Chapter 7

Roman Spectacle: Ancient Contexts and Modern Perceptions

Although the *ludi* (the theatrical and circus games) and the *munera* (the gladiatorial games) had very different origins, the political advantage to be gained from such displays had been well-recognised in Rome during the last two centuries BC. In the imperial period it was common practice for the emperor to put on special games to commemorate victories and anniversaries, and it was an accepted obligation of members of the provincial elites to present spectacles for public entertainment at their own expense, following the ideal of enhancing the life of the community ('euergetism'). Indeed, it was often a requirement of those holding public office. These games could be very elaborate, involving a broad range of different types of display, sometimes over several days. Epigraphic evidence indicates that such obligatory shows were given in Italy and the provinces by such individuals to preserve their memory, but effectively they were also a tax on status, while the donor's reputation (*famia*) was greatly enhanced as a result. Thus public entertainment provided a focal point for the exercise of power at different levels.

The modern view of these spectacles is often to separate them, but in reality they frequently overlapped. One set of games could include a wide variety of different types of entertainment, sometimes using the same venue (such as the Colosseum with gladiatorial combat and wild beast hunts), sometimes using multiple locations. Nevertheless, they all formed part of the same celebration.

The important link between spectacle and political power is at no time more obvious than in the first century BC, with the manoeuvrings of figures such as Julius Caesar and Pompey. They and their contemporaries were caught up in an inflationary spiral of competition, as each man aimed to outdo his rivals. Early in his career, as *aedile* in 65 BC, Caesar arranged a number of different displays, including wild animal hunts and theatrical performances. He also arranged for a gladiatorial *munus*, but according to Suetonius (*Julius* 10) it involved fewer pairs of gladiators than he had originally planned. Apparently the group he had hired was so large that it

26. Tombstone of the Thracian gladiator Marcus Antonius Exochus, who fought under Trajan (*CIL* 6.10194, now lost).

terrified his political enemies, and emergency legislation was passed to restrict the number of gladiators that anyone could keep in Rome. Even so, there were still 320 pairs (Pliny, *Natural History* 33.53; Plutarch, *Caesar* 5). No specific venues are mentioned in any account, although the gladiatorial combat presumably took place in the Forum Romanum.

Pompey responded by providing Rome with her first permanent theatre, which he dedicated in 55 BC with lavish entertainments. These included music and gymnastic contests, a horse-race in the circus and

animal displays which resulted in large-scale slaughter. Dio (39.38.2) reported that 500 lions were used up in five days, and eighteen elephants fought against men in heavy armour.

This practice of variety continued into the imperial period. The tombstone of Marcus Antonius Exochus (*CIL* 6.10194) (Fig. 26), a Thracian gladiator, refers to the games Trajan held to celebrate his Dacian triumph in the early second century AD. Exochus fought several times, once receiving *missio* and once being victorious. The *Fasti Ostienses* imply that these games were in fact spread over several years culminating in AD 109 when nearly 10,000 gladiators were involved and sea-battles were staged in Trajan's *naumachia.*

Evidence from outside Rome indicates that the same variety was a feature of shows in Italy and the provinces. A marble relief panel from the tomb of the *duovir* N. Clovatius at Pompeii provides a permanent record laid out in three superimposed registers of a set of games involving both gladiators and animal displays. The event opened with a parade (*pompa*) of gladiators led by trumpeters (*tubicines*). Gladiators are shown arming, then in combat. In the lower register are various animal combat scenes. A similar variety is displayed on the Zliten mosaic.

At Allifae in Italy, the *duovir* Lucius Fadius gave lavish spectacles in connection with the imperial cult to mark his election in the second half of the first century AD (*CIL* 9.2350). He exhibited 30 pairs of gladiators and a hunt of African beasts; a few months later, with a contribution of 13,000 sesterces from the town council, he staged a hunt and displayed 21 pairs of gladiators. After he had completed his year of office, he paid for theatrical shows out of his own wealth. This was an individual who maximised the personal benefit to be accrued from his public service.

By the later second century a debate in the senate over the level of expenditure for shows resulted in legislation which included a ranking of gladiators by price and experience, and matching them with the quality of *munus* that a local magistrate was required to fund (Fig. 27). There has been much debate over the precise meaning and details of this law, but there can be little doubt of the organisation involved and wealth expended on a yearly basis to provide gladiatorial *munera* across the Roman world. The provision of the gladiatorial performers may have been through provincial *ludi* maintained by the emperor which are attested across the empire. This legislation also gives important insights into gladiatorial hierarchies, hinted at in other evidence. Moreover, single combat, whilst possibly the norm, was not the only way for gladiators to appear in the arena; they could also make up battle groups (as *gregarii*).

By the mid first century AD a day at the games would comprise animal

Type/grade	Amount (*sestertii*)	Amount (modern estimate)
munera assiforana (profit-making gladiatorial combats)	less than 30,000	£200,000
Class IV	30,000-60,000	£200,000-£400,000
Class III	60,000-100,000	£400,000-£650,000
Class II	100,000-150,000	£650,000- £1,000,000
Class I	150,000-200,000 & above	£1-1.2 million

At least half the total number of gladiators must be *gregarii* at a cost of 1,000-2,000 *sestertii.*
Damnati ad bestias were available at a cost of 600 *sestertii.*
Special Celtic sacrificial victims (*trinquii:* perhaps a special type of *bestiarius*) were available as substitutes for gladiators at 2,000 *sestertii.*

27. Provisions of a *senatus consultum de pretiis gladiatorum minuendis* (*CIL* 2.6278) issued AD 177-180 to regulate the prices of gladiators sold to organisers of games. Modern estimates are based on D. Bomgardner, *The Story of the Roman Amphitheatre*, London 2000.

displays in the morning, with executions over lunchtime (*ludi meridiani*) as the appetiser to the main course of gladiatorial combat in the afternoon. Seneca, in a letter to his friend Lucilius (*Letters* 7), bemoaned the fact that he had gone to the arena at midday 'hoping for a little wit and humour', only to be confronted by 'butchery', claiming 'then [i.e. in the morning] men were thrown to lions and bears, but at midday to the audience'. Interestingly, Seneca appreciated the gladiatorial games for their educational value, as a demonstration of moral excellence (*virtus*). Pliny the Younger, in his panegyric of Trajan, referred to a 'beautiful' show where the detested informers were publicly degraded and punished (*Panegyric* 34.3). Public execution was obviously a very powerful judicial retribution and deterrent, but for a society so much defined by status, it was also humiliating. Convicted criminals served an exemplary purpose for the public good. According to the legislation published under Marcus Aurelius (Fig. 27), it was possible to purchase criminals who had been condemned *ad bestias* for execution in privately funded displays. It was perhaps by this means that Marcus Putilius Macedon was able to include four convicts (*noxii*) in his 'magnificent four-day show' at Beneventum (*CIL* 9.2237), which also included four wild animals (*ferae*) and sixteen bears. These games give an idea of the relative scale of such games outside the capital.

The public aspect of execution is not that unfamiliar in more recent historical times, when public hangings would be anticipated and enjoyed with a picnic. However, Roman executions went one stage further, some-

times being dressed up with a mythological or ethnographic elaboration. Strabo (*Geography* 6.2) witnessed the execution of the Sicilian bandit Selurus who had been sent to Rome to suffer his fate. The setting not only aimed to recall his criminal stomping ground (Mount Etna), but also his nickname:

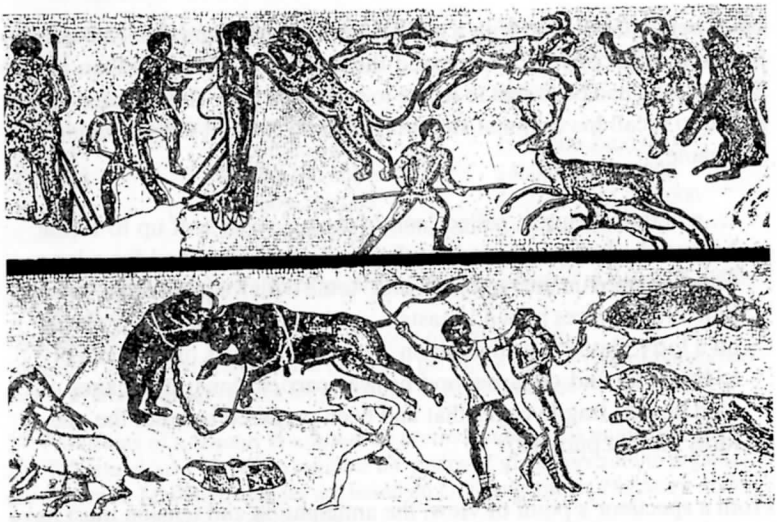
> ... a certain Selurus, called 'son of Aetna', was sent up to Rome because he had put himself at the head of an army and for a long time had overrun the region around Aetna with frequent raids. I saw him torn to pieces by wild beasts ... in the Forum, for he was placed on a lofty platform as though on Aetna, which was made suddenly to break up and collapse, and he was carried down into cages of wild beasts, fragile cages that had been prepared beneath the platform for that purpose.

From a spectator's point of view, the anticipation and tension must have been exhilarating.

The *damnati* were condemned criminals or people enslaved in war. By watching their deaths, metropolitan spectators were witnessing and endorsing the course of justice. There were three main methods of execution in the arena: burning alive (*crematio*), throwing to the beasts (*ad bestias*), and crucifixion. Thus, Christians were famously burned by Nero in the Circus, as well as hunted by animals and crucified after the great fire of AD 64 (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44). An advertisement for games at Pompeii (*CIL* IV 9983a) included criminals to be crucified in the amphitheatre during a regular *munus*. However, crucifixion was slow and boring with little spectator appeal. If it was combined with other instruments of execution, for example animals, then it was more interesting. This is certainly the case with Blandina, a Christian woman who was martyred at Lyon in AD 177; she was hung upside down on a post as bait for animals.

None of these displays offered any realistic chance of survival, as compared with those condemned to fight as gladiators or *venatores*. A mythological setting might be provided, as is clearly referred to by Martial in his account of the games for the inauguration of the Colosseum. For example, the story of Orpheus, who charmed the animals with his music, was re-enacted – except that he was actually torn apart by the animals. Another involved some kind of re-enactment of the encounter between Pasiphae and the bull (the offspring of which was the Minotaur).

The Zliten mosaic depicts several executions (Fig. 28). Criminals are shown tied to miniature chariots and wheeled up by attendants to be



28. Detail of scenes from the Zliten mosaic, showing a fight between a chained bear and bull and condemned criminals being thrown to the beasts.

attacked by wild animals, some of which are urged on by whips. Another North African mosaic from El Djem (Tunisia) shows leopards and bears within a bloodstained arena. The deaths of the condemned men, hands bound behind their backs as they are attacked by animals, are shown in grisly and graphic detail. The incorporation of such scenes into interior decoration was a way for the elite to align themselves with the very visible administration of justice and provide a reminder to the viewer of the natural order of the Roman world.

Further social reinforcement occurred during spectator engagement with the venues themselves. From the second century BC, the seating arrangements in the theatre came to reflect and reaffirm the social hierarchy, at least in Rome. To some extent this also became true for the amphitheatre also. The evidence is fragmentary and has to be gleaned from epigraphic and literary sources. The senate sat separately for the first time at Roman games in 194 BC (Livy 34.54). In 67 BC the *lex Roscia* reserved the first 14 rows of seats for equestrians (Cicero, *To Atticus* 2.29.3). This was renewed and reinforced under Augustus with his *lex Iulia theatralis* (Suetonius, *Augustus* 44) which demanded the audience be seated in a hierarchical fashion by social rank and gender. Similar segregation in the Colosseum is confirmed by the divisions in the *cavea* and by inscriptions on the seats. The most dramatic division is the separation of the upper two tiers from the rest; a vertical drop of 5 metres

kept non-citizens, women and slaves well away from the rest of the audience (Fig. 31). Access to these seats further emphasised this segregation as different entrances needed to be used depending on where a spectator was seated. The only women to enjoy ringside seats were the Vestal Virgins and members of the imperial family. Formal segregation was less rigid in the circus. A senatorial resolution reserved the first row of seats for senators (Suetonius, *Augustus* 44.1). By the middle of the first century AD equestrians were given a fixed area of seating (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.32). In stark contrast to the theatre and amphitheatre, there does not seem to have been any attempt to separate male and female spectators in the circus. The concept of seating arrangements reflecting social rank was certainly adopted in theatres in towns in Italy and the provinces where epigraphic evidence suggests, for example, that there were special seats reserved for priests.

The spectacle arenas of the Roman world were undoubtedly a theatre of death, but one in which the urban population experienced the patronage of emperors and elites, the dominance of the Roman world over the barbarian, the superiority of urban civilisation over the raw forces of nature, and of the forces of order and justice over transgression and criminality. Modern observers have been disturbed by the success and popularity of the Roman spectacles. But the disquiet is all the deeper because contemporary sports media and other entertainments harmonise so well with the raw enjoyment of the Roman audience.

And what of any residual influence of these spectacles? There are many instances which can be cited since the Roman period of single combat, animal displays and fights and other forms of potentialy life-threatening competition on public show. Itinerant circus troupes with trained animal acts, bear-baiting and cock-fighting were familiar features of the medieval and later periods. The collection and display of exotic animals as an expression of power over both the human and natural worlds was a custom followed by Lorenzo the Magnificent in fifteenth-century Florence; the gift of a giraffe from Qaitbay, the Sultan of Egypt, honoured him as a Prince as opposed to a merchant. Flora and fauna from Europe and further afield were part of a grand procession through Paris in 1798 extolling the triumphs of Napoleon. In the twentieth century panda diplomacy (continuing a practice dating back to the Tang dynasty in the seventh century AD) resulted in China presenting 23 giant pandas as diplomatic gifts to nine different countries. Many of the world's great zoos originated as displays of imperial power overseas.

In the Californian Gold Rush of 1849, as cock and dog fights became tame entertainments for the hardened and desperate miners, grizzly bears

were captured (no mean feat in itself) and pitched against bulls in a circular arena surrounded by seats. There were often protests at the way the bulls' horns were sawn off, reducing their fighting effectiveness; they wanted a good, fair fight, even though death was inevitable for one of the animals.

The Spanish bullfight (the *corrida*) is often put forward as the closest modern equivalent to the Roman *venatio*, although no direct link has been proved. The colourful and showy costumes, the exaggerated and stylised postures of the human performers, the cult status of the matadors, all find parallels in the Roman world. Interestingly, in some places (such as the south of France) Roman amphitheatres are used for these spectacles, just as the stadium at Ephesus is used for camel wrestling.

It is much more difficult to produce equivalent examples involving human combatants. Boxing, bare-knuckle fighting and modern cage-fighting come closest in terms of danger of death, while the huge following that professional wrestling has, particularly in North America and Mexico, emphasises the showmanship and celebrity status of the performers.

From its outset the Hollywood film industry latched on to the excitement of Roman spectacle, from the heydey of the sword and sandal film, including spectacles in Delmer Daves's *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), William Wyler's *Ben Hur* (1959), Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), and Anthony Mann's *Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), to the modern revival centred around Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) and HBO's television success *Rome* (2005-7). All such productions heavily emphasised the bloodlust, cruelty and 'uncivilised' nature of Roman culture, with strong moralising and eroticising elements.

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