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TWO LEFT-HANDED GLADIATORS IN BRITAIN

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Two of the most frequently reproduced images of gladiatorial combat from Britain are a slate relief of a retiarius *from Chester and the famous Colchester vase, a barbotine decorated cup adorned with arena scenes. Despite the familiarity of these images, an important fact seems to have been generally overlooked: the objects appear to show gladiators who are left-handed.*[1]

THE CHESTER *RETIARIUS*

In 1982 the relief (fig 1) was submitted to the British Museum for identification, and was reunited with its real provenance in a paper by Ralph Jackson,[2] published in the 1983 volume of *Britannia*. The object was found in Chester in 1738, close to the east gate of the legionary fortress, in Fleshmonger's Lane, and therefore within 100m of the site of the Chester amphitheatre. The Minute Book of the Society of Antiquaries says that the 'remaining part was broken off by the workmen and lost among the rubbish'.[3] When noted here in 1742 it had been acquired by Dr Richard Mead, and was exhibited by George Vertue, who published an engraving of it in *Vetusta Monumenta*,[4] accompanied by Dr John Ward's Latin text. That text and engraving are the sources for all later accounts up to the time of Jackson's 1983 publication.

By 1810 the Lysons brothers recorded that the stone was in the possession of Henry Potts of Watergate Street, Chester; however, the illustration published by the Lysons is of a plaster cast.[5] It seems that two plaster casts were made, possibly both at the instance of Thomas Pennant, while the original was in Mead's collection. One example was presented to the Society of Antiquaries in 1754 by Henry Baker, FSA, while the other, now in Chester's Grosvenor Museum, appears to have been that owned by Potts and drawn by Lysons. It is probable that Potts only ever owned the cast now in the Grosvenor Museum, and not the original. It seems likely that the sale of Mead's collection in 1754 led to a sequence of (unrecorded) owners, culminating in the presentation of the relief to Saffron Walden Museum in 1836 by the family of the Revd Thomas Hopkins of Linton – by which time it had acquired an exotic provenance (Herculaneum) and was now made of marble, and not from the Manx slate described in the Society's minute book (the original piece is, in fact, of North Welsh slate[6]).

The piece shows a *retiarius*, or net fighter, standing in a watchful pose. He is shown facing left in a slightly twisted perspective, with his torso shown frontally and his head and limbs in profile. He wears the typical costume of his gladiatorial class: a belted breech-cloth (*subligaculum*) worn around his waist and a padded sleeve (*manica*)

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Fig 1. Relief of a left-handed *retiarius* from Chester. *Photograph*: Saffron Walden Museum.



Fig 2. Part of the Bignor villa gladiator frieze showing combat between a *retiarius* and a *secutor*. *Photograph*: by kind permission of the Tupper family.

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protecting his right arm. On his right shoulder is a bronze shield (*galerus*), which stands upright on the shoulder to protect the head and face without the need for a helmet. This is a design unique to the *retiarius*, and there is no analogue in any repertoire of armour of any other culture or time. The trident (*tridens*) is held upright in the right hand, and the net (*rete*) is held loosely in the left hand. Though the portion of the tablet that would have shown his opponent is broken off and lost, a sword and shield can be seen. The opponent – probably a heavily armoured *secutor* – has dropped his sword, and has either dropped the shield, or is holding it up in a gesture of surrender. The piece thus depicts the moment of victory.

The two notable features of this representation are its rarity as a sculptural representation of a *retiarius* holding a net (though there are a number on samian and other vessels) and its depiction of the trident being held in the right hand and the net in the left, while the *manica* and *galerus* are worn on the right arm. Just how unusual this is can be seen by looking at other representations of *retiarii* in a variety of media from all over the Roman Empire.

The sarcophagus from Florence of the *retiarius* Balerianus,[7] killed on his birthday, shows him holding a victor's palm on one side and in identical pose to the Chester gladiator on the other with what is perhaps the only other sculpted example of a *retiarius* holding a net. Balerianus is shown with the net in his right hand and *galerus* and *manica* on the left, conforming to a line in Juvenal's *Satires*: 'see how … with poised *right* hand he has cast the trailing net in vain' (author's italics).[8] Though depictions of the net are rare, *retiarii* fighting with the trident are commonly seen on mosaics and pottery, in reliefs, bronzes, lamps and painted glass, and are always shown, like Balerianus, with the *galerus* and *manica* on the left arm. The Bignor mosaic, West Sussex (fig 2), clearly shows the fighting stance of the *retiarius*. He has cast his net, and wields his trident. The natural stance of any right-handed person using a pole arm is to have the left shoulder forward. The weapon is balanced in the left hand, but manipulated with the right, which also provides the strength for a thrust. The tendency to stand sideways in order to minimize the target area leaves the left arm and shoulder vulnerable. This is clearly the reason for the design of the *galerus*. Rising high from the left shoulder it afforded protection for the head and face of the *retiarius*, who was able to shelter behind it while standing sideways with trident outstretched. A right-handed *retiarius* will thus have an armoured left hand, in distinction to the right-handed swordsman, who will always have the vulnerable outstretched right sword-arm armoured, while the left arm is protected by his shield.

Though most representations are the reverse of the Chester example this has only once been remarked upon. In his article, Ralph Jackson notes that the position of the armour shows that the gladiator has not simply switched hands. He goes on to explain it by saying that: 'Either the sculptor has made an error, or he has deliberately changed things around, perhaps to take best advantage of his available space'.[9] I would favour a third explanation – that the relief was intended deliberately to depict a left-handed *retiarius*. Given the way in which the *retiarius* fought, it is clear that this would be instantly obvious to any ancient viewer familiar with the arena.

THE COLCHESTER VASE

This is a colour-coated vessel in red fabric, with gladiatorial decoration in barbotine, and is accepted as a product of the Colchester kilns (fig 3).[10] It was found in a grave at

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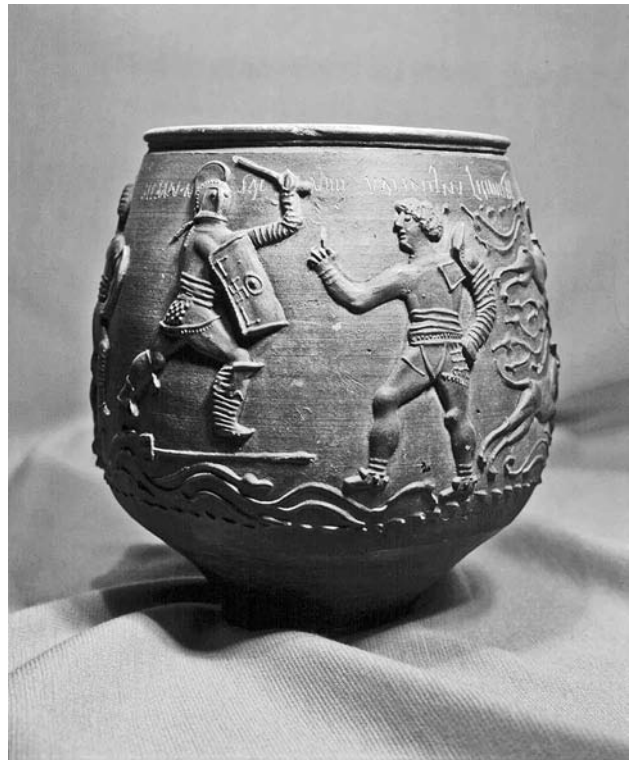


Fig 3. The Colchester vase. *Photograph*: Colchester Museums.

West Lodge, Suffolk, in 1848. It shows both principal aspects of arena events. On one side are two *venatores*, one wielding a whip over the head of an animal, probably intended to represent a bear. The names SECVNDVS and MARIO are inscribed above the head of the man with the whip. On the other side is a famous scene of a *retiarius*, his trident dropped to the ground and his index finger raised in the gesture of surrender before the attack of a *secutor*, who is advancing, shield forward and sword upraised in his left hand. The *secutor* is shown as a left-handed swordsman. The gladiators are identified in inscriptions, which, like those over the *venatores*, were cut on to the vessel after firing:[11]

MEMNON SAC VIIII VALENTINV LEGIONIS XXX

This seems to mean Memnon, the *secutor*, nine victories; Valentinus of the thirtieth legion. The inscription over the figure of Memnon is typical of inscriptions over figures of gladiators seen, for example, in graffiti from Pompeii.[12] The identification of Valentinus with the thirtieth Legion (Leg XXX Ulpia Victrix) is more unusual, not least because this legion was stationed far from Britain at Xanten in the province of Lower Germany. It has been suggested that the gladiators were part of a troupe attached to the legion, either far famed in the western provinces,[13] or a troupe which went 'on tour'. The Colchester vase is the only certain example of the existence of such a military 'stable'.[14] Other references to gladiators and spectacles in a military context are literary;

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thus Suetonius describes Tiberius attending garrison games at Circeii, during which he threw javelins from the president's box at a wild boar in the arena,[15] and Tacitus' account of the accession of Tiberius in AD 14 mentions that Q Junius Blaesus commanding Legions VIII, IX and XV in Pannonia had gladiators as slaves in his household.[16]

The fact that the inscription was cut after the vase was fired might lead to the suspicion that the vessel was in origin a generic piece, with the names of particular arena performers scratched on later, perhaps after the owner had witnessed a combat the result of which neatly matched the subject shown. The fact that the *secutor* is left-handed, however, suggests that a left-handed *secutor* named Memnon existed and was deliberately depicted with an actual opponent. In this case the post-firing inscription would have been added as part of the manufacturing process.

A note of caution is necessary here, however. The manufacture of this vessel involved a number of processes, one of which was the making of a mould. It must remain a possibility that the mould-maker created a positive mould, which, when an impression was taken, resulted in an image on the pot which was the reverse of that intended. If this was the case, Memnon was not intended to be shown as a left-hander.

DISCUSSION

Though there is some doubt over Memnon, the single process of sculpture involved in the production of the Chester *retiarius* makes it highly likely that he was intended to be shown as a left-hander. I would go further and suggest that this was a representation of a specific and well-known individual. As we have seen from the example of the Colchester vase, the names of combatants are given on many depictions of gladiators in various media – mosaic, ceramic or sculptural. There are other reliefs similar to the Chester *retiarius* which also carry the names of fighters; a good parallel comes from the fragments of the tomb of a *secutor* on the Appian Way.[17] One fragment shows the dead man's eleventh and twelfth victories, against Pantheriscus and Hilarus; another a victory over the *retiarius* Improbus. These reliefs, like that from Chester, have a broad band framing the scene above and beneath. The names are inscribed on these bands, and it seems at least probable that had the frame of the Chester image survived, the name of our *retiarius* may have been similarly carved.

There is evidence that left-handedness was a trait which was valued in gladiators. The symmetry of equipment would have become somewhat unbalanced by a left-hander, whose different reactions would (for the audience) add variety to a familiar type of combat. In a left-handed *versus* right-handed combat, the vulnerable parts of each fighter would be directly rather than diametrically opposite each other, and as both fighters would be trained to oppose mainly right-handed opponents, the left-hander would seem to have an advantage, like the southpaw in modern boxing.[18] Seneca says: 'Some fight better with fully armoured gladiators, others with the lighter equipped; some desire, others fear, to be matched against a left hander [*scaeva*].'[19]

The Emperor Commodus, notorious for his appearances in the arena, was himself a *scaeva*. According to Cassius Dio,[20] he substituted the head of the Colossus by the Colosseum with his own head, gave it a club and bronze lion to make it look like Hercules (with whom Commodus identified), and inscribed his own titles upon it, culminating with these words: 'champion of *secutores* – the only left-handed gladiator to

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conquer twelve times one thousand men'. Interestingly, Aurelius Victor relates a story of Commodus refusing to fight a gladiator in the arena, and having him removed.[21] The gladiator's name was Scaeva, and one wonders whether Commodus was afraid to lose his usual natural advantage in fighting a fellow southpaw.

Left-handers are commemorated in a number of inscriptions, many of which have been collected by Kathleen Coleman for her 1996 paper on a graffito from Pompeii depicting a *scaeva* named Albanus, where the inscription is accompanied by a cartoon of a gladiator holding a sword in his left hand.[22] Coleman notes several tombstones of left-handers – the *murmillo* Valerius from Sorrento, Apollonius, a *thraex*, from Rome, and Lycus,[23] a left-handed gladiator of the *murmillo* class, also from Rome, with four fights behind him, whose stone was erected by Longinus, a *contrarete* – the alternative word for a *secutor* – one who fought against *retiarii*. All of these include the Latin word *scaeva*, defining a left-hander. The tombstones of Victor from Philippopolis and an un-named gladiator from Iasos use the term transliterated into Greek.[24]

As well as inscriptions there are other depictions of left-handers. In mosaic a left-handed victor, a *secutor*, is shown at Augst, Switzerland,[25] and a loser (a *thraex*) at Bad Kreuznach, Germany.[26] A relief of a left-hander comes from Dyrrachium, Albania;[27] in this example, the single greave worn by the fighter is on the right leg. The greave would normally be worn (by a right-hander) on the left leg, as the leg on the shield side would be forward in combat. Robert has pointed out that such issues as a greave on the right leg alone would indicate a left-hander if an artwork was incomplete.[28]

If a gladiator was left-handed there was a desire to commemorate the fact. This is shown particularly by a funerary stele found in Cologne, Germany, showing a left-handed *thraex*, on which there are traces of an original image of the man fighting right-handed. Robert interpreted the fact that a change was made as indicating the intervention of those commissioning the memorial after a sculptor had made an initial assumption of right-handedness.[29]

It is fair to conclude that the Chester *retiarius* sculpture is something special. No mere generic scene of gladiatorial combat, it probably depicts an individual gladiator, well known, and celebrated for his unusual mode of fighting. When the relief was complete, it may well have recorded his name. Though there are representations of other left-handed individuals in a number of other gladiator classes, I have so far found no other record of a left-handed *retiarius*. It seems that this man was rightly commemorated as someone special.

NOTES

1. This paper originated as a Ballot exhibit presented to the Society of Antiquaries of London (SAL) on 15 June 2006 of a cast of the Chester gladiator in the possession of the Society. I am grateful to Professor Kathleen Coleman for discussing the object with me.
2. Jackson 1983.
3. SAL, Minutes, IV, 142, 25 Nov 1742.
4. *Vetusta Monumenta*, I, pl LXV.
5. Lysons and Lysons 1810, 431.
6. Jackson 1983, 91.
7. Junkelmann 2000a, 30.
8. Juvenal, *Satires*, VIII.203–5; see also Junkelmann 2000b.
9. Jackson 1983, 92.
10. Hull 1963, 96.
11. *RIB* II, no. 2503.119.
12. Jacobelli 2003, 58–61.
13. Toynbee 1964, 411–13.
14. Ville 1981, 214.
15. Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 72.

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16. Tacitus, *Annales*, I.21.
17. Lovatelli 1895.
18. I am grateful to the Macedonian southpaw boxer, Kosta Markovski, for demonstrating this to me in no uncertain manner!
19. Seneca, *Controversiae*, III, *praef* 10.
20. Cassius Dio, 73:22.
21. Aurelius Victor, *de Caesaribus*, 17.
22. Coleman 1996. The original publication of the inscription was in *CIL* IV, no. 8056. The inscription reads: 'Albanus sc[aeva] l[iber pvgnarvm] xix v[icit]', commemorating 19 victories.
23. ILS 5105: D M/ LYCO LIB MUR/ SCAEV PUGNA IIII/ FEC LONGINUS/ LIB CONTRARETE/ FRATRI B M.
24. Coleman 1996, 195.
25. Junkelmann 2000a, 97, figs 135, 137.
26. Ibid, 98, fig 139.
27. Ibid, 116, fig 173.
28. Robert 1940, 71.
29. Robert 1946, 146; Coleman 1996, 196, n 14.

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