

# THE TRADE IN WILD BEASTS FOR ROMAN SPECTACLES : A GREEN PERSPECTIVE

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## Summary

The trade in wild beasts from North Africa has usually been examined from the point of view of the destination : accounts of venationes held in the amphitheatres and circuses of Italy. The purpose of this paper is to examine this trade in terms of the impact upon North Africa and specifically to examine the relationship between it and the large scale agricultural production of North Africa.

Ample testimony exists to document roughly the scale of export of animals from North Africa from the late Republic through the Early Empire. By the end of the fourth century AD, if not earlier, such animals were becoming difficult to obtain.

The large scale production in North Africa of corn and oil for export was arguably the primary aim of Roman policy there. With the extension and liberalization of the *lex Manciana* under Hadrian, marginal land was encouraged to be occupied and brought under cultivation, particularly in olive plantations. The large-scale export of oil and the growth of prosperity of regions too dry for cereal cultivation (notably the Sahel of Tunisia) during the second/third centuries, attest the success of this policy.

It is argued that the combined pressures of both the hunting of species for aristocratic recreation and for use in venationes coupled with the destruction of habitat to maximize agricultural productivity caused a dramatic decrease in numbers of wild animals in large tracts of North Africa. This scarcity is probably reflected in changes in the way in which wild beasts were treated in the arenas of the late Empire. Animals were no longer slaughtered wholesale, but were kept alive for return performances - humans now ran the risk of injury or death in the arena as they tried to elude the jaws and claws of the baited animals or else the animals performed clever tricks, sometimes mimicking human behaviour. Out of these trends came the lineal descendants of the modern European travelling circus.

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## Key Words

Amphitheatre, Venationes, Wild Beast Trade, Agriculture

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## Résumé

Le commerce des animaux sauvages pour les spectacles romains : perspective écologiste.

Le commerce des bêtes sauvages dans l'antiquité romaine a principalement été étudié jusqu'ici au point de vue de sa destination : les venationes dans les amphithéâtres et les cirques de l'Italie ancienne. Le but du présent article est d'examiner les effets de ce commerce sur le principal fournisseur, l'Afrique du Nord, en particulier à propos de son développement agricole. Les nombreux témoignages disponibles permettent de dresser le tableau général de l'exportation des animaux sauvages, notamment les félins, vers l'Italie, de la fin de la République au début de l'Empire. Ils montrent aussi que, dès la fin du 4<sup>e</sup> siècle après J-C, l'approvisionnement était devenu difficile. Dès la début de la conquête, l'objectif prioritaire de la politique romaine en Afrique du Nord fut d'intensifier la production des céréales et de l'huile. Sous Hadrien, la mise en application de la *lex Manciana* pour l'exploitation de terres nouvelles, consacrées entre autres à la culture de l'olivier. Le volume des exportations d'huile et la prospérité croissante, au II<sup>e</sup> et III<sup>e</sup> siècles, de régions trop sèches pour la culture des céréales, comme le Sahel tunisien, attestent la réussite de cette politique. On découvre donc trois buts à la chasse pratiquée en Afrique du Nord à l'époque romaine : le divertissement des nobles, l'approvisionnement des venationes, l'assainissement du territoire en vue de l'exploitation agricole. Sous l'effet de la pression à laquelle elle se trouva ainsi soumise, la faune sauvage régressa rapidement et dans de très grandes proportions. La raréfaction des espèces semble même avoir été à l'origine de modifications dans l'organisation des spectacles à la fin de l'Empire. Les animaux ne furent plus alors abattus systématiquement, mais gardés vivants pour être exhibés à plusieurs reprises. Ils servaient à l'exécution des condamnés (*damnatio ad bestias*) ou ils étaient entraînés à exécuter toutes sortes de tours d'adresse. Les cirques itinérants qui sillonnèrent l'Europe à partir du Moyen Age pourraient trouver là leur origine.

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## Mots clés

Amphithéâtre, Venationes, Commerce des animaux sauvages, Agriculture

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## Introduction

This paper is intended to provoke further discussion and investigation and to provide a working hypothesis to explain certain developments which can be traced in the attitudes towards and the uses of animals in the arenas of the Late Empire. It does not pretend to be a definitive statement nor does it ignore the fact that certain evidence exists which might contradict this theory.

It must be admitted at this point that there exist other possible explanations for the changes observed in *venationes* in the Late Empire. Economic factors such as the rising costs of trapping and transporting animals, increased pressures on individual purses already stretched with crushing civic burdens (*munera*) and a general decline in prosperity in the West during this era probably played their part in causing change. In addition the military and political situation probably entailed a lowering of priorities among the Emperors for the provision of *venationes* for their subjects : other needs such as food and military security being far more pressing (JONES, 1964 ; REMONDON, 1970). Closely allied to the former one would expect a general decline and decay of the networks previously established by the Emperors for the provision of animals for such spectacles. (The best modern treatment of the organization of this trade is Sabbatini Tumolesi, 1988). Finally one must consider the impact of Christianity upon the *venationes*. It is quite clear that the militant agitation of the Christian clergy had contributed towards bringing an end to gladiatorial combats by the early fifth century AD (VILLE, 1960). What is far from clear, however, is the precise nature of the interaction between the continuing criticisms of *venationes* by the Church, after the virtual elimination of gladiatorial *munera*, and the developments in the *venationes* themselves in the Late Empire (LAFAYE, 1912 : 708f. ; ROBERT, 1940 : 329-31 ; VILLE, 1960 : 332-35 ; LEPELLEY, 1979 : I.298-302, II.44-47).

## The evidence for the trade in wild beasts

There have been various studies, notably those by FRIEDLAENDER (1922), JENNISON (1937) and most recently VILLE (1981), which have gleaned the literary sources for references to individual spectacles. They record details such as the numbers of beasts killed in any one series of games, the types of animals hunted and similar information which focuses on the Italian mainland and the ultimate use of the beasts. Such data

have certain shortcomings. First, the record is notoriously skewed chronologically : the Early Principate and particularly the reigns of the Julio-Claudian and Flavian emperors are well represented, while later periods have few or no historical documents of relevance to these matters. Second, the nature of the evidence itself is variable. Suetonius and Cassius Dio were deeply interested in the spectacles and generally recorded more or less detailed accounts of spectacles. Others, such as Pliny the Elder and the writers of the so-called *Historia Augusta* were either only marginally interested in the spectacles or tend to amalgamate a wide range of evidence in a rather uncritical fashion. Third, only spectacles which were somehow exceptional tended to receive mention in the sources. Arguments built on such a body of evidence must always be viewed with a certain caution in case they have unwittingly incorporated bias and exaggeration. Finally, since the terminology for wild beasts used in these sources tends to be generic rather than specific, it is seldom possible to deduce the regions from which the beasts for any particular series of games were captured. There are a few notable exceptions, as for example the games given by Sulla (early first century BC : Seneca, *De Brev. Vitae* 13.5) in which 100 maned lions were hunted. It is quite clear that King Bocchus of Mauretania supplied these animals to his Roman *patronus*, Sulla. Such cautionary remarks about the nature of the evidence must apply with equal force to the present study. Therefore, I have intentionally avoided this well-tilled plot of scholarship and have instead chosen to engage in some lateral thinking about other areas which I believe are related to these problems.

## Roman agricultural policy in North Africa

It is particularly appropriate that North Africa be chosen for examination in relation to this trade in wild beasts for spectacles, for in the eyes of the Romans themselves this region was considered the source of supply *par excellence* for such animals. Indeed the very generic names for the most popular feline species to appear in the arena (*Africanae bestiae* in Latin and *Libyka theria* in Greek) reveal the close mental linkages between the source of supply and this geographical area (JENNISON, 1937 : 3-5, 43ff.).

As mentioned above I believe that the Romans exploited North Africa in a systematic, pragmatic, almost ruthless fashion, in order to maximize production

of agricultural products, chiefly corn and oil, for the supply of Rome. Recent studies such as RICKMAN (1980) have charted the main lines of this exploitation. In addition, following the foundation of Constantinople, North Africa was immeasurably more important to Rome since the surplus of Egypt was now diverted from Rome to supply this second Imperial city. As mentioned above the up-dated version by Hadrian of the *lex Manciana*, whose original date is still a much debated topic, was probably intended to bring marginal land into cultivation through a series of graduated tax incentives and outright title to the land, if cultivated without interruption (ROSTOVITZ, 1957 : 202, 368-69, 628 n. 12, 684 n. 75 ; for a contrary, restricted interpretation of this law see WHITTAKER, 1978). That this measure was spectacularly effective in certain areas of North Africa can be demonstrated. In a series of articles HEDI SLIM (1960, 1964, 1983) has linked the rise to prosperity of the Sahel of Tunisia and particularly the city of El-Djem, ancient Thysdrus, to the successful introduction of wide-spread olive plantations at just this time. Similarly in the high plains of central Algeria at this time cities such as Timgad, Djemila, Cirta and Sétif were beginning to experience their first great prosperity linked to intensive cereal cultivation of this region (MACKENDRICK, 1980 : 226ff. ; RAVEN, 1984 : 84ff.). This phenomenon is visibly reflected in the surprising degree of centuriation recently discovered on aerial photographs even in quite remote, hilly sectors of this region (SOYER, 1976).

Finally CARANDINI (1983) has recently published an economic analysis of the distribution of African wares in the Mediterranean. He chronicles an absolute dominance of this market by North African wares by the end of the second century AD, a dominance which lasted throughout much of the Late Antique period. The pottery forms which were particularly widespread were amphorae probably containing oil and wine. Thus it can be argued that, by the end of the second century AD, the reforms introduced by Hadrian had had profound repercussions in North African agricultural practice.

## The amphitheatres of North Africa

A study of the amphitheatres of North Africa formed the basis for my doctoral thesis at the University of Michigan (BOMGARDNER, 1984). During the course of my research several aspects of these monuments struck me as unusual. First the very large numbers of them, some 70 in all, and their extremely high density in

the region of Tunisia known as the *Campi Magni*, its chief cereal growing area. Second, the fact that even the smallest examples seemed to have been designed with sophisticated architectural features, such as pens built into the fabric of the arena wall, specifically aimed towards the presentation of *venationes*. Another aspect of this investigation was the relative rarity of representations or epigraphical references to gladiators or their combats (BOMGARDNER, 1989), a situation strikingly contrasted by the ubiquitous representations of *venationes* and *venatores*, which are especially common on polychrome mosaic pavements (DUNBABIN, 1978 : 65-87). These mosaics frequently commemorated a particular spectacle and were installed in the villa of the person who paid for the games, the *munerarius*. Finally SALOMONSON (1979 : esp. 42ff.) has recently published a study of African Red Slip Wares with applied decoration. He documents that well over half the representations on third century AD wares depict *venationes* and even into the next century this decorative motif remained amongst the most popular of decorations. Thus one sees that North African amphitheatres were almost entirely devoted to the presentation of *venationes* - a situation not unexpected when one considers that wild beasts could be had in abundance in North Africa. But could there also be other, less obvious reasons for this situation ?

## The inter-relationships between agriculture and animal populations

Farmers in Provence are often troubled by roving herds of wild boar which root among the tender shoots of newly-sprouted crops. In the mid-fourth century AD farmers in the Fayûm region of Egypt called upon a priest to organize assistance for them. Gazelles were destroying the crop and the priest sent an official request to a squadron of cavalry stationed nearby requesting the loan of some nets to put a stop to the depredations (BELL *et al.*, 1962). One wonders if the priest had it also in mind later to sell the gazelles for exhibition in amphitheatre spectacles. British statistics for the Indian sub-continent for the year 1911 indicate that some 2,382 people and over 100,000 head of livestock were killed due to wild beasts (LAFAYE, 1912 : 702, n. 16). In a similar vein, during the late eighteenth century, a particular clan of natives, the Welled Beni Boogannim, living in the mountainous region of northwestern Tunisia near Le Kef, were given an hereditary exemption from taxation by the Bey of Tunis if they killed and ate mountain lions in

order to keep this region safe for its inhabitants (BRUCE, 1790, I : xxivf.). Thus it can be seen that having a large resident population of wild animals presents very real problems to any attempts to maximize agricultural productivity : attacks on flocks, herds and farm labourers by carnivores and destruction of crops by herbivores are the main problems. Is it possible that Roman authorities may have fostered widespread *venationes* in North Africa and the large-scale exportation of beasts in an effort to control the numbers of animals in the vital agricultural districts of these provinces ?

## A systematic Roman policy for North Africa ?

Strabo (2.5.33), already in the reign of the emperor Augustus, had noticed the effects in Numidia of intensive trapping for live export to Rome. There was a scarcity of wild animals there. Similarly the author of a poem (7.626) in the *Anthologia Palatina*, the date of which is still debated, but which VILLE (1981 : 112) places in the early Empire, waxes rhetorical about an Africa liberated from lions which have been captured alive for exhibition in *venationes*. But perhaps the most telling literary reference on this point comes from an unusual source. Luxorius was a Latin court poet to the Vandalic kingdom of Carthage during the fifth century AD. In much the same style as Martial had chronicled the spectacles of the Flavian emperors in Rome, Luxorius composed a series of epigrams on the spectacles of the Carthage amphitheatre. Among these epigrams is a unique example of a poem (ROSENBLUM, 1961 : no. 60, 146-47, 223-24) which deals with a private seaside villa which possesses its own private amphitheatre.

*Amphitheatrales mirantur rura triumphos  
et nemus ignotas cernit adesse feras.  
Spectat arando novos agrestis turba labores  
nautica de pelago gaudia mixta videt.  
Fecundus nil perdit ager, plus germina crescunt.  
Dum metuunt omnes hic sua fata ferae.*

“The countryside marvels at the triumphs of the amphitheatre and the forest notices that strange wild beasts are there. The many farmers look at new struggles while ploughing and the sailor sees varied entertainments from the sea. The fertile land loses nothing, the plants grow in greater abundance while all the wild beasts fear their fates here” (Transl. ROSENBLUM, 1961 : no. 60).

It is a problematical epigram, but I think that it expresses the conscious link between the culling/control of wild beasts, the *venationes* of the arena and the levels of agricultural productivity, the only expression of its kind to my knowledge. The land given over to this arena is not wasted, its function will ensure the enhanced production elsewhere on the estate. A grim, functional view of the natural world.

It seems that this outlook began to take its toll from the end of the second century AD. From about this time it would seem that supplies of big cats and other popular species from North Africa began to dwindle. One finds increasingly the substitution of locally obtainable species, particularly bears from this time onwards (JENNISON, 1937 : 83ff.). Indeed the trade in bears became such big business that the emperors put a 2 per cent import tariff (*quingagesima*) on all such professional traders, the only part of the wild beast trade so taxed (cf. Symmachus, *Epist.* 5.62). In addition one finds increasingly the addition of species such as bulls, boars and herbivores into the *venationes* from this time forth (JENNISON, 1937 : 83ff.). So too does the use of trained animals become more common : they were not killed, but performed turns and tricks on command (JENNISON, 1937 : 177ff. ; VILLE, 1960 : 332-35). And the very spectacles themselves began to show signs of future developments. Animals were used increasingly as executioners in the arena : the gruesome *damnatio ad bestias*, often in the perverted performance of a mythical tale such as Orpheus charming the beasts (AUGUET, 1972 : 99ff.). All of these trends seem to me to point to shortages of supply of the more popular feline species - a shortage somewhat rectified when new sources of supply became available in Syria and Mesopotamia (JENNISON, 1937 : 53ff.). Increasingly the combined pressures of hunting, live capture for the arenas and destruction of habitat for cultivation took their toll. Eventually by the late fourth century as indicated in the letters of Symmachus, the urban prefect of the city of Rome, one could no longer be assured of supplies at all (JENNISON, 1937 : 95ff.). It is noteworthy that, although Symmachus had been governor of the province of Africa in 373 with popular approval, almost no African animals were to appear in the spectacles which marked the games of his son's political career (BARROW, 1973 : 1ff. ; JENNISON, 1937 : *idem*). This might indicate that there were low levels of wild animals in this region at this time.

As long ago as 1940, in his seminal study of gladiators in the Greek East, Louis Robert had urged the

systematic study of the persistence of *venationes* into the seventh century AD. (ROBERT, 1940 : 329-31). I too would also urge this undertaking for surely the later history of these spectacles merges imperceptibly into the origins of the itinerant circus of Medieval Europe

and remarkably even reappear among the rodeo clowns, straw dummies and Brahma bull riders of the Wild West's Rodeo (cf. the representations of fifth/sixth century *venationes* in DELBRUECK, 1929 : 75ff.).

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