RETIARIUS
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1. OVERVIEW
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The retiarius is probably the most exotic of all gladiator types. It is the only armatura which does not carry a helmet, but rather three weapons. The very agile fighting style of the retiarius is a strong contrast to his heavily armoured opponents, the secutor, the murmillo and the arbelas/scissor. This quickly made this duel the most popular gladiator pairing [1].
1. OVERVIEW

CHRONOLOGICAL OVERVIEW OVER PROVEN GLADIATOR TYPES
1. Overview

Possible development stages of the Retiarius

- Heavy Retiarius
- Light Retiarius
- Pons fights
- Theatrical fights

Possible development stages of the Pontiarius

- Heavy Pontiarius
- Light Pontiarius
- Duel fights
2. ORIGIN
The exact origin of the retiarius is unknown.

There are currently three theories about the origin of the retiarius:

1) Naumachia
2) Duel Pittacus against Phrynon
3) Pontiarius
2.1. NAUMACHIA

Naumachiae were reenacted naval battles. The exact equipment of the combatants is unknown, but the use of tridents seems possible. This kind of equipment could have been so popular that a distinct gladiator type was developed for it, but there are no known sources for this theory.
2.2. PITTAKOS AGAINST PHRYNON

In the year 606 BCE, Pittacus, one of the seven sages of Greece, fought as army general of Mytilene against Phrynon of Athens. Instead of a pitched battle, a duel was conducted in which Pittacus caught his adversary with a net and subsequently killed him [2]. Information concerning details of the fight vary. According to some sources, the net was hidden behind a shield [3], according to others, he fought with net, trident and sword [4].

This tale was known to the Romans and could have inspired the equipment of the retiarius. Only secondary textual sources are known, no depictions.
2.3. PONTIARIUS

In 332 BCE, Alexander the Great besieged and conquered the Phoenician port city of Tyre. As the city was set on an island, the Macedons had to construct a narrow dam while the defenders on the city walls attacked them with nets and tridents.

The pontiarius fight could be a reenactment of this important historical event which was known to the Romans.
The earliest depictions show fighters with equipment clearly inspired by military gear [5]. They wore an attic-boeotic helmet, chainmail and greaves. A rope allowed him to recover the thrown trident. This equipment was most-likely for theatrical display of the siege, rather than a balanced sport fight.
2.3. PONTIARIUS

The first distinct depiction of a pons fight shows only one ramp and two fighters. Textual sources mention gladiator pairs as well. Both facts support the theory of contemporary theatrical reenactment of the siege of Tyre.

The fighter on the right seems to wear an open helmet and a large shield. He most likely is a murmillo. The gladiator on the left is a pontiarius, a retiarius fighting on a pons.
Starting in the 1st cen. CE, all depictions show two ramps and three fighters. Additionally, the net of the pontiarius was replaced with throwing projectiles. The secutor becomes established as main enemy. Through these rule changes, the pons fight is turned into a balanced sport fight. No further changes are known, even up to the 4th cen. CE.
2.4. RETIARIUS

If the pontiarius theory is further pursued, it can be seen that the retiarius not only fought on the pons, but due to his popularity, was used for regular gladiator pairings as well. In the beginning, his opponent was the murmillo (s, left), later the secutor (s. right), in rare instances also the arbelas/scissor.
3. EQUIPMENT
The retiarius was the only gladiator type not to wear a helmet. His exposed face was supposed to make joy and pain visible, but led Artemidorus [6] and Juvenal[7] to mockery, claiming retiarii were inferior to „real“ gladiators who wore helmets.

However, the many depictions and the great popularity of the retiarius-secutor pairing do not support these claims.

MODERN INTERPRETATION
The trident (tridens o. fuscina) was the main weapon of the retiarius. Its design always sported an undecorated, straight cross bar. On most depictions, the shaft is slightly longer than the fighter is tall. Only a single, clearly identified as gladiatorial weapon, find exists.
Often finds are falsely classified as gladiatorial tridents. Pieces with unequal prongs and an additional cross bar were all identified as finials of flag poles of the Roman legion [8]. Finds with barbs or curved cross bars were classified as fishing tridents [9].
3. EQUIPMENT

The retiarius used a knotted net, which was weighted at the edge with lead or thicker ropes and had a diameter of ca. 3m. The net could have a square (s. Left) or round (s. Right) shape. Due to the thrown net, he was sometimes called „laculator“ (thrower) [10].
As secondary armament, the retiarius carried a gladius with a length of 30-40cm. During the fight, this weapon was mostly carried in the left hand together with the trident. No depictions showing a scabbard or the gladius being tucked into the belt are known.
Since the weapon has the same size on depictions as the gladii of other fighters, e.g. secutors or provocators, a classification as pugio (roman military dagger) has not been proven to exist. In addition the shapes of the blade and the handle of the short sword of the retiarius and of the pugio differ considerably.
A shoulder guard protected the shoulder and especially the head of the retiarius. It was made from bronze and could have a straight or curved shape.
No evidence which would validate the term *galerus* for the shoulder guard has been found yet. The term only appears once in Juvenal's satires. In that instance, a translation as a hat with a golden cord is the most likely [11]. The term *munimenta umeri*, or fortress of the upper arm, can be found in the satires as well. Therefore, no primary source clearly proving *galerus* as term for the shoulder guard exists.

In modern research *galerus* has prevailed as term, though.
Below the shoulder guard, a manica protected the arm. It was made from padded cloth. Often, it covered the back of the hand as well. In later variants, the retiarius could wear an additional layer of chain or scale mail.
3. EQUIPMENT

GRAFFITI, POMPEII
ITALY
1ST CEN. CE

MOSAIK, COLOGNE
GERMANY
2ND – 3RD CEN. CE

No evidence exists for the armouring of both arms. Only decorative strips of cloth or leather which were also worn on the legs, are known from depictions.
The belt of the retiarius did not differ from those of other gladiator types. It was roughly 10cm wide, had straight edges and was fabricated from leather. Sometimes, it was decorated with metal elements.
Most depictions show the legs of the retiarius unprotected. Partial leg wrappings or foot protection, probably made from leather, are shown. For shoes, no evidence is known.

(Many re-enactment groups wear shoes for security reasons when not fighting in a sand arena.)
A tomb relief as well as wound traces on a thigh bone [12] from the gladiator tomb in Ephesos indicate the use of a close combat weapon with four prongs which was used in addition to the gladius. No further sources for this are known and no clear conclusions concerning the use of this weapon can be drawn.
Juvenal and others [11] mention auctoratii (non-slaves, fighting voluntarily) fighting as retiarius *tunicata*. A few depictions show retiarii wearing a tunic as well. The historical background for this is still unclear. Maybe nobles fighting as retiarius covered their body this way [10].
4. FURTHER DEVELOPMENT
Even in the 3rd and 4th century CE, the most popular fight was between the retiarius and secutor. Based on the classical „light“ retiarius (s. left) a second variant, the modern „heavy“ retiarius (s. right) was developed. Both versions were used in parallel.
Instead of the shoulder guard, the „heavy“ retiarius wore a chain or scale armour over his manica which also partially covered his chest. There is no known depiction of this type which shows the use of a net.
5. FIGHTING STYLE
His three weapons of the retiarius enable him to use a very versatile fighting style. Caught by the net, the mobility of his enemy is hindered (left). The trident not only gives a reach advantage, it also allows to pry open shields (middle) as well as attacks during retreats (right).
Between the 1st and 3rd century CE, the fighting style changed significantly. The net seems to have been unimportant in many fights and disappears more and more from depictions [13]. Some retiarii stopped using it altogether. The trident is mostly used for blocking (s. left) and the gladius becomes the primary attack weapon (s. right).
QUELLENANGABEN


2) A. Steenbeek, „Iusti Lipsii Saturnalium Sermonum libri duo, qui de gladiatoribus“, in Brill's Studies in Intellectual History (2011)


4) Strabon, Geography, III.38


6) Artemidor von Daldis, Oneirocritica, II, 32, 2nd cen. CE

7) Juvenal, Saturae, VIII, 209f.


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