**Marcus Licinius Crassus** (ca. 115 BC – 53 BC)

Crassuswas a Roman general and politician who suppressed the slave revolt led by Spartacus, and entered into the political alliance known as the First Triumvirate with Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus and Gaius Julius Caesar. At the height of his fortune he was allegedly worth more than 200,000,000 sestertii. Considered the wealthiest man in Roman history, and perhaps the richest man in all history, he is ranked in the top 10 wealthiest historical figures. Crassus nonetheless desired recognition for his military victories in the form of a triumph. This ambition for acclaim eventually led him into Syria, where he was defeated and killed.

**Crassus and Spartacus**

Crassus was rising steadily up the political ladder (cursus honorum) when ordinary Roman politics was interrupted by a rebellion of Roman slaves under the leadership of Spartacus (summer 73 BC to spring 71 BC

The Senate did not initially take the slave rebellion seriously, until it became clear that Rome itself was under threat. Crassus offered to equip, train, and lead new troops, at his own expense, after several legions had been defeated and their commanders killed in battle or taken prisoner. Eventually, Crassus was sent into battle against Spartacus by the Senate. At first he had trouble both in anticipating Spartacus' moves and in inspiring his army and strengthening their morale. When a segment of his army fled from battle, abandoning their weapons, Crassus revived the ancient practice of decimation - i.e., executing one out of every ten men, with the victims selected by drawing lots. Plutarch reports that "many things horrible and dreadful to see" occurred during the infliction of punishment, which was witnessed by the rest of Crassus' army. Nevertheless, according to Appian, the troops' fighting spirit improved dramatically thereafter, since Crassus had demonstrated that "he was more dangerous to them than the enemy."

Afterwards, when Spartacus retreated to the Bruttium peninsula in the southwest of Italy, Crassus tried to pen up his armies by building a ditch and a rampart across an isthmus in Bruttium, "from sea to sea." Despite this remarkable feat, Spartacus and part of his army still managed to break out. On the night of a heavy snowstorm, they sneaked through Crassus' lines and made a bridge of dirt and tree branches over the ditch, thus escaping.

Sometime later, when the Roman armies led by Pompey and Varro Lucullus were recalled to Italy in support of Crassus, Spartacus decided to fight rather than find himself and his followers trapped between three armies, two of them returning from overseas action. In this last battle, Crassus gained a decisive victory, and captured six thousand slaves alive. During the fighting, Spartacus attempted to kill Crassus personally, slaughtering his way toward the general's position, but he succeeded only in killing two of the centurions guarding Crassus. Spartacus himself is believed to have been killed in the battle, although his body was never recovered. The six thousand captured slaves were crucified along the Via Appia by Crassus' orders. At his command, their bodies were not taken down afterwards but remained rotting along Rome's principal route to the South. This was intended as an object lesson to anyone who might think of defying Rome in the future.

Crassus effectively ended the slave revolt, but his rival Pompey stole the victory with a letter to the Senate, in which he argued that Crassus had merely defeated some slaves, while Pompey had won the war. This caused much strife between Pompey and Crassus. Crassus was honored only with an ovation (less than a triumph), even though the danger to Rome and the destruction to Roman lives and property merited much more. As a result, Crassus' animosity towards the upstart Pompey increased.

Nevertheless, Crassus was elected consul for 70 BC, alongside Pompey. In that year, he displayed his wealth by entertaining the populace at 10,000 tables and distributing sufficient grain to last each family three months.

**Death of Crassus in Syria**

Crassus received Syria as his province, which promised to be an inexhaustible source of wealth. It would have been had he not also sought military glory and crossed the Euphrates in an attempt to conquer Parthia. Crassus attacked Parthia not only because of its great source of riches, but because of a desire to match the military victories of his two major rivals, Pompey the Great and Julius Caesar.

His legions were defeated at Carrhae (modern Harran in Turkey) in 53 BC by a numerically inferior Parthian force. Crassus' legions were mainly infantry men and were not prepared for the type of swift, cavalry-and-arrow, attack that the Parthian troops were particularly adept at; the same type of attack that Genghis Khan later immortalized. The Parthians would get within shooting range, rain a barrage of arrows down upon Crassus's troops, turn, fall back, and charge forth with another attack in the same vein. They were even able to shoot as well backwards as they could forwards, increasing the deadliness of their onslaught. Crassus refused his quaestor Gaius Cassius Longinus's plans to reconstitute the Roman battle line, and remained in the testudo formation thinking that the Parthians would eventually run out of arrows.

Subsequently Crassus' men, being near mutiny, demanded he parley with the Parthians, who had offered to meet with him. Crassus, despondent at the death of his son Publius in the battle, finally agreed to meet the Parthian general. However, when Crassus mounted a horse to ride to the Parthian camp for a peace negotiation, his junior officer Octavius suspected a Parthian trap and grabbed Crassus' horse by the bridle, instigating a sudden fight with the Parthians which left the Roman party dead, including Crassus. A story later emerged that after Crassus' death the Parthians poured molten gold into his mouth as a symbol of his thirst for wealth.