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# GLADIATORS

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# GLADIATORS

## GLADIATORS IN AXIS

*Axis is a city of wonders, military power, and martial competition. Gladiatorial games, skirmishes between noble houses, and staged holy wars hone the fighting spirit of an empire built on conquest.*

—13<sup>th</sup> Age core rulebook, page 216

*The early Emperors who understood that their people needed games of war to remain fit for true battle imagined that the war games would stop when the Empire charged into actual war. Which shows that Emperors know much of war but little of people.*

—Kullis the Cynic

Like last month's *Coin Tricks*, *Gladiators* skips around more than most other issues of the *Monthly*. We'll start with a nod to Rome, the gladiator-centered empire whose deeply ingrained influence required me to ask our wonderful artist Rich Longmore to take the arena spectators on the cover out of togas and into diverse fantastic wardrobes! We'll move through a number of campaign options that make the arenas of Axis considerably different than those of ancient Rome, before touching briefly on gladiators in Drakkenhall and gladiators sponsored by the Lich King or his retinue.

## THE SHADOW OF THE PAST

The Dragon Empire isn't the Roman Empire, but Rome casts a large shadow! Posit a powerful empire spread out around a Midland Sea and offer gladiatorial arenas as a key part of the capital city's structure and it's hard to keep pieces of Rome from sliding over.

Maybe that's okay. Maybe you want your gladiators and gladiatorial arenas to follow familiar Roman sandal-tracks, at least until you opt to surprise everyone with a fantastic divergence. Since you don't need us to tell you how to model tropes from ancient Rome, we'll focus on how the Dragon Empire contrasts with expectations inherited from what we know of the Roman arenas.

## SLAVES, CRIMINALS, & PROFESSIONAL WARRIORS

We often skim over in-depth questions about the society and culture of the Dragon Empire so that your campaigns can follow their own paths. But covering gladiators in depth generates structural questions about the campaign world.

### SLAVES

Rome's gladiators were nearly always someone's property. Being a gladiator wasn't a career path, or an option for a professional warrior.

To date, our published 13<sup>th</sup> Age material on the Dragon Empire has presented slavery as the kind of thing that happens in Drakkenhall and among followers of evil gods and evil icons. The Dragon Empire may look somewhat medieval, but the core ethos of our high fantasy is actually modern. We're not attempting anthropologically 'accurate' depiction of pre-modern human societies . . . or if we are, we're not doing it with an eye for the ambiguities of the human spirit that you'll find in games like *Empire of the Petal Throne*, and worlds like Greg Stafford's Glorantha, the Dark Sun setting, and Steven Erikson and Ian Esselmont's Malazan Empire.

If you decide that you're interested in Axis arenas full of armed gladiatorial slaves, we aren't doing a lot of other writing that supports the trope. But it's not hard to come up with tweaks to the Roman model that will suit a magical world.

A world populated by gladiatorial slaves probably involves a warlike Empire that takes slaves via conquest . . . or maybe even by defense. Perhaps the invaders coming out of the Iron Sea against the Sea Wall aren't only giant monsters, but the attackers also include humanoid warriors who can be drafted into the Imperial arenas. Or perhaps the Orc Lord is an icon for the race that even the heroic icons of the Dragon Empire feel fine about enslaving: orcs.

As these options suggest, handing slaves weapons and teaching them to fight well enough to entertain the crowds summons the specter of slave revolts. Rome had several gladiatorial revolts, Spartacus the best known. If you feel like running a very different campaign, try the Orc Lord as Spartacus and the Prince of Shadows as the revolutionary vanguard.

### CRIMINALS

I'm not likely to run a campaign in which the heroic icons have much to do with slavery anytime soon. I feel differently, however, about sending criminals to the arena.

I don't see the Dragon Empire as a legal system that practices rehabilitation and punishment via extensive systematic incarceration. Elements of our Organized Play adventures have disagreed with my view, but it doesn't feel like the Emperor's style of justice to me. Instead, there's poetic justice in offering some criminals the option of fighting in the arena instead of death or military conscription.



Greg Stolze's excellent *The Forgotten Monk* offers exactly this choice to a barbarian warrior who has slain a soft townsman. The somewhat humane punishments meted out to various wrongdoers by a traveling paladin of the Empire in Greg's novel impressed me as a useful view for many campaigns.

If violent criminals are part of the gladiatorial system, they might not always have to be fighting to the death. They might occupy most of the high-risk niches in the system, but as you'll see, other pieces of this article look at how a fantastic world's gladiatorial system might be something other than a binary split between death and glory.

### THE EMPEROR'S THUMB

Life or death pivoting on the direction of a thumb is another legacy of imperial Roman gladiatorial battles. A fallen gladiator might be spared if the Emperor gave him a thumbs-up. Thumbs-down meant death. Certainly the opinion of the crowd carried some weight.

If you love the thumbs-up/thumbs-down imagery and are already playing your gladiatorial games to the death, you could use that well-known trope. If only a few of the gladiatorial battles in your campaign are to the death, the vote of the Emperor or the Emperor's representative could be a distinguishing mark of the death match.

My default view is that many gladiators are professional warriors, a style of entertainer that has connections to the Empire's various armies. If your campaign agrees with me, you could use the thumbs-up and thumbs-down to indicate arena promotions and censure.

The thumbs-up or thumbs-down decision doesn't have to determine the life or death of the fighter, but it might determine whether they're showered with rotten vegetables and invited to fight in the arena again. Too many thumbs-down decisions and you're *dead to the arena*: get out, loser, if you can. That sets up interesting plots outside the arena where gladiators who feel they were wronged either seek reinstatement or vengeance.

Thumbs-up judgments would be the sought-after accolades that take a gladiator to the top. It's possible that a thumbs-up from the Emperor himself means a lot more than a thumbs-up from the Imperial vizier of the day. Hopefully the Emperor was paying attention at the right moment instead of sampling the wine.

## DRAGON MASTERS

*In my next campaign, it won't be a coincidence that the gladiator-obsessed capital of the Empire is also the preferred home of its powerful metallic dragons. Instead of holding themselves above the arena, the earthy metallic dragons of this version of the Empire will be the arena's biggest fans and patrons.*

—13 True Ways, page 118

One straightforward implementation of this idea assigns gladiator factions by the colors of the metallic dragons. Warriors sponsored by the Coppers would compete with warriors sponsored by the Silvers, and so on.

If you like this idea, you need to decide whether the metallic dragon types are actually unified so that they have formed true teams, or whether the faction arrangement is more for the

spectators and fans, while individual dragons sponsor their own warriors and a Bronze gladiator might fight another Bronze.

**Proxy fights:** When the system is working well, the Axis dragons' affection for their city's gladiatorial arenas might be part of the explanation for the Emperor's ability to keep many dragons more or less happy in close proximity to each other. Let's assume that dragons normally need space. They get on each other's nerves, tails, and fighting claws, and that's before they actually start fighting. Maybe channeling their mutually aggressive instincts into gladiatorial battles keeps actual fights to a minimum. If that's true, the Emperor, and indeed the entire Empire, might be far more tolerant of whichever direction the dragons push the arenas.

**Ethics & lethality:** If the metallic dragons are seriously involved, then the games are either on the non-lethal side OR metallic dragons are perfectly happy being nasty. In fact, that might be an excellent explanation for some of the Empire's current problems. Perhaps the metallic dragons that were the armored core of the Empire's military strength have become enamored of gladiatorial combat to the point that they are frittering away the Empire's fighters instead of anchoring the legions. Perhaps the dragons are paying attention to events in the arena when they should be paying attention to events on the frontier, or even in the Seven Cities. The Emperor would be in a difficult position. He has to keep the dragons happy, but happy dragons are no longer efficiently serving the Empire.

Gold dragons might not be at fault. They're mostly serving the Empire in some fashion alongside the Great Gold Wyrms. But if gold dragons have been peeling away from the icon to play with the arenas, well, that would be a problem on many levels. And where there's a multi-level problem, there's a champion-tier player character with conflicted relationships with the Emperor and the Great Gold Wyrms who is going to make things right, or kill a few dragons trying!

## STAGED HOLY WARS

As mentioned on page 196 of the 13<sup>th</sup> Age core rulebook, we've opted against presenting new gods in order to focus on the icons.

We know that the Priestess' Cathedral is a refuge for the temples and worshipers of the gods of light. The Crusader is a servant or champion of the dark gods. What if the arenas of Axis are a showplace for the gods of war? Robin D. Laws' introduction to Axis on page 113 of *13 True Ways* mentioned the city's thirteen arenas, but no temples.

If you'd like to bring one aspect of religion into a more prominent light, you could say that the various war gods worshiped in the Empire sponsor gladiator squads. You could also say that status, temple location, and Imperial blessings go to the worshipers of the god whose gladiatorial team earns the most glory in a season.

If you wanted to push it further (and come on, who *doesn't* want to push it?) you could say that there are only a certain number of high temples, and spots in the holiest positions are earned and lost through something like European team sports' promotion and relegation systems.



I'm amused by this type of competition but the violence it would probably encourage doesn't strike me as a stabilizing style of violence. Maybe this type of staged holy war is a new wrinkle on an old tradition, reformatting and pushed by the Crusader. His dark war gods have so many delicious perks to gain and almost nothing to lose, since they didn't have a toehold in Axis before anyway.

## CONFLICT RESOLUTION

It's not as dramatic as the proxy fights between dragons and war gods, but we've written a few times about business, legal, and political disputes or ongoing negotiations being settled by sponsored arena battles. One example of this concept is on page 114 of *13 True Ways*, where access to Axis docks is organized by priorities established in gladiatorial battles.

Unless your Dragon Empire is on the dark side, these battles don't seem like the type of contests that would require fights to the death. Proxy fights probably employ professional gladiators who want to live to fight another day. Which brings us to our next subject. . .

## GLADIATORIAL ARMOR

Assuming that professional gladiators, adventurers, imperial soldiers, and would-be champions aren't signing on to kill-or-be-killed in the arena, they usually don armor that helps them stay alive but put on a great show.

As pictured on the cover, the most common gladiatorial armor worn in the Axis games offers full protection to the head and torso and none at all to the arms and legs. Heads do not have to roll. Hearts do not have to bleed. But limbs must fly!

In heavy helmets and thick armor, Axis gladiators have most of their vital spots covered. But with arms and legs bare, bloody damage is certain. Unless both combatants have amazing defensive-fighting skills, serious exchanges of blows leave someone bloody. Instead of lethal blows to the throat or heart or gut, the crowd is looking for skillful but powerful attacks that crush a limb or send an arm or leg flying.

In matches where there's bad blood or a requirement for a clear victor, it's possible that a fighter isn't truly down until they've lost a limb. Unless a gladiator is meant to die, or has received a lethal thumbs-down, healing magic set up permanently just outside the arena can almost always save and reattach limbs.

**Arm monkeys & leg clowns:** This idea will be either too silly or too callous for some campaigns. If you're buying into the idea that limbs are frequently severed in Axis gladiatorial bouts, some arenas might have their own specialized versions of rodeo clowns. Arm monkeys are sent after severed arms. Despite the name, the 'monkeys' are probably humans wearing monkey masks. Leg clowns go after severed legs. The comedic possibilities are left in your capable hands.

Of course some factions and teams don't trust the clowns and use their own dedicated medics to retrieve their fallen and scattered limbs.

**Gladiator armor for player characters:** Gladiator armor protects characters as if it were light armor. Anyone not proficient in heavy armor takes a -1 attack penalty wearing

gladiator armor. You gain a +5 bonus to the first death save you make while wearing gladiator armor, but if you roll a natural 16+, you don't get up; instead you heal to 0 hit points and stop making death saves, but are still unconscious and helpless.

## AXIS GLADIATOR SHIELDS

Shields go in and out of fashion in the arena. They're obviously great for serious warfare and for battles with high stakes that are being fought to the death. They're sometimes less entertaining for martial spectacle that's supposed to end with someone losing a limb. But perhaps the point is to have a more dramatic long battle? Like gladiator armor, gladiator's shields don't have to be up to be as functional as their military equivalents. For gladiatorial spectacles instead of as serious fights, use the following shield rule.

**Crumbler shields:** Keep track of how many natural even melee or ranged attack rolls are made against a character wielding a crumbler shield. Starting with the second such roll, and for each subsequent natural even attack roll, that character must roll a save. If the save fails, the shield falls apart and is entirely useless.

It's possible that truly crummy crumbler shields might risk falling apart after the first natural even attack roll. The shield's supplier may have some explaining to do, or that may have been an intentional part of the show.

## CRESTED HELMS

If metallic dragons sponsor gladiators in your campaign, fighters might wear figures of their patron dragon on their helmets. The woman on the cover wears such a helmet, a bronze dragon spitting lightning. Dragon-crested helms could be worn during any battle. If you're using the staged holy war idea, you could adapt the crests to represent the various war gods.

**Taking a crest:** Bouts that are more about skill than blood could be fought 'to the crest' instead of until warriors fall. Knock your enemy's crest off and they're done, you win. Naturally the loser is described as crestfallen, until they take a crest or win a later battle, anyway. (What? You were told there would be no puns? You were told *wrong*.)

**Crest mechanics:** If the player characters end up in such a battle, try this mechanic: any natural even hit has a 10% chance of knocking off the enemy's crest, or 20% if that enemy is staggered. Or you can decide to aim for their crest with a melee attack, in which case your attack takes a -4 penalty and deals half damage, but has a 33% chance of knocking off the enemy's crest if you hit, or 50% if they are staggered.

**Handicapping and exhibitions:** Crest fights work well for exhibitions of skill and for fights between highly unequal combatants. A superbly skilled champion fighting five normal soldiers becomes an interesting fight instead of a slaughter. Similarly, crest matches are perfect for political and legal contests that aren't necessarily worth maiming and slaying over.

**Cresting grudges:** Like any supposedly controlled combat situation, crest fights can escalate out of control. Combatants usually wear standard gladiator armor and if they've humiliated an opponent too thoroughly, they may need it. The judgment of the arena tends to fall heavily on bad losers, so it's possible that



someone who has lost their temper over a bad showing in a crest fight will realize that they're about to get thumbed out of the arena and that they may as well do some damage.

**Crested helms as magic items:** As a rule, magic items are frowned on in most arena fights. But if your campaign features metallic dragons showing their support for specific fighters, or any other iconic or powerful NPC patronage scheme, perhaps the crested helms will be an exception to the rule for the most powerful champions. Or maybe player characters with gladiatorial histories enjoy showing off their connections. Or maybe living dungeons are surfacing carrying magic items that seem destined for the Axis arenas!

Here are a few suitably restrained dragon helms. The items are presented as true magic items, scaling up to epic, with quirks. If you wanted to treat them as a variety of one-use magic items instead of as true magic, you could say that the magic of the Axis arenas allows the dragons to create the helms as one-use items that last for a single battle whether or not the crest is taken or has its power used. I'm not certain what the cost would be, but I think it should be something around the cost of a one-use rune. Not something the dragons would create lightly.

### DRAGON CREST HELMS

**Default bonus:** Mental defense: +1 MD (adventurer); +2 MD (champion); +3 MD (epic).

**Brass Gladiator's Helm (recharge 16+):** When you disengage from an enemy, deal 10 fire damage to it (champion: 25 damage; epic: 50 damage). Quirk: Has bursts of patter.

**Bronze Gladiator's Helm (recharge 16+):** When an enemy uses an action before attacking you with a melee attack, you gain a +2 bonus to AC against that attack. In addition, if the attack misses, that enemy takes 15 lightning damage (champion: 30 damage; epic: 80 damage). Quirk: Swaggers when they should be ducking.

**Copper Gladiator's Helm (recharge 11+):** When an enemy hits you with a natural even attack roll, it must reroll that attack against your Mental Defense. The reroll takes a -4 attack penalty. Quirk: Boasts about clever plans when it would be cleverer to keep them secret.

**Silver Gladiator's Helm (daily):** When an enemy rolls a critical hit against you, they must reroll that attack. You have *resist damage 16+* against the reroll. Quirk: Uses the accents or mannerisms of their social superiors.

## PLAYER CHARACTERS IN THE ARENA

The item and armor notes above mainly apply to player characters. Most of the time, Axis arena fights are meant to use designated nonmagical weapons and armor rather than being exhibitions of magic item powers. That's not necessarily true in the type of proxy battles that adventurers are most likely to end up in. For instance, *The Crown Commands* contains an adventure in which the full party must enter an arena competition to thwart attempts by the evil icons to win a particular magical contest. The adventure is more war-on-sand than a combat-show-on-sand.

**Spellcasting:** Most of the time, Axis arena battles are about fighting with weapons. Spellcasting is possible, but it's not what the arenas generally want to present, partly because trying to use magic to protect the arena is too difficult and/or expensive. Spectators have reason to believe that a woman with a sword isn't about to kill thirty of them after they've booed her. That's not as clear when it's a woman armed with a lightning staff.

Therefore spellcasters aren't usually professional gladiators. But if you want non-subtle spellcasters to get in on the action, the highest-grade arenas could have regularly reinforced rituals that keep magic used in the arena within the arena.

## OUTSIDE AXIS?

Roman culture used arenas as civic focal points. Any settlement that meant to be taken seriously listed baths, civic buildings, and an arena as its central amenities.

So far our presentation of gladiatorial combat in the Dragon Empire has taken a different tack, suggesting strongly that gladiatorial combat is part of what makes Axis unique.

In my version I'd rather make gladiatorial combat the exception rather than the rule. There are enough types of combat ricocheting around the Empire. A world that includes the Orc Lord, living dungeons, and hellholes doesn't need gladiatorial combat to get its fix of violence.

That said, *13<sup>th</sup> Age Monthly* articles are only partly about telling you what we'd run, and mostly about contributing ideas to the campaigns you'll invent. So the next few paragraphs riff on the possibilities of taking gladiatorial games outside Axis.

## AN IMPERIAL GLADIATORIAL CIRCUIT

If the idea of a gladiatorial combat circuit appeals to you, here's an interesting way to use some of the other notions in this piece to create a combat ring that would maximize storytelling opportunities.

The idea that entertains me the most is to use Axis' metallic dragon squads as the emissaries, organizers, or inspiration for gladiatorial combats outside Axis.

**Patrol incentives:** One version suggests that draconic patrols play a part in the defense of the frontiers. Over the years, people noticed that the Axis dragons preferred to visit areas with entertainment. Not surprisingly, gladiatorial combat turns out to be the biggest draw.

Some areas are bashful about the quality of their product compared to the arenas of Axis. If that seems like an accurate worry, you could play that the dragons that fly out to the provinces and get involved with seasonal gladiatorial rings are the smaller dragons that haven't sunk their fangs into the Axis action.

Consequences of this dynamic might include regularly scheduled patrols based around festivals and gladiatorial fights, so that wrongdoers and barbarians know that festival time is the wrong time to create trouble that would provoke an Imperial response, since that is exactly the type of response that will be close at hand.











**Other festivals:** Just because this article is all about gladiatorial battles, don't lose track of the fact that the metallic dragons of your world (or a couple colors of them, anyway!) might care about an entirely different type of festival or artistic activity. You could shape a campaign around the aesthetic inclinations of Axis dragons who have become bizarre gourmands or art collectors. Perhaps this is a problematic divergence from the Empire's original path. Or perhaps you have a more subtle plot in mind as the younger dragons disperse, strengthening the frontiers and weakening the center.

## DRAKKENHALL

And speaking of the weakening center, the Three have no problem with slavery. The governor of Drakkenhall, the Blue, also has no problem with gladiatorial arenas in her city, so long as those who run and attend them pay more attention to her and only token homage to the Emperor.

Whatever you've decided about how gladiatorial events play out in Axis and the rest of the Empire, contradict it in Drakkenhall. The Blue doesn't need war sports to keep her people honed. She might or might not enjoy them. It seems unlikely that Drakkenhall's arenas are going to be as organized as what's going on in Axis, partly because Drakkenhall's human gladiators are more likely to be slaves and the semi-professional gladiators are more likely to be monsters like minotaurs, ogres, ettins, and trolls.

Niceties such as Axis' fancy gladiatorial armor and the dragon crest helms don't register in Drakkenhall. My guess is that the chromatic dragons don't share the metallic dragons' interest in war sports, and may regard it as an exploitable weakness.

It probably amuses some Drakkenhall gladiatorial managers to give their human fighters crumbly shields: "That's how you do it in Axis, right?" But skilled warriors probably earn just as much respect in Drakkenhall as they do in Axis.

## UNDEAD GLADIATORS

Warriors who can be sewn back together and raised from the dead might make excellent gladiators for arenas that aren't picky about needing to see quick-moving fighters who bleed red. As the ideas that follow indicate, the Lich King himself may or may not care about using undead as gladiatorial warriors. If you

suspect that your Lich King would be too proud to imitate the Emperor's fondness for gladiatorial games, remember that the Wizard King had his own imperial system first, and it could be that the Emperor continued a tradition rather than innovating.

Some ideas for using undead gladiators follow:

- An independent attempt by a member of the Undying Peerage to impress the other liches with their ability to put on a show.
- A sadistic deathtrap for agents of the Empire: "If you like gladiatorial shows so much, why don't you die in one?"
- An expression of unusual personality by normally mindless undead that seem to remember their fondness for war-sports long after the rest of their personalities have been worn smooth. Undead aren't supposed to have morale, but perhaps one or more servants of the Lich King have come to believe that their zombie and skeleton armies fight better when they're kept in arena-trim.
- Once a decade the Lich King runs gladiatorial games at the Necropolis. Members of the Undying Peerage of liches (*13<sup>th</sup> Age Bestiary*, page 134) send contingents of undead warriors to represent them in the games whether or not they can attend in person. Intercepting and eliminating the undead gladiators en route is the type of stunt player characters who want to irritate the Lich King would pull. Magically assuming the likeness of the undead gladiators in order to infiltrate the Necropolis is the type of stunt ambitious player characters who have watched Enter the Dragon too many times would pull.
- It's cultural outreach, of a sort: "Don't worry, some of the things you enjoy while alive you'll still be able to enjoy after our undead apocalypse."
- Zombies in gladiator armor aren't immune to headshots. Treat headshot crits as leg or arm shots that take the zombie out just the same.
- A living dungeon based around undead gladiators. What the heck, an entire circuit of living dungeons! One funny way to handle this would be to send a ring of three related living dungeons spiraling up toward the surface. It turns out that each of them has its own flavor of gladiatorial arena, and none of them can be entirely defeated until you've taken the prize at all three of the arenas. It's coercive, it's silly, but it may be the silly coercion you're looking for.
- In a campaign in which Axis has fallen into disturbing and counter-productive habits, particular arenas may have opted to contract for undead gladiators. Or it could be that the provincial arenas, unable to keep up with Axis, have started contracting with necromancers, and it's time for Imperial agents to scour the sands.