How many ages hence

Shall this our lofty scene be acted over,

In states unborn, and accents yet unknown.

— SHAKESPEARE,

Julius Caesar, 3:1:111–113

2 clio

GREEK AND ROMAN HISTORY

History has always fascinated humans. Before people could write, they told their history in legends; before they invented drama, they wrote their history on tablets and stone; and before they invented the cinema, they acted out their history on stage.

Then came film. Since 1900 every major historical character and epoch has been captured on film, and the ancient world has had more than its share. From the archaic age of Greece, in which Sappho, the Lesbian from whom lesbians got the name, wrote her poetry, to Attila's barbarian invasions of Rome, nearly all of the major personalities of the ancient world have been honored with a celluloid portrait. And what personalities! The energetic Alexander, the reservedly regal Julius Caesar, the treacherous Nero, the alluring Cleopatra, as well as Hannibal, Spartacus, Constantine, and other historical giants—their legacy still lives though their lives were spent some two thousand years ago.

The quality of these historical films varies widely. They range from the multimillion-dollar spectacle of *Cleopatra* (1963) to the low-budget black-and-white *Julius Caesar* (1951), from a script by George Bernard Shaw to poorly dubbed Italo-English dialogue, and from the carefully researched historical accuracy of *Alexander the Great* (1955) to the delightfully absurd fabrications of *Son of Spartacus* (1962). But neither expense nor historical accuracy is the one ultimate criterion for evaluation of these films. Each film should be judged according to its aims, execution, and periods—the period *in* which the film is made and *about* which the film is concerned. It would be unfair, for example, to criticize both the spectacular silent *Cabiria* (1914) and the

low-budget sound *Hannibal* (1960) with the same standards even though both movies are set in the Second Punic War. One might as well compare Eisenstein's *October* with *Dr. Zhivago*. It would be just as unfair to praise *Alexander the Great* because of its historical accuracy and simultaneously to pan *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) because it makes some academic errors; in terms of dramatic achievement *The Roman Empire* rises and *Alexander* is not so great.

Some historical filmmakers defeat their very *raison d'être* by ignoring historical details that would have made the film better drama. *Constantine and the Cross* (1962) portrays one of the most able and shrewd politicians in history as a one-dimensional, whitewashed holyman (Cornel Wilde); this cinematic portrayal of Constantine flattens the historically complex character of a pagan general who connived his way to the Roman Empire's throne by publicly (and calculatingly) embracing the growing subversive Christian movement. Believe it or not, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* depicts the insane emperor Commodus (Christopher Plummer) too temperately. Our historical sources tell us that while personally participating in gladiatorial battles, he wore a lion skin over his head and carried a club in imitation of Hercules, a harmless eccentricity that a filmmaker might have used as an early clue to Commodus's delicate emotional balance. Later, to reveal the worst of the insane emperor's character, the film could have alluded to his sleeping with his sister and then having her put to death for trying to assassinate him because he was not showing her enough affection. These bizarre idiosyncrasies were omitted from the film even though they are historically documented. In contrast, Alexander Korda's unfinished production of *I, Claudius* (1937) re-created one of the early Roman Empire's most interesting moments, when mad Caligula (Emlyn Williams) presented his horse as a government official to the Roman Senate. This historical detail added much to the film's fine characterization of the demented Caesar Caligula.

Films of Ancient Greece

Because the Romans etched so indelibly on the tablets of history such vivid images as bloody gladiatorial spectacles and seductive Oriental queens, their history has offered Hollywood and Cinecittà more material than Greek history. Yet some of the better-known memories of ancient Greece—Sappho, the Persian Wars, Socrates, Damon and Pythias, Alexander the Great, and the Colossus of Rhodes—have found their place in film. A survey of these films follows, in order of historical, not cinematic, chronology.

Sappho, one of archaic Greece's finest poets, appears as the graceful heroine of the Italian-made *The Warrior Empress* (1960). Never judge a book by its cover, and never judge an Italian movie about the ancient world by its English title. In this case, the original Italian title was a less bellicose *Saffo, Venere di Lesbo* (Sappho, Venus of Lesbos). A lovely Tina Louise portrays the poet of the Greek island of Lesbos, who falls in love with the (masculine) rebel hero Phaon (Kerwin Matthews). The flowery wall frescoes and light interior

decor give an appropriately archaic sixth-century B.C. impression, though the tantalizing costumes of some of Sappho's fellow Lesbians are closely modeled after the dress of the Bronze Age Minoan "Snake Goddess" of Knossos. The plot generally follows the stories told in the poems of Sappho, her fellow Lesbian Alcaeus, and other archaic Greek poets of a civilian revolt, a love triangle, and a personal vendetta. The pace of the film drags while the insipid romantic plot develops, but at least *The Warrior Empress* made an attempt at re-creating an otherwise fairly obscure historical character on the screen. Sappho's brother Larichus, the rebel leader Pittacus, and the revolt against Melanchrus are all historical, as is Sappho's lover, Phaon. The poet, a Lesbian geographically, was not exclusively so sexually. Our sources tell us that she had a husband and bore him a child, and that she ultimately threw herself over a cliff on the island of Leukas because of her unrequited love for Phaon.

Two films take place in the era of the Persian invasions of Greece, 490–479 B.C. In *The Giant of Marathon* (1959) the main character Philippides (Steve Reeves) runs from the battle of Marathon to Athens at the instructions of the Greek leader Miltiades. Meanwhile the Persian forces, aided by the Athenian traitor Hippias, invade Athens by land and sea. There follows a macabre naval battle typical of director Jacques Tourneur's work *(Berlin Express, Cat People)*. Shot with frequent underwater photography, the climax of the operations focuses on a Persian ship with movable wooden jaws at its prow that crush Greek ships in their crunching grip. The film is based on the story of the famous historical character Pheidippides (or Philippides [Herodotus 6.105]), who ran from Marathon to Athens to bring news of the Greek victory. After running the twenty-six miles, he collapsed and died, his legendary fatal run immortalized in the name of our long-distance run. In the film, Philippides—out of breath, perhaps, but still breathing—takes his girl Andromeda into the sunset in the final reel. The light, romantic mood, the athletic heroics of Philippides, and the despicable encroachment of the Persians and evil Greek traitors, all displayed in cheap costumes and brought to the inevitable happy conclusion with a Persian defeat, assure us that this is a pretty typical *peplum*—an enjoyable early-1960s romantic, heroic, Italian muscleman film without pretenses, subtleties, or sophistication.

In producing and directing *The 300 Spartans* (1962), Rudolph Maté chose one of the most glorious moments in human history: the Spartan defense against the Persian advance through the central Greek pass of Thermopylae in 480 B.C. He wisely chose to film not a whole war, nor one general's career, but one classic battle that became legendary within a generation of its waging. Maté carefully characterized the three essential historical figures—the brave King Leonidas of Sparta (Richard Egan), the cruel, megalomaniac Persian King of Kings, Xerxes (David Farrar), and the Athenian admiral and political wizard, Themistocles (Ralph Richardson). Besides the character development, the focus on a single battle gave Maté a ready-made climax: the famous clash and the poignant death of all three hundred Spartans. The entire film builds up to this crescendo, and the slain heroes meet a compellingly tragic end.

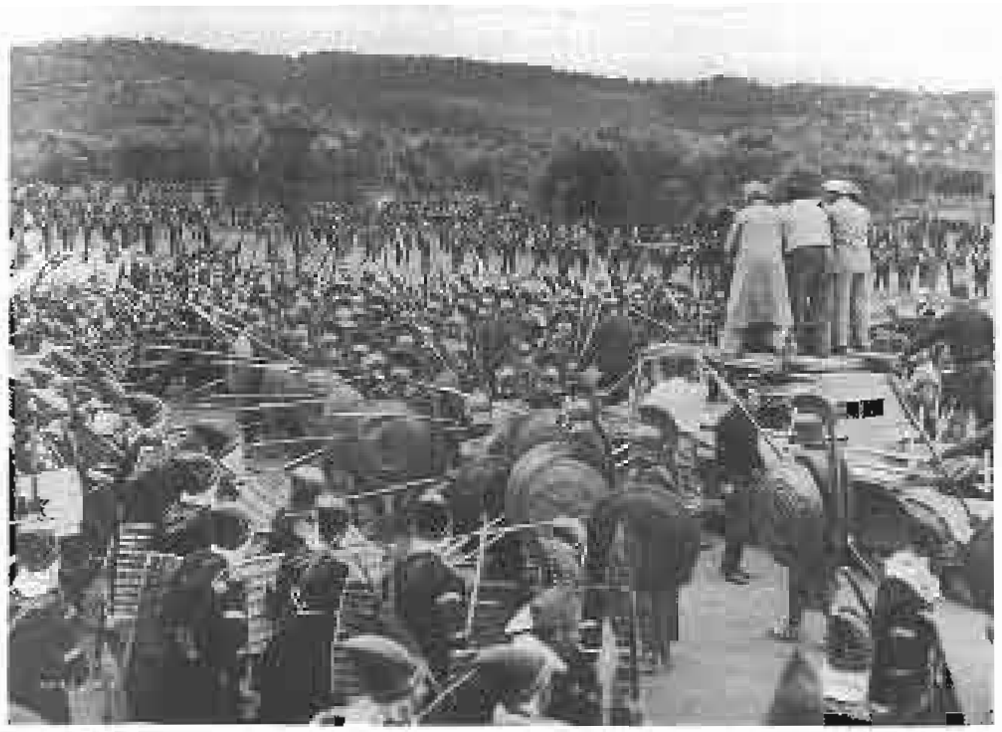
Early in the film Xerxes' aide Hydarnes warns Leonidas that Persian arrows will "blot out the sun." In response, Leonidas coolly squints, looks at the sun, and says, "Then we'll fight in the shade." When Leonidas falls in the last desperate defense of Thermopylae, the Spartans are surrounded by Persian archers, and their whizzing arrows do indeed blot out the sun as the handsome and brave red-cloaked Spartan warriors succumb to one of the largest armies ever assembled in ancient times. We remember the Spartan scout's quaint description: "For six days I watched them pass; I ran out of numbers and still there were more of them!" The music suddenly strikes a screeching and mournful strain, and within seconds the small band of heroes that had impressed us through the entire film is wiped out.

Lifting many lines directly from the Greek historian Herodotus, George St. George's screenplay usually rises above clichés. Themistocles recites the immortal warning of the Delphic Oracle that the Athenians should "hide behind wooden walls." Then a henpecked shepherd speaks amusing lines of St. George's own creation: "Who can understand the ways of the gods; they create lovely girls and then turn them into wives." The ancients loved their aphorisms, and a generous sprinkling of them—whether genuinely venerable or crafted to seem so—helps create "ancient" atmosphere on film.

The pleasant, foot-tapping music of the thematic Spartan march turns dissonant as the Persian "Immortals" (Xerxes' bodyguard) make their way into the pass of Thermopylae; they are led by a Greek traitor, the gold-worshiping Ephialtes, the Judas of Greece. Then in three classic Persian assaults, Spartan cunning and training perform miracles. They surround the black-cloaked Persians with fire; they box the enemy in with a phalanx of hoplites; and they wedge their way through the Persian line. Using a cast of a few thousand (modern Greek soldiers) and covering them well with a panning CinemaScope lens—angling alongside the straight rows of Spartan spears and shields, and rising to include the massive numbers of Persians—Maté created one of the most exciting and authentic ancient battles ever put on film.

From the opening shot of the film, in which thousands of black-cloaked, conical-helmeted, and wicker-shielded Persian soldiers march and shout "Xerxes! Xerxes!" to that last shot of the three hundred horse-crested Spartans falling in a heroic heap, the film moves insistently toward the tragic climax. The unflinching determination of the Spartans is an inspirational contrast to the whimpering of the Oriental tyrant Xerxes. As he sits proudly on his colored marble throne covered in thick, rich, embroidered cloth, Xerxes angrily declares "I shall capture them alive, put them in cages, and exhibit them all over Asia!" The audience appreciates the irony: the Spartans, we know, will lose the battle, but the Greeks will win the war. Interrupted only occasionally by a formulaic young-lovers motif that runs sporadically through the story, *The 300 Spartans* sings the fame of the legendary Lacedaemonian warriors while tragically sacrificing them in the name of freedom before our admiring eyes.

Unfortunately, culturally brilliant fifth-century Athens has been ignored by the cinema. No one has thought Pericles, Alcibiades, or the Peloponnesian Wars worthy of the



17/18 Most Greek hoplites, like the Spartan soldiers in the production photo from *The 300 Spartans* (1962), wore short tunics and carried round shields, long spears, and short swords. Notice how the shields overlap in the flying-wedge phalanx formation. The Persians have conical helmets, black robes, and wicker shields. The Greeks' nose-guarded Corinthian helmets, also used in *Alexander the Great*, were made of bronze and characterized by the nose piece; they came with or without a crest. In a relief from Delphi's Siphnian Treasury (525 B.C.), the soldiers have discarded their spears.

modern cinema. Even wise and ironical Socrates was the focus of only one feature film—a 1970 Italian television movie by Roberto Rossellini. But although Rossellini uncompromisingly re-creates Plato's *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito,* and *Phaedo,* the film never rises above its quasi-documentary form; it remains a mere subtitled dialogue on film. More interesting by contrast is Maxwell Anderson's less reverent Hallmark Hall of Fame television production of *Barefoot in Athens* (1966), starring Peter Ustinov. And more fun by far is the role of Socrates in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1988). Here the philosopher, whose named the dimwitted title characters pronounce as a bisyllabic "sow-crates," actually speaks a few syllables of ancient Greek and time-travels to contemporary California to help the two dudes pass their history class.

Fourth-century B.C. Greece has four entries in the film world: two versions each of *Damon and Pythias* and *Alexander the Great.* Like its 1914 Universal predecessor, the 1962 Italian/American coproduction of *Damon and Pythias* concerns the immortal tale of a friendship set in the Greek colony of Syracuse, on Sicily. Their friendship was strong enough to cause Damon to offer his own life to save Pythias's and vice versa, but ultimately neither has to die at the hands of the tyrant Dionysius. (This is the same Dionysius who invited Plato to visit him, but this historical event was overlooked in the film.) The sprightly and lively acting by Guy Williams (Damon) and the almost profound, speculative conversations about the (historically authentic) secretive Pythagorean philosophies help elevate *Damon and Pythias,* as does the directing by German-born Curtis Bernhardt, best known for his 1953 Rita Hayworth vehicle, *Miss Sadie Thompson.* Incidentally, Damon's friend was actually named Phintias, but the better-known if erroneous name was used to avoid confusing the audience. Popular misconceptions about history are often best left undisturbed in film.

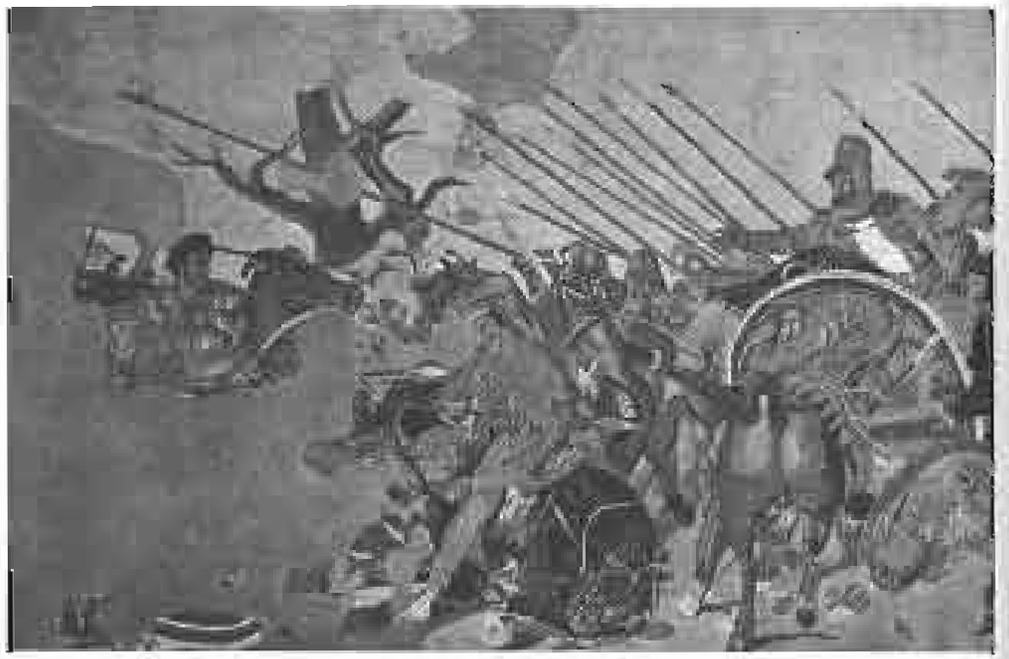
Alexander the Great (1955) is one of the most historically faithful of all movies about the ancient world and perhaps one of the most intelligent, too. It was written, produced, and directed by Robert Rossen, who was between his Academy Award–winning *All the King's Men* (1949) and his Academy Award–nominated *The Hustler* (1961). *Alexander the Great* does not idle in meaningless physical combat, nor does it excessively glorify or whitewash Alexander. Instead, the most intriguing episodes in his fascinating life that were passed down from ancient times (mostly in Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*) appear in the film—Alexander's semidivine birth, the burning of the temple of Ephesus, his admiration for the mythical Achilles and his love for Homer's *Iliad* (he always kept a copy, just as Napoleon would keep a copy of Plutarch's *Alexander* with him), his years with Aristotle at Mieza, his power-hungry mother and his drunken but shrewd father, his throwing the spear to claim Asia, his cutting of the Gordian knot, the destruction of Persepolis, his murdering his best friend Cleitus, his marriage of ten thousand Greeks and Orientals at Susa, and his early death at Babylon.

Richard Burton does an admirable job in acting the part of the energetic, visionary Alexander. He portrays a young man displaying constantly changing moods and qualities of anger, reverence, courage, collapse, energy, fever, idealism, practicality, shrewdness, hot temper, and intelligence. His short stature and smooth, handsome, blond appearance contrasts well with the dark, hairy, and frightening look of his barbaric father, Philip (Fredric March). March's imposing characterization of Philip imbues the most haunting scene in the film: after Philip has won the battle of Chaeronea against the united cities of Greece, he gets drunk and mocks the famous Athenian orator Demosthenes for calling him a barbarian; in an echoing voice he shouts, "Philip the barbarian, Philip the barbarian," and dances precariously and clumsily on top of a rocky cliff. His voice has a curious sound of alcohol-induced self-pity, and although Philip dies early in the picture, his vivid memory lives on in Alexander's mind (and ours) for the rest of his life.

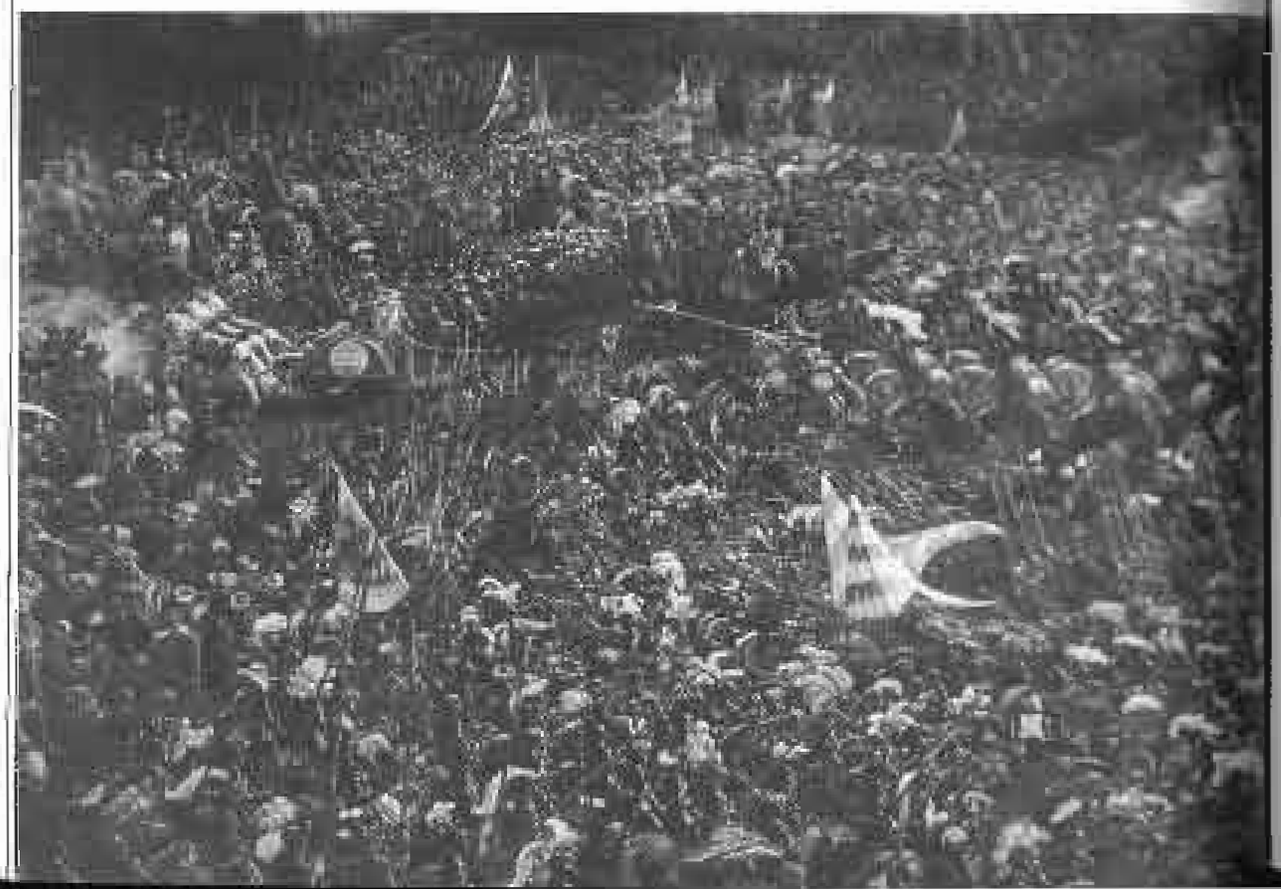
Their father-son relationship is complicated by the fact that Alexander may have had a hand in Philip's assassination. History is unsure about the affair, so Rossen cleverly leaves the blame ambiguous. Alexander hears his mother, Olympias (Danielle Darrieaux), "suggest" to a young Macedonian to kill Philip. Rossen does not hint at any other involvement until after the young man has stabbed Philip on the palace steps at Pella; Alexander then runs after the assassin and kills him—ostensibly for revenge, but perhaps so the young man cannot announce that Alexander was privy to the plot. Even more difficult than putting historical fact on film is putting historical controversy on film, and Rossen accomplished this nicely here. Confining himself to what the consensus of our historical sources tell us, Rossen neither accuses nor acquits Alexander.

Alexander the Great offers a realistic portrayal of a historical legend. Alexander never has superhuman strength, and he suffers personal defeats and setbacks despite his youthfully glorious conquest of the Persian Empire. At the zenith of his conquest of Asia, Alexander's boyhood companion, "black" Cleitus, warns him that he is getting too much like an Oriental potentate—like the pampered Darius (Harry Andrews) he just conquered. In his drunken anger Alexander throws a spear into his friend's back. He hugs Cleitus's corpse and weeps; this is no plastic, one-dimensional, unerring, cinematic conqueror. Surrounded by able actors playing the full complement of Macedonian and Greek generals—Attalus (Stanley Baker), Parmenio (Niall MacGinnis), and another Greek traitor, Memnon (Peter Cushing)—Alexander and his staff are emotive, energetic, and rational soldiers who live war, friendship, and politics on a most realistic scale.

The battles in *Alexander the Great* are brief but effective. The battle by the river Granicus in Turkey (shot by the Jarama River in Spain) consists of a splashing-through-the-river charge by Alexander, surrounded by six thousand extras dressed as Macedonians and Persians. The battle culminates quickly as a Persian raises his sword to slice at Alexander but soon sees his own bloody arm fall into the river from Cleitus's saving swoop; shocking, momentary, and vivid, this authentic scene is directly from the pages of ancient history. Some of the other panning military shots of the Macedonian troops carrying their unique eighteen-foot pikes *(sarissae)* are artistically arresting.



19 The magnificent Alexander mosaic from Pompeii (above). Executed some time before Pompeii's destruction in A.D. 79, this mosaic depicting Alexander, left, and the Persian King Darius, right, uses the long Macedonian pikes *(sarissae)* for angular emphasis.



Still, *Alexander the Great* demonstrates one of the problems inherent in making a historically accurate film about a historical character. Literary accounts of history cannot be easily translated into cinematic accounts, and a penalty is paid in dramatic energy for progressing intelligently through Alexander's life. The film sometimes drags while Burton's monotonic words are thrown instead of spears. But $4 million and three years of Rossen's planning and research otherwise produced an excellent filmic document about a most complex and interesting young general. Our curious fascination with Alexander the Great lives on in this authentic biopic.

A second attempt at a biography of Alexander was filmed nearly a decade later—an unsold 1964 television pilot starring William Shatner, who, after establishing his

20/21 Albrecht Altdorfer's 1529 painting of Alexander's battle of Issus against the Persians (facing page, bottom) again uses the angling spears to highlight Alexander (labeled as Alexander Magnus) and to create a swirling motion throughout the painting. The sixteenth-century painting conventionally dresses Alexander in contemporary armor. Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great* (1955, above) maintains the artistic tradition by surrounding Alexander (Richard Burton) with long Macedonian pikes. The other soldiers have round or trapezoidal shields, pikes or swords, Corinthian or Macedonian helmets, and military cloaks.

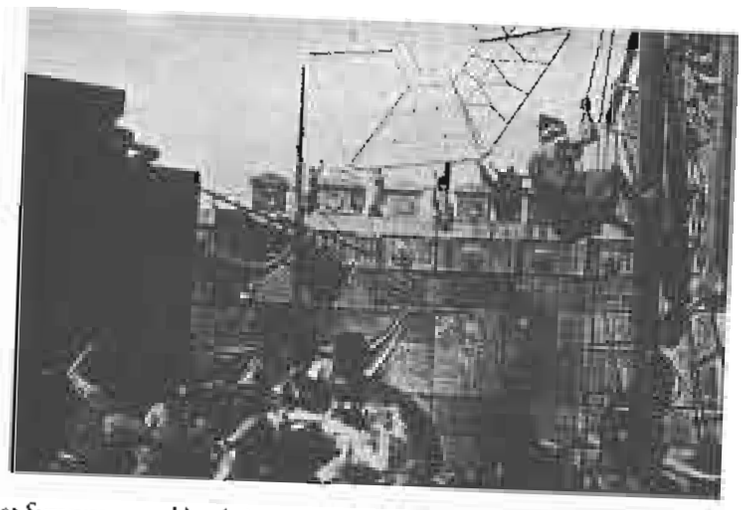
reputation as a young Shakespearean actor in the 1950s, was at the time (1960–1968) establishing his own eternal fame as Captain Kirk in the television series *Star Trek*. The hour-long film also featured John Cassavetes (General Karonos) and Joseph Cotten (Antigonus).

As the historical Alexander lay on his deathbed, his generals huddled around him to hear who would be designated his successor; Alexander curtly said, "To the strongest." Three hundred years of war, political marriages, and assassinations were spent deciding the designee of these words. This period of history between the death of Alexander and the rise of Rome, called today the Hellenistic Era, was a period of commercial expansion and modernization. This was the period in which Sergio Leone set his *The Colossus of Rhodes* (1961), an excitingly gruesome and creatively bizarre movie that anticipated the "spaghetti Western" and the end of the linguini cloak-and-sandal film.

Leone, the son of the director Vincenzo Leone and the actress Francesca Bertini, both prominent figures in Italian cinema, had recently refined his directorial skills working on such overseas American productions as *Ben-Hur*. He began writing and directing action films in 1958 with *Nel Segno di Roma* (released in the United States as *Sign of the Gladiator*) and *Afrodite, dea dell'amore (Slave Women of Corinth);* he then continued with a new version of *The Last Days of Pompeii* in 1960 and *Romolo e Remo (Duel of the Titans)* and *The Colossus of Rhodes* in the following year. He became internationally recognized for his next few films, casting Clint Eastwood as the Man with No Name in the quintessential "spaghetti Westerns" *A Fistful of Dollars, For a Few Dollars More,* and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.*

The plot of *The Colossus of Rhodes* is the standard stuff of *peplum:* in another typical early-1960s revolt of the masses, the macho hero Dario (Rory Calhoun) challenges another Snidely Whiplash–like ancient tyrant. But the gloomy atmosphere and the magnificent bronze (actually plastic) colossus that looms gigantically over the harbor make the film at once artistically engaging and visually bizarre. The colossus straddles the harbor and drops deadly bowlsful of hot oil on helpless enemy ships below. The inner wooden and metal machinery inside the colossus provide a curious setting for the few sword duels inside its head, on its arms, and through its three-foot ear canals. True to history the colossus is ultimately destroyed by an earthquake at the end of the film.

The tense, brutal style made famous in Leone's Western trilogy is already in evidence in *The Colossus of Rhodes:* at one juncture Peliocles (George Marchal) and his men are tortured with bubbling hot oil dripping through sieve-holes in a stone roof onto their backs; in another excruciating scene, Peliocles suffers excruciating pain when placed inside an eight-foot iron bell, which is then rung around him, sparkling blood pouring from his numbed ears. With ominous, windblown shots setting up desolate exteriors similar to those to be seen in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly, The Colossus of Rhodes* offers the same savage naturalistic ambience that would soon remove Italian cinema from B.C. to the wild West.



22 The great Syracusan naval battle in one of the most influential movies ever made, *Cabiria* (1914). Under the direction of the ancient scientist Archimedes, the Syracusans remove a cloth covering from a huge mirror. Within minutes the reflected sunlight has the Roman fleet in flames. Three decades ago, a historian took three hundred mirrors to the Greek coast and proved that such an ancient flame thrower could actually work.

Films of Ancient Rome

The same expansive Hellenistic period that produced the famous colossus of Rhodes also introduced a new power into the Mediterranean—Rome. Led by its famous general Scipio against Carthage, with its equally renowned quarterback Hannibal, Rome eventually wiped its foe off the map for a few generations. Five movies have been made about these Punic Wars, including the finest spectacular production of the silent era in Europe. *Cabiria* (1914) is the story of a young Sicilian girl who has been taken to Carthage as a slave. There she is rescued twice by a Roman spy and his faithful, muscular servant, Maciste (Bartolomeo Pagano). Meanwhile, the Romans attack Syracuse and Cirta while Queen Sophonisba falls into an ill-fated love that causes her death. The romantic plot rests on a structure of historical fact; Livy (29.23–30.15) and other Roman historians tell us about Scipio's attack on Cirta and Rome's famous naval assault on Syracuse, where the Hellenistic genius Archimedes instructs the defenders to aim a huge reflecting glass at the Roman fleet to burn it to a soggy crisp. The Romans eventually win the war, of course, and Cabiria and the Roman spy, Fulvius Axilla, set a dubious film precedent by riding off into the sunset with a superimposed circle of angels fluttering around them.

Cabiria is a classic. The whole silent spectacle exudes an unequaled charm. The cheerfully innocent Cabiria and the strong-willed, dark, and heroically chiseled form of mighty Maciste provide us with two lovable characters set in striking contrast to the

spectacles of Archimedes' mirrors, Hannibal crossing the snow-covered Alps, Mount Etna erupting in fiery furor, Roman soldiers forming a testudo, and the child-devouring furnace in the forty-meter-high Carthaginian temple of Moloch. The elegant suicide of Queen Sophonisba, who had been introduced while luxuriously stroking the backs of her two pet leopards, and the lightly cunning and deceiving antics of the little Carthaginian man called "la Scimmia" (the monkey) broaden the human elements of the plot.

Shooting *Cabiria* at the Turin studios of Itala Films as well as on location in the Alps, Sicily, and Tunisia (Carthage), director Giovanni Pastrone revolutionized filmmaking with his technical innovations. He was the first to use the camera dolly, which he patented. He was the first to use extensive artificial lighting—hence the eerie atmosphere inside the massive and fiery temple of Moloch and at the burning of the Roman fleet in the harbor. He was one of the first to edit extensively; he shot some 20,000 meters of film, which he cut to 4,500 meters—approximately three hours' running time. These techniques and the finished film itself influenced the directors of film spectaculars who followed. DeMille learned his concept of gigantism from *Cabiria*, and it is no accident that Griffith's *Intolerance* was shot in the two years that followed the American release of *Cabiria*; some critics at the time even claimed that Griffith owned his own print of *Cabiria* and looked at it in secret. Whatever the truth of this rumor, Griffith's elephant-tid columns, massive stairways, and panning camera were all preceded by Pastrone's masterpiece.

But if *Cabiria* influenced later spectacles, it borrowed from its predecessors as well. Maciste, the muscular protector of the young girl, is influenced by the character Ursus in the novel and early film version of *Quo Vadis?* "La Scimmia" originates in *Quo Vadis's* Chilon. The volcanic eruption in Cabiria's Sicilian homeland was a motif central to the novel and early film versions of *The Last Days of Pompeii.* Pastrone himself had used massive crowds a few years before in *La Caduta di Troia* (1911). But the blend of effects is part of the unique charm of *Cabiria.*

The impact of *Cabiria* on audiences in Europe and America in 1914 is difficult to imagine now, for this extraordinarily long and spectacular movie was often shown with the accompaniment of a large chorus and orchestra—the Sensurround equivalent of the age. In its rerelease in New York in 1921 it was hailed as "the greatest picture in memory," and it was rereleased again in 1929.[1] Inspired by the 1911 Turkish invasion of Tripolitania, which was part of the ancient Carthaginian and Roman empires, Pastrone used an adventure story set in ancient times to pursue a politically volatile issue: the foreign invasion of traditionally Roman territory. He added an innocent and sympathetic heroine, spectacular special effects, technical innovations, and an unforgettable hero named Maciste. He even gave the film a literary seasoning by hiring poet Gabriele D'Annunzio to write some of the titles. (The poet was broke at the time and living in exile to avoid paying his massive debts.) So with gimmick and art, with borrowing and innovation, with contemporary and ancient politics, and with charm and spectacle, Pastrone gave birth to *Cabiria*—a delightful monument in the history of the cinema.

Wary of professional actors, Pastrone found his muscular Maciste working on the docks in Genoa. Pagano was so well received that he went on to make several more "Maciste" films; he helped to establish a new word for the English language and set the precedent for the muscleman epics that made international movie heroes of Steve Reeves and his eventual successor, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Rossano Brazzi and Tina Louise were not quite so fortunate in their roles in *The Siege of Syracuse* (1962). Brazzi played the part of Archimedes in this unremarkable film that, thanks to *Cabiria,* highlights the famous mirror battle waged by the Syracusan scientist. Another film about the Carthaginians and Romans, *Carthage in Flames* (1960), has an interesting sea battle that uses real ships rather than the usual models. A highlight is a flaming confrontation between a large Phoenician-type ship, fitted with an open mouth at the bow, and a high-decked Carthaginian trireme. This vivid naval battle, the special effects during the burning of Carthage, the noble attempt at historicity, the frequent references to the Goddess Tanit, the exciting music of Mario Nascimbene *(Alexander the Great),* and the experienced directing of Carmine Gallone (*The Last Days of Pompeii* [1926]) combine to produce an exciting adventure film, even if entertainment substitutes for art.

If the idea of *Cabiria* was suggested by contemporary political maneuvers in 1911 and their relation to ancient Italian sovereignty in North Africa, Mussolini's propaganda film *Scipio L'Africano* (1937) was a full-scale cinematic justification for his African campaign. The dialogue, filled with Fascist rhetoric, bogs down the film and undermines its grand design, and today it is rarely screened, even in Italy. But the large sets of the Roman Forum built in Il Duce's colossal new studios at Cinecittà were epic indeed, as were the life-sized galleys shot at the port near Ostia. The battle scenes are memorable, particularly in director Carmine Gallone's *(Carthage in Flames)* use of Hannibal's historic bevy of pachydermic tanks.

And speaking of pachyderms, we could hardly forget the opening scenes of *Hannibal* (1960), shot in the wintry Alps, where the Carthaginian general (Victor Mature) leads sixty elephants and forty thousand men from Gaul to Italy via a rocky, frozen, steep, and slippery path. The broad location shots are impressive: infinitely long lines of fur-bundled soldiers struggle against the blurred, white mountainsides. We see four or five elephants in close-ups, and an irritating corporal keeps hollering "Keep going" to the numbed Carthaginians and Numidian mercenaries. This opening scene, though crude in parts, certainly has scope, and if you think it incredible that elephants could climb a snowy mountain, you're in good company: the ancient Romans thought it incredible, too, until Hannibal caught them with their togas down in the autumn of 218 B.C. and slaughtered more than fifty thousand of them in three battles. Hannibal and Sylvia (Rita Gam) have the requisite inconsequential love affair, but the film also includes such historical details as the flinging into Hannibal's camp of his brother Hasdrubal's head, the clever battle plan of Hannibal at Cannae, and the immortal statement of Hannibal's cavalry commander, Maharbal: "You know how to win victories, Hannibal, but you don't know

how to follow them up" (Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita,* 22.51.4). The interior set of Sylvia's house—a *peristylum* of white marble, fluted columns, graceful urns, and neatly arranged shrubbery, drapery, and sculpture—adds to the film's realism. Ultimately, however, *Hannibal* lacks both the vitality needed for a great adventure film and the intellect and grandeur needed for an epic.

From the long period of Roman republican power that begins with the Second Punic War in 218 B.C. and ends with Augustus's establishment of the rich and expansive Roman Empire in 31 B.C., we have appropriately derived some of our longest, most famous, richest, and most expensive movies. If numbers mean anything, the forty-three years between Spartacus's revolt and Cleopatra's asp are documented in sixteen films lasting more than thirty hours and costing about $100 million.

The first of these, gauged by historical chronology, is Stanley Kubrick's $12 million, 184-minute *Spartacus.* Hailed as "the thinking man's epic" before it was released in 1960, it afterward was criticized as a "spotty spectacular" and a "ragged toga saga."[2] But *Spartacus* deserves praise for its human sensitivity, sharp characterizations, visionary photography, and bold political realities. An impressive leading cast of Kirk Douglas (Spartacus), Laurence Olivier (Crassus), Jean Simmons (Varinia), Charles Laughton (Gracchus), and Academy Award–winning Peter Ustinov (Batiatus) is supported by an effective group of heavies led by towering Woody Strode (Draba), sadistic Charles McGraw (Marcellus), and eccentrically Oriental Herbert Loin (Tigranes). They present a wide range of well-developed and contrasting characters, and their individual talents are supplemented by Kubrick's meticulous direction (so meticulous that he even numbered "dead" men on the battlefield; by calling a dead man's number he could tell him to move into a more effective position before the next take). The whole cast deftly pronounces the rich and often witty lines of blacklisted Dalton Trumbo's script (based on the novel of the unofficially blacklisted Howard Fast), and the literate dialogue flows as easily as sweat on a slave's brow.

The action opens in 73 B.C. amid the arid desert mountains of Libya. On top of the chalky red, sulfuric mountainside, a slave is beaten, and then the squeamishly pretentious Batiatus enters on a litter. While choosing slaves to buy for his gladiatorial school, he carries on this uniquely Ustinovish, admirably despicable monologue:

"These? Carrion! The buzzards are late. . . . I don't like Gauls . . . hairy. . . . Be good enough to show me the teeth . . . yes, as the teeth go, so go the bones . . . this fellow is made of chalk." His unctuous cowardliness is most evident in a later response to Crassus, who has just insisted that Batiatus remain for the ensuing battle: "But you don't understand. I'm a civilian. I'm even more of a civilian than most civilians!"

Laughton's Gracchus is heroically unheroic and deliciously cynical. In one of the film's finest moments, these two corpulent men, one a money-hungry member of the middle class, the other a land-wealthy aristocrat, sit at a feast with thinly clad *concubinae* on their laps. Gracchus gives this terse and accurate statement on Roman morality and

23 Victor Mature in a process shot from *Hannibal* (1960) oversees his pachyderms crossing the snowy Alps.

imperialism: "I'm the most virtuous man in Rome. I keep these women out of my respect for Roman morality—that morality which had made Rome strong enough to steal two-thirds of the world from its rightful owners, founded on the sanctity of Roman marriage and the Roman family." Batiatus nods in amused agreement as he licks a thick brown gravy off his pudgy fingers.

Gracchus plays the self-aware, populist patrician, while the conservatives include young Julius Caesar (John Gavin) and Crassus (Laurence Olivier), the wealthiest man in Rome. They portray the Roman aristocracy as a cruel, shrewd, power-hungry, and treacherous mob who by the lucky graces of destiny happen not to be slaves but wealthy, educated, and powerful citizens. Trumbo's neo-Marxist characterization of the Roman aristocracy is epitomized by Crassus's remark to another patrician: "The unfortunate thing about being a patrician is that occasionally you have to act like one." Elsewhere, Crassus, cold and unmoved, watches Sparracus and Draba duel in deadly gladiatorial combat until a victorious but compassionate Draba leaps up from the sandy arena to kill Crassus. Cool as ice, Crassus slashes Draba's throat with his dagger without even rising from his chair. The aristocratic women who accompany Crassus, meanwhile, examine the half-naked gladiators with rolling eyes and lick their lips as if selecting slabs of ham from the butcher.

24 Batiatus (Academy Award–winning Peter Ustinov) and Gracchus (Charles Laughton) abound in corpulent luxury in this scene from *Spartacus* (1960). The gourmet detail on the table and the bathtub and Venus statue in the background are authentic. And notice the ram's-head table legs: many pieces of ancient furniture had this sort of zoomorphic ornament.

"A couple of capricious, overpainted nymphs," Batiatus calls them in private; when Crassus is present, Batiatus characteristically stoops to flattery of "those charming ladies."

This is the insensitive, powerful Roman establishment against which Spartacus revolts. His misery is evident from that first scene with Batiatus in the Libyan mountains; in frustration he bites through the ankle of a Roman guard and "hamstrings" him. He is bought by Batiatus and taken to Capua in southern Italy to be trained as a gladiator by Marcellus. The trainees are humiliated in every way—beaten, painted on, held in silence, forced to train with imposing wooden machines. Batiatus and Marcellus leer and laugh at Spartacus from a small cell window as he prepares to make love to Varinia. Prodded by these humiliations and the unforgettably ghoulish sequence in which the gladiators silently file past Draba's inverted and naked corpse, a rebellious instinct overpowers Spartacus. After distinctively drowning Marcellus in a large pot of disgusting brown stew, Spartacus leads the trainees out of the school and into the hills of Italy, where they experience freedom at long last.

Spartacus might appear to be an otherwise unremarkable slave, an illiterate Thracian already defeated in the arena, but his ordinary physique and his limited intellectual capacity belie a splendidly rebellious spirit surpassed by few in history. One hundred thousand slaves follow him because he treats them like people instead of like animals. He has a naive confidence that endears him to his army and to us: "A free man dies and he loses the pleasure of life; a slave loses his pain. Death is the only freedom a slave knows. . . . That's why we'll win." The contrast between the simple humanity of the slaves and the shrewd cynicism of the Romans is the real essence of *Spartacus,* a contrast highlighted not only by Trumbo's incisive lines but by Kubrick's intimate shots of slaves huddled with their families, marching through rain and snow, milking their goats, telling folktales, and smiling with the contentment of freedom—even if just for the moment. The most poignant of these tableaux appear under the poetic voice-over by Antoninus (Tony Curtis), illuminating a world two millennia past but a nature identical to our own. Of all the films made about the ancient world, this is the only one that artistically, realistically, and sympathetically shows common people in a time when being common people was much worse than it is today. This emphasis on humanity perhaps suggests the exact opposite of "the thinking man's epic," but then again, the human condition is the very essence of thought.

Film critics and Ph.D.'d scholars bemoan the crucifixion that Spartacus receives in the film, for history tells us that he was hacked to pieces in battle. But while the quibblers reread their Plutarch's *Life of Crassus* to find other historical inauthenticities, the film lover watches with swelling emotion as Crassus, victorious in the final battle, offers amnesty to the defeated slaves if they will point out Spartacus to him; Spartacus rises to say, "I'm Spartacus," but he is instantly anticipated first by Antoninus and then by hundreds and then thousands of rising faithful coconspirators, each proclaiming, "I'm Spartacus! . . . I'm Spartacus!" To omit this scene—or the anguish of the crucified Spartacus, looking down from his cross at his wife Varinia and their infant child—would be a far graver histrionic error than the actual historical error. Those who demand pure history as the main course for their cinematic appetite can be assured that Thracian Spartacus, Gallic Crixus (John Ireland), Batiatus, Crassus, the Cilician pirates, Caesar, the decor, the uniforms, and the Capuan revolt are all historical; the historical meat of *Spartacus* may have some Hollywood sauce, but it is still meat.

And forty years later, the "I'm Spartacus! . . . I'm Spartacus!" scene is the film's best remembered and most imitated. In recent years it has been used in such films as *Life of Brian* (1979), *Punchline* (1988), *That Thing You Do* (1996), *In and Out* (1997), and *The Mask of Zorro* (1998).

In all of filmdom, there is no better exhibition of Roman military genius than the last battle in *Spartacus.* Shot (in Spain) in an effective wide-screen format (Super Technirama 70 with Panavision lenses), the scene places us within the rebellious hordes of slaves as a few thousand Roman soldiers gather on the long, rolling, green hill one-half mile in the gloomy distance. We are desperate and determined, dressed in dull leather and the odd

25/26 Spartacus (Kirk Douglas) and Draba (Woody Strode) fight to the death in *Spartacus* (1960). Spartacus fights in the Thracian style, with short sword and shield (discarded), while the Ethiopian fights as a retiarius, with net and trident. The armor of mail for the thrusting arm was common to all styles of gladiatorial fighting in ancient Rome. A second-century A.D. mosaic from Leptis Magna in Libya shows gladiators in full dress. The gladiatorial scene in *Spartacus* lacks greaves and helmets because it is not a full-scale combat, but the short sword, mail arm protector, thick belt, and triangular loincloth were all re-created for the film.

27 The climactic battle from *Spartacus* (1960). The camera is set up behind the undisciplined rebellious slaves to give us their view of the organized Roman legions on the opposite hill. Roman legions of six thousand troops were arranged into centuries of one hundred and maniples of ten, and each unit was trained to move on signal. They usually intimidated and then outmaneuvered their opponents, as they did here. The historical Spartacus was killed in this battle of 71 B.C.

piece of stolen armor; the Roman cohorts and maniples, machinelike and crimson-cloaked, maneuver efficiently into perfectly straight phalanxes of icy death. In ancient days, the sight of the Roman rectangular organization with its quick movements struck fear into the once bold spirits of non-Romans all over the Mediterranean and Europe. For almost a thousand years, this was the most formidable weapon on Earth. Contrary to most ancient battle sequences in films, Roman legions did not usually fight battles in mishmash affairs of independent shields and swords. They were as organized as the Stoic cosmos and as powerful and menacing as a colossal monster.

Despite his professional approach to *Spartacus*, Kubrick was disgruntled that he did not have total control over the making of the film. "I am disappointed in the film," he complained. "It had everything but a good story."[3] True, perhaps, but we should not give too much credence to Kubrick's self-criticism. After all, Vergil's last instructions are said to have been "Burn the *Aeneid*." Of all the ancient epic films of the period, only *Spartacus* was fully, digitally restored and rereleased in the 1990s. The 1991 version ran

198 minutes, 14 minutes longer than the premiere release, and some of this restored footage included the notorious sequence in which Crassus tries to seduce Antoninus with "oysters and snails." (Hollywood rumor has it that the sound track had been damaged, so Anthony Hopkins dubbed in some of Olivier's lines.)

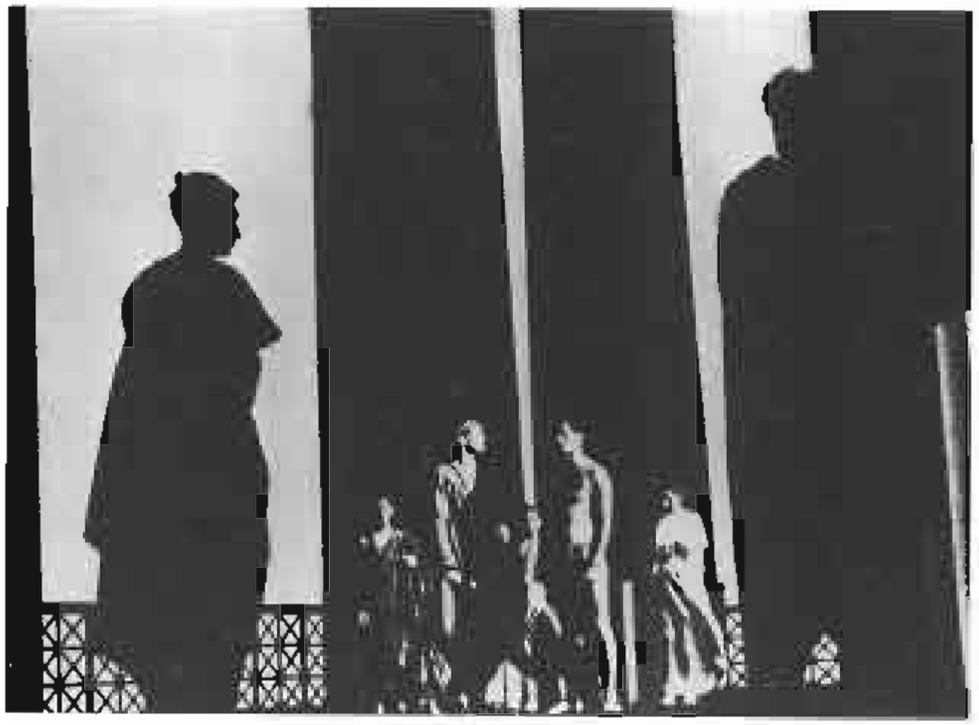
The character Spartacus appeared in five other films set in antiquity. Our sources are vague or confusing regarding Latium's 1909 version of *Spartaco* and the 1914 Cines version starring Anthony Novelli. The former, no longer extant, was no doubt based on Raffaello Giovagnoli's much-adored 1874 novel *Spartaco*. Pasquali's 1913 version, starring Mario Guaita Ausonia and directed by Giovanni Enrico Vidali, is still available (albeit incomplete) for examination because George Kleine distributed it in the United States in 1914. Efficient and muscular acting by Ausonia and a fat, amusing Crassus convey the light style of this early costumer. Essentially a "gladiator film," *Spartaco* predictably culminates with some lion wrestling in Rome's famous Circus Maximus. The Circus sequence is well done, as are the exteriors at Vesuvius (including the famous scene in which Spartacus and his men lower themselves down the cliffs on ropes made of vines). The costumes are typical of the early Italian spectacles: full and dark, covered with excessive embroidery, and heaped up with double or triple mantling, they look operatic. But in this instance there was good reason to sacrifice historical accuracy in exchange for black-and-white chiaroscuro effect.

Sins of Rome (1954) is one of those movies that is so badly written, so terribly overacted, so sloppily dubbed that it is amusing to watch if one is in the right (silly) mood. It does offer some clever night photography and camera angles, and Renzo Rossellini's music can be stirring, but otherwise this Italian version of Spartacus is a slave to its own ineptness.

The Slave (1962), also released as *The Son of Spartacus,* picks up where Kubrick's film left off. A Roman soldier named Randis (Steve Reeves) finds out that he is the son of Spartacus. He proceeds to lead another revolt, seeing how the last one failed, and this time the poor folk win. *The Slave,* produced by the same crew that made *Duel of the Titans,* contains a satisfactory complement of competent action shots and creative photographic angles—for example, a crowd is seen through the diagonal support beams of a crucifix. There is Egyptian scenery, some exciting, urgent music, and the magnificent chest of Steve Reeves. Crassus, Caesar, and Clodia are the historical personages included here. Our historical sources make plausible the sequence set at Crassus's court at Zeugma complete with authentic-looking belly-dancers, but the villainous plutocrat receives an absurd method of execution reminiscent of the colossus sequences in Sergio Leone's *The Colossus of Rhodes:* molten gold is poured onto his face. "Gold was your life, now let it be your death," say the victorious rebels. The historical Crassus was beheaded. Either method of execution must have been unpleasant, but cinematically the method chosen for *The Slave,* in which we see the gold poured onto the screen with the subjective camera angle, is more effective.

28 Crassus (Laurence Olivier), the wealthy patrician, examines seven new slaves in the *peristylum* (courtyard) of one of his villas in *Spartacus* (1960). The Ionic columns, bronze and marble statuary, and mosaic floors all reflect Crassus's vast fortune. The Latin sign hanging from the neck of Antoninus (Tony Curtis) says, "Antoninus, Sicilian, age 21, player and magician, never ran away or went mad."

29 This ancient mosaic, made in Rome was copied for *Spartacus* (1960); the replica can be seen on the floor of Crassus's peristylum. The original depicts a Nilotic scene complete with reed boats, pygmies, crocodiles, and hippopotamuses, but the *Spartacus* imitation omits the animals.



30 David Bradley's 16mm *Julius Caesar* (1951) was one of the few midcentury independent films to enter the commercial mainstream. This shot taken on the porch of Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry hides Cassius (Grosvenor Glenn) and Brutus (Bradley) in shadows while Caesar (Harold Tasker) and Antony (Charlton Heston) create a bold chiaroscuro effect against the dark columns.

Julius Caesar has been honored twelve times with a film portrait. The finest of the early versions was Cines's 1914 *Giulio Casare,* starring Amleto Novelli. This semidocumentary film covers the life of the renowned soldier, author, and statesman from his marriage to Cornelia in 83 B.C. to his assassination on the Ides of March, 44 B.C. The most memorable sequences are those in tripartite Gaul, where Caesar's neatly armored legions battle Gauls who wear thick-strapped boots, bulky fur clothing, and spiked helmets. These proto-Frenchmen are led by the proud Vercingetorix. Defeated in battle by the Roman *ballista* (a type of catapult), the subjugated Gauls and Vercingetorix humbly bow and kiss Caesar's foot. Before the battle of Pharsalia between Pompey and Caesar, the forces of the two generals are contrasted: those of Pompey argue among themselves while Caesar's are disciplined and orderly; obviously, Caesar's troops will win the battle. Kubrick effectively used a similar contrast between Roman discipline and non-Roman disorder before the great battle scene in his version of *Spartacus.* The photography in the 1914 *Giulio Casare* displays some signs of precocious artistry. During the battle of Pharsalia, the camera frames a few dead men in the foreground while the infantry battles in the distance. Later, there is a fine shot of a silhouetted Caesar standing by the shore; maintaining a noble stance near a few men with dark Roman standards, he gazes out at Pompey's ships fleeing into the sunset. When Caesar returns triumphantly to Rome, we see a magnificent parade of fifteen lictors, Roman standards and eagles, eight *tubae* (horns), SPQR and legionary signs, infantry with spears, fifty senators, a horse-drawn float with Caesar on top, Egyptian priests with ostrich-feather fans, and cavalry, all in a Forum jammed with people waving in every portal and arcade. This magnificent scene helped to set the precedent for all the luxurious and expensive triumph scenes in films to come, *Quo Vadis?* (1951), *Ben-Hur* (1959), and *Cleopatra* (1963) among them.

The other three versions of *Julius Caesar* have the honor of having been written by the finest poet Hollywood ever used—Shakespeare. David Bradley's 1951 version betrays its amateur origin and its $10,000 budget with inexpensive costuming, bare scenery, and crude 16mm photography. Yet this artistic film made an indelible impression on audiences. It was one of the first amateur films to enjoy commercial success, a success owed in part to the fine acting of a young unknown named Charlton Heston as Antony, and in part to its shadowy settings and oblique camera angles. Shot near Lake Michigan's shores and among the neoclassical buildings on the South Side of Chicago (particularly the Museum of Science and Industry), this unprofessional film is transformed into an unique creative experience via heavy shadows, bold facial close-ups, and camera angles that exploit high columns and long shadows to the utmost. Black and white has rarely been used with such profound effect; Bradley achieved the perfect union of photography and classical architecture. One memorable scene is Cassius's soliloquy (1.2.305 ff.) during which the conspirator walks toward the camera between two sides of a long, eerie colonnade of Soldier's Field, as if emerging from the deep linear perspective of a Dürer etching.

Joseph Mankiewicz chose to film *Julius Caesar* (1953) in black and white as well. The MGM follow-up to the grand success of *Quo Vadis?* (1951) had a budget of only $2 million, but the resulting film remains one of the most faithful Hollywoodian renditions of a Shakespearean drama. Louis Calhern is fine in the title role, and John Gielgud and James Mason complement each other perfectly as the "lean and hungry"–looking Cassius and the stoical Brutus. But Marlon Brando as Antony provided the most rousing performance of the film with the famed funeral oration—once the bane of so many eighth-graders. In a well-paced speech building gradually to its climax, Brando's angry eyes pierce the crowd from under lowered brows; his jaws are clenched so firmly that the tendons bulge on his rounded forehead. Brando was an unconventional choice for the role; in fact, the young Heston had been considered for the part. But *Julius Caesar* established Brando's credibility among many doubting critics who had feared that he would act the part in a dirty toga and mumble "Fwens, Womans, countwymun." To the contrary, he was featured in his (clean) toga on the cover of *Life* in May 1953 and was nominated for an Academy Award.

31 Years after the die was cast and long after coming, seeing, and conquering, Julius Caesar (Louis Calhern) desperately clings to Brutus, who has just stabbed him in *Julius Caesar* (1953). Brutus (James Mason) evokes Shakespeare's immortal words, "Et tu, Brute? Then fall Caesar." Caesar's ring is an authentic Roman design.

32 Marcus Antonius (Charlton Heston) offers to read Caesar's will in the 1969 version of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. The thick, cowled robes belong more to the Renaissance than to antiquity; but Shakespeare's antiquity can be performed in ancient, Renaissance, or modern dress.

As in all three screen versions of Shakespeare's play, the last two acts (which follow Caesar's assassination) of the 1953 version are extensively cut. The battle at Philippi is brief and unremarkable, but Miklos Rozsa's score supplies it with some intensity.

While Bradley's version was amateurishly significant and Mankiewicz's faithful and somber, Stuart Burge's 1969 version is the most cinematic of all. The film abounds in pastel colors and makes full use of exterior shots in Acts 4 and 5. Even the opening of the film is colorfully vivid: the camera pans the dead warriors on the battlefield of Mundae, where Caesar has defeated Pompey's sons; vultures perch on overturned chariots; the camera closes in on one skeleton seemingly gasping "Cae-sar, Cae-sar!" and his macabre voice soon blends into the deafening roar of thousands chanting the same syllables, initiating a rousing march that heralds Caesar's triumph in Rome and Act 1. The distinctive sound of a Moog synthesizer is frequently heard in the film, and costumes and decor combine Renaissance and Roman elements.

Charlton Heston, in reprising Antony, approaches the funeral oration magnificently. In a rendering grander than his interpretation in the Bradley version and more explosive than Brando's, Heston uses his unique ability to portray "the Heroic" in such a way that the crowd below him becomes part of his art. Brando's Antony was intense and subtle, but Heston's is overwhelming. He offers Caesar's will to the hungry desires of the Roman rabble as if offering Christians to salivating lions. His energy might have pleased even the Stratfordian himself. The rest of the cast performs admirably, although Jason Robards's philosophically stoic Brutus is a bit too linguistically stoic. John Gielgud is a consummate Caesar, while Richard Johnson plays an impressive Cassius, Richard Chamberlain a handsome young Octavian, and Diana Rigg a noble Portia. Casting horror-film icon Christopher Lee as the mysterious Artemidorus was a stroke of genius.

The scripts of all three sound versions of *Julius Caesar* maintain Shakespeare's original blank verse, although speeches are cut, edited, and rearranged somewhat. This use of centuries-old dialogue makes the films unrealistic and at best quasi-historical while at the same time elevating the language above that of the average prosaic script. The Bradley and MGM versions were essentially conceived of as plays on film. Special effects, especially double exposure, were used only for Calpurnia's dream and for Caesar's ghost. The Burge version, however, aimed at spectacle, as had *Henry V* some twenty years earlier. It is a tribute to the unparalleled dramatic brilliance of Shakespeare that three completely different versions of *Julius Caesar* have been put on film and that each is successful in its own unique way.

While an infamous number of jealous senators were attacking Julius Caesar in front of Pompey's statue on March 15, 44 B.C., two of the dictator's earlier acquaintances dwelled in other parts of the eternal city—his general and his mistress, Antony and Cleopatra. This most famous couple came together in the wake of mighty Caesar's death, and before they parted, they themselves were to be involved in the ultimate struggle for control of the massive Roman domain. Their lives centered around love, politics, and power, and for those glamorous few years they spent together, they became a legend. They have appeared on film at least fifteen times.

After Georges Méliès's 1899 version, the earliest feature film called *Cleopatra* was produced by the Helen Gardner Players in upstate New York in 1912. One of the first "full-length" American feature films, this primitive, one-hour movie seems crude to our modern eyes. A still camera views a cardboard barge "sailing" across a stage before a painted matte of the sea; a hefty Cleopatra (Helen Gardner) steps out and waves, gestures, pleads, embraces, faints, supplicates, and strokes a cumbersomely uniformed Antony. Gardner's acting is emotive and varied, but all else in this early American film lacks conviction. The sea battle of Actium shows Cleopatra and Antony ridiculously rocking back and forth while buckets of water are tossed at them. Nonetheless, this film was handsomely promoted as a "road show": several different groups were sent around the country to show a print of the film, lecture on its subject, and count the profits reaped from the various showings in opera houses, town halls, and theaters.

Cines produced *Marcantonio e Cleopatra* in 1913 starring Antony Novelli (Antony) and Giovanna Terribili Gonzales (Cleopatra). Displaying the same fine photography used in *Giulio Casare* the following year, Cines hit its creative peak with this spectacular and fascinating silent. Superbly acted dual scenes (Cleo and Antony, Antony and Octavia), quick-paced action, and large crowds were essential to all Cines films of the era, but *Marcantonio e Cleopatra* is distinguished by small touches as well: Charmian's bizarre death amid alligators, the Senate's declaration of Antony's treason, a lovely shot of Octavian's troops reflected in a pool of marshy water, the battle at Alexandria. Of special interest is the scene after Antony's death. In all the other film versions of the story, Cleopatra commits suicide immediately after Antony does so. Here, however, Cleopatra lives on for a little while. She

stares longingly at her lover's throne; she even fondles his armor, and then she dreams of herself in Octavian's triumphal procession amid festooned balustrades and the people-filled porches of Rome (like the triumph in *Julius Caesar*). Rather than have this nightmare come true, she gives a poisonous asp a taste of her breast.

In 1917 Theda Bara vamped a version of *Cleopatra* directed by J. Gordon Edwards. From the opening shot, which espied the great Sphinx from a distance, then moved in to focus in on its face—that of Theda Bara—the film was purposefully dazzling, not to mention lucratively shocking. Bara wore several dozen costumes, most of them expensive looking—though one eyewitness account recalled that one particular costume "cost $1,000 a yard, and Theda seemed to be wearing only ten cents' worth."[4] Fox reported that the film cost $500,000 to produce and had a cast of several thousand, but Bara's screen presence and the controversy surrounding the film ensured a million-dollar box office. Several still photographs survive, but the film itself is lost; the last two known prints were destroyed by fires in the Fox studios and at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Thousands of silent films have been lost because of neglect and the chemical deterioration and flammability of their nitrate base, but Theda Bara's *Cleopatra* is on the American Film Institute's list of Top Ten Missing films.

The first sound version of the story was Cecil B. DeMille's *Cleopatra* (1934). A Cleopatra who can speak can become a more complex character than a silent Cleopatra, and the charming, calculating, yet vulnerable chatter of Claudette Colbert's queen is as complex as the layered gauze wrapped around a mummy. She is matched with an unmovably haughty, veni, vidi, vici-ing Caesar (Warren William) and a hot-headed, wildly debauched Antony (Henry Wilcoxon). All the witty dialogue is spouted before delightfully lavish sets and able character actors (C. Aubrey Smith as Enobarbus, Joseph Schildkraut as Herod). The film also revels in the inimitable DeMillish combination of grand magnificence, wickedly cute dialogue, and forcefully climactic action.

The film opens with an exciting chariot run set to rousing music, and Cleopatra is deposited in the desert by her political enemies. Left alone to die with her aide Apollodorus, she hears his sage suggestion to ally herself with Rome. She replies with a regally childish pout, "Why do you talk about Rome and politics? I'm hungry!" Soon after, we see Julius Caesar in Alexandria testing a new siege engine. Enter a merchant with a rolled-up Persian carpet; impatient Caesar is not amused when Cleopatra is unrolled from the tapestry, but wily Colbert, about to win her Oscar for *It Happened One Night*, comments in a low, tempting voice,

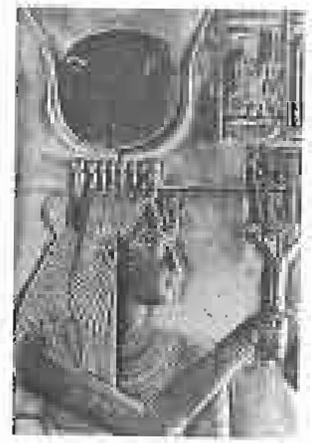
> CLEOPATRA: It's strange to see you working. I've always pictured you either fighting . . . or loving.
> CAESAR: I've had experience with fighting.
> CLEOPATRA: But not with loving, I suppose?
> CAESAR: Not with pretty little queens.

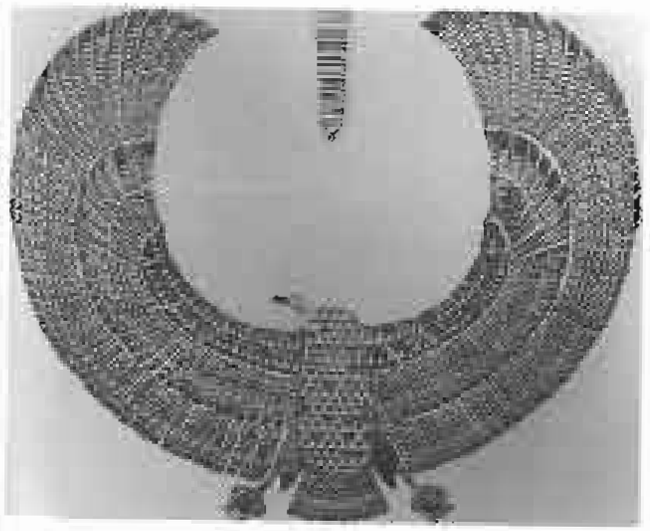
Such dialogue is only a small part of DeMille's attack on the legendary and historical story. Antony's visit to Cleopatra's elegant, swan-necked barge is DeMille at his most lavish. After Cleopatra wheedles Antony into drinking and having an enjoyable evening in spite of himself, she gives the signal: two flowing curtains are crisscrossed before our eyes, rose petals fall gently from the ceiling, and long festoons are raised; the camera pulls back to take in the lightly clad dancers, the graceful attendants, and the large Nubian slaves; the compelling music builds and builds while stylized animal-headed oars move in time to the crash of a huge drum; a muscular conductor *(hortator)* pounds out a throbbing beat in his angular attack on the drum as the music climaxes and the scene dissolves. The barge scene is without parallel in grandeur, grace, and romantic power, and its historical source is Plutarch's *Life of Antony.*

DeMille's court scenes entertain us with humorous cynicism; when Antony sees a slave's body carried out he hears that "the queen is testing poisons." And although the naval battle of Actium and land battle of Alexandria consume less than two minutes, these carefully edited sequences make an immediate and effective impact. With footage borrowed from *The Ten Commandments* (1923), a smoke-filled screen of Stygian gloom moves in rapid succession from Nubian to Roman tubae, marching spearmen and standards, deafening chariots, a gigantic battering ram, falling and grimacing faces, a huge rolling echinodermatous spike, catapults of fire, underwater shots of the dead, all ending in a large fireball shot right at the camera.

Twelve years later Gabriel Pascal followed up his screen versions of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and *Major Barbara* with another Shavian masterpiece, *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1946). Spending just under $3 million to create lavish sets and splendid costumes, Pascal also captured the superficially silly yet intellectually challenging contexts that characterize most of Shaw's work. Shaw himself wrote the dialogue for the film. His genius combined well with the elegant continental music of Georges Auric and the fascinating sets by Oliver Messel and John Bryan. Claude Rains plays Caesar, the father figure, who tries to teach the young, giggly Cleopatra (Vivien Leigh) how to be a queen. Their relationship is a playful one amid the soft bluish cyclorama tint of the Egyptian sky and before a large, imposing sphinx. In her childlike simplicity, Cleopatra rues that "Julius Caesar's father was a tiger, his mother was a burning mountain, and his nose is like an elephant's trunk." She has heard that Caesar will "gobble me up in one bite." But the charming and kind "old" Caesar encourages her to act regally. Cleopatra asserts her newfound royalty by beating a helpless slave: "I'm a real queen, ooo!" The other two main characters are Stewart Granger as the Oriental swashbuckler from Sicily and Flora Robson as Cleopatra's humorless nurse, Ftatateeta, whose name Caesar repeatedly mispronounces, calling her "Teeta Tota," "Tora Teeta," and eventually an exasperated "Tota."

Some epic sweep appears in the battle at the film's end, but for the most part *Caesar and Cleopatra* concentrates on its unique synthesis of intellectual wit and mundane play.





33/36 Claudette Colbert as Cleopatra in DeMille's 1934 *Cleopatra.* Her low, suggestive voice and her adaptability to comedy and drama made her perfect for the part. Her costume, hardly the Hollywoodian fantasy that might be expected, incorporates two bird-shaped earrings used as bracelets in the film, the crown of Isis-Hathor, and a vulture collar. The earrings and collar are from the renowned treasure of Tutankhamen. The Isis-Hathor crown has been modified for the film; the horns (Hathor was originally a cow) and the disk (symbolizing the goddess of the sky) have been shrunk, and most of the snake heads have been omitted. The feather-textured gilded cap and the frontal cobra head remain intact.

37/38 Britannicus (Cecil Parker), Caesar (Claude Rains), and Cleopatra (Vivien Leigh) talk politics and love in George Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1945). The mixture of humor and epic sweep in this British film is unique; where else would Cleopatra say, "Oooo! the Romans will gobble me up in one bite"? Cleo's wig and the mosaic floor are authentic, and a helmet carved about A.D. 100 on the head of no less a warrior than the god Mars, shows the type used for Caesar's helmet. Claude Rains's version adds cheek pieces to the authentic visor, crest, sculpted reliefs, and frontal griffin. This helmet is the typical Italian type—very different from the Corinthian used in Greece some four centuries earlier (and in *The 300 Spartans*).

When Cleopatra and her effeminate teenage brother/husband, Ptolemy, contend for the right to the throne of Egypt, Cleopatra (whose sweet smile, batting eyelashes, and wily plans suggest Miss Scarlett vying for an Egyptian Tara and a Roman Rhett) runs into the room and ignobly pulls her brother from the throne onto the floor. After some silly verbal squabbling, Roman troops enter under Rufio's generalship. Suddenly the young Egyptian king and queen are "Roman guests." Ptolemy sticks his tongue out at his "mean" sister, while his regent, Pothinus, demands of Caesar, "Where is your right to do this?" Caesar replies in a superior tone, "In Rufio's scabbard, for the moment."

The next two versions of Cleopatra were cheap and disappointing. Columbia produced *Serpent of the Nile* (1953), which drastically changes the story of the two lovers so that Cleopatra (Rhonda Fleming) loves not Antony (Raymond Burr) but his best friend. In 1959 Vittorio Cottavafi directed *Legions of the Nile*, also entitled *Legions of Cleopatra*, a cinematic comic book containing brutal ruffians, sleazy or sassy girls, and overbold heroes, each cut from the thinnest cardboard. Thanks to some spirited action scenes and some amusing romantic play, the film becomes almost tolerable.

And then came the quintessential version of *Cleopatra*. What is there to write about a film that caused an international scandal and cost the studio president, the film's producer, two directors, and a clutch of scriptwriters their jobs? What can be justified about a film that cost more than $30 million to put on the screen and opened in six hundred theaters? What can be described about a movie that has over ninety-six hours of film in the cans (120 miles!) yet is shown in slightly more than three hours? And how many words can be used to analyze a film so hyped, talked about, and scandalous before its release that its advertisements did not even need to include the title?

Plenty. Filmmakers and critics alike still shudder when they think of one of the most expensive (allowing for inflation), longest, most publicized, and most controversial pictures ever made. Opinions range widely, but in one way or another, for better or for worse, the 1963 version of *Cleopatra* is undeniably one of the most spectacular movies that will ever be made.

It all started with Theda Bara in 1917. Fox had produced her successful version of *Cleopatra*, and throughout the resurgence of ancient films in the 1950s Fox had been considering a remake. But earthquakes start as small tremors, so at first Fox president Spiros Skouras and producer William Wanger—whose credits include such varied films as *Stagecoach* (1939), *Joan of Arc* (1948), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)—planned a modestly budgeted, $2 million film, with Joan Collins playing the title role. Soon Audrey Hepburn and Susan Hayward were being considered, but Elizabeth Taylor, fresh from her contract's termination at MGM, agreed to do the part for a few hundred thousand dollars. Skouras and Wanger knew that the big name in the title role would make the picture more successful, and Liz had just won her Oscar for *Butterfield 8*. Rouben Mamoulian was hired as director, and location shooting was planned for Egypt and Italy, then Turkey, then London—yes, definitely London. This was 1959.

By September 30, 1960, eight and one-half acres of ancient Alexandria had been built at Pinewood Studios outside of London. The first day of shooting was buried in fog, and the fog lasted all week. Liz contracted a fever. The delays continued. By November 1 the $2 million was spent. The cold and damp weather remained. Whenever someone spoke, frosty vapors accompanied the dialogue. This was Egypt? In mid-November, Liz's illness continued, so production was closed down until January 3. Soon a new scriptwriter, Nunnally Johnson, was hired, but Mamoulian quit on January 18. So far, the film had cost $7 million, taken sixteen months, and yielded twelve minutes of footage. Lloyds of London covered part of the losses, so Skouras splurged on a new director, Joseph L. Mankiewicz (*Julius Caesar* [1953]).

Within a week Elizabeth Taylor was in the hospital, near death with pneumonia and anemia; she underwent a life-saving tracheotomy. The director decided to shoot the rest of the picture in Hollywood—no, Rome. Meanwhile, Peter Finch had been replaced as Caesar by Rex Harrison, Olivier having declined. Richard Burton then left his Broadway role in *Camelot* to replace Stephen Boyd as Antony. Once Liz was healthy, they could shoot this picture.

By September 1961, only one of a planned forty-seven interior sets was ready; meanwhile, the costumes had been ripped. In November a sudden windstorm arose and shut down production for the day; cost: $75,000. That winter began "Le Scandale." Reportedly, Richard Burton's first words to Taylor were, "Has anybody ever told you that you're a very pretty girl?" Corny, but it worked. By the spring Liz and Richard were oppressed by *paparazzi* and Italian gossip hounds. Photographers came to the door of their $3,000-per-month house dressed as carpenters, servants, and priests.

Delays continued to abound. In April a cat and her kittens were heard meowing underneath *Cleopatra*'s bedroom set. Shooting was interrupted while the set was dismantled, the cats were freed, and the set was reassembled; cost: $17,000. Production costs, including overtime for the stars, were now $500,000 per week. By March 2, 1963, the last day of shooting, Wanger had been fired, Skouras had been ousted, and Daryl Zanuck had taken over Fox. Zanuck sent Mankiewicz to the employment bureau with this announcement: "In exchange for top compensation and a considerable expense account, Mr. Joseph Mankiewicz had for two years spent his time, talent, and $35,000,000 of Twentieth-Century Fox's shareholders' money to direct and complete the first cut of the film *Cleopatra*. He has earned a well-deserved rest."[5]

Finally ready for release, the film was advertised in New York on the world's largest billboard. Newspaper ads showed a reclining Cleopatra with Antony standing above her. There was no title in the ad; the whole universe had been hearing about the film and its personalities for three years, so who needed a title?

On June 12, 1963, *Cleopatra* opened at the Rivoli Theatre at $100 a ticket amid a Manhattan street crowd of ten thousand. Postcards with "Cleopatra-scented" perfume were sold in the lobby. Before the premiere, *Cleopatra* was already the eighth-biggest box-office hit of all time, with $15 million paid in advance rental. On opening night the film was four hours, twenty-four minutes long. Within two weeks it was mysteriously four hours, three minutes. In a few months, it was being shown in just over three hours. *Newsweek* called the film "The Amputee."[6]

What happened? Skouras admitted that the film should have cost half as much as it eventually did (even more than the $35 million Zanuck had cited, including printing and distribution costs). Mankiewicz bemoaned that "this was a chance to flirt with disaster."[7] Taylor reluctantly viewed a print of the finished (and cut) movie, described it as "vulgar," and promptly ran to the powder room to throw up.[8] She called Zanuck and offered to redub some of her weaker voice parts. He would not spend a cent more on the monstrous enterprise.

Cleopatra suffered from poor planning and ill fortune. Gossip and adverse publicity blamed Liz's romance, overeating, and high living for the delay and expense of the film. This was cruel and untrue. Her illness was not her fault, and Mankiewicz contracted strep throat, Roddy McDowall (Octavian) had a skin ailment, Harrison suffered food poisoning, and Burton missed shooting one day thanks to an Antony-esque drinking bout the night before. He nobly offered to pay for the lost day. Any self-respecting Roman general would have done the same.

Bad weather in London and Rome, excessive prices charged by the Italian vendors, and other delays and costs added daily figures onto the growing budget. At one point, elephants were hired for the famous scene in which Cleopatra enters Rome in a magnificent show. The elephants ran loose and disrupted the shooting. Mankiewicz ordered the beasts off the set and called them "wild." Fox was then sued for $100,000 for slandering the elephants. To build the Alexandria exteriors, a beach at Anzio was rented, for $150,000. By the end of shooting, the weary production manager, who had become a laughingstock, turned frugal at the wrong time in the wrong way. He told the cast, "Save on the paper cups." Miss Taylor's hairdresser was earning $800 per week. Her chauffeur was similarly well paid. Rex Harrison complained that his chauffeur was making less: "Why the hell should Elizabeth Taylor's chauffeur get more than mine just because she has a bigger chest!"[9]

Another reason for the great expense was the panic caused by Twentieth-Century Fox management. "Hurry up," they insisted. Mankiewicz was forced to rewrite the script over the weekend and to shoot the film in historical sequence in the following week. Rarely is a film shot sequentially, and the inefficiencies of that method are magnified in an expensive extravaganza. Idle actors cost as much as busy ones, and 250 days of shooting add up; Taylor was receiving $50,000 per week, Harrison $10,000. Then one day, 1,500 spears were "lost" somehow. On another occasion Italian vendors delivered an $80,000 bottled-water bill to Fox. Liz calculated that the volume specified in the bill represented two and one-half gallons of water per person per day. Someone was outfoxing Fox.

39 One of the many famous moments in Cleopatra's life: Julius Caesar (Rex Harrison) unrolls a carpet that conceals Cleopatra inside. This episode in *Cleopatra* (1963) derives from Plutarch's *Life of Julius Caesar* (49). Unlike many authentic historical events, this one works well on film.

But these are the extraordinary expenses that were invisible in the film itself. The luxury that pervades the screen reveals the vast expenditures for sets and costumes. Cleopatra's costumes and wigs (thirty) and jewelry (125 pieces) cost more than $130,000. Her twenty-four-carat gold-thread dress for the entry into Rome cost $6,500. A huge cast of extras for the battles of Pharsalia, Actium, Philippi, and Alexandria (including the historically authentic "turtle") needed twenty-six thousand costumes; that cost half a million. The extraordinarily beautiful barge that carried Cleopatra to meet Antony at Tarsus cost $250,000, and the entry into Rome another half million. Mankiewicz summarized the insanity best: "This picture was conceived in a state of emergency, shot in confusion, and wound up in blind panic."[10]

The film—ah yes, the film. *Cleopatra* has three serious faults that no one tries to deny: length, editing, and the thinness of Elizabeth Taylor's voice. Taylor herself bemoaned her occasionally shrill voice, and Mankiewicz knew that audiences would think four hours was too long; he originally wanted two films of two hours and twenty minutes each, entitled *Caesar and Cleopatra* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Fox declined Liz's offer to redub and rejected Mankiewicz's two-for-one plan. And even critics who declared that the

film "bumps from scene to ponderous scene on the square wheels of exposition" realized that this rough-flowing lethargy was largely a result of the extensive and detrimental cutting.[11] In fact, even before the cutting the film underwent after its initial release, the portrayal of Antony was demolished by the first bit of surgery. Mankiewicz later stated, "The person who suffered most in the cutting of the film was Dick Burton. He gave a brilliant performance and a lot of his most marvelous scenes were never shown."[12] In the released version, Burton plays a dissolute, weak, passionately amorous pawn who expectedly loses a battle to the severe Octavian and his most able admiral, Agrippa. What we do not see is that Antony was at one time Caesar's most trusted general, a fully competent strategist who had Octavian equally matched until Octavian's cheap, slanderous propaganda campaign turned all of Rome against him and his "Nilotic serpent." The Antony of history and the Antony of the unused portions of the film began as the competent military and political successor to the mighty Caesar; his fall could only be a tragic one. The Antony of the released *Cleopatra* cannot be the tragic hero that Antony really was; a tragic hero has to be an epic personage who is felled from the zenith of his pride by the cruel and inexplicable force of destiny. This cinematic Antony starts at the bottom and falls sideways.

Another example of the poor cutting is the scene in which Caesar is assassinated. Suddenly Cleopatra is seen gazing into an oracular fire, and through the flames she sees the assassination pantomimed to the tense succession of buzzing viola chords. Cut from the film was a scene detailing Cleopatra's dependence on fire-worship and oracles. The oracular scene as it stands is thoroughly bewildering. Then there is the scene in which Octavian reads Antony's "will" to the Senate. Cut from the film is the scene that explains how the shrewd Octavian obtained this fictitious document.

But enough of flaws. Rex Harrison well deserved his best actor award from the National Board of Review; he also earned nominations from the Academy and the New York Film Critics. He displays a smiling, Caesarian confidence in his worldly knowledge, practical wisdom, and aristocratic air, yet he allows himself to have a human love for his son and for the young Cleopatra. Like Warren William's Caesar in DeMille's version, Harrison's Caesar is not impressed with the lovely young queen at first. "Have you broken out of your nursery, young lady, to annoy us adults? . . . You are what I say you are, and nothing more." His sense of humor is splendidly controlled. When he sees Apollodorus carry in the famous Oriental carpet with the queen concealed inside, he knowledgeably quips, "This rug may require some cutting." When planning his battle at Alexandria, he omits some details from his explanation to Agrippa. When Agrippa asks what will happen at dawn, Caesar condescendingly answers, "I thought you knew. The sun comes up."

Cleopatra holds her own when quarreling with Caesar. Cleopatra, "Kindred of Horus and Ra, beloved of the Moon and Sun, Daughter to Isis, and of Upper and Lower Egypt, Queen," reminds the haughty Caesar, "You Roman generals take on divinity so quickly—a few victories, a few massacres. Remember, yesterday Pompey was a god!" Earlier, Caesar had been offered Pompey's head in a jar.

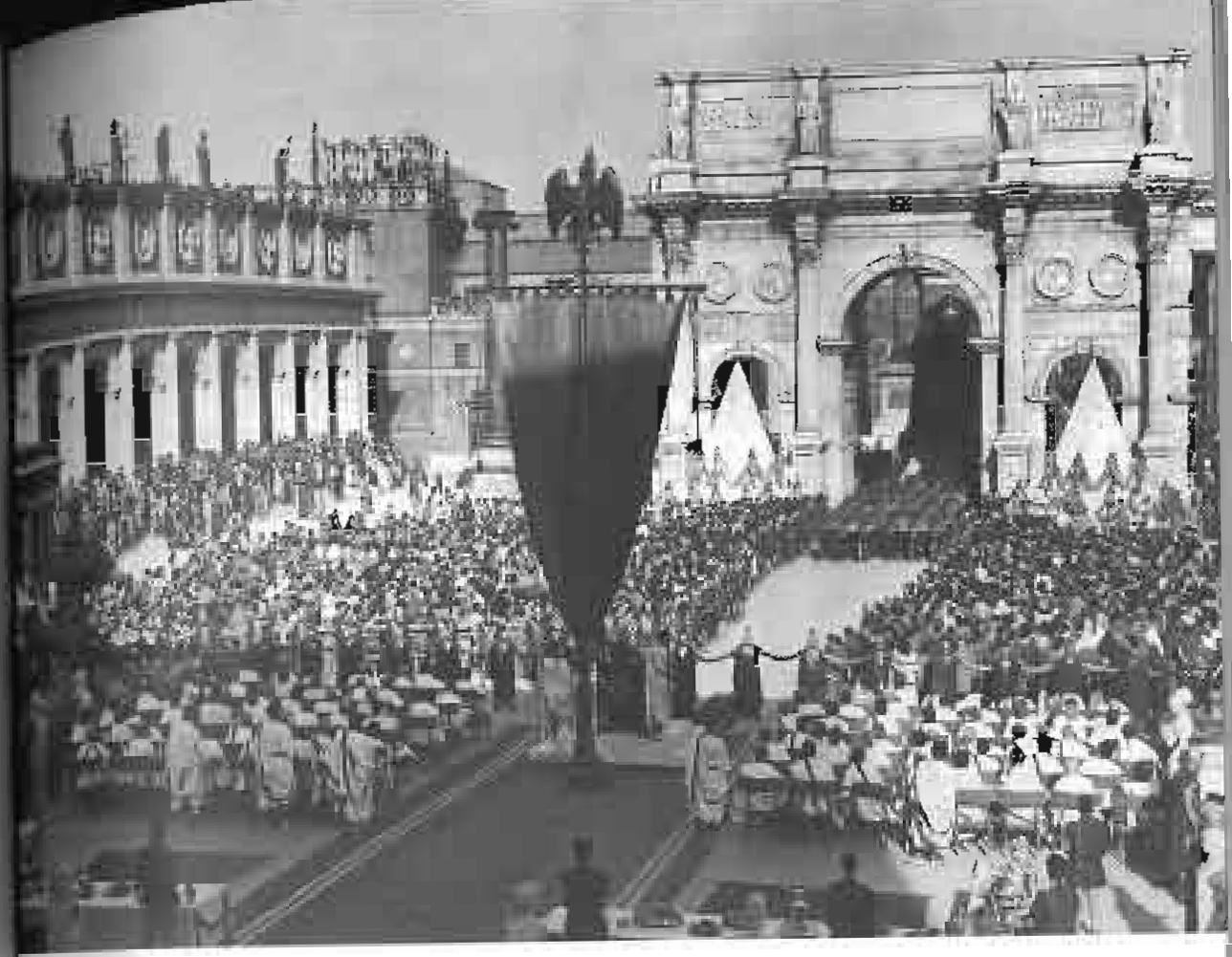
The love scenes between Antony and Cleopatra do drag a bit, but the script is at least literate, if not particularly fluid. Taylor is convincingly matronly when she tells Caesar, "I am the Nile; I will bear many sons," and appropriately noble at Cleopatra's suicide. Her passionate side is revealed when she hears that Antony has left her and married Octavia, Octavian's sister. She grabs a sword and hacks apart his clothes and their bed with the greatest of furor. Like Burton in *Alexander the Great*, Taylor has a particularly difficult part to play. She must be a beautiful queen, an ambitious politician, a seductive woman, a determined mother, and a desperate snake. It is perhaps too much to ask of an actor that he or she hit every note of one of the most complicated characters in history. Legendary historical figures are legendary precisely because they are hard to pin down. That a "mere actor" be expected to re-create perfectly such a prodigy is asking the impossible.

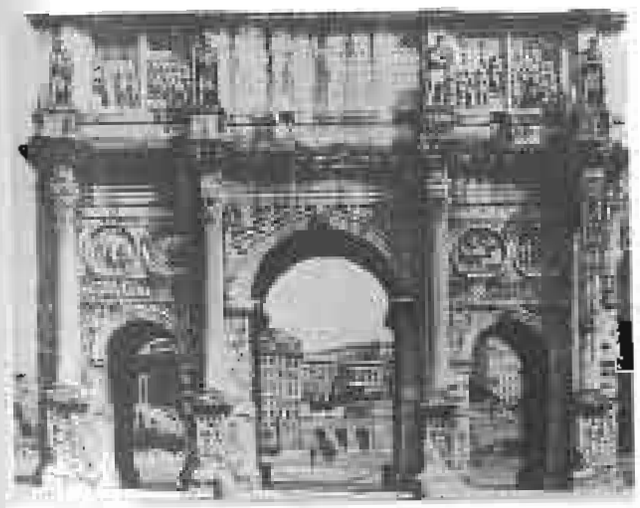
Burton is a sprightly Antony. He characteristically fires off passionate bursts in an intense flurry, and his humor drips with sarcasm as he is about to stab himself with his sword, "I always envied Rufio his long arms." There can be no doubt, however, that the unkindest cut was administered by the editor at Twentieth-Century Fox; we may never know exactly how Burton played this role.

The supporting cast adds to the color and complication of the plot. Martin Landau (Rufio) plays Antony's faithful aide, and Gregoire Aslan (Pothinus) and Herbert Berghof (Theodorus) are perfect as the effeminate eunuch regents of young Ptolemy ("a high position ta'en not without, shall we say, certain sacrifice," remarks Caesar). Roddy McDowall as Octavian embodies, in a few brief scenes, one of the shrewdest politicians in the history of mankind. Key to this characterization is Octavian's decisive victory over Antony's fleet at the battle of Actium. Agrippa plans, directs, and fights the battle while Octavian lies ill belowdeck. Agrippa runs in to tell the man who would soon become Emperor Augustus that he has won a tremendous victory: Octavian weakly raises himself on his sickly arms, looks briefly at the spirited, bearded admiral, and collapses in nauseated apathy. This is right from the pages of history (though Octavian's sickness actually came at Philippi); the scene characterizes Octavian exquisitely without his speaking a line. The scene in which Octavian kills Sosigenes, on the other hand, is historically absurd, and it turns him into a savage murderer rather than an unscrupulous politician.

The great hullabaloo about Elizabeth Taylor's elegant costumes, wigs, and splendid jewelry was certainly not exaggerated; her wardrobe set fashion trends for months, and her makeup helped make eyeshadow an essential part of the sixties look. The costly sets of Alexandria's harbor, the queen's palace, and Rome were likewise worth the price. But two scenes, in terms of lavishness and cinematic spectacle, are unsurpassed: the barge and the entry into Rome.

The arrival of Cleopatra's barge at Tarsus (in Turkey) was calculated to make a gigantic impression on Antony. DeMille's splendid interior of the barge had to be equaled, if not bettered. DeMille's exterior shots had been of a mechanical model, but Mankiewicz decided to build a full-scale, working barge. Then he planned to shoot the scene in the Bay





40 The most spectacular pageant sequence ever filmed, the entry of Cleopatra into Rome in Fox's 1963 *Cleopatra*. The Roman senators with their purple-striped *praetextae* (togas) sit in the foreground surrounded by marble herms. Caesar sits enthroned in their midst with Antony on his right. The Roman populace fills arcade, rooftop, and piazza as three hundred slaves pull Cleopatra's float through the arch. Notice the winged girls with the pyramids below the outer two arches of the huge triumphal arch. This entry into Rome alone cost one-half million dollars.

41 The real Arch of Constantine copied for *Cleopatra*. Fox's arch left out some of the sculptural detail and the central inscription—not to mention portraying an arch that would not be built for three and a half centuries. But it is impression and atmosphere that the film world demands, not historical precision.

of Naples. One quarter of a million dollars later, the 250-foot barge with its 100-foot masts was ready for filming. Two linen sails rise from a gracefully curved hull. An exotic palm tree stands in its middle. Cleopatra waits underneath light curtains at the back of the barge, resembling Plutarch's description in the *Life of Antony* (26), "dressed as a painted Venus." Thirty-five handmaidens throw coins over the steep sides of the boat as young men swim alongside to retrieve the gold, and forty more lovely Egyptian maidens strew flowers into the bay. Antony must have been impressed if the real thing was as elegant and luxurious as this. In fact, Twentieth-Century Fox was so pleased with the appearance of the barge that studio executives considered displaying the vessel at the New York World's Fair.

The entry of Cleopatra into Rome might be the most spectacular pageant sequence ever filmed. Even in its truncated present form, the procession includes seven minutes of constant entertainment, dance, color, crowds, excitement, and grandeur. White horses bearing tubae-players in two rows enter a large square in Rome through a well-reconstructed (if anachronistic) Arch of Constantine. Rows of racing chariots crisscross, followed by slaves tossing red ribbons through the electric air. Fifty archers shoot colored streamers into the sky, and a yellow–caped and feathered African dance troop performs an undulating act intriguingly blurred by thick yellow smoke. Oxen, zebra, and the slandered elephants follow, and fifteen-foot sistra are carried and shaken. Choreographer Hermes Pan *(Top Hat, Silk Stockings)* deserves much of the credit for all the varied movement in the scene. Finally men enter carrying long white ostrich-feather fans, accompanied by winged and gilded women with a pyramid float that releases fluttering white doves. The crowd of senators, wives, and Roman rabble step back in awe-inspired unison. Alex North's rhythmic and penetrating score leads in three hundred dark slaves in six rows. They slowly sway from side to side as they pull the two-ton float behind them.

The camera views the crowded spectacle from all angles as the porphyry float enters the square. At the top of this huge *nemes*-headed pharaoh sit the incarnations of Isis and Horus—golden-robed Cleopatra and the young son of Julius Caesar, Caesarion. The crowd runs to her and cheers loudly. Caesar, the man of reality and vision combined, ignores the entire procession except for what concerns him most. "See how unafraid he is!" he says of his son. Antony is not listening; he has his eyes on a different Egyptian. The Senate of Rome rises, and a red carpet is rolled out. Stairs are miraculously unfolded from the float, and nine Nubians bear Cleopatra's litter. Cleopatra winks at Caesar; she and he know that Rome has been conquered.

When the scene was being filmed, 4,500 Italian extras filled the set. There had been a bomb scare the night before, and Taylor feared that the crowd would react angrily to the accounts of her affair with Burton. As the mob closed in on her float at the climax of the scene, they ignored their prescribed line of "Cleopatra, Cleopatra," and replaced it with a heart-warming "Leez, Leez." Amazingly, Leez, er, Liz, had survived some of the most vicious publicity any movie star had ever faced.

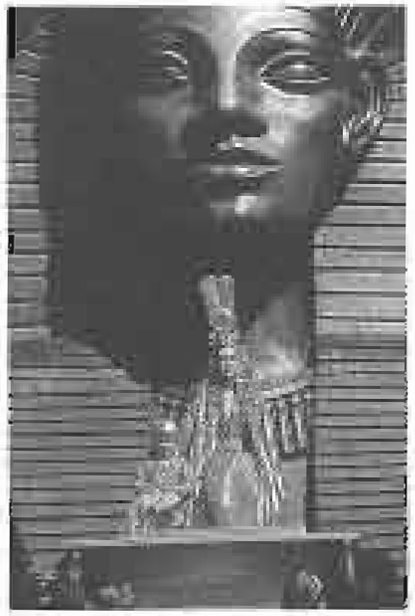
The battle at Actium, the massive sea engagement of September 2, 31 B.C., was unequaled in ancient history. Octavian, Antony, and Cleopatra each sent in a few hundred ships to decide who would rule Rome, but Cleopatra suddenly and inexplicably pulled out of the battle, and Antony suffered an ignominious defeat. The battle sequence in *Cleopatra* is frighteningly realistic. Cleopatra's flagship carries on its deck a memorable relief map on which we can follow the maneuvers of the conflict. Antony's men clash their spears against their shields in a deafening roar; urgent signals are flashed with mirrors in the sunlight; and heavy war ships are equipped with massive ramming spikes. Ballistas send roaring, smoking firebombs of pitch into the quickly obscured sky. Trails of smoke and thunder lead to blazing ships. Helpless men swim for their lives amid the flotsam and fiery waters. Superior to the slightly smaller-scaled naval battles in *The Colossus of Rhodes* and *Ben-Hur* (1925), and to the exciting model work in the naval battle of *Ben-Hur* (1959), *Cleopatra*'s Actium brings the bitter struggle between Octavian and Antony to an appropriately horrifying conclusion.

The aftermath of *Cleopatra* was a bitter one. Elizabeth Taylor described its shooting as "a disease" and observed, "Surely that film must be the most bizarre piece of entertainment ever to be perpetrated."[13] Twentieth-Century Fox sued her and Burton for the adverse publicity they had stirred up, though the actors reportedly lost much of their money to taxes anyway. Hurt by severe editing, the film was savaged by most leading critics, and it suffered at the box office. But it did win four Academy Awards and was nominated for five others, and by the time ABC signed to show the film twice on prime-time television, Fox eventually broke even. (In any case, $160 million in profits from *The Sound of Music* more than made up for *Cleopatra*'s temporary losses.)

In the final analysis, *Cleopatra* is a mighty and a mighty choppy spectacle, with serious flaws and magnificent moments. The first half is generally superior to the second, and Fox might have profited from spending a little more money still to put a corrective finish onto the second half. The leading characters are well-developed people for the most part. A living, breathing Caesar, Antony, Octavian, and Cleopatra seem to be inextricably involved in a desperate era of politics, war, and destiny; we could say much the same about the principals in the making of the movie.

Oddly, even though the financial scare of *Cleopatra* almost single-handedly killed a genre of film that had been thriving for fourteen years, two of the next major "ancient" artistic projects were again about the life and loves of Cleopatra. The first was Samuel Barber's opera *Antony and Cleopatra,* composed for the inauguration of the new New York Metropolitan Opera House and produced by Franco Zeffirelli in 1966. Although the work was musically and visually impressive, the critics, tired of the Cleopatra-Antony romance and its association with extravagance, panned the otherwise gala evening.

The second was Charlton Heston's 1973 film version of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Heston featured himself as Antony, and his Cleopatra was the young South



43 The huge float on which Cleopatra enters Rome is shaped like a pharaoh wearing a *nemes*, the traditional squared headcloth. DeMille used this huge pharaonic background in his 1923 version of *The Ten Commandments*, and no doubt Fox's float originated in this particular bit of DeMillean grandeur.

42 Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra with her son Caesarion (Loris Loddi). Her headpiece consists of the *uraeus*—the band of snake heads symbolizing royalty—and the disk and tall horns with feathered filling. Her dress was made of actual gold thread at a cost of $6,500. Notice the authentic cobra design beneath her, and the pharaonic float behind her. The film follows ancient Egyptian tradition in presenting Cleopatra and her son (by Caesar) as the gods Isis and Horus incarnate.

44 This bracelet of gold and glass paste from the first century B.C. shows the winged goddess Isis. Cleopatra entered Rome as Isis incarnate, hence her dress of gold wings. The wings symbolize Isis's protection of the dead.

45 Pharaoh Tutankhamen's throne from c. 1340 B.C. The woman's crown is copied in *Cleopatra* (1963). This splendid piece of furniture is wood covered with gold leaf, and inlaid with faience, glass, and stone.

46 An ancient Egyptian canopic shrine with a cobra design in its upper half duplicated in the great float for Cleopatra's entry.

African Hildegarde Neil, who commands her Shakespeare but lacks the Nilotic allure commonly associated with the role. Like its predecessors, Heston's version is elaborate, making use of several exterior sets to enliven the bard's drama. At one point two gladiators battle each other during a critical meeting between Antony and Octavian, and elsewhere Cleopatra and her handmaidens lie leisurely about a river bier.

The most recent attempt at filming the tale is the 1999 television miniseries *Cleopatra,* which features the ingenue Leonor Varela in the title role, Timothy Dalton as Caesar, and Billy Zane as Antony. Compared with this romanticized nonsense, the Fox version of 1963 looks like a history course at Harvard. Caesar rises like Shamu from the rose-petal-strewn waters of Cleopatra's pool to shout about the glory of being named king for life. And when all goes badly for Antony at the battle of Actium, Cleopatra dons a helmet and sword and fights her own battle, eliminating one particularly ominous Roman by slashing him in the groin. Theda Bara never vamped any Roman so blatantly!

Octavian's victory over Antony and Cleopatra at Actium ended once and for all the Roman Republic and gave birth to the Roman Empire. The Senate "voluntarily" confirmed the appointment of the successors of Augustus, and the next four Julio-Claudian emperors—Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero—have all found their way into film history. From what clues we have, *I, Claudius* (1937) might have become one of the finest films Joseph von Sternberg ever directed, but it was never completed. Based on Robert Graves's best-selling novel, the film contrasted the mysterious brilliance of Claudius (Charles Laughton) with the lasciviousness of his bride Messalina (Merle Oberon) and the wickedness of his predecessor Caligula (Emlyn Williams). Oberon barely appeared at all in the six weeks of shooting before her head went crashing through the windshield of her wildly chauffeured car; production of the film was immediately canceled. But surviving rushes that display Claudius's risible limp and stuttering tongue ("Nature never quite finished me!") and those that show him announcing to the shocked Senate that he will be their next emperor hint at how great this movie could have been. BBC brought the remarkable rushes out of obscurity in 1965 and featured them in a television program called *The Epic That Never Was.*

I, Claudius was produced by Alexander Korda, who was trying at the time to "out-Hollywood Hollywood" with his historical spectaculars *(Catherine the Great, The Private Life of Henry VIII).* Magnificent sets—including a full-scale replica of Augustus's Ara Pacis—were nearly dwarfed by the titanic performances of the cast. Augustus's eighty-year-old widow, Livia (Flora Robson), shakes and quivers with every feeble movement, yet she accurately reviles the young, beastly Caligula, calling him the "vilest, most despicable reptile the gods ever created. He's unscrupulous, dishonest—" "Vain, spiteful, lecherous, and cruel," interrupts the amused Caligula. "You flatter me."

Claudius, the buffoon with natural deficiencies who makes buffoons of all who underestimate him, lives on his pig farm writing books. His nephew Caligula calls him to Rome. When the self-glorifying Caligula "discovers" that he is becoming a god, he says to the groveling Claudius, "I am being reborn; it is painful to be one's mother. Well, you idiot, can't you see any change in me?" Claudius stammers: "I was blind n-not to see it at first. I w-w-was overc-c-come. I've b-b-been used to p-pigs." Von Sternberg also preserved Graves's accurate portrayal of the fawning and decadent Roman Senate under the Empire—the same Senate that might have accepted Caligula's horse to its membership. When one senator mocks Claudius's stutter, the emperor's uncle gently remarks, "I did not know you could also stutter; I thought your talents were confined to neighing like a horse."

Claudius's wife, Messalina, is one of the most notorious aristocratic sluts in history, and so she was a cinematic natural, featured in films in 1910, 1922, 1953, and 1960. Enrico Guazzoni's 1922 *Messalina* had stupendous settings and an artistically spectacular atmosphere, while Carmine Gallone's *The Affairs of Messalina* (1953), a low-budget, dull, subpar romance, would have perhaps fared better as one of his silent films. Two years later, however, Messalina was played with great verve by Susan Hayward in *Demetrius and the Gladiators.*

The two imperial predecessors of Claudius and his successor have appeared in important roles in a number of movies dealing with Christ and early Christianity. Tiberius was emperor when "that carpenter was crucified in the troublesome province of Judea" (as cinematic Roman generals are wont to say). He appears in *Ben-Hur* (George Relph) and *The Robe* (Ernest Thesiger). His successor, Caligula, plays a major role in *The Robe* (Jay Robinson) and its sequel *Demetrius and the Gladiators.* These films will be discussed in Chapter 5, which focuses on films of the New Testament. Bob Guccione's *Caligula* (1980) gave Malcolm McDowell a starring role as the depraved emperor. The film was the *Penthouse* magazine publisher's bold attempt at a mainstream pornographic release. He attached Gore Vidal's name to the project, attracted plenty of press attention, and hoped that perhaps the world's multiplexes were ready for a sex film. But the film offered much more X-rated sexual activity than history, and it spawned no mainstream heirs. It did pave the way, however, for a number of hard-core videos with titles like *Venus of the Nile* (1995), *Cleopatra's Bondage Revenge* (1985), *Rise of the Roman Empress* (1987), and *Rise of the Roman Empress II* (1990). Even HBO focused on a pornographic film with a classical title ("Eat-a-Puss Rex") in a 1995 episode of *Dream On* entitled "Am I Blue?"

Claudius's successor was the great maestro Nero (whose mother, Agrippina, allegedly poisoned Claudius with a plate of toxic mushrooms to "make room" for her son). His central role in the three versions of *Quo Vadis?* and *The Sign of the Cross* belongs to the discussion of films about early Christianity. Most of these Julio-Claudians have roles in the interminable made-for-television miniseries *A.D.,* which features Anthony Andrews as Nero, Ava Gardner as Agrippina, James Mason as Tiberius, and John McEnery as Caligula.

Nero himself rated ten dramatic films, not to mention two comedies. The 1922 *Nero,* directed by J. Gordon Edwards (Theda Bara's *Cleopatra*), had impressive natural scenery, with massive crowds, chariots, and all the other elements that go into making a vi-

47 Gladiators exercise in Carmine Gallone's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1926). Gallone reconstructed many buildings found during the excavations at Pompeii. The wall paintings and foreground statuary in this shot of the gymnasium are based on ancient Pompeian originals.

sual spectacle about the ancient world. Nero's most famous (if not factual) crime—his burning of Rome—is mightily reenacted, but flat acting and some uneven photography mar the film. Nero's infamous and sexy wife, Poppaea, whose name to this day in modern Italian means "chesty," is perhaps more evil that either history or drama demands. An earlier silent version by Ambrosio in 1909 has a smaller scope and is less historical: Nero suffers from a guilty conscience for executing the Christians! But the painted mattes are excellent pieces of trompe-l'oeil, and Nero's double-exposed "flights of fancy" are particularly entertaining. Poppaea herself was highlighted in Latium Film's *Poppea ed Ottavia* (1911), *Nero's Mistress* (1956), *Le Calde Notti di Poppea* (*The Hot Nights of Poppaea*, 1969), an Italian B-film by Primo Zeglio called *Nerone e Messalina* (1949), and Bruno Mattei's exploitation film *Nerone e Poppea* (1981), while Agrippina had her brief cinematic stardom in Guazzoni's *Agrippina* (1910).

Historical novels have supplied the story line for many of the more popular movies about ancient times. *Spartacus, Barabbas, The Robe, Cleopatra, Ben-Hur,* and *Quo Vadis?* all had their origins in the literary world. One of the most successful novels of this type, and one of the first, was Lord Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*. Set just before the catastrophic volcanic eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D., this novel involves a

48 The two prime ingredients in most of the early Italian spectacles about the ancient world—the arena and natural disaster. This is the amphitheater of Pompeii, with Mount Vesuvius in the background. Early Italian versions of *The Last Days of Pompeii* were actually shot here. Thought to be relatively safe today, Vesuvius has erupted in 1631, 1794, 1871, 1900, 1903, 1904, 1906, 1929, 1944, and, of course, 79 A.D.

handsome young Athenian named Glaucus who falls in love with the lovely patrician maiden, Ione, and who is in turn loved by the impoverished, blind flower girl Nydia. The insidious priest of Isis, Arbaces, falls in love with Ione and tries to take her away from innocent Glaucus. He cruelly dupes heartsick Nydia into giving Glaucus a magic philter. She thinks it will make Glaucus fall in love with her, but it actually makes him mad. Arbaces' scheme is that Ione will abandon the now-lunatic Glaucus in favor of the evil priest. Glaucus drinks the potion, raves all over the decadent city, and is arrested (at Arbaces' instigation) for the murder of Ione's brother. Glaucus must face the lions in the arena, but Nydia finds out about Arbaces' wicked machinations, reveals Glaucus's innocence, and turns the huge crowd at the arena against the priest. At this climactic point—Kaboom!—the volcano erupts. Nydia helps Glaucus and Ione to safety but kills herself when she realizes that she will never have Glaucus's love.

The first major screen production of *The Last Days of Pompeii* appeared in 1908; I have assessed its importance for the history of the cinema and this genre in particular in Chapter 1. Three more versions appeared in 1913, one of them starring Ubaldo Stefani as Glaucus. This version has a graceful pace not evident in most silent Italian epics. With some fine acting by Stefani and Fernanda Negri-Pouger (Nydia), the tale of magic and perfidy receives a charming interpretation. The special effects used for the rainstorm on Vesuvius, the dream of Arbaces, and the eruption are quite primitive compared with those in the Cines version of 1926.

Carmine Gallone directed that version; it starred an international cast of Maria Korda (Nydia), Rina De Liguoro (Ione), and Victor Varconi (Glaucus). Although both these versions take advantage of their Italian origins by shooting on location at the ruins

of Pompeii, the later version actually displays some fine reconstructions of real Pompeian buildings. With a superabundance of minor properties—fountains, urns, statuary, bowls, tables, jars, jewelry, signs, wall advertisements, frescoes—and some impressive crowd scenes in the forum and arena, this late silent spectacular was unfairly labeled "The Last Days of Italian Cinema."[14] Costing more than seven million lire (Korda alone received six thousand lire per day), the film ran into financial and business difficulties that anticipated those of Fox's *Cleopatra.* And like *Cleopatra,* the movie discouraged most film companies from filming in the ancient-spectacular genre for a few years. The production includes an impressive and daring banquet scene with bare-breasted dancers, realistic special effects during the eruption, and a clever insanity scene: Glaucus stares at a fresco of Zeus and the dancing Muses, and the figures on the wall suddenly come alive!

Shortly after RKO had devastated much of Manhattan in *King Kong*, the studio turned to the destructive powers of Vesuvius. RKO's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935) was produced, written, and directed by the same group of artists that created *Kong*, Merian C. Cooper, Ruth Rose, and Ernest B. Schoedsack, respectively. The music borrowed heavily from Max Steiner's *Kong* score; a few motifs are directly copied. The special effects belong again to the technical wizardry of Willis O'Brien.

This RKO version changes the novel's narrative, as bulky Marcus (Preston Foster) loses his once-happy blacksmith's life and bitterly learns that money is everything. He becomes a gladiator, and with numerous *morituri te salutamus*es and many victories, he becomes famous and fabulously rich. He travels to Judea, where he meets Pontius Pilate (Basil Rathbone) and a certain bearded Healer from Bethlehem. (RKO used cinematic license to move the eruption of Vesuvius back a few decades.) This straightforward melodrama maintains its exciting pace from beginning to end. It is energized by the addition of a robust Burbix (Alan Hale Sr.) and an insensitive Roman prefect (Louis Calhern). In the climactic eruption scene, O'Brien conjures a frightening mix of deadly sparks and flames, crumbling buildings, catapulted embers, thick smoke and dust, molten lava, and human panic.

If it was filmed in Italy in the silent era, you can be sure it would be filmed again in the early 1960s. Right on schedule, a new version of *The Last Days of Pompeii* was released in 1960, starring Steve Reeves, Christina Kaufmann, and Fernando Rey (Arbaces). Sporting a funky temple of Isis, complete with a hidden treasure vault and trap door, this film combines the Christian theme of the 1935 version with the novel's emphasis on the evil of Arbaces. A muscleman epic from start to finish, with every character either angelic or devilish, this entertaining film concludes with Reeves's triumph in spite of the volcano. The 1984 made-for-television version directed by Peter Hunt featured Franco Nero as Arbaces and Olivia Hussey as Ione. Like most television miniseries of the era, this version of *The Last Days of Pompeii* has the filmmaker's most precious luxury: almost unlimited time. But also like most television miniseries of the era, this film demonstrates why most films are better off telling a story in two hours, before tedium sets in and the director's attention to detail replaces dramatic tension. Writer Carmen Culver *(The Thorn Birds)* also

added a number of new subplots, defeating the purpose of having the extra time to tell the original story.

The second century A.D. brought the zenith of the Roman Empire, with relative peace presided over by sane, even excellent emperors, whose successions followed smoothly. Good governance, bad drama: few films. One cinematic representative from this pax Romana was another film adaptation of a Shaw play, *Androcles and the Lion* (1952). Based on the original story told in Aulus Gellius's *Attic Nights,* the film portrays a humble Christian sentenced to death by the cruel Romans. Androcles is saved in the arena when the lion sent out to eat him turns out to be the same one from whose paw Androcles had removed a thorn a few weeks earlier. Shaw treats the entire affair with his irreverent witticisms and comically bitter sarcasm. The quality of the farce is enhanced by the intentional overacting of its players, particularly Caesar (Maurice Evans), who is portrayed as a middle-aged, vain, intellectual fool; Androcles (Alan Young), who is portrayed as a naive, humanitarian clown; and Ferrovius (Robert Newton), who is a big, strong, dirty Christian fanatic who loves to give his fellow men the chance to turn *their* other cheek ("I broke his jaw," he recalls of one such encounter, "but I saved his soul"). Jean Simmons, Elsa Lanchester, Victor Mature, and Jim Backus round out the cast. Occasionally hilarious, and always light as a feather, *Androcles and the Lion* boasts a sprightly, sometimes silly atmosphere. Androcles' baby-talk to the thorn-troubled lion is characteristic: "Has the thorn made you too sick to eat the nice Christian man for breakfast, liony-piony?" Incidentally, some of the sets for this RKO production were taken from the studio's *The Last Days of Pompeii,* and even Preston Foster can be glimpsed in the short gladiatorial sequence.

Another film made about the glorious and relatively stable second century A.D. was, ironically, Samuel Bronston's *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). Critics joked of the folly of cramming Gibbon's massive opus into 188 minutes, but in fact the film begins with the death of the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius (Alec Guinness) and focuses on the brief reign of demented Commodus. Because it was released one year after *Cleopatra, The Fall of the Roman Empire* had little chance for praise from the public; ancient spectaculars had had their day. Bosley Crowther described it as "a mammoth and murky accumulation of Hollywooden heroics and history."[15] It is true that some of the characterizations are rather flat and that history is occasionally distorted to no evident purpose, but Bronston and director Anthony Mann, who directed *Spartacus* for one week until he was replaced by Kubrick, deserve commendation for choosing the contrasting periods of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. They capture the frustration of a gentle, philosophical man of high virtue whose twenty-year rule was filled with little but bitter barbarian battles and frontier wars, and who leaves behind as son and successor a twisted, spoiled pervert who deserved the death by strangulation he historically received.

Much of the film's action is located not in the capital city of Rome but in the cold, isolated frontiers of Armenia and Pannonia (Austria and Yugoslavia). In Armenia we see a magnificent sandstone fortress of Oriental design, while the Pannonia scenes employ

one of the most atmospheric sets ever used in an historical movie. Not made to impress with grandeur and richness, the icy winter fortress in the barbarized European province gives us the lonely sense of exile to the ends of civilization. Heavy wooden beams and thick, snow-covered stone walls remind us that ancient life was not all polished marble and eating grapes. Modeled after as lofty an artistic enterprise as Trajan's column and approved by consultant Will Durant, this authentic winter fortress serves as the perfect isolated

49/50 Alec Guinness as the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (facing page, 1964). His squared beard, curled hair, heavy robe, and somber countenance can be found in ancient depictions of Marcus Aurelius. In a relief from the second century A.D., for example, the emperor sacrifices before a temple in Rome.

background in which Marcus Aurelius the Stoic must meet his expected death. Although some of Aurelius's dying words might seem to contradict those in his *Meditations*, the calmness with which he meets death, his frustration that the Empire has not yet seen the true pax Romana, and the philosophical loneliness he feels form a screen portrait of the wise stoic sovereign that any historian should appreciate. And for the average moviegoer, there is the tremendous pathos of it all.

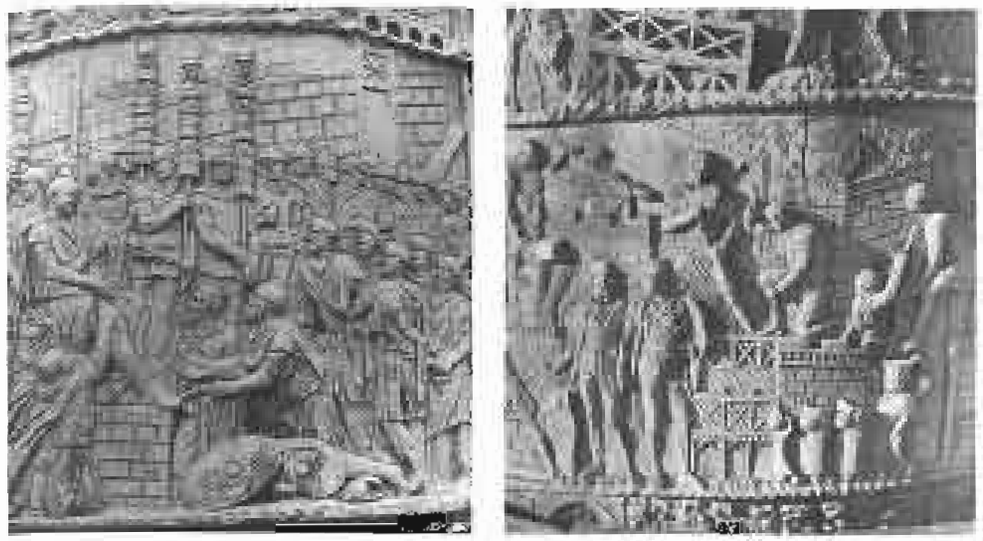
From the bleak Danubian frontier the film moves to a Rome glorying in its richest and most dominant era. Using much of his $16 million budget on sets, Bronston rebuilt a Roman Forum and Capitoline Hill that even Nero would have been reluctant to burn. Skillfully utilizing the panning camera of Robert Krasker, Mann directed Commodus's triumphal entry into Rome with an enormous breadth of scope. The procession passes a classically rounded temple of Vesta, a long aqueduct, horses with crisp red capes, soldiers in a variety of uniforms from all the territories of the Empire, towering victory columns, statue-filled archways, and a magnificent and lofty temple of Jupiter glistening

51 The cold, isolated Danubian headquarters of Marcus Aurelius in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Tributary princes ride before the seated emperor (Alec Guinness), with Timonides (James Mason) at one side and Livius (Stephen Boyd) on the other. Surrounding them are lictors bearing *aquilae* (eagle standards) and *fasces* (symbolic bundles of sticks with axes). To both sides of these can be seen Roman-numeraled legionary banners and standards.

in the bright sunlight. A deafening crowd cheers "Hail Caesar" while a somber slave stands behind Commodus and recites the traditional words "Remember, thou art mortal." Before long, Commodus would forget, even renaming Rome "The City of Commodus."

Even more authentic than the magnificent exterior sets are the elegant interiors with their delicate acanthus columns and hanging garlands; the walls have Pompeian-style pastel-colored frescoes between, deeply coffered sculpted ceilings and richly colorful mosaic floors. In the Capitoline Jupiter temple the huge chryselephantine (gold and ivory) cult statue sits amid rows of magnificently stout, fluted, marble columns.

The acting in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is superior as well. James Mason is cast well as the Stoic Timonides; confronted with a desperate barbarian chieftain (John Ireland) who is about to plunge fire into his face, Timonides philosophically suggests, "Let's look upon this logically." Christopher Plummer's Commodus is convincingly sinister and half-mad, and Sophia Loren (Lucilla) and Stephen Boyd (Livius) do the best they can with their disappointingly bland roles; the undeveloped love element between Lucilla



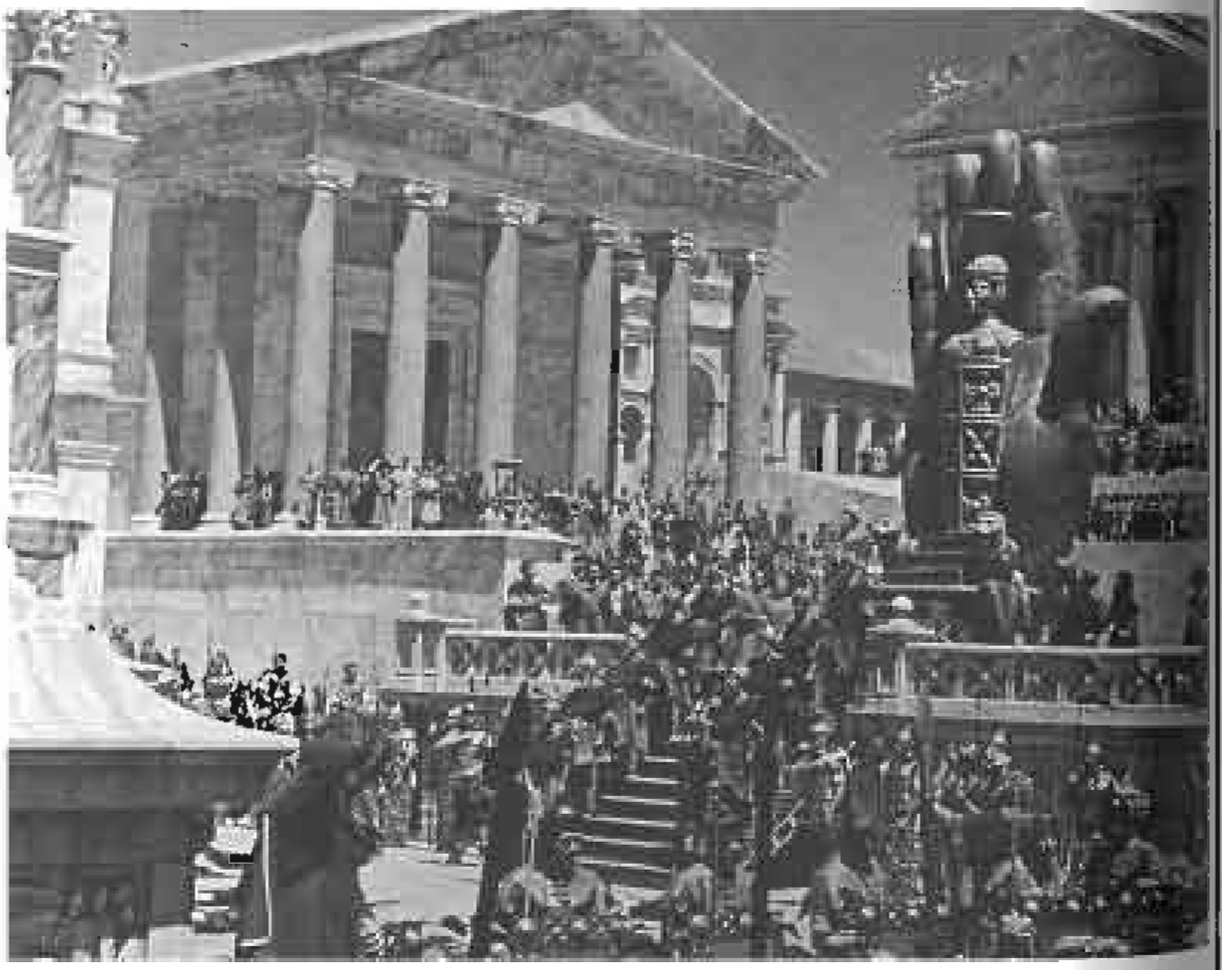
52/53 Two scenes from Trajan's column (c. A.D. 106) served as models for the Danubian frontier fort reconstructed for *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. In one scene the emperor Trajan, seated on a podium and surrounded by legionary standards and aides, receives enemy chieftains. Another scene shows Roman soldier-engineers building a fort much like the one in the film. Walls of large rectangular stones, wooden hatchwork, and crenellated ramparts typify Roman frontier architecture.

and Livius pulls the picture down from the heights it might have otherwise reached. But all the technical elements of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*—sets, costumes, the fine second-unit work of Yakima Canutt, the photography, and Dmitri Tiomkin's elusively insistent score—make this picture an aesthetically impressive exposition. The impressive double-decked square of thick shields in which Commodus and Livius fight to the death, the gigantic hand of Sabazius in the Forum from which the "divine" Commodus emerges, the exciting chariot chase in the snow, and Commodus's lavish baths—all merit more appreciation than they received in the wake of the *Cleopatra* debacle.

The very last scene, in which relatively virtuous Livius, triumphant over Commodus, is offered the position of emperor, while fat, rich, ambitious senators offer millions and millions of sesterces to buy the Empire's highest office, demonstrates in a few seconds the lack of leadership, the decadent politics, and the wild inflation that gradually gnawed away at the backbone of Roman society and left its carcass for hungry hordes of barbarians. This brief moment of shocking historicity subtly reminds us that great civilizations rarely fall to foreign conquerors before they are first felled from within.

The Fall of the Roman Empire was the twentieth century's final Roman history film. Thereafter the "ancient" genre entered an extended hiatus that lasted several decades. Curiously, *Gladiator* (2000), the first Roman history film thereafter, revisited some of the

54 Part of the vast Roman Forum reconstructed for *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Covering acres of (Spanish) ground, this reconstructed Rome includes the temple of Saturn, upper left, and temple of Jupiter, upper right. Emperor Commodus (Christopher Plummer) stands before the huge, bronze hand of Sabazius. On the stairway are his guard in Armenian leopardskin dress. (Each Roman legion dressed individually, according to locale, function, and tradition.) In the foreground the legionaries wear the *lorica segmentata* (segmented breast-cover of leather or metal); between them and the leopardskinned troops are several legionary officers in the more familiar anatomical cuirass (chest armor).

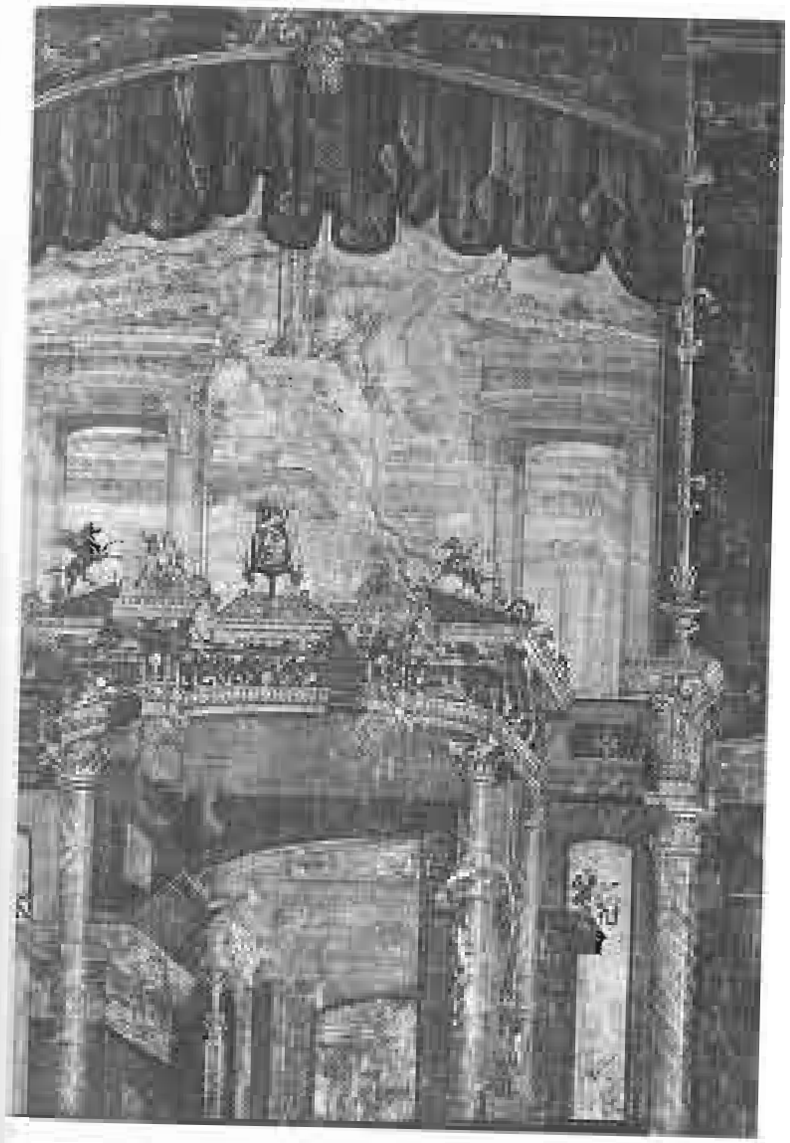


55 The Maison Carrée in Nimes, France. Built about 9 B.C., this Roman temple survives intact. Like many temples of the Roman Empire, it stands on a podium above ground level, is surrounded by fluted, acanthus-leaved, Corinthian columns, and is topped with a triangular roof. Today it lacks the roof-top finials placed on most ancient temples.

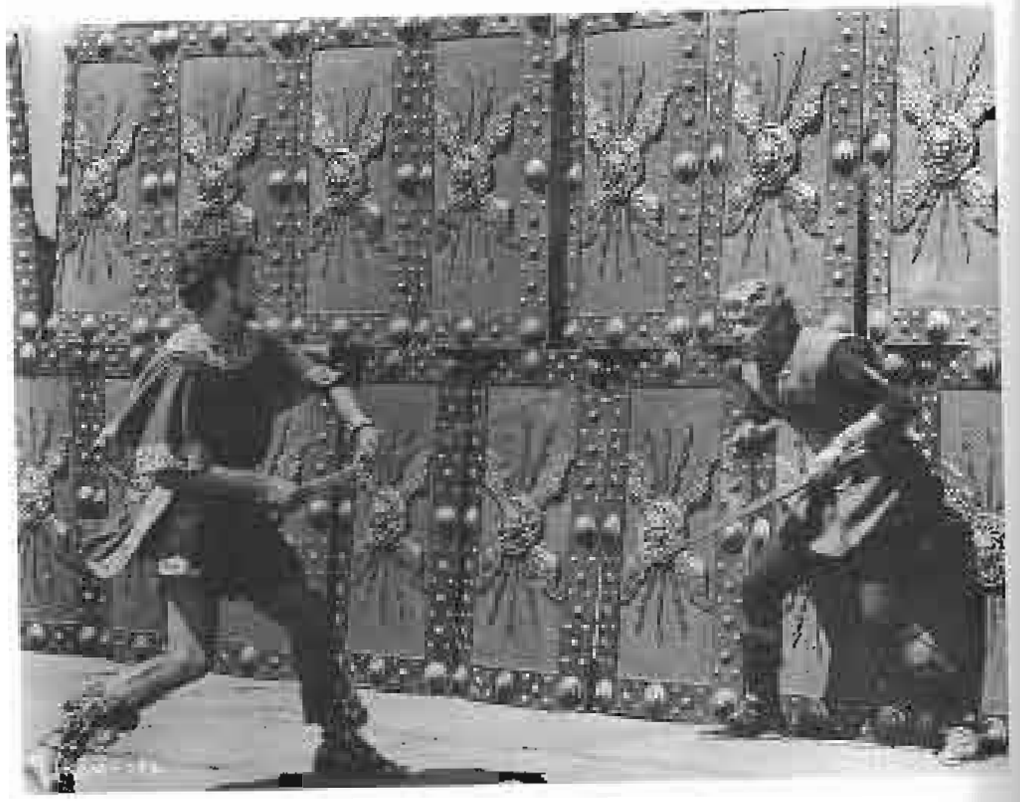
56 These Roman soldiers from Trajan's column wear the *lorica segmentata*. Their shields are *scuta* (the curved, rectangular type). Their modern counterparts in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* wear leather lorica and hold red, curved shields.

same events and characters—the death of Marcus Aurelius and the rise and fall of Commodus. Unlike his counterpart in *The Fall of the Roman Empire, Gladiator*'s Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix) is a young man (age nineteen) when he accesses to the throne. His sister Lucilla (Connie Nielsen) is accurately portrayed as a politically determined imperial widow who plots a failed revolt against Commodus; in the film her father, Marcus Aurelius, (Richard Harris) admits to her, "If only you'd been born a man, what a Caesar you would have made!" Commodus's murder of Aurelius, while not attested in our sources, is not beyond the realm of conspiracy theorists, and his swift termination of the German wars, his subsequent grand triumph into Rome, his initial popularity with the people of Rome, his antagonism toward the Senate, and his fondness for the gladiatorial arena are all well documented. Phoenix seems to have been born for the part of Commodus. His cleft lip and slumped shoulders give him a slightly off-balance appearance that barely masks the pervasive evil within his tormented soul.

David Franzoni's script gives Commodus ample opportunity for tyrannical duplicity and cruelty. His own father remarks that "Commodus is not a moral man." But more intellectually impressive is a verbal confrontation between Commodus and the philosopher emperor. Commodus laments that Aurelius admired the four Platonic/Aristotelian/



57/58 The interior sets in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* are brilliantly planned and varied. Here Livius (Stephen Boyd) and Lucilla (Sophia Loren) stand in a detailed, architecturally busy room (facing page). The three-dimensional portal, acanthus columns, delicate finials, festive garlands, statuary, and late-period Pompeii-styled frescoes give the true baroque feeling of Roman imperial life in the second century A.D. Adviser Will Durant may have suggested a Roman architectural source like this highly ornate fresco. The image, found in Herculaneum, which was destroyed along with Pompeii in the A.D. 79 eruption of Vesuvius, includes acanthus columns, garlands, statuary, and trompe-l'oeil architectural painting, all evident in the home of Livius in the film.



59 Commodus (Christopher Plummer) and Livius (Stephen Boyd) fight to the death with iron pikes in *The Fall of the Roman Empire.* Commodus's Praetorians form a double-decked square with their rectangular, metal-bound *scuta.* Commodus's leopardskin boots (the *crepidae* with open-toes and laced on the instep) perhaps suggest his obsession with the gladiatorial life. Livius wears *caligae*—heavy marching boots that are secured by shin-wrapping thongs.

Stoic virtues—wisdom, justice, fortitude, and temperance—while ignoring the virtues Commodus possessed, devotion to family and ambition for good purposes. This passage cleverly sidesteps *Fall*'s technique of articulating Aurelian philosophical meditations via Alec Guinness's voice-overs; Franzoni transfers Aurelian meditations into the mouths of others and uses them to build powerful emotional tensions.

Later in the film Franzoni features another Aurelian paraphrase just before the final battle between Commodus and Maximus (Russell Crowe): "Death smiles at us all, and all we can do is smile back." Indeed, the concept of death is ubiquitous in the film. The opening shot and its concluding echo show us Maximus's vision of the Land of the Dead, and periodically we are reminded that Maximus's yearning for an eternal Elysium makes the danger he faces as both a Roman soldier and a gladiator immaterial. Death is ever-present in battle and in the arena, and—so long as Commodus is involved—in politics as well.

This theme helps convey to us how relatively cheap life was in late antiquity, when so many different livelihoods courted death, but also how comforting it must have been to have a strong belief in the afterlife. This is most certainly a pagan film, not a Christian film.

As a film of the twenty-first century, *Gladiator* enjoys the economic and visual advantages not just of computer-generated special effects but of an entire generation's worth of developments in film technique. A model of the lower tier of the Roman Colosseum was physically constructed for the film, but the entire four tiers are re-created through computer generation, and the audience gets to look at this famous ancient monument from a variety of angles—an aerial shot and a selection of interior midrange and distance views, including the views from the imperial box and from the luxury box of the gladiator owner Proximo (Oliver Reed), as well as sweeping eye-level views, not to mention several views of the machinery below the sands of the arena. Several ground-level views create breathtaking impressions of the Roman arena in its heyday: the porphyry and black marble–faced interior Colosseum walls frame an arena floor strewn with fallen gladiators, their futile weapons, roaming tigers, and rose petals, all bathed in light either streaming through wooden latticework above the portals or diffused and mottled by the canvases drawn over the top of the Colosseum. These moments evoke the neoclassical nineteenth-century paintings of the sort that inspired Griffith and DeMille. In addition, the contemporary style of hyperrealism introduced in recent works by Oliver Stone and Steven Spielberg, accomplished mostly through rapid editing and variations in film stocks and developing techniques, creates dazzling moments of suggestive and intense but not overly grisly beheadings, amputations, and other mutilations that inevitably accompanied combat with swords.

The antiquity in *Gladiator* was not created from hard drives alone. Before shooting the introductory Germanic battle scene (in Surrey, England), director Ridley Scott ordered four hundred acres of forest burned, two thousand sets of armor constructed, and twenty-six thousand arrows prepared. The African provincial town of "Zucchabar" was constructed with tens of thousands of sun-dried mud bricks. And Scott's staff did its cinematic homework as well. Twice the *testudo* ("turtle") formation first used in 1963's *Cleopatra* is re-created; the Praetorians form the boundaries for the final battle between Maximus and Commodus as they did for the final battle of *The Fall of the Roman Empire;* the Minotaur gladiator is drawn from *Fellini Satyricon;* and the gladiatorial school owes much to that in *Spartacus.* Similarly, the idea of having an African slave (Djimon Hounsou) befriend the protagonist echoes both *Spartacus* and *Demetrius and the Gladiators.* The suggested incest between the Aurelian siblings no doubt owes its inspiration to television's *I, Claudius,* and the twirling airborn sword Maximus throws is a set piece of television's *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys.* The death of the film's hero, a plot concept rarely seen in Hollywood films since the 1960s, probably derives more immediately from the medieval epic *Braveheart* (1995), but *Spartacus* again is a likely source.

Gladiator reveals another twenty-first-century bias. Contemporary Hollywood family values interject themselves into the ancient Roman zeitgeist. Maximus is offered the

60 When portraying a mad Roman emperor the cinema can revel in his historically documented eccentricity. Compare this third-century A.D. imperial portrait of Commodus, complete with Herculean lionskin, club, and Golden Apples of the Hesperides, with the attire of Christopher Plummer's mad Commodus in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

throne of the empire but prefers to return home to his wife and son. Lucilla might also take the throne, but her main concern is for her son Lucius Veras (the younger). Commodus suggests that he would have been a better human if his father had loved him, and Marcus Aurelius admits that his son's faults are the failure of a neglectful father.

To emphasize this theme the film distorts history. The historical Lucilla was so ambitious of accession to the throne that she was exiled and then executed—not what one wants from one's mother. And Aurelius took Commodus with him on his most important campaigns and trusted his son with a series of titles, honors, and promotions toward assuming full imperial power. Maximus, who at one point calls himself an improbable "Maximus Decimus Meridius," is an invented character and therefore not subject to the same scrutiny. In fact, his wish to return not so much to his family but to his farm to harvest the crops recalls an early Roman exemplar of nobility—Cincinnatus, who rescued his country in a fifteen-day war and immediately retired back to his farm.

Such values of Republican Rome reverberate throughout the film. Derek Jacobi's character is named Senator Gracchus, recalling both the Republican Senator Gracchus

(Charles Laughton) in *Spartacus* and the historical populist reformers Tiberius and Gaius Sempronius Gracchus of the second century B.C. Maximus and others repeat an army slogan "Strength and honor." And in three scenes, including the last scene of the film, we see that Maximus honors his household gods, the Penates, which represent traditional Roman familial morality. In *HBO First Look: Gladiator,* director Scott said, "Togas and sandals and wreaths—I've tried to avoid that. Nobody lies down in this on a couch and eats grapes." To achieve his vision, he superimposed both modern familial sensitivity and ancient Roman Republican virtues onto a fascinating transitional decade of the Roman empire.

Sign of the Gladiator (1959) tells the story of Queen Zenobia (Anita Ekberg) and her mighty Eastern Empire of Palmyra. Accurately set in the third century A.D. in what is now Syria, this film (shot in Yugoslavia) has many technical errors. Hollow dubbing and slow-moving action are off-putting. The plot is less interesting than the historical facts. In reality, Zenobia led her armies against the Roman provinces of Asia Minor (Turkey) and Egypt and then proclaimed her young son as Emperor of Rome. The Roman Emperor Aurelian defeated her in battle, led Zenobia in chains to a massive triumph through the streets of Rome, and then kept her as a hostage for the rest of her life. Instead, this romantic pseudohistory has Zenobia fall in love with a Roman general, break with him, and, you guessed it, fall back in love with him after Aurelian pardons her. For those with sharp eyes, a copy of the frieze of embassies from Persepolis can be seen in Palmyra's main temple.

Fabiola, a tale of Christian martyrdom set circa 300 A.D. from Nicholas Cardinal Wiseman's 1854 novel, has been filmed twice. The silent version of 1916 suffers from a long initial period of tableau after tableau of introductions as director Enrico Guazzoni tries to introduce too many of the novel's characters. Once the story gets rolling, however, fine acting, varied and clever photography, and some delicately painted interiors appear. Climaxed by a somber early Christian funeral in the Roman catacombs and the baptism of the aristocratic Fabiola, the film reaches an inspiring conclusion.

The 1948 version of *Fabiola* was one of the most ambitious releases of postwar Italy. The impoverished Italian film industry was not responsible for the English sound track, which sounds as if it were dubbed by Martians; this was added in 1951 when a script prepared in part by Marc Connelly was dubbed over a much edited version of the 150-minute original release. The dark visual tones of the film were typical of the Italian neorealism of the time. (The film was produced the same year as Vittorio de Sica's *The Bicycle Thief.*) Of the noirish sequences, the most effective is the nocturnal romantic beach scene, but for *realismo* nothing surpasses the shadowy, sanguinary sequence showing St. Sebastian's sagittary martyrdom. The climactic gladiatorial sequences create a complex collage enlivened by oblique camera angles, close-ups of hungry lions, and wide shots of the convex arena and its large, ebullient crowds.

Constantine and the Cross (1962) takes place during the reign of the fourth-century emperor who first brought Christianity under the Empire's protection. The film keeps to the basic truth of how Constantine (Cornel Wilde) had to battle for the throne

61 Jack Palance (Attila) grimaces and threatens a Roman soldier in *Sign of the Pagan* (1955). Long hair, Genghis Khan mustache, and fur or skin clothing are the most obvious characteristics of a cinematic barbarian. The hide-covered wagons and standards of skulls and horns also differentiate Hun from Roman. The Roman soldier to the far left wears the *squamata*, or scale-armor. Palance played another barbarian—Alboin, king of the Lombards—in *Sword of the Conqueror*.

against numerous rivals, chief among them Maxentius and Licinius. Also of historical interest is Constantine's canonized mother, Helena. The emperor's romantic feelings toward his wife Fausta (Belinda Lee) seem exaggerated, given that the historical Constantine did not hesitate to put Fausta to death a few years into his reign. But on the whole, *Constantine and the Cross* contains enough sobriety to satisfy mildly demanding students of the era. The character of Constantine is one-dimensional, but Wilde has a noble bearing and a serious approach to his important position. He wears the uniform of a Roman general particularly well—a talent not shared by all actors. Mario Nascimbene's music carries many of the well-planned action scenes, and the evening sky over the famed Milvian Bridge has one of the richest Nile blues imaginable.

The script is well above average for an early 1960s Italian cloak-and-sandal film.

Maxentius remarks wisely as he holds up a bust of Constantine, "Our descendants have a right to know the faces of the great heroes of the past. We mere thinkers and authors must stay in the shadows and let posterity guess what we look like. This is the age of soldiers and warriors." When Constantine's handsome friend Hadrian is offered a glass of milk, his refusal—"Give me wine, chicken, anything but that!"—is historical as well as comic: Romans thought only barbarians drank milk. Before Constantine discovers the meaning of Christianity, he hears Maxentius say these historically ironic words: "These Christians are great actors; if they played Seneca, they'd be a great success."

The final battle at the Milvian Bridge—the battle before which Constantine sees in the sky his famous vision "In Hoc Vinces" (In this [sign] you will conquer)—shows some very clever strategy, exciting action, well-angled photography, and an authentic Roman stockade. These capable outdoor scenes and some beautiful interior sets, especially the red-bricked Roman Senate, the high vaults of the basilica, Fausta's marble pool, and the simple but elegant temple at Trevia, set the background for a solid cinematic rendition of Constantine's early reign. Some sloppy editing and uneven scenes keep the film from achieving a superior estimation, but it certainly rests a noble notch or two above most films of its ilk.

In the two centuries that followed Constantine, wave after wave of marauding Mongolian, Germanic, and Asian tribes forced their way into the outer fringes of the Roman Empire and into the history of Western man. These "barbarians," many of whom would be known within the next few centuries simply as Europeans, came in many nations and generations. One group, the Huns, surpassed the others in fame, largely because of the terrifying reputation of its leader, Attila.

Attila has appeared in three movies, including Febo Mari's 1916 *Attila*. In the two modern films, not surprisingly, he has been played by the heavies Anthony Quinn and Jack Palance. In *Attila the Hun* (1954), Quinn looks the "typical" barbarian in pants, sleeveless vest, thick mustache, and an earring; his hair falls in a strangely ferocious looking pigtail. He leads his fur-clad Huns against a badly governed Roman Empire. "Today Rome, tomorrow the world!" Attila predicts. The effeminate and childish Valentinian III is nominally the Roman emperor in 451, but his mother, Galla Placidia (Colette Regis), really runs things. The labored plot has Attila secretly loving Honoria (Sophia Loren), a relation of the Roman court, while he himself is loved by a fellow barbarian named Grune (Irene Papas). Although most of this is twisted history (Galla Placidia, for example, was already dead), the impetuous Attila did, as in the film, murder his brother Bleda and lead his thousands of hungry nomads against the Roman forces led by Aetius (Henry Vidal). *Attila* presents rousing action and offers a poignant contrast between the dissolute Byzantine court, with its colorful mosaics, and the barbarian hordes in their earthy encampments. The film ends with Attila giving way before the white-robed Bishop of Ravenna. The filmmakers got the church right, but historically Pope Leo is credited with saving Rome.

Sign of the Pagan (1955) presents us with a similar impression of the "Scourge of God." The actual history of Attila's barbaric invasions is juggled a bit more, but Jack Palance presents us with a frighteningly brutal portrait of the Huns' leader. This time Attila's Roman adversary is the Emperor Marcian (Jeff Chandler), but exciting battle sequences are curtailed for too much exposition of the politics of the period—which were far more interesting than the moviegoer would guess.

Four versions of *Theodora* have been filmed. Ernesto Pasquali directed the first, in 1909, and twelve years later Arturo Ambrosio directed a silent version based on the drama written by Victorien Sardou. Justinian, emperor of the Byzantine Roman Empire in the sixth century, falls in love with a streetwalker named Theodora (Rita Jolivet) and legally commits himself to a mésalliance. As empress, Theodora is cruel and so impractical that she eventually lets the arena's lions loose on the populace. Her subjects understandably resent this feline emancipation and storm the palace in the rousing climax. The film impresses us even today with its colossal marble columns and statuary and its crowds of thousands. The 1955 version of *Theodora* also offers us some splendid shots of Constantinople's hippodrome, palaces, and marketplaces, but—as with many "ancient" movies made in Italy in the early 1950s—the acting is stiff, the pace dull, and the dubbing out of whack.

Although *Titus* (1999), a film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus,* is set during the Roman Empire, the characters are not historical. There was no Roman emperor Saturninus, though the name and political status no doubt derive from Julius Saturninus, who claimed to be emperor in A.D. 281 but was quickly assassinated—by his own troops. The late-third-century date of the historical Saturninus seems about right as well, for the play's Roman Empire, in which the barbarian Gothic queen Tamora plays an important role, surely predates the institutionalization of Christianity. The Goths made their first significant contact with the Romans in A.D. 251. As for the name Titus Andronicus, the Bard had probably heard of the famous early Roman poet Livius Andronicus.

Because more than 110 films have developed or exploited events and characters from ancient history (not including Greek mytho-history), it would be impossible to discuss all of them in depth in one chapter. Final mention must be made, however, of the numerous "ancient history" films made in Italy during the sword-and-sandal flourish in the early sixties. Besides the previously mentioned films that were Italian-made yet widely released throughout the United States—*Damon and Pythias, The Colossus of Rhodes, Constantine and the Cross, The Giant of Marathon,* and so on—Italy also re-created the semilegendary battle between the triplet Horatii and the triplet Curiatii in *Duel of Champions* (1961) starring Alan Ladd; the Gallic attack on Rome and Camillus in 390 B.C. in *Brennus, Enemy of Rome* (1960); the exile of Coriolanus (Gordon Scott) in *Coriolanus: Hero Without a Country* (1962), the script of which is most definitely not from Shakespeare; the Roman sack of Corinth in *The Centurion* (1962); Lars Porsenna's attack on Rome in *Amazons of Rome* (1963) starring Louis Jourdan; Praxiteles' workshop in *The Gardens of Love*

(1960); Alexander's capture of Sardis in *Goliath and the Rebel Slave Girl* (1963); Caesar's struggles against Vercingetorix in *The Giants of Rome* (1963) and *The Slave of Rome* (1960); Lucullus's Eastern expedition in *Rome Against Rome* (1963); the Druid opposition to Rome in *The Viking Queen* (1966), which follows the story line of the opera *Norma;* the gluttonous emperor Vitellius in the atrociously titled *Terror of Rome Against the Son of Hercules* (1963); Pertinax's accession to the throne in *A Sword for the Empire* (1965); Caracalla's reign in *Gladiator of Rome* (1962); Alaric's sack of Rome in *The Revenge of the Barbarians* (1960); Alboin's rule over the Lombards in *Sword of the Conqueror* (1961); and several other films that vaguely toss in crudely drawn characters with names like Spartacus, Nero, Diocletian, and Commodus. The historicity of almost all of these early-sixties Italian films is slight; most producers, directors, and writers thought it was enough simply to base the film's narrative on an historical event or character. For the most part, they were wrong. History's fascination belongs not so much in its names, dates, and events as in its vivid and credible re-creation.

Jon Solomon

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To Lois, *quasi quasar universi mei*