

# The Gladius: The Roman Short Sword

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By M.C. Bishop; illustrations by Peter Dennis

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## Review by Jonathan Aird

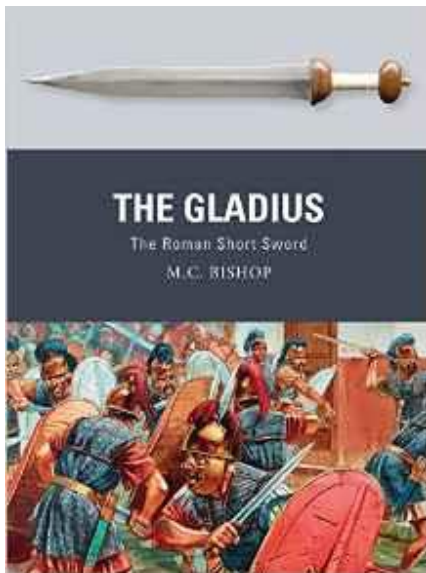
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This latest entry in the weapon series covers the classic Roman short sword, giving the story of its evolution from the early Spanish sword style and covering the various different styles of manufacture and decoration to give a very detailed study of the weapon and the related accessories such as the scabbard. Noting that gladius just means "sword," Mike Bishop clarifies early on that this is a book about the gladius Hispaniense (or gladius Hispanus, depending on Roman author consulted), which started out as a cavalry weapon but was

relegated from this use by the longer Spatha. The short sword became the prime close quarters weapon for the Roman military machine -- it was also adopted for gladiatorial combats, making it, as the author notes, pre-eminent in the Roman world for offence, defence and entertainment.



The chapter on the development of the Gladius ó which, as a sword that was used for several centuries, of course did not stay eternally fixed in style -- is easy to follow and elaborates well on the different types found around the Empire, as well as covering changes that occurred over time. The main thrust of this topic is well illustrated by a plate comparing the earliest Spanish blade -- still long enough to serve as both a cavalry and a foot weapon, through the Mainz style whose main characteristic difference is a further reduction in length to the classic Gladius of the Pompeii style -- shorter again and with a straighter blade, now perfected as a close quarters stabbing weapon but retaining a viable slashing blade edge as well. It's interesting stuff -- as is the discussion on manufacture and pommel variations ó but, to be

honest, the small differences will not be very apparent on wargame scale figures, apart from the 3rd Century adoption of ring pommels which are different enough to stand out.

The chapter on use describes some of the difficulties of interpreting the methods actually employed most often in combat. Here is a stabbing sword, with a cutting edge. There are period authors who describe the sword's use in combat, but they are not totally reliable. Actual bodies from combats should give a better idea, one might think, but thanks to a tendency for torture of captives and mutilation of the dead it's hard to say which blow caused the death of skeletons being examined. Here is one with his head near severed -- surely the killing blow, but he also has clear evidence of trauma to the spine. His comrades offer little help -- one might have all four limbs severed, but these are probably post-death mutilations. There is evidence from sculptural reliefs which backs up a predominance of use for thrusting and stabbing wounds, but then the

(really well illustrated on a double plate) Dacian wars required the adoption by legionaries of armour for the sword arm, indicative of the adoption of a tactic of cutting blows to get past the long Dacian blades.

In the end, the only sensible conclusion, when offered a sword designed to be used in several ways, is to assume that it actually was used for cutting, stabbing and thrusting blows. The Legions adopted the tactic best suited to the fight ahead of them. The discussion on usage is backed up with sections on training, decoration of blades and scabbards to distinguish ownership, style of carriage, and some comments on written sources for the use of the Gladius in battle. Again, there are plenty of good illustrations for all these points, with one very telling one from a battle during a slave revolt. Finding themselves faced with fully armoured men carrying the same Gladius as they did, the Legions were at first at a disadvantage. When faced with their own weapon, a new tactic was required. The solution? Resort to their entrenching tools and just bludgeon the enemy to death. An elegant resolution? Not really, but effective, and that is the message that is given throughout the book -- the legions did what was effective, that was the real secret of their many successes. It is this point that Mike Bishop makes in conclusion -- the Gladius declined rapidly in the late Empire and was replaced by the longer Spatha. This was not, in his view, due to a decline in Roman military prowess but represents a response to new ways of fighting that gave a benefit to a longer blade. Warfare evolved -- the Legions had to evolve along with it.

In all, a really interesting book, with plenty of detail for the more archaeologically interested reader and enough colour and inspiration for the more general wargames reader.