Chapter 6

Spectacle in Late Antiquity

Compared to earlier periods, spectacle in late antiquity has received patchy attention, mainly due to the fragmentary nature of the evidence. The area best understood is chariot racing, which by the later fourth century had become highly politicised in both content and spectator involvement. Recent work at sites such as Aphrodisias has also greatly added to the picture. One of the biggest challenges is that presented by the role of Christianity in any changes which took place at this time. How was the range and type of public entertainments affected by new religious agendas? The traditional view holds that from the time of Constantine's rescript issued at Berytus in AD 325 gladiatorial games were banned, and that from the 390s Theodosius I authorised the destruction of 'pagan' buildings and the suppression of traditional public festivals and entertainments. Thus spectacles were transformed: no gladiators, very little theatre, no exotic and spectacular executions, nothing except chariot racing. This is a very simplistic view that does not take in the whole picture. There certainly was change, but the evolution of spectacle had as much to do with the social and economic environment as the religious. At least in some locations, the range of entertainments enjoyed was still very broad – and for a while it was still very bloodthirsty.

The form of spectacle in this period varied from one location to another, and a further problem is that the documentary evidence and archaeological evidence do not always align, indeed often they indicate rather different situations. It is not clear how far-reaching were the various pieces of legislation concerning public spectacle and performers. The growing body of Christian literature is very instructive about early Christian attitudes to public spectacle, but naturally it presented a very biased and imaginary view, in particular when concerned with 'persecution' of Christians and their appearance in the arena. Modern romantic ideas and the products of Hollywood have certainly helped to compound and prolong the biases.

Mid-fourth-century Rome enjoyed 175 festival days each year. The associated games comprised 10 days of gladiatorial *munera*, 64 of chariot racing (*circenses*) and 101 when dramatic *ludi* were staged. Thus, even at

this late date, the full range of entertainments was still important, and presumably still popular, at least in the capital. Of course the inherent links with traditional cults and their celebration remained, as did the political significance of spectacles. Indeed, during the fifth and sixth centuries this latter element was greatly enhanced. From the time of Constantine, games, particularly and increasingly those held in the circus, were more closely linked to the emperor's actions, held to mark such events as his arrival at a major city, his victories in war and his anniversaries (of accession, etc). In addition the appointment of magistrates continued to be celebrated with games, certainly in Rome and Constantinople.

The anti-pagan edicts of Theodosius I at the very end of the fourth century which authorised the destruction of cult buildings and the suppression of public festivals and associated entertainments had a profound influence on urban life and probably accelerated changes in the forms of public entertainment. Yet a century later in AD 498, Anastasius issued an edict suppressing shows in all cities of the eastern empire. Nevertheless, *venationes* continued in Constantinople. Epigraphic evidence from Aphrodisias demonstrates that such spectacles continued there into the early sixth century AD. At the same time, athletic festivals were also still being held at Antioch and Apamea in Syria.

Spectacle and Christianity

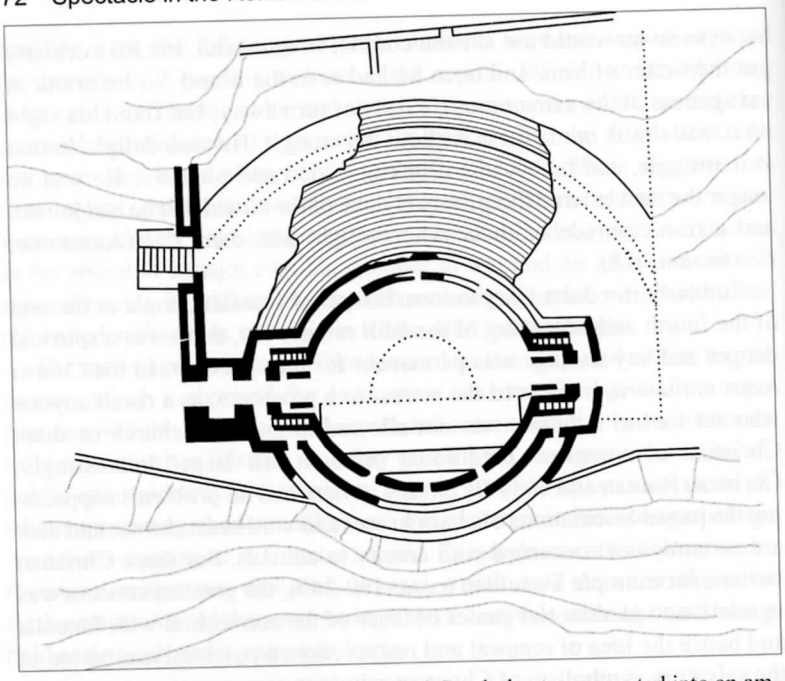
Christian objections to Roman public spectacle were complex. There was already existing philosophical opposition to some of the performances, which was taken up by early Christians. At a fundamental level the circus and beast displays could continue provided that any pagan sacrifice and other explicitly pagan elements were removed from the procession and ceremonies. The philosophic tradition going as far back as the later first century AD had viewed gladiatorial displays as a particular threat to Greek culture, but it is interesting to note that there was little indication of objections on humanitarian grounds. For Christian writers, opposition was based on the grounds that the games were morally dangerous to the audience; the 'infamous' performers, it seems, were beyond hope! The objections were predictable but at their heart was the fear that Christians were habitually indulging in the behaviour which was being condemned. For St Augustine, bishop of Hippo at the end of the fourth century AD, the main concern was the psychological effect on the Christian soul of watching such entertainments, particularly gladiatorial displays. In his writings, the gladiator is characterised as evil and immoral, and the spectators as drunk on blood and violence. He recounts the story of Alypius who was taken to the amphitheatre in Rome by friends. He closed

his eyes so he would not see the combat in the arena, but his curiosity got the better of him, and once he had seen the blood '... he drank in savageness at the same time. He did not turn away, but fixed his sight on it, and drank in madness without knowing it. He took delight in that evil struggle, and he became drunk on blood and pleasure. He was no longer the man entered there, but only one of the crowd that he had joined, and a true comrade of those who brought him there ...' (Augustine, *Confessions* 6.8).

Similarly, for John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century AD, there was a spiritual danger and any damage was permanent for the spectator. In his *Contra ludos et theatra*, he likened the actress to a prostitute; as a result anyone who set foot in a theatre was not allowed to enter his church or share Christian communion. Traditional *infamia* writ large! Interestingly, Christian Roman and early Byzantine writers had no problems suppressing the pagan associations of chariot races and wild beast shows; and they are certainly not concerned with cruelty to animals. For some Christian writers, for example Tertullian (*c.* AD 160-240), the greatest concern was in relation to gladiatorial games because of the connection with funerals and hence the idea of renewal and resurrection, a potential usurpation of the salvatory symbolism of Christian religious sacraments.

The execution of criminals in the arena, an old and established Roman practice, was also unproblematic in late antiquity. This aspect of the judicial system continued and could be brutal. Indeed, from the time of Constantine there was an extended range of crimes which required torture and execution by fire or by wild beasts. For example, practitioners of magic and their accomplices faced death in the circus or the amphitheatre. The emperor Valentinian I in the later fourth century had the unpopular *praepositus* Rhodanus burned alive in the circus in Constantinople on charges of embezzlement.

An examination of the venues themselves can also be very instructive. Many were not torn down under Christian influence, and in some areas of public entertainment it actually took up to 200 years for terminal decline to set in. A number of buildings were modified for continued entertainment functions. Notably, a number of theatres in the eastern provinces were modified involving the cutting back of seating to create an arena-like area, for example at Ephesus, Cyrene in eastern modern Libya (Fig. 22), and the Theatre of Dionysos in Athens. These modifications varied in terms of date, with some possibly as early as the late first and second centuries AD, and are sometimes ambiguous as to the exact form of spectacle presented. Most of the modifications seem to have accommodated



22. Theatre, Cyrene (Libya). Plan. Original Greek theatre converted into an amphitheatre in second/third century AD.

gladiatorial displays, where the podium wall was only 1.5-2 metres high, but supplementary nets could also have been rigged on top of these walls to create extra protection during *venationes*. The theatre at Aphrodisias was also modified for gladiatorial combats, but other types of entertainment, such as acrobatics, were also accommodated, as evidenced by a graffito on the stage building depicting a tight-rope walker.

Gladiatorial displays

The evidence for gladiatorial displays in late antiquity is contradictory and its interpretation is especially influenced by modern preconceptions. Constantine's rescript of AD 325 is usually interpreted as having banned gladiatorial games. It did forbid gladiators and ruled that criminals should be condemned to work in the mines (*ad metallas*) instead of fighting in the arena, but there was also perhaps an economic dimension to this. Previously Christians had often been condemned to the mines, but with tolerance of their cult there followed a shortage of such manpower. The contrariness of this legislation is highlighted by the fact that just ten years before (AD 315) Constantine had condemned kidnappers to fight as

gladiators, and in AD 330 he allowed a *munus* (which included both theatrical displays and gladiatorial combats) to be given at Hispalum in Umbria (Italy) as part of celebrations for the cult of the imperial house. There is firm evidence for gladiatorial combat continuing into the fifth century AD in Rome, although the spectacles were not as lavish or as common as in earlier centuries. When Flavius Symmachus was Urban Prefect, barbarian captives were forced to fight both gladiators and wild beasts in the arena (AD 383-4). However, it is clear that the cost of putting on spectacles was escalating and other legislation limited senatorial expenditure on both theatrical and gladiatorial spectacles.

Commemorative medallions (*contorniates*) of Valentinian III (AD 419-455) with depictions of gladiatorial combat on their reverse demonstrate that such displays continued in Rome into the fifth century. One of the last documentary references to gladiators is in AD 404 when a monk, Telemachus, was torn apart by an irate crowd when he tried to stop a *munus* in Rome, inadvertently becoming part of the spectacle himself.

Outside Rome, gladiatorial shows are not mentioned in the literary sources after Arcadius (AD 383-408). Perhaps by this time Christian disapproval was beginning to have an effect, coupled with economic factors. In the western provinces, evidence for gladiatorial shows is sparse after the third century AD. It may also be that there was no longer the same incentive for individuals to fight as gladiators. In the eastern provinces the evidence suggests that gladiatorial games became rare after the mid-/late fourth century; they are not mentioned after the reign of Arcadius, and there is no mention of them at all at Constantinople. By the mid-fifth century Christian writers were criticising other forms of spectacle without mentioning gladiators. However, animal displays continued to entertain mass audiences.

Animal shows

Always popular, *venationes* continued as a characteristic feature of games celebrated at provincial capitals in honour of emperors, but they were evidently increasingly expensive. Any local officials who wanted to stage such spectacles, through choice or in connection with public office, had to make considerable monetary outlay. Thus at the beginning of the fifth century AD Symmachus' frustration and anger is understandable when he writes to the sons of Nicomarchus: 'We intended to retain the crocodiles advertised for the theatrical spectacle until your arrival, but they, having persevered in their hunger strike, which was emaciating them for fifty days at a stretch, were killed in the combat in the second games. We will preserve the two that are still alive now until your arrival, although there

23. Diptych of Areobindus, AD 506.

is no guarantee that they will be able to live long because they are refusing food' (*Letters* 6.43).

By late antiquity there were a number of changes in the nature of animal displays. Exotic animals no longer had the crowd-pull they once enjoyed, mainly because there were few exotic animals which were still to be seen or available *en masse*. There were still combats, but they often included the use of props which effectively turned the tables on the human com-

24. Diptych of Anastasius, AD 517.

batants because they provoked and enraged the animals, increasing the human danger (and the entertainment value).

In this context a number of scenes depicted on consular diptychs are most informative. These were hinged, two-leaved, carved ivory plaques produced from the fourth to sixth centuries. They were connected with assumption of high office and were presumably bestowed as deluxe gifts. As such they have the advantage of being closely datable. Several of them show scenes of public spectacle, preserving a visual record of the games staged to celebrate consular appointment. On the Diptych of Areobindus (AD 506), below the main scene of the seated consul there is a composite picture of the games (Fig. 23). The majority of the animals shown are bears. One is depicted attacking a kind of oval cage in which a person's head is visible. This is possibly an *ericius*, as mentioned in a letter of Theodoric (Cassiodorus *Variae* 5.42) of the early sixth century AD; this would have provided some limited protection for the individual as it moved around the arena, rather like a very large hamster ball. Another bear has been injured on a spike extending from some kind of chest-piece worn by another man. Down to the right, a sort of dummy with a perforated head is shown; this is a *palea*, mentioned in the same letter of Theodoric, which could be used to taunt and excite the animals in a novel manner. There also seem to be contests between animals: a mule strikes a bear in the chest with its hind legs, and a lion and bull are in close combat. The public context of these displays is very clear, with the heads of the audience filling the top two corners. On a slightly later diptych of

25. Stadium, Aphrodisias (Turkey). Originally constructed in the late first century AD to accommodate a variety of spectacles, the east end (in foreground) was modified in late antiquity by the insertion of a small arena.

Anastasius (AD 517), at one side there are scenes of acrobats, and of bears fighting. A nearby contraption has two men in baskets apparently suspended by ropes held by them from a large timber upright. Below them a bear appears to be licking his lips (Fig. 24)! On the other side there are similar scenes, but also several instances of the *cochlea* (literally snail), a kind of revolving door behind which a man shelters, clearly intended to drive the animal into a frenzy in its attempts to get at him. Such a mechanism is also shown on an intriguing third-century AD relief from Sofia (Bulgaria).

The venues for animal displays in Rome had been the amphitheatre and, possibly more frequently, the Circus Maximus. In Constantinople it was the circus or another building called the *kynegion*, a structure shaped like an amphitheatre but exclusively for *venationes*. It is here that the last recorded instance of animal displays took place in Constantinople on 1 January 537 during consular games. The type of modification seen in the stadium at Aphrodisias (Fig. 25) as well as the stadium at Athens and the circus at Jerash (Jordan) may have been carried out to accommodate such spectacles.

Aquatic displays

With the exception of Philip the Arab's display, held in the middle of the third century as part of Rome's 1000th birthday celebrations, *naumachiae* did not continue in Rome after the early second century AD. However, an

interesting phenomenon of late antiquity, particularly in the eastern provinces, is the number of structures, notably theatres, that were adapted to accommodate water displays. The theatre at Argos, already modified once to a more Roman design, was further altered with the addition of a wall around the orchestra at the level of the fifth row of seats. An aqueduct provided the means to flood the resultant arena. Sometime before AD 400, the entire orchestra of the odeion at Ptolemais (Libya), a small structure which had originally served as a council meeting room (*bouleuterion*), was waterproofed to serve as a tank for aquatic displays. The area was restrictive, 7.5 metres in diameter and 1.3 metres deep. Similar modifications occurred in the theatres at Paphos (Cyprus), Corinth and Athens, and many more. The size of the area would have limited the type of display, and perhaps a Roman version of synchronised swimming was envisaged, along the lines of the Ziegfeld Follies of the early twentieth century. Given that most of these late examples occur in the eastern Mediterranean (a notable western exception is the theatre at Ostia), modifications may have been linked to the notorious Maiuma festivals. Probably of Phoenician origin, the Maiuma gained a reputation by the late empire for aquatic, candle-lit nocturnal activities by scantily clad female performers.

Chariot racing

Of all the Roman spectacles, chariot racing is the most closely associated with the Byzantine world. Although circus spectacles were not as common as in the West until the third century, they became particularly popular in the East later on, focussing imperial ceremony and patronage, and popular enthusiasm, as the circus became a primary location of interaction between ruler and ruled. The most lavish and important games were those associated with anniversaries of imperial births, victories, and other state and political occasions. By this time the physical relationship between circus and imperial palace had been set. The Palatine imperial palace in Rome overlooked the Circus Maximus and this relationship was drawn on for the new regional capitals of the Tetrarchy, instituted by Diocletian in AD 293. This was the place where the emperor encountered and showed himself to his subjects. This physical proximity is evident in Constantinople and was depicted on the base-reliefs of the Theodosian obelisk placed on the central barrier of the circus. The emperor is shown in the *kathisma* or imperial box. The obelisk itself, placed on the spina by Theodosius I at the end of the fourth century, again mirrors earlier practice, copying the obelisks of Augustus and Constantius II in the Circus Maximus.

As the popularity of chariot racing increased in late antiquity, so feelings could run high amongst the spectators. Ammianus Marcellinus

mocked race fans who argued that the state itself would fall unless their favoured team exited first from the starting gates and properly negotiated the turns. He wrote that 'their temple, their dwelling, their assembly and the height of all their hopes is the Circus Maximus' (37.4.28-31). A riot took place in AD 390 at Thessaloniki over the imprisonment of a favourite charioteer. The emperor Theodosius retaliated by enticing people into the circus for games and then sending in troops who killed between 7,000 and 15,000 people. Such violence is often blamed on the circus factions. By the fifth century AD the range of colours had been subsumed into the Blues and the Greens, and these were complex organisations which not only provided stabling, chariots, drivers and training as of old, but also the animals for circus intervals and the entertainers, such as the dancers and musicians figured on the Theodosian obelisk base. Epigraphic evidence from Aphrodisias demonstrates that they were also involved in theatrical productions. It is tempting to think of the factions in the fifth and sixth centuries as rowdy, quasi-political bodies waiting for the next race-day to cause problems. In fact there was very little trouble in the circus before the fifth century whereas there are a good number of documented cases of riots and rowdiness in the theatre. The circus had a much bigger area, and factions within the audience were much more visible in their colours, akin to stands of football supporters today. The most famous of the circus riots in late antiquity are the so-called 'Nike' Riots in Constantinople (AD 532), a factional dispute that had little direct concern with actual chariot racing but which threatened to replace the emperor Justinian and the suppression of which resulted in 30,000 deaths.

The huge popularity, not only of chariot racing, but also of the charioteers themselves at this time, is illustrated by the career of Porphyrius (late fifth to early sixth century AD). Seven statues to Porphyrius were set up on the *spina* of the circus in Constantinople; the bases of only two survive and are now in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. They were set up by the Greens and the Blues; he raced for both of them in a career during which he came back from retirement several times. As well as praising Porphyrius, the epigrams also record the names of successful horses.

As, one by one, the great metropoleis of the Roman world were lost (e.g. Carthage, Alexandria) so chariot racing disappeared. The very last chariot races in the Circus Maximus were staged by the Ostrogothic King Totila in AD 550 (Procopius, *Gothic Wars* 3.37.4) . As we have seen, chariot racing did remain a key part of imperial ceremonial in the circus of Constantinople as late as the twelfth century, but by that time it was a shadow of its former self.

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