

MAN VERSUS LION



It's a common scene in movies about ancient Rome: A gladiator fights a ferocious beast in the center of a packed arena. For centuries, we had only written accounts and ancient artwork to show that these battles really took place. But in April, scientists announced that bite marks found on the skeleton of a gladiator had likely come from a lion.

"It's the only physical evidence that gladiators fought animals," says Tim Thompson. He's the **anthropologist** who led the study of the skeleton.

Fierce Fighters

Nearly 2,000 years ago, gladiators were the star athletes of the Roman Empire (*see map*). They faced off with spears, swords, and other weapons. Some were prisoners or enslaved men who were forced to fight, while others volunteered in the hope of becoming rich and famous.

The Roman Empire



In 2004, researchers unearthed a gladiator cemetery in York, England. One skeleton had what appeared to be bite marks on its hip. Experts suspected that the marks came from a large animal. Thompson and his team set out to prove it.

Uncovering the Truth

First, the team approached zoos in England with an unusual request. They asked for bones that cheetahs, lions, tigers, and other animals had gnawed on. The researchers then compared

the bite marks on the chewed-up bones with those on the gladiator's skeleton. They concluded that the marks on the man had probably come from a lion.

Thompson says the bite to the hip didn't kill the gladiator

though. He thinks the fighter was already injured when the lion bit him and dragged his body away.

The findings show that there is still much to discover about the Roman Empire, Thompson says. For example, scientists haven't found a gladiator arena in York. Is one hiding beneath the surface?

—by Alicia Green

WORD TO KNOW

anthropologist *noun*. a scientist who studies the ways of life of different peoples and cultures