

CHAPTER 34

Roman Beast Hunts

Chris Epplett

1 Introduction

While gladiatorial combats and chariot races are perhaps the spectacles most commonly associated with ancient Rome in modern perception, a third type of spectacle, the *venatio* (beast hunt), was also popular among Romans. Animal spectacles of one kind or another, in fact, were staged over a longer period of time in Roman territory than gladiatorial contests.

A variety of sources attest to the popularity of such events in the Roman world. Writers such as Pliny the Elder and Suetonius often mention especially noteworthy spectacles staged in Rome, including *venationes*. Inscriptions commemorating games staged by wealthy residents of dozens of different communities demonstrate the ubiquity of animal spectacles over the centuries of Roman rule. Artistic evidence, in particular mosaics from North Africa, leave no doubt that *venationes* were memorable occasions.

Staged animal hunts, typically with aristocrats and monarchs as active participants, were a staple of many societies in Asia and Europe for millennia (Allsen 2006; Kyle 2007: 23–37), so it is not surprising that such events also attracted a wide following in ancient Rome. What is relatively rare in terms of the hunts in Rome is that they did not normally include the direct participation of either rulers or the aristocratic elite. Nonetheless, Roman animal spectacles served many of the same ideological and propagandistic functions as those found elsewhere.

2 Origins and Development of the Beast Hunts in Republican Rome

When Romans began staging animal spectacles in the third century BCE, they were aware of and influenced by the practices of other cultures in the Mediterranean, most notably

A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity, First Edition.

Edited by Paul Christesen and Donald G. Kyle.

© 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2014 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

the Greeks. Spectacles involving trained animals (e.g., bears, lions) took place periodically in Greek city-states such as Athens; the earliest relevant evidence dates to the fourth century (see, for example, Isocrates *Antidosis* 213), but such shows probably had a long history in the Greek world before that time. Contact between Rome and the Greek East intensified over time, and Greek animal showmen could have brought their talents to new audiences in Italy and thereby helped acclimatize the latter to animal displays (Loisel 1912: 90–1).

Another, probably more important, influence was the magnificent procession of exotic animals staged by Ptolemy II on the streets of Alexandria in 275/4 BCE, an event which attracted widespread attention far beyond the borders of Egypt. The hundreds of animals involved in this event, intended in part to embody and symbolize the wealth and extent of the Ptolemaic Kingdom, included Indian elephants, lions, leopards, cheetahs, a rhinoceros, and a giraffe (Jennison 1937: 30–5; Rice 1983; Coleman 1996; Bell 2004: 114–38).

The earliest known Roman animal spectacles took place in 275 and 250 BCE, when captured war elephants were paraded through the streets of Rome by the victorious generals Dentatus and Metellus, respectively. The first animal spectacles in Rome, like their Greek counterparts, thus appear to have focused more upon exhibition than slaughter. The spectacles of 275 and 250 could have been inspired in part by reports of Ptolemy II's procession in Alexandria. Nonetheless, these displays also conformed, in certain respects, to the traditional Roman celebration of military triumph in that animal as well as human prisoners of war were paraded before the Roman populace (Kyle 2007: 259–64; Shelton 2004: 363–5).

By the late third century BCE, exhibitions of exotic animals were staged in Rome on a fairly regular basis and no longer merely consisted of animals captured as spoils of war. The playwright Plautus (c.254–184 BCE) refers to contemporary processions of African animals and displays of ostriches in the Circus Maximus as if they were relatively common occurrences (*The Persian* 197–8; *The Little Carthaginian* 1011–12).

The expansion of Roman territory and influence in the last three centuries of the Republic allowed *editores* (individuals who organized games) greater and more regular access to exotic animals. Scipio Nasica, for example, probably exploited his family's close connection with the ruling dynasty of Numidia in North Africa to procure animals for the spectacle that he, along with Lentulus, staged in 169 BCE (Deniaux 2000: 1300).

Aristocrats like Nasica also appear to have used such channels of influence to stock their own private animal enclosures, or *vivaria*, with exotic beasts. The large *vivaria* characteristic of the Late Republic had a precedent in the modest enclosures for hares (*leporaria*) common in Italy from a much earlier date. Another source of inspiration was the magnificent animal enclosures that the Romans encountered as they started conquering territories in the eastern Mediterranean in the second century BCE (Epplett 2003). Contemporary *vivaria* and public animal spectacles appear to have been mutually reinforcing. The private animal exhibitions staged at various *vivaria* apparently drew their inspiration, on occasion, from contemporary spectacles, and, conversely, members of the Roman political elite who possessed their own enclosures may have been inspired to replicate their own animal collections for the pleasure of the general public at various events they staged to increase their political popularity.¹

The practice of collecting and displaying exotic animals in Rome, as we have seen, seems partially to owe its existence to Greek or Ptolemaic precedents, but the most characteristic type of Roman animal spectacle, the *venatio*, appears to have arisen through influences closer to home. The famous scene from the sixth-century BCE Tomb of the Augurs in Tarquinia, which depicts a hooded man fighting some sort of animal (most likely a dog), suggests that some form of staged animal combat may have existed in earlier Etruscan culture (Futrell 1997: 15–16; see Chapter 26 in this volume). Carthaginian customs may also have influenced Roman practice (Ville 1981: 52–4). The most decisive influence upon the development of Roman *venationes*, however, appears to have been gladiatorial combat.

The first securely attested beast hunt in Rome (as opposed to a nonviolent display or procession of animals) was a *venatio* staged by Marcus Fulvius Nobilior in 186 BCE that featured both lions and leopards (Livy 39.22.2). The term *venatio*, in the context of a public spectacle, most commonly denotes either animals fighting against each other, or trained human performers (*venatores*) confronting various beasts in the arena.² Therefore, when a given animal spectacle, such as that of Nobilior, is simply described as a *venatio*, we cannot be sure of what specific events were included.

Nobilior's *venatio* took place during a period when gladiatorial spectacles were being staged on a rapidly escalating scale and it may well have been at least partly a result of that escalation. Public animal displays, from their earliest appearance in Rome, were commonly staged by magistrates in association with other types of events such as chariot racing and gladiatorial combat. It seems likely, then, that developments in one type of spectacle affected other types of contemporary events. The most important change in this context made itself felt in the early second century BCE, when games started to involve an ever increasing number of gladiators. This intensification was perhaps related to Rome's disastrous losses in the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE) (Kyle 1998: 47–8; Wiedemann 1992: 5–6). *Editores* seeking political popularity staged ever-grander spectacles, and nonviolent animal displays perhaps seemed lackluster in comparison to their gladiatorial counterparts, inspiring spectacle organizers to introduce a similar element of violence into animal shows to maintain their popularity.

During the final two centuries of the Republic, violent animal spectacles, like gladiatorial shows, became increasingly elaborate and popular. The growing popularity of the *venationes*, and their potential political usefulness, led to a short-lived senatorial ban on the importation of African animals, which was in force between 186 (the year of Nobilior's spectacle) and 170 BCE (Pliny *Natural History* 8.24). Even at this relatively early date, some members of the Senate were evidently concerned that an ambitious magistrate like Nobilior might use the popularity gained through the staging of a successful *venatio* to elevate himself above his peers. Therefore they sought to make the procurement of exotic animals more difficult. It is notable, in terms of the public demand for animal spectacles, that the tribune Gaius Aufudius, who overturned the ban in 170, was a representative of the plebs and hence spoke for the people, not the aristocracy.

Nonviolent displays of exotic animals did not disappear entirely after the emergence of *venationes* in the early second century BCE, but the hunts swiftly became the most popular animal spectacle in Rome. By the end of the century, in fact, the Roman public had come to expect that mid-level magistrates, the aediles, would stage a beast hunt each year as part of their civic duties. (Politically ambitious Romans typically held a succession of offices,

serving as quaestor, then aedile, then praetor, before seeking election to the consulship, the most important political position in the Republic.) Sulla claimed to have lost his initial bid for the praetorship because of the public's wish that he first serve a term as aedile and thereby have to provide a magnificent *venatio* for them (Plutarch *Sulla* 5).

Magistrates staging beast spectacles in the last two centuries of the Republic regularly tried to maintain spectator interest by increasing the number and variety of the beasts involved as well as by making novel, and often more violent, additions to the entertainment. Much of the innovation in *venationes* in the Late Republic involved staging fights between animals that had previously only appeared in nonviolent displays or of presenting combats between unusual combinations of animals. In 104 BCE, for example, the aediles Crassus and Scaevola staged the first combat of multiple lions in Rome, and the first hunt involving elephants was presented only a few years later in 99 BCE (Pliny *Natural History* 8.70, 8.20). The first combat between elephants and bulls was also staged in the early first century BCE, although the exact date is not certain.³ The growing scale and variety of such events clearly provided a precedent for the truly lavish animal spectacles of the last years of the Republic.

Venationes involving over a hundred beasts (such as Scaurus's spectacle of 58 BCE featuring 150 leopards, 5 crocodiles, and a hippopotamus (Pliny *Natural History* 8.24)) were not unusual by the first century BCE, but such spectacles were eclipsed by the extravagant events staged by Pompey and Caesar. In 55 BCE, Pompey, drawing upon his extensive overseas contacts, staged a lavish spectacle in Rome featuring approximately 20 elephants, 410 leopards, 500 lions, and various other animals. Unfortunately for Pompey, this event was not memorable for any of the reasons he might have envisaged. The spectacle's most famous incident occurred when many spectators became outraged at the slaughter of seemingly defenseless elephants by North African hunters whom Pompey had specially imported for the event (Cicero *Letters to His Friends* 7.1.3; Dio Cassius 39.38.2–3; Pliny *Natural History* 8.20–1; Seneca *On the Shortness of Life* 13.6–7; Plutarch *Pompey* 52.4). Apparently spectators were upset because the elephants appeared to beg for mercy in a most humanlike fashion before being dispatched by the hunters. This particular *venatio*, then, was not the public relations triumph Pompey had undoubtedly expected (Shelton 1999; Bell 2004: 157–72; Fagan 2011: 249–52).

In 46 BCE Caesar attempted to outdo Pompey with magnificent games featuring 400 lions, Thessalian bulls, and the first appearance of a giraffe in Rome. He also avoided the wholesale slaughter of elephants that made Pompey's spectacle infamous (Pliny *Natural History* 8.20, 8.70; Dio Cassius 43.22–3; Suetonius *Julius Caesar* 37.2). Caesar's program included a combat featuring cavalry, infantry, and at least 40 elephants, but the elephants apparently had more of a sporting chance for survival than those killed in Pompey's spectacle. No surviving evidence indicates spectator displeasure at Caesar's event.⁴

The extravagant animal spectacles of Pompey and Caesar served as a model for subsequent Roman emperors, demonstrating the scale of events possible when an *editor* mobilized contacts and resources from throughout Roman territory. More particularly, Pompey and Caesar were among the earliest spectacle organizers in Rome to advertise deliberately the extent of their conquests (real or alleged) to the Roman populace through the choice of animals appearing in their shows. In his games of 55 BCE, for example, Pompey exhibited the first Ethiopian apes and the first rhinoceros ever seen in

Rome in order to highlight the widespread influence he had gained in Africa and the East through his successful military campaigns. Similarly, Caesar presented a giraffe and Thessalian bulls symbolizing his victory in Egypt and his defeat of Pompey at the Battle of Pharsalos in 48 BCE (Merten 1991: 140–2; Shelton 1999: 245–6, 249–50).

3 Animal Spectacles under the Empire

Augustus and subsequent emperors staged animal spectacles in Rome more frequently than in the past, and they brought them under tighter imperial control, a measure both of the shows' popularity and their propaganda value. By the end of Augustus's reign (31 BCE–14 CE), animal events were firmly linked to gladiatorial contests: a typical day's entertainment at the arena henceforth consisted of *venationes* or other animal events in the morning, criminal executions during the midday pause, and gladiatorial combats in the afternoon. Under the developed system, 10 days at the end of December each year were reserved for the staging of such games, although the total number of shows annually was undoubtedly higher as a result of spectacles being presented intermittently throughout a given year to celebrate special occasions. Beginning in 20 BCE, for example, such events were staged each year to celebrate the emperor's birthday (Wiedemann 1992: 11–12, 55, 59; Ville 1981: 123–7).

In the Late Republic, apart from the exceptional spectacles of victorious Roman commanders like Caesar or Pompey, *venationes* and other animal events had been routinely staged by aediles or praetors (Ville 1981: 94–5, 97–9). By the reign of Domitian (81–96 CE) however, no games (including animal spectacles) could be staged in Rome except by the emperor or one of his officials (Wiedemann 1992: 8). After this date magistrates or even private citizens could periodically stage animal events in Rome but only after obtaining imperial permission. On such occasions spectators still understood who was ultimately responsible for their entertainment.

Under the emperors violent and nonviolent animal spectacles alike served a wider variety of propaganda functions than they had under the Republic. Of course, Roman emperors, like victorious generals of the Republic, still used animal *spectacula* to advertise recent military conquests or the (alleged) expansion of Roman political influence. Augustus, for example, exhibited a hippopotamus in Rome to commemorate his conquest of Egypt, and a tiger brought to Rome during his reign symbolized contemporary Roman interest in the Indian subcontinent (Ville 1981: 110–11; Merten 1991: 141–2).

Another, more general, propaganda purpose of the animal spectacles was to symbolize the emperor's control over the natural world, a role similar to that played by the institution of the royal hunt in many other cultures. The sheer number and variety of animals brought to Rome for various events, in particular large and/or dangerous beasts, served as proof of the emperor's power to bend the natural world to his will (Allsen 2006: 23; Fagan 2011: 18). Emperors also demonstrated their mastery over animals by forcing them to fight and die in the arena and by having beasts perform fantastic tricks or maneuvers including, for example, terrestrial animals fighting in water, as occurred during the inaugural games of the Colosseum in 80 CE (Dio Cassius 66.25.2; Coleman 1993: 65).

Although nonviolent animal displays were not unheard of in imperial spectacles, especially in the Late Empire, *venationes* were by far the most popular form of animal event under the Empire. Roman territory grew during the first century or so of the Empire, thereby giving spectacle organizers access to a greater number and variety of wild animals. Consequently, the scale of *venationes* and other animal events also increased. Unfortunately, we cannot rely without question upon the figures given by various ancient sources for the number of animals at a given event; in many cases the numbers appear to be prone to exaggeration (cf. Dio Cassius 43.22.4). Nonetheless, taking such figures as a rough estimate of the total number of animals involved in a given spectacle gives an idea of the size of the *venationes* and other such events over time.

Augustus claimed that 3,500 animals were killed in 26 *venationes* during his reign, which suggests an average of 135 beasts slain per show (*Res Gestae* 22). Subsequent rulers reportedly staged even bloodier animal spectacles. Nero, for example, staged a single *venatio* in which allegedly 300 lions and 400 bears died (Dio Cassius 61.9.1). Such figures pale, however, beside the number of animals Titus is said to have collected for the *venationes* included in the lavish inaugural games for the Colosseum in 80 CE. In over a hundred days of festivities, nine thousand animals are said to have perished (Dio Cassius 66.25.1).

The largest series of *venationes* on record was staged in the first half of the second century CE, a period when Rome reached its maximum territorial extent and the height of its prosperity. According to Dio Cassius (68.15), the 123 days of spectacles staged by Trajan to celebrate his final victory over the Dacians saw the death of some eleven thousand animals, a figure allegedly equaled by the 120 days of games the emperor subsequently funded for his heir Hadrian (*Scriptores Historiae Augustae Hadrian* 3.8; Wiedemann 1992: 11). An inscription from Ostia (the *fasti Ostienses*) records more precisely that 2,689 beasts died in another set of games staged in Rome early in Hadrian's reign (*CIL* 14.4546; Fora 1996: 42–3).

Undoubtedly, the most famous devotee of the *venationes* was the emperor Commodus (ruled 180–92 CE), who not only staged such events for his subjects, but also participated in them (albeit without putting himself in any real danger) to emulate the hunting prowess of his role model, Hercules. Such was Commodus's passion for hunting and killing animals that he is credited with using special crescent-tipped arrows to more easily decapitate ostriches in the arena (Herodian 1.15.5–6). Most Roman authors saw Commodus's direct participation in such staged hunts as improper behavior, but it would not have seemed so in many other cultures. Interestingly, at least in Herodian's account (1.15.7), Commodus's subjects indeed found something edifying in his displays of hunting prowess; it was the emperor's decision to comport himself as a gladiator which they found truly degrading (Hekster 2002: 154–62).

Commodus's successors, apart from Caracalla, did not emulate his direct participation in *venationes* but simply staged such events for their subjects. Unfortunately, one of our major sources for imperial spectacles following the reign of Commodus is the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* (*SHA*), a work whose content cannot always be taken at face value (Cameron 2011: 743–82). Nonetheless, the *SHA* and surviving evidence pertaining to later Roman animal spectacles clearly indicates that the number of exotic animals available for imperial *venationes* declined steadily over time. This development is perhaps best illustrated by the collection of animals said to have belonged to Gordian III in the

mid-third century: “There were 32 elephants at Rome in the time of Gordian . . . 10 elk, 10 tigers, 60 tame lions, 30 tame leopards, 10 *belbi* or hyenas . . . six hippopotami, one rhinoceros, 10 wild lions, 10 giraffes, 20 wild asses, 40 wild horses, and various other animals of this nature without number” (*SHA The Three Gordians* 33.1, trans. D. Magie). The biographer claims that Gordian had a huge collection of animals (*animalia innumera*), but the numbers recorded for specific types of animals do not bear out this claim. For example, 32 elephants, six hippopotami, and a single rhinoceros do not represent an especially large collection of exotic animals compared to the numbers involved in various spectacles in the first and second centuries. One explanation for this decline in the availability of exotic animals is obvious: as the Roman Empire descended into crisis in the third century, rulers no longer possessed the necessary funds or infrastructure to procure as many animals as their predecessors, which profoundly affected the nature of later Roman animal spectacles.

Such problems were not limited to Rome itself. Magistrates and private citizens in cities and towns throughout the Empire staged *venationes* and gladiatorial events to improve their standing within the community (see Chapter 30). Responding to public demand, priests of the imperial cult in various places routinely staged such shows as part of their official duties. These local spectacles, because of the limited resources available, were decidedly more modest than the shows at Rome, but occasionally a given *editor* could stage an unusually large event owing to imperial largesse. A *duumvir* of Minturnae,⁵ for example, boasted of the alleged *editio celebrata* he staged in 249 thanks to the *indulgentia principis* (permission of the emperor) (*CIL* 10.6012; Fora 1996: 71–3).

Venationes were particularly popular in North Africa, in part because spectacle organizers there had much easier access to wild animals like leopards or lions. Also, in an area of intensive agricultural cultivation like North Africa, the removal of such dangerous beasts from arable land was seen as a public service (Bomgardner 1992: 162–3; cf. Fagan 2011: 132). With the popularity of such events in North Africa, numerous hunting corporations emerged, like the *Telegenii*, who were paid by spectacle organizers to produce various *venationes* in their name. Evidence for these corporations and their activities in North Africa suggests that each of these groups possessed their own devout followers, not unlike the partisans of the circus factions, yet another indication of the popularity of *venationes* in the region (Beschaouch 1996 and 2006: 1405–11; Dunbabin 1978: 67–78).

4 The Infrastructure of Roman Animal Spectacles

The staging of animal spectacles outside of North Africa required the efforts of myriad officials and personnel behind the scenes to ensure that the requisite animals were captured and transported safely to their ultimate destinations and that the events within the arena proceeded as planned. As with other organizational aspects of the *venationes*, the infrastructure of such spectacles, especially those organized by the emperors themselves, became more regularized over time.

The available evidence suggests that the production of animal spectacles in the Republic, in particular the procurement of the necessary beasts, was largely informal. Spectacle organizers like Pompey or Caesar used their overseas contacts to acquire animals and hunters for their events. Magistrates organizing animal shows also called

upon their political associates in wildlife-rich areas of Roman territory to supply the animals they needed. A famous example of this is seen in the series of letters Marcus Caelius Rufus, a candidate for aedile, wrote to Cicero in search of leopards when Cicero was governor of Cilicia in 51 BCE (Cicero *Letters to His Friends* 2.11.2, 8.2.2, 8.4.5, 8.6.5, 8.8.10, 8.9.3; *Letters to Atticus* 6.1.21).

This practice of using one's political contacts to round up animals for a spectacle appears to have lasted almost as long as the *venationes* themselves. Libanius, for example, attempted to use his political influence on more than one occasion in the mid-fourth century CE to procure animals for spectacles being organized by his friends and relatives in Antioch (Libanius *Letters* 217, 544, 586–8, 598–9, 1118, 1131, 1399, 1400). Similarly, Symmachus, some fifty years later, exploited his political connections to try and obtain various beasts for *venationes* being staged by his son in Rome (Symmachus *Letters* 2.46, 2.76–7, 4.63, 5.59, 5.62, 6.35, 7.122, 9.117, 9.144).

Unfortunately, such correspondence only provides the barest mention of the numerous civilian hunters and other support personnel enlisted to capture and transport animals. The letters of Cicero and Libanius, for example, mention men named Patiscus and Polycarp, who evidently made a living by obtaining animals for wealthy clients, but they say next to nothing about the hunters and trappers employed in turn by these entrepreneurs. Nonetheless, as other evidence suggests, local huntsmen, particularly in wildlife-rich areas of the Empire, certainly made a career of supplying animals to the countless shows staged throughout Roman territory over the course of centuries. Epigraphic evidence dating to the early third century CE from Noricum (modern-day Austria), for example, mentions the involvement of a prominent local family, the Albi, in the animal trade (Egger 1966).

As the animal spectacles and their infrastructure became more regularized under Augustus and subsequent emperors, one of the most important developments was the increasing role of the Roman military in the capture and transport of animals (Epplett 2001). Perhaps the best evidence for this particular activity is an inscription from Moesia Inferior (modern-day Bulgaria) recording the various detachments of troops ordered by the governor in 147 CE to capture bulls and European bison for an upcoming *venatio*, probably that staged by Antoninus Pius in Rome the following year (Velkov and Alexandrov 1988). Other inscriptions mention specialist military troops whose noncombat duties evidently involved the hunting and capture of game. For example, *venatores immunes*, who received exemption from more mundane military duties in exchange for their hunting skills, are attested within Roman frontier garrisons and also within the elite Praetorian Guard (*CIL* 3.7449, 6.130). Military inscriptions also record specialist *ursarii* (bear hunters) and *vestigatores* (trackers) (e.g., *CIL* 13.8639, 13.12048; Kiessling 1960: no. 9272). Of course, such personnel could often have hunted and trapped food for fellow soldiers, but given the military's role in supplying animals for spectacles, their duties at least periodically must have involved the latter as well.

Under the Empire, then, both civilian and military personnel were active in capturing animals for spectacles and could, of course, work together to fulfill this objective. Evidence for such collaboration comes from the famous fourth-century "Great Hunt" mosaic from the villa complex at Piazza Armerina in Sicily. This mosaic depicts both civilian and military hunters capturing and transporting various exotic animals in the wild, including an ostrich, rhinoceros, and elephant (Carandini, Ricci, and de Vos 1982: vol.

1: 94–107, 194–230, figs. 106–31 and vol. 2: pls. 27–31; Wilson 1983: 24–5, pls. 11–13, 35, 44, 54–5, 58). The massive size of the mosaic and its central position within the villa suggests that one of the primary duties of the wealthy official who owned the estate was supervising shipments of exotic animals to Rome for shows. The personifications of Africa and India at either end of the mosaic suggest that the hunters working under the official gathered animals from the very ends of the earth, again symbolizing the emperor's power over nature, in this case exercised through a trusted official (Wilson 1983: 24, 97–8).

After the animals for a show arrived at their ultimate destination, they would normally be kept in some sort of enclosure (*vivarium*) prior to the day of their appearance in the arena (Epplert 2003; Scobie 1998: 202–3). In Rome itself, one *vivarium* was located at the southeastern corner of the city, near the Porta Praenestina (Procopius *The Gothic War* 1.22–3). A second enclosure in the capital was evidently overseen by the aforementioned *venatores immunes* of the Praetorian Guard, again illustrating the role played by the Roman military in providing animals for imperial spectacles (*CIL* 6.130, Sabbatini Tumolesi 1988: 26).

Inscriptions mention the personnel who looked after the animals in another facility at Laurentum, some 20 kilometers south of Rome. Two such texts from the Early Empire, for example, record the presence of a *procurator ad elephantos* and a *praepositus camelorum* in Laurentum (*CIL* 6.8583; *AE* 1971: 68). Two other inscriptions from the environs of Rome, this time dating to the later second century CE, record an *adiutor ad feras* and a *praepositus herbariarum*, although it is not certain whether the officials in question were posted to Laurentum (*CIL* 6.10209, 6.10208). Nonetheless, the existence of officials specifically entrusted with elephants, camels, wild animals, and herbivores indicates that the Romans carefully subdivided the various types and species of animals at such enclosures to ensure that they were looked after as safely and efficiently as possible.

This evidence, in particular the specific reference to wild, as opposed to domesticated animals, indicates that the Romans attempted to breed and raise different species (e.g., elephants, rhinoceroses, various herbivores) in captivity (Aelian *On the Nature of Animals* 2.11; Pliny *Natural History* 8.29; Varro *On Agriculture* 3.12.1; Columella *On Agriculture* 7.2. 4–5). That presumably was less expensive than capturing animals in the wild and shipping them long distances, and it perhaps became even more important in the Late Empire, when importing exotic beasts became more difficult. This may partially explain why higher numbers of herbivores (animals which could more easily be bred in captivity) appear to have featured in the *venationes* of Late Antiquity.

While some officials supervised the care and transport of captured animals, others were responsible for the events in the arena themselves and for the trained *venatores*. In Rome the most senior of these functionaries was the *procurator Ludi Matutini* (“manager of the Morning School”), first attested during the reign of Trajan (*AE* 1972: 574). It is unclear when this particular facility, the main training venue for *venatores* in Rome, first opened. It may have been functioning as early as the reign of Augustus; if so, this would be another example of Augustus's increasing organization of animal spectacles (Wiedemann 1992: 8).

The number of lesser officials attending to *venationes* and their production appears to have proliferated after Augustus. Inscriptions, for example, attest the existence of an administrative secretary to the *procurator Ludi Matutini* as early as the reign of Caligula

and of an early second-century CE official specifically concerned with the clothing of the *venatores* (CIL 6.352, 6.8555; Sabbatini Tumolesi 1988: 24, 39–40). Doctors associated with the *Ludus Matutinus* are also attested for the first and second centuries (CIL 6.10172; *Inscriptiones Graecae* XIV 1330, Sabbatini Tumolesi 1988: 40–2).

5 The Performers

Similarities existed between *venatores* and gladiators beyond the fact that both had their own specialized training facilities in Rome. Both groups, for example, drew their membership almost exclusively from the lower or marginal classes, such as criminals condemned to fight in the arena as formal punishment for their misdeeds (Kyle 1998: 79–80). Under Augustus some young nobles participated in *venationes* to display their courage and weapons skills, but such aristocratic participation apparently was no longer condoned by the end of the first century CE. Domitian, in fact, executed a former consul on the grounds that he had publicly fought against wild animals (Suetonius *Augustus* 43.2; Dio Cassius 67.14.3).

One important difference between gladiators and *venatores* was that, while gladiators were subdivided into a number of different types based upon their particular equipment and weapons expertise (see Chapter 25), *venatores* were far less diversified in terms of their armament. Although arena hunters periodically carried defensive armor like helmets and shields, more commonly they wore only a simple leather tunic or leather bands over their lower abdomens. They also employed a much more limited selection of weaponry than gladiators; by far their most common weapon was the long hunting spear known as a *venabulum* (Junklemaun 2000: 70–1). Unlike most gladiators, hunters in combats preferred to rely upon their own speed and agility rather than the protection afforded by armor.

Despite their lowly background, *venatores*, like gladiators, could sometimes become star attractions because of their fighting prowess. The most famous of these is the *venator* Carphorus (Coleman 2006: 140–7) immortalized in the poems Martial wrote to commemorate the opening games of the Colosseum in 80 CE:

That which constituted the crowning glory of your fame, Meleager, what a small proportion it is of Carphorus' renown: the laying low of a boar! He also plunged his spear into a charging bear, a beast without peer in the region of the Arctic clime, and he laid low a lion of unheard-of-size, a sight to behold that would have done credit to the hands of Hercules. (Martial *Spectacles* 17, trans. K. Coleman)

Centuries later, the poet Luxorius similarly extolled the exploits of the *venator* Olympius in Vandal-occupied Carthage in the sixth century, showing that the popularity of *venationes* continued at that time, particularly in North Africa (Rosenblum 1961: 151–3, nos. 67–8).

It was not only human arena performers, however, who could earn the approbation of the crowd. Quite apart from those animals who performed tricks for the pleasure of the spectators, like elephants taught to dance or spar as gladiators (Pliny *Natural History* 8.2), beasts that fought particularly well in the arena, or that were admired for their beauty, could also earn popular acclaim. Occasionally animals were granted *missio*, like

gladiators, so they could be preserved for future audiences (Martial *Epigrams* 13.98–100; Ville 1981: 427; Fagan 2011: 126–7). Especially popular and ferocious beasts, at least on occasion, could be pitted against much weaker animals so that they could display their fighting prowess without any real risk of death or serious injury. Sometimes, however, this strategy would backfire, and the “celebrity” animal would be unexpectedly killed by its designated prey as appears to have happened in the case of the popular lion commemorated by Statius in the first century CE:

You are fallen, skilled ravager of tall beasts, not trapped by the surrounding band of Massylian hunters, not propelled by an awesome leap upon the spears, nor tricked by the unseen opening of a pit, but conquered by a fleeing beast . . . the sorrowful populace and senators groaned at your death, as if you had fallen as a famous gladiator on the dismal sand. (*Silvae* 2.5.7–26, trans. C. Epplett)

6 The End of Animal *Spectacula*

In Late Antiquity even more of a premium was put on the lives of arena animals because of the ever-increasing difficulty in procuring them. Although the animal spectacles of this period were still commonly referred to as *venationes*, they were decidedly different from the events of the Republic and Early Empire. In many of the *venationes* of Late Antiquity, the human participants did not actually try to kill the animals they were pitted against but instead entertained the crowd by attempting to evade attacks. They used various means to elude the animals ranging from a simple pole used to vault over an onrushing beast to far more elaborate contraptions. Evidence for such events is found on sixth-century CE diptychs from the Eastern Empire, for example one of those produced to celebrate the games staged by the consul Anastasius in 517 (see Figure 34.1). Behind the figure vaulting over a bear in the foreground is depicted a large post attached to two large baskets by what appears to be some sort of pulley system. Using the ropes, the two performers in the baskets (at least in theory) were able to elevate themselves and evade the lunges of the bear below. It is important to note that, unlike representations of earlier *venationes*, scenes of animals being killed or wounded are relatively few; often the humans appear to be in much greater danger than their animal adversaries.

The same shortage of beasts that prompted a change in the nature of *venationes* in Late Antiquity was probably the major factor in their ultimate demise rather than any moral objection to killing animals. The spectators’ outrage at the slaughter of elephants at Pompey’s event is one of the few recorded instances of public displeasure associated with the killing of animals in shows. It seems that the majority of Romans had no moral objections to the slaughter of animals for entertainment. A *venator* who successfully fought and killed wild beasts in the arena could be seen as providing both an edifying display of his (or her) own bravery and a demonstration of the superiority of skill over brute force (Most 1992: 403–5).

As gladiatorial spectacles disappeared in the later Empire, *venationes* only appear to have increased in popularity (Libanius *Letters* 1399; Ville 1960: 324–5). The problem for contemporary spectacle organizers, though, was to provide a large enough variety and number of animals to make events worthwhile for the audience. Unfortunately, as the



Figure 34.1 Lower register of ivory diptych made for Anastasius showing *venatio*, 517 CE (formerly in Berlin, now lost). *Source:* Photograph from J. Helbig, *L'Art Mosan* (1906), pl. 4.

Empire, particularly in the West, lost more and more territory in the fourth and fifth centuries CE (including the loss of wildlife-rich North Africa to the Vandals) this objective became progressively more expensive and difficult to fulfill. The *venationes* staged during this period tended to feature common and readily available animals, like bears, rather than the more exotic specimens of earlier spectacles. The last *venationes*, staged in the sixth century, bore only the faintest resemblance to their much more extravagant predecessors. Sports like bearbaiting in the succeeding centuries indicate, of course, that people in formerly Roman territories had not lost their taste for violent animal combat, but such events no longer had the symbolic or political importance of earlier Roman spectacles.

ABBREVIATIONS

AE = *Année Epigraphique*

CIL = *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*

NOTES

- 1 Varro (*On Agriculture* 3.13.2–3) records that the reenactment of the myth of Orpheus staged in the private enclosure of his contemporary Hortensius differed from contemporary public spectacles only in the absence of African animals.

- 2 Performers who fought against various animals in the arena were also sometimes known as *bestiarii*. Since, however, the same term was often used to denote unarmed criminals mauled to death by beasts in the arena, for the sake of clarity I use the term *venator(es)* to refer to the former group.
- 3 Sources disagree on whether this particular contest first occurred in 99 or 78 BCE. See Pliny *Natural History* 8.7 and Ville 1981: 89.
- 4 The key ancient sources on this point are Pliny *Natural History* 8.7, Suetonius *Julius* 39.3, Appian *The Civil Wars* 2.102, and Dio Cassius 43.23.3. These sources, and their interpretation, are discussed in Jennison 1937: 57–8 and Scullard 1974: 197–8.
- 5 A *duumvir* was one of the two highest magistrates in a local city or colony; they acted as a board of two, especially in judicial matters.

REFERENCES

- Allsen, T. 2006. *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History*. Philadelphia.
- Bell, A. 2004. *Spectacular Power in the Greek and Roman City*. Oxford.
- Bertrand, F. 1987. “Remarques sur le commerce des bêtes sauvages entre l’Afrique du Nord et l’Italie.” *Mélanges de l’École Française de Rome* 99: 211–41.
- Beschaouch, A. 1966. “La mosaïque de chasse à l’amphithéâtre découverte à Smirat en Tunisie.” *Comptes rendus de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*: 134–57.
- Beschaouch, A. 2006. “Que savons-nous des sodalités africo-romaines?” *Comptes rendus de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*: 1401–17.
- Blanchard-Lemée, M., M. Ennaïfer, H. Slim, et al. 1996 (1995). *Mosaics of Roman Africa*. Translated by K. Whitehead. New York.
- Bomgardner, D. 1992. “The Trade in Wild Animals for Roman Spectacles: A Green Perspective.” *Anthropozoologica* 16: 161–6.
- Byrne, S. and E. Cueva, eds. 1999. *Veritatis Amicitiaeque Causa: Essays in Honor of Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark*. Wauconda, IL.
- Cameron, A. 2011. *The Last Pagans of Rome*. New York.
- Carandini, A., A. Ricci, and M. de Vos. 1982. *Filosofiana: The Villa of Piazza Armerina: The Image of a Roman Aristocrat at the Time of Constantine*. Translated by M. C. Keith. 2 vols. Palermo.
- Coleman, K. 1993. “Launching into History: Aquatic Displays in the Early Empire.” *Journal of Roman Studies* 83: 48–74.
- Coleman, K. 1996. “Ptolemy Philadelphus and the Roman Amphitheatre.” In W. Slater, ed., 49–68.
- Coleman, K, ed. 2006. *M. Valerii Martialis Liber Spectaculorum*. Oxford.
- Deniaux, É. 2000. “L’importation d’animaux d’Afrique à l’époque républicaine et les relations de clientèle. L’Africa romana.” In M. Khanoussi, P. Ruggeri, and C. Vismara, eds., 1299–1307.
- Dunbabin, K. M. D. 1978. *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa: Studies in Iconography and Patronage*. Oxford.
- Edwards, C. 1997. “Unspeakable Professions: Public Performance and Prostitution in Ancient Rome.” In J. Hallett and M. Skinner, eds., 66–95.
- Egger, R. 1966. “Bemerkungen zu einem Salzburger Mithräum.” *Wiener Studien* 79: 613–23.
- Epplert, C. 2001. “The Capture of Animals by the Roman Military.” *Greece and Rome* 48: 210–22.
- Epplert, C. 2003. “The Preparation of Animals for Roman Spectacula: *Vivaria* and their Administration.” *Ludica* 9: 76–92.

- Fagan, G. 2011. *The Lure of the Arena: Social Psychology and the Crowd at the Roman Games*. Cambridge.
- Fora, M. 1996. *Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell'Occidente Romano IV: Regio Italiae I. Latium*. Rome.
- Futrell, A. 1997. *Blood in the Arena: The Spectacle of Roman Power*. Austin, TX.
- Hallett, J. and M. Skinner, eds. 1997. *Roman Sexualities*. Princeton.
- Hekster, O. 2002. *Commodus: An Emperor at the Crossroads*. Amsterdam.
- Hexter, R. and D. Selden, eds. 1992. *Innovations of Antiquity*. New York.
- Jennison, G. 1937. *Animals for Show and Pleasure in Ancient Rome*. Manchester.
- Joyal, M. and R. Egan, eds. 2004. *Daimonopylai: Essays in Classics and the Classical Tradition Presented to Edmund G. Berry*. Winnipeg.
- Junkelmann, M. 2000. "Familia Gladiatoria: The Heroes of the Amphitheatre." In E. Köhne, C. Ewigleben, and R. Jackson, eds., 31–74.
- Khanoussi, M., P. Ruggeri, and C. Vismara, eds. 2000. *L'Africa romana. Atti del XIII convegno di studio*. Rome.
- Kiessling, E. 1960. *Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Ägypten*. Vol. 6.2. Wiesbaden.
- Köhne, E., C. Ewigleben, and R. Jackson, eds. 2000. *Gladiators and Caesars: The Power of Spectacle in Ancient Rome*. Berkeley.
- Kyle, D. 1998. *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*. London.
- Kyle, D. 2007. *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*. Malden, MA.
- Loisel, G. 1912. *Histoire des ménageries de l'antiquité à nos jours*. Paris.
- MacKinnon, M. 2006. "Supplying Exotic Animals for the Roman Amphitheatre Games." *Museion* 6: 137–61.
- Merten, E. 1991. "Venationes in der Historia Augusta." In K. Rosen, ed., 139–78.
- Most, G. 1992. "Disiecti Membra Poetae: The Rhetoric of Dismemberment in Neronian Poetry." In R. Hexter and D. Selden, eds., 391–419.
- Potter, D. 2010. "Entertainers in the Roman Empire." In D. Potter and D. Mattingly, eds., 280–349.
- Potter, D. and D. Mattingly, eds. 2010. *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire*. 2nd ed. Ann Arbor.
- Rice, E. 1983. *The Grand Procession of Ptolemy Philadelphus*. London.
- Robert, L. 1940. *Les gladiateurs dans l'Orient grec*. Paris.
- Rosen, K., ed. 1991. *Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium: 1986/1989*. Bonn.
- Rosenblum, M. 1961. *Luxorius: A Latin Poet among the Vandals*. New York.
- Rosivach, V. 2006. "The First Venatio." *New England Classical Journal* 33: 271–8.
- Sabbatini Tumolesi, P. 1988. *Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell'Occidente Romano I: Roma*. Rome.
- Scobie, A. 1988. "Spectator Security and Comfort at Gladiatorial Games." *Nikephoros* 1: 192–243.
- Scullard, H. 1974. *The Elephant in the Greek and Roman World*. Ithaca.
- Shelton, J.-A. 1999. "Elephants, Pompey, and the Reports of Popular Displeasure in 55 BC." In S. Byrne and E. Cueva, eds., 231–71.
- Shelton, J.-A. 2004. "Dancing and Dying: The Display of Elephants in Ancient Roman Arenas." In M. Joyal and R. Egan, eds., 363–82.
- Slater, W., ed. 1996. *Roman Theater and Society*. Ann Arbor.
- Velkov, V. and G. Alexandrov. 1988. "Venatio Caesariana. Eine neue Inschrift aus Montana (Moesia Inferior)." *Chiron* 18: 271–7.
- Ville, G. 1960. "Les jeux de gladiateurs dans l'empire Chrétien." *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'École Française de Rome* 72: 273–335.
- Ville, G. 1981. *La gladiature en Occident, des origines à la mort de Domitien*. Rome.
- Wiedemann, T. 1992. *Emperors and Gladiators*. London.
- Wilson, R. 1983. *Piazza Armerina*. Austin, TX.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

No source provides a more vivid depiction of Roman animal spectacles than Martial's *Spectacles*, particularly the poems celebrating the exploits of the *venator* Carpophorus. Coleman 2006 provides an indispensable commentary upon this work. The biographies of Suetonius and the later *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* often describe various spectacles, including *venationes*, in the course of detailing a particular emperor's reign. On the accounts of *venationes* in the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, see Merten 1991. Numerous inscriptions recording animal spectacles can be found in such epigraphic collections as *CIL* and *ILS* (*Inscriptionum Latinae Selectae*). For more specific discussion of such inscriptions in the Western Empire, see the volumes of *Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell'occidente Roman* (1988–96). Robert 1940 remains an important reference for inscriptions pertaining to *venationes* and other animal events in the Greek East. Dunbabin 1978 and Köhne, Ewigleben, and Jackson 2000 contain many relevant illustrations. Excellent images of the mosaic from Piazza Armerina can be found in Carandini, Ricci, and de Vos 1982.

Allsen 2006 is very helpful for placing Roman animal spectacles in a wider cross-cultural context.

An accessible, concise study of Roman beast hunts, including their Near Eastern and Greek antecedents, can be found in Kyle 2007: 23–37, 259–69. Surveys of gladiatorial spectacles in the Roman Empire (e.g., Ville 1981: 51–6, 88–94, 106–16, 123–8; Wiedemann 1992: 55–67) often contain useful information on Roman animal *spectacula* as well, but few book-length secondary works focus exclusively upon animal spectacles, so Jennison 1937 is still useful on *venationes* and their supporting infrastructure. There are a substantial number of articles on specific aspects of Roman animal spectacles. On the earliest Roman animal spectacles, the elephant displays of the early third century, see Shelton 1999 and 2004. On Roman elites using their personal connections to acquire exotic animals during the Republic, see Deniaux 2000. On the *venatio* staged by Marcus Fulvius Nobilior in 186 BCE, see Rosivach 2006.

For a survey of the logistics of supplying animals to the arena, see Jennison 1937: 137–81. For more recent work on the same subject, see Bertrand 1987; Bomgardner 1992; Epplert 2001 and 2003; and MacKinnon 2006. On hunting corporations in North Africa, see Beschaouch 1966 and 2006 and Blanchard-Lemée, Ennaifer, Slim, *et al.* 1996 (1995): 214–15. Edwards 1997 and Potter 2010 provide useful discussions of the origins and status of the various kinds of performers that appeared in Roman arenas.