**Spartacus** was trained at the gladiatorial school (ludo) near Capua, belonging to Lentulus Batiatus. In 73 BC, Spartacus and some 70 followers escaped from the gladiator school of Lentulus Batiatus. Seizing the knives in the cook's shop and a wagon full of weapons, the slaves fled to the caldera of Mount Vesuvius, near modern day Naples. There they were joined by other rural slaves. The group overran the region, plundering and pillaging, although Spartacus apparently tried to restrain them. His chief aides were gladiators from Gaul, named Crixus, Castus, Gannicus and Oenomaus. Other runaway slaves joined, until the group grew into an army of allegedly 120,000 escaped slaves. The slave-to-Roman citizen ratio at that time was very high, making this slave rebellion a very serious threat to Rome. The Senate sent a praetor, Claudius Glaber (his nomen may have been Clodius; his praenomen is unknown), against the rebels, with a militia of about 3,000. They besieged the rebels on Vesuvius, but Spartacus led his men down the other side of the mountain, to the rear of the Roman soldiers, and staged a surprise attack. Most of the Roman soldiers were killed in this attack, including Claudius Glaber........

Spartacus' forces defeated two more Roman legions sent to crush them, then settled down for the winter on the south coast, making weapons.By spring they marched north towards Gaul. The Senate, alarmed, sent two consuls, Gellius Publicola and Gnaeus Cornelius Lentulus Clodianus, each with two legions, against the rebels. The Gauls and Germanic peoples, who had separated from Spartacus, were defeated by Publicola, and Crixus was killed. Spartacus defeated Lentulus, and then Publicola. At Picenum in central Italy, Spartacus defeated the consular armies, then pushed north. At Mutina (now Modena) they defeated yet another legion under Gaius Cassius Longinus, the Governor of Cisalpine Gaul ("Gaul this side of the Alps").

Apparently, Spartacus had intended to march his army out of Italy and into Gaul (now Belgium, Switzerland and France) or maybe even to Hispania to join the rebellion of Quintus Sertorius. But he changed his mind and turned back south, under pressure from his followers, for they wanted more plunder. Although it is not known for certain why they turned back when they were on the brink of escaping into Gaul, it is regarded as their greatest mistake. Perhaps their many victories made them overconfident, or perhaps they believed that they would escape to Sicily as planned, and could plunder more in the meantime. There are theories that some of the non-fighting followers (some 10,000 or so) did, in fact, cross the Alps and return to their homelands. The rest marched back south, and defeated two more legions under Marcus Licinius Crassus, who at that time was the wealthiest man in Rome. At the end of 72 BC, Spartacus was encamped in Rhegium (Reggio Calabria), near the Strait of Messina (the "toe of the Italian boot"). Spartacus' deal with Cilician pirates to get them to Sicily fell through. In the beginning of 71 BC, eight legions of Crassus isolated Spartacus's army in Calabria. With the assassination of Quintus Sertorius, the Roman Senate also recalled Pompey from Hispania; and Lucullus from northern Anatolia where he was campaigning against Rome's most obstinate enemy Mithridates VI of Pontus. Spartacus managed to break through Crassus's lines, and escaped towards Brundisium (now Brindisi), but Crassus's forces intercepted them in Lucania, and the slaves were routed in a subsequent battle at the river Silarus. After the battle, legionaries found and rescued 3,000 unharmed Roman prisoners in their camp. 6,600 of Spartacus's followers were crucified along the via Appia (or the Appian Way) from Brundisium to Rome. Crassus never gave orders for the bodies to be taken down, thus travelers were forced to see the bodies for years, perhaps decades, after the final battle.

Around 5,000 slaves, however, escaped the capture. They fled north and were later destroyed by Pompey, who was coming back from Roman Iberia. This enabled him also to claim credit for ending this war. Pompey was greeted as a hero in Rome while Crassus received little credit or celebration. It is unknown whether or not Spartacus died in the battle at Silarus or survived and was crucified along with his men. Spartacus' body was never found (Appian, The Civil Wars 1.14.120). Crassus was captured and killed years later while campaigning in Parthia.