

## **Animal Spectacles in Ancient Rome: Meat and Meaning**

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J.M.C. Toynbee (*Animals in Roman Life and Art*) notes that, paradoxically, ancient Romans loved pets and exotic beasts but they also flocked to watch the killing of animals in hunting spectacles (venationes) in the arena. To understand this paradox we first must suspend our modern attitudes about animal rights and sport hunting. As Martial's *On the Spectacles* suggests, above all this killing in the arena symbolized power, empire and leadership. Romans were drawn to the arena by the allure of violence, the erotic and exotic sights, and an appreciation of the skill and courage of participants, but perhaps yet another feature of the beast fights contributed to the enthusiasm of spectators.

That countless thousands of animals, fierce and timid, carnivores and herbivores, from elephants to ostriches, were killed in the spectacles is well known, but what happened to the carcasses? At most, studies simply suggest, without adequate archaeological evidence, that the remains were taken away and

dumped in pits (carnaria) at the edge of town. They overlook the possibility that Rome made some practical use of animal arena meat. The beasts of the empire were an imperial resource: live beasts had value as arena exhibits, dead beasts had not outlived their usefulness to Rome. This paper suggests that at least some of the animal meat from the beast spectacles was given to the people of Rome both as a nutritional supplement and as a political device.

Romans had native subsistence hunting traditions, some of their early festivals included hunts and beast baiting, and they used the same word, venatio, for all kinds of hunting, including the spectator hunts in the arena. The plebs of rome suffered from protein deficiency in their diet, and they were not fussy eaters. They looked to their emperors for food, and emperors were unlikely to waste the potential beneficia of arena-meat gifts. Festivals and spectacles were routinely associated with distributions of food, and, in a well documented custom, emperors threw to the crowds tokens redeemable for gifts of, sometimes fleshy, food. In fact, Christian sources explicitly charge that Romans defiled themselves by eating meat from the arena. At times commoners may have had an even more direct sporting involvement: imperial histories suggest that some third-century emperors let spectators enter the arena and carry off game themselves.

Anthropologically, the acquisition, sharing, and eating of animal flesh all were (and remain) profoundly symbolic. Perhaps we have overlooked another communal aspect of the Roman spectacles.