

ROMAN SWORDS AND THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

Even people with minimal knowledge about the Roman military recognize the term *gladius*, the legendary sword/weapon that helped Rome rule the empire.

Every Roman soldier, regardless of rank, carried a *gladius* as his main offensive and defensive weapon. This sturdy sword was used primarily to thrust and stab rather than to slash or hack, although it was deadly either way. It is surmised by historians that the Romans modified early Spanish swords to perfect the *gladius*.



Like most weapons, the Roman sword came in many shapes, sizes, styles, and lengths. The cavalry troops needed a longer sword, so the *spatha* was developed to meet the need. While a *gladius* was typically 28 inches over-all, the *spatha* was increased to 30 to 40 total inches in length thus giving it a more deadly reach from a mounted soldier.

During what would be the equivalent of Roman military basic training, the recruits would use a training truncheon, the *clava lignea*, which was twice the weight of the real *gladius*. The idea was that by training with a double weight weapon when they got into battle with the real thing it would make using the *gladius* more accurate and deadly.

It was usual for attacking ranks of Roman soldiers to march as a solid wall of shields with swords drawn and projecting to the right of each shield. This must have been a terrifying formation to see if you were an enemy soldier.

The standard use of the *gladius* was for the soldier to lead with his left foot, keeping the shield in his left hand and the sword in his right hand and back behind/beside the shield. The hilt of the *gladius* would be kept at waist level. When the opportune moment came, the soldier would lunge forward with the right foot while simultaneously thrusting the sword forward with the right arm while locking the elbow. This would not only make a quick and deadly movement, but would capture the added weight of the body's momentum. This allowed a deadly reach of nearly eight feet. An unwary opponent could think he was safe, only to find out that he was within deadly reach of the *gladius*.

Keeping the sword at waist level and behind the shield kept it somewhat out of sight of the enemy and made it difficult to judge what the Roman soldier was intending to do.

In order to harden the blade of the *gladius*, a smith forged it using charcoal dust to sprinkle onto the edges

during the forging process; this raised the carbon content and hardness of the blade as well as the deadly effectiveness of the finished product.

The handle/grip of the *gladius* could be made of bone, ivory, metal or wood. What they all had in common was a surface which would provide a firm grip so the soldier would not have the weapon slip out of his hand, or slip in his hand. A firm hold on his sword was the difference between life and death in battle.



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