

9. THE MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE? ANIMALS IN THE ROMAN ARENA

¿Los amos del universo? Animales en la arena romana

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RESUMEN

La presente contribución examina la ideología tras las *venationes*, «cazas», en los juegos romanos. Argumenta que deberían ser vistas, no como una manifestación de violencia contra los animales, sino como una supresión de violencia de los animales hacia los humanos. Muestra que las *venationes* permitían a la aristocracia local, y especialmente al emperador, demostrar su poder sobre la naturaleza y sobre la propia vida. Si bien esta seguridad disminuyó en la tardoantigüedad, se mantuvo presente en el centro del imperio, junto con los juegos que la escenificaban.

Palabras clave: *violencia; poder; naturaleza; crueldad; exotismo*

ABSTRACT

This piece examines the ideology behind *venationes*, «hunts», in Roman games. It argues that they should be seen not as a manifestation of violence towards animals, but rather one of the suppression of violence by animals towards humans. It goes on to show that *venationes* allowed local aristocrats, and more especially the emperor, to demonstrate their power, including over nature and life itself. While this confidence diminished in late antiquity, it, and the games which embodied it, remained present in the centre of empire.

Keywords: *violence; power; nature; cruelty; exotica*

A late Roman mosaic found at Rudston in North Yorkshire is best known for its central roundel with its remarkably inept depiction of Venus. This notorious feature is framed by four hemicycles, each of which contains an equally crude animal: a deer, a leopard, a bull, and a lion. In the spaces left between the hemicycles are four figures which appear to be naked, shown with their feet pointing to the outer edge of the mosaic. At the top left is a spear-bearer, perhaps female, followed clockwise by a figure crouching on its haunches, a male figure brandishing a long whip or rope over his head with both arms, and finally a sadly lost figure.¹

¹ The mosaic dates from the late third century AD, see Neal & Cosh (2002: 353-354). The female figure is suggested by the attention paid to the nipples and its red pubic area. For a literary attestation of female *bestiariae*, see Martial, *On the Spectacles* 6, 6b.

Of the animals it is the lion that takes pride of place. It is placed at the foot of the Venus in the central roundel, ie in the direction the mosaic would normally be approached. Enigmatically labelled *Leo Flammefer*, «the fiery lion», the beast is shown transfixed by a hunting spear which has entered via its belly and the upper half of which protrudes through the animal's back. Blood gushes from the entrance wound which must have been dealt as the animal leapt towards its intended victim. In short, this is the classical death wound as dealt by a *venator* (hunter) or *bestiarius* (beast-fighter) with the weapon of choice, the *venabulum*, of his profession.² The whole pavement thus commemorates a *venatio*: animal hunt held in an arena. The four figures are best seen as depictions of the various kinds of *bestiarii* and the animals as their victims. Apart from the lion, one other animal, the bull, is also labelled: *taurus omicida*, or «the man-killing bull».

The Rudston mosaic is one of many monuments from across the Roman Empire reminding us that while modern scholarship on ancient blood sports, if sport is the right term, has very often focussed on gladiatorial combat, such spectacles were equalled, perhaps in parts of the empire surpassed, in popularity and extent by contests of man against animals.³ The bulk of our literary testimonia for these spectacles, the most important of which are the poems of Martial, comes from Rome itself. However, provincial material also survives. Writing much later, Luxorius describes the *venationes* of North Africa, and, though his poetry is modelled on that of Martial, he captures a local, contemporary sensibility which seems to parallel that of his much earlier metropolitan model. These two are supplemented by epigraphy on stone and mosaics which again express congruent opinions. Most of our visual material in contrast comes from the provinces. It is always difficult to interpret mute evidence, but what is shown seems to mirror the sentiments of our written sources and not to vary greatly, if at all, from province to province. This is not surprising, reactions to football have similarly differed little over a century and a half and are consistent across a wide swathe of the world. In terms of social attitudes, football has become more acceptable to the upper classes with the passage of time, and this phenomenon appears to be mirrored by ancient attitudes to the games.

The popularity of the *venationes* is shown by Antoninus Pius's issuing a whole series of coins with different animals to stress his *munificentia* to his people in AD 147/8 (Mattingly & Sydenham, 1981), an example copied by Philip the Arab when celebrating his own Secular Games in AD 248 (Mattingly & Sydenham, 1986). The generosity of the emperor was that of paying to procure these animals which would then have been slaughtered in the arena. In the same way when the Emperor Gordian III chose to issue medallions showing him in the Colosseum to celebrate his munificence, he is depicted presiding not over gladiatorial combat, but rather one between a mahout and his elephant and a bull (Toynbee,

² For a description of the death blow, see Oppian, *Halieutica* 2.348. The ideal was, as in the Iberian corrido to kill with a single blow. This can be seen from curse tablets which ask that the cursed be prevented from performing in this way, Audollent (1894: no. 247).

³ Despite their widespread nature, size, and long duration, *venationes* only take up, for example, four pages out of three hundred and forty six in Kyle (2007) For works specifically dealing with *venationes*, see Muñoz-Santos (2006) and Blázquez (1962).

1944: 110). While simple exhibitions of living animals occurred from time to time, it was their slaughter, and in large numbers, which held far more attraction for crowds across the empire. As the Rudston mosaic and Philip's coins show, the species involved in these «hunts» were varied and included both native and non-native animals, herbivores and carnivores.

Animal baiting in the form of pitting animal against animal, either of the same or different species, has a long history in very many cultures and, of course, was present in classical antiquity. We find evidence of cock-fighting, seemingly a Greek passion (Aelian, *Variae Historiae* 2.28; Brugas & de Witte, 1868), and in the Imperial Roman period there is a wealth of evidence, both literary and visual, for such contests with a wide variety of animals across the breadth of the empire (Jennison & Aymard, 1951). However, if we remove hunting from our considerations, the number of societies which hold contests pitting men against animals purely as a spectacle rather than a form of aggravated execution is much rarer.⁴ Yet such combat was treasured at Rome and formed a major part of the Roman *ludi*. Moreover, although baiting of various kinds has been practised and promoted privately throughout the centuries, it has never enjoyed the structural integration into the body politic such as was seen in the Roman empire. Often the state has been markedly hostile to such practices as can be seen in the attitude of both Church and crown to the *corrida* in Iberia. Yet at Rome they enjoyed state patronage at both Imperial and local level and the organs of state were actively deployed to ensure a constant supply of animals for them (Epplett, 2001).

Possibly the first combat between man and animal in Rome occurred during the 1st Punic War when in 252 BC Caecilius Metellus brought some 140 elephants that he had captured from the Carthaginians in Sicily to Rome. In this Metellus more than emulated Curius Dentatus who had previously exhibited four elephants captured from Pyrrhus in 275 (Eutropius, *Breviarium* 2.14). The fate of Dentatus's elephants is a mystery, not so Metellus's. According to Verrius Flaccus, they were fought and killed with javelins in the Circus Maximus (Pliny, *NH* 8.6.6). The reason given is that they were unwanted and the Romans were reluctant to give them to «kings», presumably as they were regarded as too formidable a weapon of war. Thus began a long tradition of killing. Hellenistic monarchs, though they were inclined to parade captured animals, never indulged in this sort of slaughter, though some animals were reserved for religious sacrifices (Jennison, 1937: 28-41). The Roman response here may simply have been one of pragmatism, pasturing 140 elephants would have been a major drain on resources in the third century BC,⁵ but it perhaps speaks to something deeper in the Roman psyche.

Livy records that in 186 BC a *venatio* or «hunt» of lions and panthers was given at Rome by Fulvius Nobilior. Often asserted to be the first of its kind, Livy's Latin is in fact highly ambiguous and such events may have occurred even earlier.⁶ Sadly, the historian gives no details of the mechanics of the hunt, but it is clear that this style of spectacle grew in popularity. By 174 BC, the censors arranged that iron cages be placed in the Circus Maximus to accommodate

⁴ The obvious exception being the *corrida* of Iberia and Southern France.

⁵ In the Imperial period, by contrast, an Imperial elephant herds were maintained at Laurentum and Ardea, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* 1578, Juvenal 12.104-6.

⁶ *athletarum quoque certamen tum primo Romanis spectaculo fuit, et venatio data leonum et pantherarum*, Livy 39.22.

captive animals (Livy 41.27) and in 168 BC two aediles produced a *venatio* which included 63 «African animals» (a euphemism for carnivorous big cats which points to their usual source), 40 bears, and some elephants (Livy 44.18). At some point there was enough concern for a law to be passed to ban the importation of «African animals», but this was overturned in 114 BC and may already have been circumvented by the importation of animals from the East rather than Africa.⁷ This law was a piece of sumptuary legislation and entirely motivated by a wish to stop the purchase of political popularity, not one to halt cruelty towards animals.

The size of *venationes* rose steadily. Just over 100 years after the ban, in 58 BC Marcus Scaurus held a *venatio* to celebrate his being elected aedile. This involved at least 150 leopards (*variae*) being released simultaneously. He also created a first by exhibiting a hippopotamus along with five crocodiles in a temporary euripus, presumably a long, thin channel. This sounds like a display of animal baiting, although our source, the Elder Pliny, does not tell us the fate of any of the animals concerned (Pliny, *NH* 8.26.40). Three years later the *venationes* of Pompey in 55 BC involved the slaughter of 600 lions, of which 315 were maned, 410 leopards, 20 elephants, various apes, a European lynx, and, another first, a rhinoceros (Pliny, *NH* 8.29.71). The slaughter was done by specialist Gaetulian huntsmen from North Africa. AD 80 saw the emperor Titus preside over the death of 8,000 animals on the inauguration of the Colosseum, 5,000 of them on a single day; while Trajan's 120 day celebration of his triumph in the Dacian Wars witnessed the death of 11,000 animals.⁸ Probus's games of AD 281 introduced a variant on the theme. Having turned the Circus Maximus into a form of parkland by temporary planting, he exhibited one thousand ostriches and an equal numbers of stags and wild boars, along with unspecified numbers of deer, ibexes, wild sheep, and «other herbivores» (*cetera herbatica animalia*). After they had been released, the public was then invited to enter and take what it wished or was able to do so. As most of these animals would have been able to resist capture, this was an invitation to an amateur hunt and to obtain free, high quality food. Probus's biographer does not tell us whether the public came to watch as well as to participate. This curiosity was followed by the killing of 100 maned lions, followed by 100 Syrian leopards, 100 African leopards, 100 lionesses along with «at the same time» 300 bears. Oddly, though the biographer is approving of Probus, he describes the spectacle as large but dull, feeling that the animals, especially the lions, were killed too rapidly and at a distance, taking away any excitement (*SHA* Probus 19).

In our accounts of the games, we see two factors which are a constant: a desire for an ever greater number of animals and for ever more exotic beasts. Martial (5.65) praises Domitian for providing both: «Every morning brings greater fights. How many monsters, heavier than Nemea's [ie lions], are laid low! How many Maenalian boars are skewered by your spear! And if the Spanish shepherd's threefold fight was refought, you have a man who could vanquish Geryon [Geryon was a three-bodied monster so the reference here is to a fight against three animals]. Though Greek Lerna's monster could often be counted, what is the poor hydra compared to the beasts of Nile [ie crocodiles]?» There is also a strong stress on killing, which

⁷ The law was abrogated by the tribune Cn. Aufidius, Pliny, *NH* 8.20. Arguably it was overturned by an earlier Aufidius in 170 BC, but this sits awkwardly with the censors' provision of cages in 174 BC.

⁸ Titus: Dio 66.25, Suetonius, *Titus* 7; Trajan: Dio 68.15.

is also found in visual representations. The style of depicting *venationes* is striking. Sporting pictures from later periods rarely dwell on the actual act of killing or on its bloody consequences (This is also true of later English sporting prints, even those showing baiting rather than hunting). In contrast, the gory depiction of the lion on the Rudston mosaic is the norm for pictures of Roman *venationes* which have a tendency focus precisely on the moment of truth, and the depiction of blood as it is spilled is almost *de rigeur*.

The *venationes* were thus introduced at Rome before gladiatorial contests and were to go on to outlive them in late antiquity. As such it is impossible to attribute the slaughter of animals in them to the killing found in gladiatorial games. Moreover, defeated gladiators were frequently spared, but there is little evidence for the sparing of animals in *venationes* and the iconography of the spectacle would argue strongly that this was not commonly done. It is possible that very occasionally, as in the modern *corrida*, an animal was spared after an exceptional show of ferocity, but death was the normal outcome. The animals who refused to emerge from their cages in Probus's games, for example, were simply shot down where they stood.⁹ As can be seen from many mosaics, animals were named, but so are bulls in the modern *corrida*, and so a name brings no expectation of future performances.¹⁰ A failure to kill would jar with the intention both to demonstrate man's superiority over the animal world and the generosity of the promoter, in terms of both expense and perhaps in the provision of food.¹¹ There was also a pragmatic aspect to the killing. Animals learn, and the presence of a beast that had previously been in the arena would make the spectacle almost impossible to perform. It is for this reason that even «pardoned» bulls in the modern *corrida* never return to fight.¹² The only evidence we have for an animal performing multiple times in the arena is for a lion which was used to bait other animals not to fight men (Stattius, *Silvae* 2.5).

Like gladiatorial contests, *venationes* occasionally drew aristocratic contempt. Cicero when writing to Marcus Marius about Pompey's games disparages such shows in general and says specifically of the *venationes*: «they were impressive, no-one denies it - but what pleasure is there for an educated man in seeing a feeble human ripped apart by a powerful beast or a noble beast run through by a hunting spear? What was worth seeing, you have already seen many times and I who was present saw nothing new.» (*Ad Fam.* 7.1.3). Philosophically animals were seen as devoid of rationality and outside of the moral community thus *venationes* presented no

⁹ See also Martial's account of does in the arena. He is impressed that they fight so well, but there was no prospect of a «pardon» for them. Martial, 4.35.

¹⁰ Toynbee (1973: 31) contrary to what is argued here, does believe that names imply repeat performances.

¹¹ For the possible use of slaughtered animals as food see Tertullian (*Apology* 9), Apuleius (*Metamorphoses* 4.14), and Kyle (1994 & 1998: 191). This could have been significant after large Imperial *venationes*. Provincial games would have produced less meat, but it is possible it could have been given to a specific audience, see Robert (1940: 315). The carcasses of dead animals could equally have been recycled to feed other animals.

¹² The language of pardoning, «indultar», is significant here. The practice is not a popular one amongst spectators. In the same way the «capping» of bulls which have not yet entered the arena on estates at night by enthusiasts is illegal in Spain, as it not only endangers those enthusiasts themselves, but also later the torero in the arena as the bull will have learnt his ploys from his previous experience.

philosophical dilemma.¹³ Seneca saw the spectacle as simply a vehicle to devise novel forms of human death (*Dial.* 10.13.6.). His observations and their concern for the men involved points out that the thrust of such complaints was quite different to modern objections to blood sports which centre on the immorality of inflicting pain on animals for pleasure and the intrinsic cruelty of doing so. Rather they are that *venationes* were monotonous and engendered the wrong, vulgar sort of pleasure in their audience. In short, they are the same sort of objections lovers of classical music might use to complain about pop music. If there is any concern about cruelty, it is about the cruelty inflicted on humans not their animal opponents.

However, such protests were voices crying in the wilderness. The games, as we can see, retained their popularity over the centuries. The length of this appeal should warn us against seeing their attraction as some sort of psychosis; an approach which is an all too common feature of modern analyses. Modern, western sensibilities towards animals have endured for much less time and are far more localised than the Roman attitude, and a time traveller from the Roman past could well justly complain that they, rather than his own, represent a deviation from the human norm. There is only one attested incident of a crowd sympathising with the plight of animals in the games. This occurred during Pompey's games in 55BC when the crowd sided with the elephants against their hunters. The reason for the sympathy is instructive: it is because the elephants seemed almost human. Pliny (*NH* 8.7.20) commented that the way one defended itself seemed to owe more to «intelligence than an animal's fury» and according to Cicero (*Ad Fam.* 7.1.3) the way the animals trumpeted created an impression that «that animal has something in common with mankind.» In short, for the crowd these elephants had ceased to be animals and were thus worthy of the sympathy that was reserved for humans. The incident was remarkable enough for Cassius Dio (39.38) to think it worth noting some two hundred and fifty years later. But too much can be made of it. It was to prove the exception that made the rule. «The savage elephant, the prince of monsters» is how the animal is described by an anonymous poem in the *Anthologia Latina* (196R) and the matching of elephants against bulls remained a popular feature of the games. It is celebrated as such by Martial (*De Spectaculis*, 19) nor is it insignificant that Gordian chose such a contest as the emblem for his medallions as discussed above. In like manner both Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius chose the elephant as an emblem on coins celebrating their *munificentia*. The coins' legends show that the animals were intended for slaughter in the arena.

A similar case is found with Statius's lament over the death of a lion trained to bait other animals (*Silvae* 2.5). The lion, who has no name in the poem, is described as a «skilful destroyer of tall beasts», *altarum vastator docte ferarum*, and its death is likened both to that of a soldier: «like soldier who knows he is badly wounded advances on the foe, so he... jaws

¹³ Aristotle (*Politics* 1256 b 22-23, 1332 b4-6) noted that man alone possessed rationality, the factor which distinguished him from brute creation. This view, taken up by both the Stoics and Epicureans, was endorsed by Roman intellectuals, see Cicero (*De Finibus* 3.67 & *De Natura Deorum* 2.133) and Pliny (*Natural History* 7.1). Plutarch provides a Greek re-assertion of this view in the Roman period (*De Sollertia Animalium* 959c). A modern restatement can be found in Scruton (2006). For a general survey of ancient attitudes to animals, see Sorabji (1995) & Newmyer (2011).

at the ready, steadies his eyes, seeking out his courage and the enemy» and a gladiator «sorrowing the senate and people groaned at your death like for that of a famous gladiator on the cruel sand.» Once again, we can see that this lion has become an honorary human. It is regarded as a *bestiarius* in its own right and that is what makes its life valuable. The death of all the other animals, despite their numbers we are told, was of no consequence (*tot... feras quae perdere vile est*).

There can be no doubt that one major part of the *venationes*' appeal was the simple pleasure that formed the centre of Cicero's protest. Man is genetically a hunting animal and, in this respect, has a deep-rooted predisposition to be attracted to such spectacles. Most, though significantly not all, the animals killed in the arena were more powerful than a man and thus a vicarious heroism formed part of the appeal of games in general. Like gladiators, there were stars among the *venatores*. Martial celebrates Carpophorus, a young venator who hailed from Austria and was able to kill a whole range of beasts both close-up and at a distance and as many as twenty in a single bout (*De Spectaculis*, 15, 27) Another celebrated venator was the African Olympius whom Luxorius (*Ep.* 67) likens to a new Hercules. Hercules spent much of his career killing monstrous animals so the comparison would have been apposite in contemporary eyes.¹⁴ Luxorius (*Ep.* 48, 49) also speaks of a painting of a venator which had eyes painted on his hands to mark out his superhuman speed. The skill of this unnamed hero is stressed, his hand is skilled, *docta*, his technique, outstanding, *egregia*, and his deeds brave, *fortia*. His victims, here bears, in contrast are savage, *saevi*.

Little is known of the earliest *venationes*, but their development could well have followed the trajectory of the *corrida* in Iberia which began as a display of aristocratic prowess and was slowly democratised into the spectacle encountered today. Hunting has often been used to showcase aristocratic prowess (Green, 1996). The main problem with such displays was their inaccessibility – only a small entourage saw the act of killing and while the victim was more visible, doubts could easily be raised about the nature of its demise. The move to an arena opened up hunting to a much wider audience. This Roman remoulding of the hunt also seems to have brought a change in performer. It is conceivable that in the earliest *venationes* aristocrats themselves performed (and this occasionally happened throughout the *venationes*' lifespan, most notoriously with the emperor Commodus), but soon the winning of prestige came to centre on a willingness to pay for ever more exotic animals and skilled, professional performers to kill them in entertaining ways rather than a personal display of prowess. Those performers themselves could gain a popular reputation, but remained firmly declassés, infamous, and thus could never usurp the status of those who hired them.¹⁵ Hunting, however, was a rich man's sport and the title *venatio* which was retained, no doubt as much through conservatism as conscious choice, allowed spectators a false and vicarious, though comforting, participation in the pastimes of the rich.

¹⁴ Hercules's feats no doubt explain why the emperor Commodus who was obsessed with him performed as a venator at Rome, see Herodian 1.15.1-7.

¹⁵ Interestingly Herodian (1.15.7.) notes that while Commodus's behaviour as a *venator* was not befitting for an emperor, it brought him great popularity; but that in contrast his participation as a gladiator brought popular disapproval.

The core appeal of the hunt lay in its demonstration of the huntsman's mastery over nature (Kyle, 1994). Though small and seemingly puny, man nevertheless defeated his physically superior adversaries. As an anonymous poem puts it of the elephant «Human force can change animal rage. Behold! A mighty beast fears a tiny human» (*Anthologia Latina*, 195R). In one of his epigrams (30) praising the emperor Gratian Ausonius dwells on the this contrast, underlining the *tenue*, «delicate» nature of the death a suffered by a lion shot by the emperor, stressing it was not the power, vires, of the iron arrowhead, but that of the man that killed it.» This human mastery is now undisputed in the contemporary developed world which is essentially composed of urban space and parkland. There are few areas within it, if any, which could be called genuinely wild and even there their denizens are carefully managed. Animals pose no threat to life and are not necessary for the functioning of civilised life. The result is that they become objects of sentimental curiosity, endowed in the eyes of many with «rights». The balance between man and nature in antiquity was quite different and resembled much more that found in many parts of the developing world. Animals were part of the necessary machinery that allowed the world to function, while the countryside was a place of danger, not leisure or entertainment. It is no co-incidence that the author of the Apocalypse of St John (6.8) ranks death by «the beasts of the earth» on a par with that by war, famine, and plague. Every part of the empire contained animal predators which posed a threat not merely to livestock and thus livelihood, but to life itself. Herbivores were as great a danger as carnivores. They could wipe out cultivated crops bringing groups to the verge of starvation, and many too, particularly males, presented a real menace to life. Overall, man may have been the dominant species, but his grasp on power often seemed precarious and in large parts of the world his writ hardly ran at all. Such a state of affairs does not produce sentimentality, but rather a need to be reassured of one's position as master and to have visible proof of the fact. The *venationes* provided precisely such a comforting reminder. The ultimate proof of mastery, especially to the Roman mind, was the killing of one's adversaries. Thus, for example, enemy commanders paraded in triumphal processions were afterwards executed (Cicero, 2 *Ver.* 5.77). While mythology could provide some magical acts of animal taming such as the myth of Orpheus, only the games gave proof positive of human superiority in the form of men despatching animals which were much more powerful than themselves. It was perhaps co-incidental, but, if so, it was a happy co-incidence, that *venationes* were frequently followed by executions which involved criminals being torn apart by animals. In his *De Spectaculis* Martial dwells on the fatal charades where criminals dressed as the bandit Laureolus and the mythical Daedalus and Orpheus were killed in this way: «his mangled limbs lived on, dripping with gore, in no part of his body could you discern a body»; «Daedalus now you are ripped apart by a Lucanian boar how you wish you had your wings»; «he lies torn apart by a vile bear.»¹⁶ This style of execution was a spectacularly violent demonstration of the brutality of which wild animals were capable. Its use symbolised the way that those so killed had been entirely excluded from human society and its protection, and at the same time underlined the danger wild beasts posed and the need for their destruction.

¹⁶ Martial, *De Spectaculis* 7, 8, 21. The execution of a criminal dressed as Orpheus by wild beasts was an act of studied irony. For a detailed study, see Coleman (1990).

Thus the triumph of the huntsman represented the triumph of man as a whole over the threatening world around him. Such anxieties explain the style in which *venationes* were typically depicted with their heavy stress on blood and the act of killing. A partially destroyed mosaic found in the «maison de Autruches» at Sousse, labels a performer and emphasises his actions: *Neoterius occidit* - «Neoterius kills». The most common image is that of an animal leaping at the throat of a venator who is either driving, or about to drive, a hunting spear, *venabulum*, into its belly. Blood is frequently shown spurting from the animal and often pooling on the floor. Such scenes reverse modern sensibilities by laying stress on the cruel, savage nature of the animals killed. At Rudston the bull is singled out as a «man-killer». Leopards and bears in particular are frequently described as *crudelis*.¹⁷ The killing of such menacing animals, like the public execution of criminals, was a visible demonstration that the world was being put to rights and made safe for mankind. An anonymous poet notes with satisfaction the way an elephant's tusks can be turned into draughtsmen after its death, so that «dying, what once had caused fear, turns into a game.» (*Anthologia Latina*, 196R). For the contemporary Roman spectator *venationes* were not displays of violence directed towards animals but rather demonstrations of the suppression of violence by animals towards men.

Only very rarely is an animal shown at an advantage in depictions of *venationes*. The best example is that of a *bestiarius* shown being mauled by a bear on a mosaic found at Nennig in Germany.¹⁸ But here too his two colleagues are coming to the rescue. These *bestiarii* are armed with whips which after the hunting spear, was the preferred weapon of these spectacles. The whip gives reach and so is an ideal weapon against animals, but its symbolism is equally important. It is the badge of a master and to be whipped, a mark of servility and punishment.¹⁹ Animals are to learn their place through fear. At the very end of the classical era writing in Vandal Africa, Luxorius captured these feelings perfectly when he celebrated the building of an amphitheatre by the sea in these terms: «The fertile earth loses nothing, more grain grows. While in this place all the beasts fear their fate. (*Ep.* 60).

Luxorius carefully joins the notion of fertility with that of the games. The absence of wild animals allows farming and instead of farmers being afraid of *bestiae*, here it is the beasts who are fearful of man and his power.²⁰ These sentiments are echoed by an anonymous Greek poet: «Far-flung Nasamonian bounds of Libya, no longer will your plains be burdened by tribes of wild beasts, or echo, even beyond the sands of the Nomads, to the sound of lions roaring in the desert. For the young Caesar has ensnared that host without

¹⁷ See, for example, the description of the ten bears exhibited by local dignitary Publius Baebius Justus at Minturnae in AD 249, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* 5062.

¹⁸ Further examples include a fresco in the Hunting Baths at Lepcis Magna, where a *venator* named Bator is overpowered by a Leopard, though he is later shown recovering (Bianchi, 2012) and an incidental vignette on a relief from the tomb of Cn. Clovatus at Pompeii (Cooley, 2014: 194).

¹⁹ Plutarch, *De Liberis Educandis* 12. For an extended discussion of the symbolism of the whip see Saller (1994: 133-153). The whip survives as the traditional accompaniment of the ringmaster in the modern circus, cf. the use of the verb *castigar* in the context of the Spanish corrida.

²⁰ There is no sense here of the games having a sacrificial nature. Luxorius's point is simply that the absence of wild animals allows agriculture to flourish.

number and set them before his spearmen. Now the mountains which were once the lairs of beasts furnish pastures for men.» (*Anthologia Palatina* 7.626).

Such considerations would have had an immediate appeal to the overwhelmingly rural population of the empire nor can they be entirely ruled out even in the urban centres of the empire. Wolves entered Rome itself and caused fatalities there in 23 and 16 BC. Even in AD 211 they penetrated the city as far as the forum itself (Dio 53.33; 54.19; 78.1). Caged animals too could escape and cause injury; a threat that would have been a reminder of the dangers that the animal world posed to mankind.²¹ However, for the urban masses different considerations would also have been in play. Luxorius's epigram encapsulates these too by stressing the strangeness of the animals (*ignotas feras*) killed in his arena. To return to Rudston, neither the lion nor panther is native to Britain and their presence there would have caused wonder and excitement. The «man-killing» bull on the mosaic stresses man's triumph over a powerful animal, but not a wild one, and it has been suggested that the beast was a special import.²² This search for exotica and the prestige they brought was a long-standing consideration. Around three hundred years before the Magerius mosaic was laid, in 51/50 BC Cicero while governor of Cilicia was bombarded with letters from his friend Caelius asking him to acquire some leopards for him to exhibit in his games in Rome. (Cicero, *Ad Fam.*8.9). Thus the Rudston mosaic could well be a celebration of an actual event, something of which its promotor, editor, was proud and wished others to remember. His ability to acquire exotic animals would have shown his influence in the world and his wealth and his willingness to pay to have these animals killed for the entertainment of the community would no doubt have reaped a political reward. The inscription commemorating Justus's games at Minturnae also draws specific attention to the slaughter of animals as a marker of generosity and political service «Remember good citizens that he killed each and every one of the herbivores on all four days». No doubt this was at considerable expense to Justus, who had also held a gladiatorial contest which showed a similar financial commitment to his community. It was held *sine missione*, ie with all the losing combatants being killed.²³

These thoughts were certainly in the mind of the commissioner of one of the most celebrated depictions of a *venatio*, Magerius. Magerius's mosaic which is of a far higher quality than that at Rudston was found at Smirat in Tunisia. On it we see four *venatores* killing leopards. All, as is normal, are shown stabbed and bleeding to death. Like the commissioner of the Rudston mosaic, it is the death of the beasts Magerius wants his viewers to remember, for in it lay the proof of his generosity to the community as such killing had to be paid for handsomely. Magerius's animals are native to Africa, though one *venator*, Spittara, adds a novelty

²¹ The danger is noted by Tertullian, perhaps with reference to Carthage (*To the Martyrs* 5) and Libanius, probably referring to Antioch (*Oration* 14).

²² This is because the goad pictured next to it bears a close resemblance to the company badge of the Telegeni, a North African based firm who supplied animals for the games. See González (2018).

²³ *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* 5062. The financial rewards of such a strategy can be seen from Petronius, *Satyricon* 45. The herbivores may then have been served as food to the audience. This is often the fate of bulls in the modern *corrida*, albeit in this case their meat is a luxury item, whereas in antiquity it is likely to have been distributed, if at all, to the poor.

of his own by performing on stilts.²⁴ To the Roman mind the leopard was the apogee of savagery and its slaughter was thus the ultimate assertion of human mastery over the animal world.²⁵ However, while important, this is not the main point of the mosaic. Its centrepiece was created to stress Magerius's wealth and generosity. The eye naturally drifts to the centre of the composition and what it sees there at first appears odd as it shows a functionary carrying four bags of money: a far less exciting proposition than the action which surrounds it. However, the speech carefully recorded to the left and right of the scene makes its purpose clear. On the left is a demand for payment. The price being asked is 500 denarii for each leopard. The money bags on the functionary's platter are clearly marked as holding 1,000 denarii each, so Magerius has paid twice the asking price. To the right of the functionary the crowd's appreciation of Magerius's act was recorded word for word for posterity. We are told that this provincial show was an example for Rome itself. It includes the exclamation *Ista dies. Magerius donat. Hoc est habere, hoc est posse, hoc est ea*, «This is the day. Magerius gives it. This is what it is to be rich, this is what it is to be powerful, this is the real deal». It is the death of the leopards that allows Magerius to showcase his worth to the community. He not only produces an expensive show, he then pays for it twice over.

While such behaviour brought prestige to wealthy individuals, for the emperor it provided both the same and much more. His ability to exhibit animals in large numbers from all across the world in Rome was again a tangible demonstration of his wealth and generosity, but even more was a visible demonstration of the might he commanded and the reach of his power. As noted above, clearing areas of dangerous animals and allowing them to become productive and generate wealth was also a clear mark of his beneficence towards his people. The resources of the Imperial house made the emperor's venationes particularly spectacular. Calpurnius Siculus's (*Ecl.* 7) celebration of Imperial games dwells on the fact that there are animals from «beneath the arctic skies» along with the hippopotamus from Egypt. and Martial too takes pains to stress the wide range of beasts that Domitian has gathered to entertain his people. His collection of epigrams, *De Spectaculis*, which probably celebrates a set of games held by Domitian in AD 83, notably concentrates more on animal than gladiatorial combat. Martial's poetry dwells on the exotic nature of the animals exhibited, particularly the rare rhinoceros, but he also focuses on another feature of the games: the ability to change the very nature of animals. This is sometimes done through violence. Martial marvels at the ferocity with which does, and perhaps more perversely a tigress, fight in the arena. This is an amplified version of the reversal of the natural order of things engendered by the appearance of human females performing as *venatrices*, one apparently killing a lion, and female gladiators.²⁶ Domitian orders a lion which bit its trainer to be killed, ordering «beasts to have a gentler spirit», an act that shows his rule extends over the animal kingdom as well as men (Martial, *De Spectaculis* 10). In the most bizarre such exhibition of this kind recorded

²⁴ Spittara reminds one of the antics of early toreros as recorded by Goya.

²⁵ Lewis & Llewellyn-Jones (2017) s.v. Leopard.

²⁶ Martial 4.74 (cf 4.35) for does; *De Spectaculis* 18 for the tigress. A female *venatrix* is the subject of *De Spectaculis* 6b and female gladiators are mentioned in *De Spectaculis* 6. The Rudston mosaic also features a *venatrix*.

a pregnant sow, probably a wild boar, was killed in the arena and gave birth in her death throes. This was no accident. Martial praises the skill of the blow, the «sure right hand», *dextera certa*, which brought it about.²⁷ The tableaux would have required careful planning in advance and demonstrated that man could exercise control over life itself.

However, another form of performance aimed to show man's domination of the natural world not through violence, but rather through its suppression. Killing animals demonstrated the superiority of man, but in a simple physical sense. A lion killed was not a lion changed, but merely a beast overcome. Some tableaux however aimed to demonstrate that man was able to control animal creation to the degree that even its most basic instincts could be changed, indeed reversed. Several of Martial's poems are dedicated to the way a lion allowed a hare to clamber into its mouth unharmed, despite it being a natural prey animal.²⁸ The power of the emperor in particular to effect such changes is again stressed. When a deer in the arena sought refuge from Domitian we are told that the Molossian hounds, a particularly ferocious breed of dog, backed off their prey.²⁹ In the same way Martial tells us that an elephant which had just killed a bull spontaneously knelt before the emperor, «believe me, even he perceives our god» (*De Spectaculis*, 30).

Venationes remained popular in late antiquity (Puk, 2014: 229-288). Animals, though not cheap, were not particularly expensive. Diocletian's price list sets the price of a male slave at 30,000 *denarii*. A «first class» lion is priced at 150,000 *denarii*, a «first class» leopard at 100,000 *denarii*. «First class» bears and boars were priced at 25,000 and 6,000 *denarii* respectively (Crawford & Reynolds, 1979: 163-210). Such prices would have been out of reach for many of the empire's citizens, but easily affordable by its rich aristocracy. The presence of animals in Diocletian's list shows that the trade was common enough to regulate, suggesting that Jennison was overly pessimistic about the supply of such beasts from the mid-second century onwards (Jennison, 1937: 83). Symmachus (*Ep.* 4.8, 5.62, 6.33) had difficulty in obtaining animals for his son's games at Rome in AD 393 and AD 401. Some of these were due to the increased bureaucracy which had taken hold in his day, but perhaps the supply of animals was beginning to run lower. It seems unlikely that this was caused by the games themselves, though they may have had some impact on numbers. A more likely reason is the steady advance of agriculture reducing the habitat of carnivores in particular, but also their prey.³⁰ Nevertheless, there was still a supply of animals to be had. An ivory diptych now in the Hermitage in St Petersburg shows a *venatio* where eight lions are killed in the traditional way.³¹ Similarly a leaf from one of consular diptychs of Aerobindus, dating to AD 506, shows four *venatores* despatching lions in a similar fashion (Delbrück, 1929).

²⁷ Martial, *De Spectaculis*, 12-14, especially 13.

²⁸ Martial devotes no fewer than eight epigrams to this theme, see for example 1.6, 1.48, 1.104.

²⁹ Martial, *De Spectaculis*, 30. For the Molossian hound see Aristotle, *De Historia Animalium* 91. The «Jennings Dog» in the British Museum (inv. 2001,1010.1) is normally thought to be a statue of this breed.

³⁰ For a brief, and perhaps overly pessimistic, discussion of these issues, see Bomgardener (1992: 164-165).

³¹ Interestingly, the lowest venator is shown raising his right hand in triumph after dealing a successful death blow, much in the same way that a modern-day torero would celebrate a well-executed *estocada*.

Other leaves which have lost their patrons' names show a *venatio* of bears (the Louvre) and of stags (Liverpool). Luxorius's venator Olympius who fought in the 6th century AD also seems to have been a venator in the style of Martial's Carpophorus, and the fact that eyes were painted on the hands of the other venator he praises suggests that his speed was in handling his weapons. Justinian when regulating games given by new consuls in AD 536 enacted that one would be a *venatio* which was to last all day with the *venatores* triumphing «through their daring» and «above all the beasts being killed», *insuper et interemptae bestiae*. (*Novellae* 105.1). It is an edict of which Trajan or Probus would have approved.

Outside of the capital however changes did occur. Libanius writing towards the end of the fourth century notes that «the people like chariot-racing and enjoy the theatre, but nothing draws them as much as men fighting animals. Escape from the beasts seems impossible, yet through sheer intelligence the men succeed» (*Ep.*199). Libanius's rhetoric here is completely different to that of his predecessors such as Martial. Both accept the inherent cruelty of wild animals and the danger they pose, but whereas Martial and other writers of the early Empire celebrate man's ability nevertheless to triumph over and subdue this threat, Libanius merely speaks of being able to use one's wits to escape from it. The focus of the games is reversed, no longer is it on killing animals but rather on avoiding being killed by them. This change is reflected on other surviving leaves from Aerobindus's diptychs. On one we see a performer vaulting over a bear on a pole.³² Two others swing in baskets above bears which threaten them from below, while another evades a further bear by using a set of parallel bars. On another leaf a performer enclosed in a wooden sphere is attacked by a bear. Similar scenes are found on the diptych of Anastasius, dating to AD 517 where two performers successfully evade bears by manipulating a series of revolving doors. A third however is caught by the ankle as he attempts to run from a bear. Complete failure is surprisingly the theme of another leaf from Aerobindus's diptychs where three performers are all shown falling victims to bears. Two are grabbed by the ankle as they try to leap over a bear, a third seems to be falling towards a bear's jaws. Given that these diptychs were distributed as souvenirs of the games, it appears that the acceptance of human failure was now acceptable or indeed regarded as part of the entertainment.

This change was no sudden innovation. Performers who specialised in avoiding death rather than killing, called «leapers», *salitores*; «treewalkers», *dendrobatai*; or «wall walkers», *toichobatai*, had always been a feature of games.³³ Varro mentions the use of revolving doors, known as a *coclea*, «sea-shell», in bull-fights as early as the first century BC (*De Re Rustica* 3.5.3). However, these attractions became ever more prominent in what were still called *venationes* with the passage of time. Our most detailed description of them is found

³² This appears to be the source of the scene carved in the ninth century onto one of the door jambs of S. Miguel de Lillo in Oviedo.

³³ *Salitores* appear to have vaulted over animals with poles. There is an echo here of the bull-leaping of Minoan Crete, and also of the early Iberian corrida of the early nineteenth century; see Goya's *La velocidad y el atrevimiento de Juanito Apiñani en el anillo de Madrid* of 1816. The *Anthologia Graeca* (9.533) mentions *salitores*, the *Codex Glossarium Latinorum* Goetz (1965 vol. 3: 240) lists both *salitores* and *dendrobatae*. The emperor Carus used *toichobatae* in at least one of his games (*SHA* Carus 19). The word is not glossed in the text and we should assume it was familiar to the contemporary reader.

in a sixth century letter, drafted by his mayordomo, Cassiodorus, of the Romanising King Theoderic to the consul Maximus. These games are entirely composed of performances which court and avoid death. There is no hunting of animals. «The first [performer] trusting to a slender pole runs towards the maws of the beasts and seems to rush at that which he desires to escape. They charge at each other together, predator and prey; and he can win safety only by encountering the one he hopes to escape. Then throwing his body into the air he lays his limbs horizontal as if they were lightest of clothes³⁴ and poised like a human rainbow above the brute, while he delays his descent, the beast's charge passes below him and so shown to be deceived, it can be made to seem that bit tamer.» Here part of the old optimism remains. The animal is defeated, though not killed, and thus made to look less formidable than it did at the outset. Theoderic does not make it clear who in his opinion is the predator and who is the prey in this encounter, though the form it takes makes one suspect that the prey is the human performer. The description of the «vaulter» is followed by one of the cochlea, then, in succession, of a performer who goads animals while lying on a plank, one who evades death by wearing a hedgehog costume, and three who play a deadly game of chase with lions across the arena floor. It ends with a performer who is enclosed in a ball and one who stands on top of it. The ball we are told «is shaped like the treacherous world: some it refreshes with hope, others it tortures with fear. It smiles on all in turn, so it can deceive them.»³⁵ What little optimism there was in Theoderic's account has evaporated. There is no mention here of any animals being killed, though Theoderic's concerns remain focussed on the human performers whom he laments will be eaten alive if they fail. Violence against animals has ceased to give an optimistic message about the ability of man to master the world and has been replaced a pessimistic one in which violence from animals constrains him. The wheel which contains the final performer becomes a gloomy metaphor for the wheel of fortune where ill fortune will inevitably follow good.³⁶

At the end of antiquity, we are confronted therefore with two very different sorts of *venatio*. A traditional one and emerging one where it was men not animals who were in peril. The second carried a gloomier, more pessimistic message and perhaps for that was all the more attractive in the provinces where in an increasingly unstable world Rome and the emperor no longer seemed the invincible powers that they once were. Theoderic's kingdom too had a precarious existence as was shown by its rapid decline on his death. The new *venatio* with its stress on the evasion of danger through quick thinking rather than the possibility of its suppression through force would have spoken true to many. In the capital, though, amid

³⁴ This is probably a reference to silk whose distribution at the games was heavily restricted, *Cod. Theod.* 15.9.1.

³⁵ *Primus fragili ligno confisus currit ad ora belvarum et illud, quod cupit evadere, magno inpetu videtur appetere. Pari in se cursu festinant et praedator et praeda nec aliter tutus esse potest, nisi huic, quem vitare cupit, occurrerit. Tunc in aere saltu corporis elevato quasi vestes levissimae supinata membra iaciuntur et quidam arcus corporeus supra belvam librat, dum moras discedendi facit, sub ipso velocitas ferina discedit, sic accidit, ut ille magis possit mitior videri, qui probatur illudi.... ad infidi mundi formata qualitatem istos spe refovet, illos timore discruciat: omnibus tamen vicissim, ut decipere possit, arridet.* Cassiodorus, *Variae* 5.42.38-45.

³⁶ It was precisely in this period that the image of the wheel of fortune to be made famous by Boethius, *Consolatio*, 4 pr. 6, 61-77.

the pomp of the new consul's games the Romans could, and did, still think of themselves as masters of the universe.

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