

MARCUS LICINIUS CRASSUS

What made him throw it all away?

COMPANION STUDY GUIDE | KEY FACTS - TIMELINE - QUESTIONS - SOURCES



Who was Crassus?

Marcus Licinius Crassus was a Roman politician, commander and financier whose wealth and influence made him one of the dominant figures of the late Republic. He helped suppress the revolt led by Spartacus, later formed a political alliance with Julius Caesar and Pompey, and finally sought military glory in the east. His campaign against Parthia ended in catastrophic defeat at Carrhae in 53 BC.

Why he matters

Crassus connects several turning points in Roman history: Sulla and the politics of the late Republic, the Spartacus revolt, the rise of Pompey and Caesar, the First Triumvirate and Rome's difficult eastern frontier. His career also raises questions that remain recognisable today - how wealth becomes political power, how rivalry shapes judgement, and why success in one field can create dangerous confidence in another.

Questions from the Hall

- How did Crassus build wealth and convert it into political influence?
- Why did Rome turn to him during the Spartacus revolt, and what does the use of decimation reveal about Roman military discipline?
- Why did rivalry with Pompey matter so much to Crassus?
- Was the alliance of Caesar, Pompey and Crassus a partnership of convenience rather than shared principle?
- Why did Crassus seek a major eastern command when he already possessed wealth and status?
- At Carrhae, which mattered more: bad intelligence, unfamiliar enemy tactics, poor strategic judgement or personal ambition?
- When success feeds ambition, at what point does ambition begin to command the successful person?

Names and terms to know

Spartacus	Leader of the major slave revolt in Italy, 73-71 BC.
Decimation	Severe Roman disciplinary punishment imposed on selected units after failure or mutiny.
Pompey	Leading Roman commander and Crassus' political rival and partner.
Julius Caesar	Third member of the political alliance later called the First Triumvirate.
Carrhae	Battle in 53 BC where Crassus' army was defeated by Parthia.
Parthia	Major eastern power whose mounted archers and cavalry challenged Roman methods.

A SHORT ROUTE THROUGH THE STORY

c. 115 BC Born into the Licinian family at Rome.

87 BC Flees political violence in Rome; later returns during Sulla's civil war.

73-71 BC Spartacus revolt. Crassus receives command and defeats the rebel army.

70 BC Crassus and Pompey serve together as consuls.

60s BC Competition, wealth and politics draw Crassus deeper into the struggle for influence.

c. 60 BC Crassus, Pompey and Caesar cooperate in the political arrangement later called the First Triumvirate.

55 BC Crassus again becomes consul and gains the province of Syria.

54-53 BC Campaigns eastward against Parthia.

53 BC Roman defeat at Carrhae; Crassus is killed during the failed campaign.

Causes and consequences to consider

Wealth and influence: Crassus accumulated extraordinary resources and used patronage, loans and political relationships to expand his position. **Rivalry:** Pompey possessed the military prestige Crassus wanted.

Opportunity: The alliance with Caesar and Pompey gave all three men leverage against senatorial opposition.

Overreach: The Parthian campaign placed a Roman army in conditions where enemy mobility and archery mattered greatly. **Aftermath:** Crassus' death removed one side of the three-man balance, leaving Caesar and Pompey increasingly opposed.

Principal research anchors

- **Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*** - the fullest surviving ancient biography; indispensable, but written long after Crassus and shaped by moral interpretation.
- **Appian, *Civil Wars*** - important for the Spartacus revolt and the political conflicts of the late Republic.
- **Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, Book 40** - a later narrative source for the Parthian campaign and Carrhae.
- **Churchill Archives Centre, Dardanelles material** - used for the film's cross-century comparison of ambition, strategic judgement and failed expeditionary warfare.
- **Modern scholarship** - useful for checking chronology, Roman institutions, military practice, Parthian methods and the limits of hostile ancient traditions.

A note on legend

Stories about Crassus became increasingly dramatic after his death, including the famous molten-gold tradition. Such tales reveal how later writers remembered his reputation for wealth and greed, but they are not all equally secure as factual reporting. The Vicarii approach is to distinguish the event - defeat and death after Carrhae - from later embellishment wherever the evidence allows.

How to use this guide

Use the timeline for quick revision, the Hall questions for discussion or essay planning, and the source notes to compare ancient narrative with later interpretation. Useful search terms include Marcus Licinius Crassus, Spartacus revolt, Roman decimation, First Triumvirate, Julius Caesar, Pompey, Carrhae, Parthia, Roman Republic, wealth and political power, military ambition and ancient sources.

Vicarii Productions approach: We do not put historical figures on trial. We bring surviving evidence back into the room, separate documented events from later legend where possible, and ask the questions fame has pushed aside.