A small part of scientific publications concerning archaeological finds related to the gladiators in the territory of present Bulgaria:

Source: Gladiatorial games in Odessos and Marcianopolis: A special impact of Pax Romana on the public life of two cities in Moesia Inferior.

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Odessos and Marcianopolis

The popularity of gladiatorial combats among the citizens of Odessos during the 2nd-3rd century AD has further been testified by several interesting small finds discovered mostly in graves of the Roman necropolis of the city. A unique piece related to this subject is a bronze balsamarium in the shape of a gladiatorial helmet found in a late 2nd early 3rd century AD grave. The helmet belongs to the group of helmets typical for both samnites and secutores.
Major ancient city in the region, situated about 30 km west of Odessos, was the already mentioned Marcianopolis (modern Devnya), site of a small Thracian village by Trajan after his second Dacian war in AD 106 as a city of the Greek type, but Latin language was also in use by local residents. The period of Marcianopolis’ real growth and flourishing economy and culture actually started under the Antonine dynasty. Under Commodus (180-192), the city was already a large centre of agriculture and crafts in the Eastern part of Moesia Inferior and was granted the right to mint its own bronze coins. As stated above, in AD 250-251 the city was totally ruined and reduced to ashes by the Goths. Soon after, Marcianopolis managed to emerge from the ashes in an even better condition. This was due to its strategic importance as a crossroad for transferring Roman troops and supplies north of Haemus and for defending the deep hinterland of the Danubian Limes.
According to suggestions about cavea structure, it consisted of twelve rows of stone seats/benches, each 44 cm high. These were made of large well-smoothed pieces of local limestone 1.40-1.50 m long, and were divided into twelve sectors by fourteen stone-cut staircases. A protective wall or podium, also made of stone, ran along the arena right in front of the cavea, with a path in-between. It is supposed that the overall height of all stone-made benches was about nine m and that the cavea ended in high arches constructed in opus mixtum, above the topmost row of benches.

Some seats had inscriptions displaying the names of their privileged owners. An inscription of the late 2nd–first half of the 3rd century AD on a broken piece of bench mentions the name of a certain Alexan[dros], an eminent citizen and possibly sponsor of the amphitheatre construction or of particular gladiatorial games.

Archaeological discoveries and ruins of Roman architectural monuments in Marcianopolis revealed that gladiatorial games were also organized in the city. The main proof for this, an amphitheatre of irregular oval (elliptic) shape, was excavated in 1958-1961 (Fig. 12). It had a total area of approximately 4000 sq. m and its outer dimensions were exactly 65.30 x 58.80 m with an arena of 46.80 x 39.80 m and a possible height of ca 7-9 m, while other scholars give rounder numbers: 70 (66) x 60 (65) m, and 46 (47) x 40 m for the arena. There were two entrances located at the south and north ends of the long axis of the structure.
The few scholars who have discussed this important archaeological site make different suggestions as to the possible number of spectators at the gladiatorial games or hunting performances. Calculations recently made by state-of-the-art methods lead to the assumption that the amphitheatre of Marcianopolis could seat about 4000, rating it as a medium-sized one among all similar structures in the Roman Empire.

One of the gravestones belonged to a certain Smaragdos, a typical name for a gladiator (and also for a slave). Unfortunately, on the preserved portion of the inscription, there is no reference as to his specialty on the arena. According to existing data, during his lifetime Smaragdos won nineteen duels and “killed many enemies”, before being killed in his last twentieth fight. It seems that this excellent combatant had resided longer in Marcianopolis, because he had a family there. The inscription mentions that the tombstone was erected on his grave by his wife. Another
possibility is that he was a free-lanced peregrine or volunteer gladiator - a category, which, though a rarity, did exist in the Roman Empire.

Much more information provides the funeral monument of a certain, also “most victorious” gladiator from Marcianopolis, named Markianos, whose gladiatorial nickname was Polyneikes – i.e. “The many times victorious one” (Fig. 17). He is depicted in relief, with a short sword or dagger in his right hand, spherical visored helmet and large rectangular shield (scutum) in his left hand, but only one greave on the left leg, which generally was a distinguishing mark of the secutores. According to this relief and the inscription engraved below it, Markianos was a secutor, but some lines of his tombstone inscription reveal that he also appeared as a myrmillo in four fights. The grave monument was dated to the 2nd-early 3rd century AD.49 Such combined use of different fighting techniques was not common among gladiators and we can conclude that Markianos Polyneikes was a very skilful fighter indeed.

Epigraphic monument of Ancient Greek is worded:

I, Tosin Marcian, which I was very victorious Secutor and Murmillo and simultaneously with this I was able well to fight with the net, on these Imperial games in divine Marcianopolis, as I died, o unlucky I, I lay here.

Something of this sort smile emoticon.

Translation Archeological Museum of Devnya
The introduction of gladiatorial games in Odessos and Marcianopolis, two of the most important cities north of Haemus (the Balkan Mountain), seems to have happened later than in other Roman cities belonging to this large region. The games were accepted by the residents of both cities as a result of a steady and sustainable enforced Roman influence on public life in a traditionally Greek-orientated civic environment of the region.

The gladiatorial games were, beyond any doubt, among the lifestyle novelties introduced by the Romans in the Balkan provinces of the empire after the 1st century AD. These games had no earlier tradition in democratic Greek cities and their apoikiai, or in ancient Thrace in general, but their popularity in Rome was enormous and they were "totius orbi desideratum"3, to quote a gladiatorial troops’ owner from Pompeii.

Odessos was an ancient Greek apoikia (colony) on the Western Black Sea coast, which, after its definitive incorporation into the Roman Empire in AD 12 (or in AD 15 at the latest), fell within the province of Moesia. In the late 1st century AD the province was divided in two, its eastern part renamed to Moesia Inferior. Not before long, the city became a major trade port of the new province and quickly emerged as a main supplier of imported goods. Its experienced native merchants met not only their own wealthy coresidents growing needs for luxury wares, but also those of the numerous villa rusticae owners in the countryside and of the provincial craftsmen, all getting better-off under the new favorable economic climate.

Archaeological evidence such as inscriptions and illustrative scenes carved in relief, as well as some objects of everyday life discovered in Odessos, reveal part of gladiatorial games’ history. In spite of the fact that these cruel entertainments started to take place in the city probably somewhat later than in other large Roman cities on the Balkans (maybe in the second half of the 2nd century AD), they manifested a surprisingly wide variety of fights presented on the local arena. The five marble reliefs (or six, because there are doubts about the Odessos-based origin of one) and the inscriptions discovered so far and preserved in various portions, offer a lot of information. Some of these finds are gravestones while others are invitations ad munera of rich relief decoration, depicting various scenes of the combats presented to the public.

The games in Odessos also offered several types of venationes or combats between various wild beasts plus hunting acts, some of them involving specially trained hunting dogs to accompany the hunters. The relief fragments reveal the appearance of taurarii (combatants against wild bulls), ursarii (combatants against bears) and possibly other
Combatants, who would fight against panthers. A relief, partially preserved on the large marble invitatio ad munera of AD 227, depicts a peculiar combat between a wild bull and an unarmed fighter wearing protective helmet. This could be a special circus performance: some kind of gymnastics performed by an acrobat amid or in the presence of wild animals. No amphitheatre has been excavated in Odessos so far, and the general layout of the city, spreading on a number of high slopes along Varna Bay, was not suitable for the construction of such large flat structure within the city walls. Therefore, it is quite possible that the stage of the city theatre served as arena for the gladiatorial games. There are some archaeological data pointing at a large restructuring of the theatre, undertaken in the late 2nd-early 3rd century AD or rather of a new facility being erected: i.e. this happened during the rule of the Severan dynasty. Then some alterations might have been done to convert it in a semi-amphitheatre, thus making possible its use also as an arena for the gladiatorial games organized in the city, as was the case with the theater in Philippopolis (Plovdiv) located in the Roman province of Thrace.

Another option for the authorities of Odessos was to stage the gladiatorial shows in the large palaistra of the vast Roman baths in the city. This could have been made possible through a temporary restructuring of the space by adding wooden rows of seats/benches in tiers and a protective wall (podium) erected in front of them to guard the spectators from the wild beasts or from possible injuries, which might be caused to the viewers by accident. The thermae of Odessos were constructed in the second half of the 2nd century AD and continued to be in use until the late 3rd century AD, when probably an earthquake put an end to its existence as city’s major public space of the Roman period. The palaistra space of ca 850 square m was perhaps suitable for games of only shorter duration and limited number of gladiatorial combats. Nonetheless I must note that the large invitatio ad munera of AD 227 was discovered within the ruins of the baths and next to the palaistra.
Judging by inscriptions dedicated to—or mentioning gladiators, discovered in Moesia and Thrace, gladiatorial combats were first presented to the local audience probably shortly before or around mid-2nd century AD. This was the time when due to a successful economic development in both provinces under Trajan and Hadrian, the few newly established there or already existing cities flourished and many of the larger settlements were granted by the emperor the urban status of coloniae or municipiae. The quick and stable economic progress of the region triggered in its residents an increasing need for luxury and various cultural activities, which the authorities of larger towns and cities were expected to satisfy.

In Rome itself these activities were considered to be a citizen’s right and therefore provided gratuitously to all free individuals, women inclusive. This providing of entertainment was obviously a practical application of the second part of Juvenal’s famous and very succinct “Panem et circenses”

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**Fig. 5. Combat between a secutor and retiarius, detail of the 227 AD**

*invitatio ad munera*

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VLPIA • AVGVSTA • TRAIANA. Historical Museum of modern Stara Zagora
Gladiator (not specifically described). Judging from the helmet depicted on the ara is from the type of Secutor. II or III century AD. Historical Museum of modern Stara Zagora or the antique VLPIA • AVGVSTA • TRAIANA

Gladiator (not specifically described). Judging from the trident depicted in his left hand on the ara he is from the type of Retiarius. II or III century AD. In his right hand he probably holds Quadrant.

Detailed information published by Professor Vagalinski in his book "Blood and entertainment. Sports and gladiatorial games in Hellenistic and Roman Thrace". "two Ara were found in 80 and 90 years of the last century and were part of the parapet surrounding the arena."
Gladiator club · MARCIANOPOLIS ·