

Sword-and-Sandals Men With Back Story Revealed New York Times

The program might have been more timely in May 2000, when Russell Crowe stormed movie theaters in "Gladiator," or in October 1960, when Kirk Douglas and "Spartacus" ruled the land, but the Discovery Channel's look at "The Secret Life of Gladiators" on Monday is engaging nonetheless.

Credit the host. The program is the first installment of "Into the Unknown With Josh Bernstein," a new series featuring the genial fellow who made archaeology entertaining as the original host of "Digging for the Truth" on History.

Mr. Bernstein promises a broader focus in his latest series, though that's hardly necessary; ancient history has plenty of mysteries that could use his lively approach. In this episode, of course, his concern is the Roman Empire, and his premise is that those gladiators familiar from the movies are only part of the story, and what we know about them is not especially accurate.

That's no surprise — when has Hollywood ever not distorted history? — but it's a decent enough excuse to explore the far more interesting and more nuanced reality. Mr. Bernstein begins at a gladiator school in Rome, even doing a little gladiating himself. (Why is there a school to teach ancient gladiator skills? Who knows?) But he is smart enough not to let that silly bit go on too long, and soon we are hearing from well-chosen experts, including some who have found what they believe is a gladiator graveyard.

By the program's end we learn that gladiators did not always fight to the death; that though they were slaves, they had a certain celebrity status; that sometimes free citizens voluntarily became gladiators for that reason.

Gladiators emerge as people who were simultaneously worshiped and reviled. Just like so many of those in the modern-day spotlight.

INTO THE UNKNOWN WITH JOSH BERNSTEIN

The Secret Life of Gladiators

Discovery Channel, Monday nights at 10, Eastern and Pacific times; 9 Central time.

Josh Bernstein, host; Bernadette McDaid, Sarah Swingler and Mr. Bernstein, executive producers; Tom Brisley, senior executive producer; Jeremy Hall, series producer; Priya Ramasubban and Brian Lovett, directors; Ron Simon, senior story producer; Mike Gehman, editor.