a trident was very common and widespread across the Roman Empire.<sup>44</sup> The graffiti also fit the fishermen assumption,<sup>45</sup> since at least four or five of them do not hold a net, as they would have if they were retiarii fighting in the arena. That alone is not enough to refute the retiarius possibility as in many depictions from the time, the retiarius was not depicted with a net in his hand.<sup>46</sup>

A similar example is the graffiti in burial cave number 4 in Beit Shearim, which is part of a large and important Jewish necropolis on the outskirts of a Jewish settlement. This graffiti depicts two figures which are usually identified as a retiarius and his murmillo opponent who is covered with the retiarius net (Fig. 10).<sup>47</sup> Yet, there are a few problems with assuming that the man buried there was a gladiator. Firstly, the graffiti is ugly and very dim, and it is very hard to determine whether the two figures are indeed gladiators. Secondly, like in Tel Eton's case, the name of the deceased does not appear near the graffiti, so we cannot assume that the graffiti represents a man who was buried there. And so, the most probable explanation of the graffiti is that it was either an artistic, decorative piece, or it was meant to represent a beloved sport of the deceased.



**Fig. 10.** The graffiti from burial cave no. 4 in Bet Shearim appeared in WEISS 1995 (p. 18).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, none of the archaeological evidence could be declared as definitive proof for the existence of Jewish gladiators. Moreover, it seems that there is no concrete affinity between some of the artefacts used to promote the ideas of Jewish gladiators, such as the helmet from Pompeii, and Judaism.

There are numerous and diverse evidence of gladiators, through skeletal remains, graves and inscriptions, yet it is considered problematic in finding the ethnic origins of

<sup>44</sup> BEKKER-NIELSEN 2007, 188-189.

<sup>45</sup> There is no real difference between the tridents used in the arena and those used by fishermen: HAXBY 2018, 176.

<sup>46</sup> Regarding retiarius and their equipment: NOSOV 2009, 62-68.

<sup>47</sup> WEISS 1995, 18.

individual gladiators, as they used pseudonyms and adopted Hellenistic or Roman names.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, we only know the origins of a small percentage of gladiators, compared to the number of practicing gladiators that there were, and even to the number of graves and their skeletal remains.<sup>49</sup> However, we know the origins of some of the gladiators from inscriptions. Only from Italy, where there is relatively little evidence for gladiators compared to the Empire as a whole, we know of two gladiators who were described as Egyptian, two from Alexandria, a few from Gaul, Iberia, Germania, Thracia and Italy, and one from Greece.<sup>50</sup> Yet, we have never found a grave of a gladiator whose profession and Jewishness are absolute. This is in sharp contrast to our knowledge about Jews who flock to the arena in large numbers as spectators,<sup>51</sup> and the definitive evidence of Jews can be found in almost any position and practice in the Empire, including in the army. A possible explanation is that while watching the fighting was considered pleasant entertainment, being a gladiator was not considered respectable among Jews. As a result, Jews sought to be gladiators less than their pagan neighbours.

Besides the graffito of Germanus, the graffiti did not have the name of the deceased. Therefore, these graffiti may either be a decorative motif or an artistic representation of the sport that the deceased loved. These graffiti could be used as evidence that the Jews were avid spectators of the sport, rather than participants in the gladiatorial games. However, we must consider that due to the level of artistry of the graffiti, the images may not represent gladiators but rather fishermen or fighting in general. On the other hand, in the case of Germanus from Beit Shearim, the fact that the graffito is in close proximity to a name of the deceased, it does indeed suggest that this graffito may represent the deceased. In this case, the deceased was most certainly not a gladiator but a venator, a beast fighter in the arena, or a soldier. Yet, there is a higher probability that Germanus was a soldier as there is ample evidence for Jewish soldiers during that period.

All in all, according to the archaeological evidence available, we cannot rule out the existence of Jewish gladiators, yet there is no archaeological evidence to support the claim that such a phenomenon existed. It is necessary that further examination of the textual evidence, especially from the Talmud, will be carried out, to see whether they can substantiate the claim of Jewish gladiators. If not, we should consider the existence of Jewish gladiators as ambiguous and rare at best.

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<sup>48</sup> HOPE 2000, 101.

<sup>49</sup> ROBERT 1946; ROBERT 1948; ROBERT 1949; ROBERT 1950.

<sup>50</sup> HOPE 2000, 102.

<sup>51</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, *Avodah Zarah*, 7a; WEISS 2001: 436-437; GROSSMARK 2007.

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