

Since the dawn of time man has shared the earth with beast. In the bible man was charged with giving each one a name and overseeing their welfare in the Garden of Eden. The beauty and majesty of such a peaceful existence can only be imagined. Some artists like Roelandt Savery try and capture the ideal harmony between man and animal. Through his and other paintings nature's ideals are portrayed. Reality paints a much more harsh portrait. Ancient Rome paints animal portraits in blood and sand. Even though the physical aspect of exotic animal games is longer a part of the human experience, the spirit of these games and their intent linger on.

Where did this infatuation with animals in the Empire begin? From the earliest times Roman citizens were farmers. Even emperors would retire to keep their cabbages, or return to their plow. Something happened when the Romans were introduced to a new sport: hunting. This is the genesis behind everything animal that would come to pass within the empire and climax with staged "hunts" of the great exotic beasts in the Coliseum.

Animal and man have shared the countryside since the beginning of time. Throughout their shared tenure each has hunted the other. Even when not hunting humans in particular, predators would move in on flocks of sheep or goat. There was always to eat or feed their offspring. Humans were the only ones to arrange hunts and call it sport. Kills became trophies and hunts became shows of power and wealth during the empire.

J.K. Anderson believes that the Romans learned the art of hunting from the same place that they learned everything else: the Greeks.¹ Grecian epic poetry and staged tragedies had made their way into Roman consciousness around the third century B.C. During the following century hunting as a sport really began within Rome's borders. Defeating the Macedonian and Syrian Empires established Rome as the leading power throughout the whole Mediterranean basin.²

The wars also brought immense wealth to Rome. With wealth and free time, Roman nobles began to take more than a passing interest in the past times of the people they had conquered. Scipio Aemilianus became one of the earliest, most famous, and dedicated huntsmen during the sport's Roman infancy. Hunting was not Scipio's only ties with Greece. Hunting paired with a "classical" Greek education for he and his children created tension within the wealthy Roman nobility.

Regardless of tempers and ideologies of "making it [in the Senate] the old fashioned way," hunting had been cultivated in Roman society and was there to stay. Anderson identifies some very prominent advocates of hunting. Cicero, who was not a hunting man, discussed the benefit of hunting in letters to his friends. Anderson says that Cicero paid formal tribute to hunting as an exercise that "imitates the discipline of war and accustoms the body to bear the colds of winter nights amid the snow."³

Hunting was a way to show valor when there was a shortage of wars during Augustus' *Pax Romana*. Hunting boar, hare, and fox was one thing, but reports of huge exotic animals that were even more dangerous and difficult to kill soon arrived from the

¹ Anderson, J.K. *Hunting in the Ancient World*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1985), 83

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. 87

farthest corners of the Empire. These stories would ignite imaginations. Soon animals would arrive at Rome's gate that had never been seen before. The greatest of land beasts both in Roman times and modernity is the Elephant. The largest terrestrial animal inhabited the same areas then as now, and Rome had access to India and Africa. Pliny the Elder described the elephant in such detail and with such feeling that it is little wonder scholars label this pachyderm as Pliny's "favorite animal."

Pliny created a problem though. The largest problem facing a historian of animals in Ancient Rome is that of sources. Every scholar on the subject of animals and Rome utilizes Pliny the Elder's voluminous works, and nearly all of them utilize his writings in the same way. Readily available sources are, in most cases, translated and "collected" works. These collections are good for an overview of any subject, but hardly ever contain enough information to paint an accurate picture of the events that occurred. Such is the case here. Primary sources are used when available and offer pertinent insight into the Roman ideas and use of animals. Other instances are referenced by secondary sources whose authors had at their disposal a greater selection of material, or at the very least complete translations and not just "collections."

Ancient Rome is remembered today for its excesses in nearly every facet of life. Animals were no exception. The time has come to look into the ancient Roman relationship with wildlife and see what the animals contributed to Roman culture, how much power they gave to, or in some cases took from, the rulers of ancient Rome, and how the relationship began with hunting and effectively ended with those exotic "staged hunts" in the Coliseum.

Pliny records in his *Natural History* nearly every animal brought to Rome during his time. The first he mentions were the elephants. The first elephants in Rome he says “were seen to show pastime with leaping and keeping astir, as if they danced.”⁴ Dancing elephants are hardly the first to spring to mind when talking about Ancient Rome. Hannibal’s war elephants elicit greater imagination, but he was not the sole purveyor of elephants in the ancient world. They were some of the most prominent “citizens” of Rome. Pompey would secure some for Rome to be used at a future date, to his detriment, which will be discussed later.

Pliny wrote of how “human-like” the elephants were and noted that Mulianus reported that one elephant had learned to make the Greek letters “and was wont to write in the sand thus much, ‘this have I written and made an offering of the Spoilts.’”⁵ Maria Belozerskaya backs this assertion up with another of Pliny’s anecdotes. She says, another elephant that was a slow learner was so embarrassed by his failure to master his lessons, and tired of being beaten for it he would practice alone in the night.⁶

An interesting thing to note about Pliny’s *Histories* is that he does not deny his subjects (the animals) any concept of “feeling.” Stoic concepts such as justice and social ethics are actively part of Pliny’s writings, especially on the elephants. This may be a nod towards Cicero works on stoicism, but that cannot be determined.

On the elephants qualities Pliny writes that there is no adultery among them. Nor to they engaged in particularly brutal battles for mates, as other animals seem to. Erica

⁴ Pliny, *Natural History*, ed. H. Rackman (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1938), 91.

⁵ Ibid. 92

⁶ Belozerskaya, Maria. *The Medici Giraffe and Other Tales of Exotic Animals and Power* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2006), 82.

Fudge in *Renaissance Beasts* reiterates this thought and discusses Pliny's anecdotes of one elephant falling in love with a flower girl, and another smitten with a Syracusean soldier for Ptolemy's army.⁷

According to Pliny, love is not the only emotions that elephants are capable of. Fudge's writings on animal self-awareness include the story of Ajax, the chief elephant of Antiochus' army. When Ajax refused to cross a river, his leadership position was given to another elephant, Patroclus. Patroclus immediately crossed the river and then received the mark of leadership, a silver harness: "an elephant's greatest delight." Ajax, after being replaced by Patroclus, and seeing the latter awarded the harness starved himself to death instead of suffering the humiliation.

Ajax was most likely already suffering from some malady, which is why he refused to ford the river in the first place. Given man's nature to anthropomorphize animals to such a degree, it is little wonder that the animals became Roman caricatures. Romans would see themselves in the animals, and they would also use common Roman values to explain animal behaviors.

Some other accounts of elephants in the Ancient world are discussed in Howard Scullard's *The Elephant in the Greek and Roman World*.

Pliny does just such a thing when he explains why lions are fierce. "Lions are fierce," he writes, because "lionesses are very lecherous."⁸ The lions can smell whether or not their mate has been faithful and if adultery was apparent then the lion would "chastise and punish" the lioness. If this is the case with lions, and they are the kings of

⁷ Fudge, Erica. *Renaissance Beasts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 175.

⁸ Pliny, *Natural History*, ed. H. Rackman (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1938), 93

the beasts, then why would a Roman man allow his wife to get away with such a slight? Why would Roman men not punish their woman for adultery even though they could carry on with whomever they wished?

In the *Life of Caesar*, Plutarch writes of Caesar's "Victory Games."⁹ These games and the ones that evolved from them are the ones that are synonymous with animals and Roman power. These early games were fairly simple exhibitions. The most exciting thing that most of these games held was a bullfight. Suetonius mentions such a bullfight given under Claudius. He says, "The horsemen would drive the wild bulls about the arena, leap on their backs when they were wearied and bring them to the ground by their horns."¹⁰

Lions even possessed some of the same traits as the elephants. Seneca described a scene in which a lion recognized one of the *bestiarii* as the man who had once been his keeper. The lion protected the man from the attacks of other animals.¹¹ The lions could also be tamed. This was more proof of the power of Rome. Martial was so impressed that the lions could be trained to capture rabbits in their jaws and then let them go again without being harmed, that he wrote at least eight of his *Epigrams* on the subject.¹²

Something happened during the early Empire. The change happened rather slowly, and no one is sure exactly what the catalyst was. Some think that it may have been Rome's expansive growth and its newly conquered lands. Others think that the Emperor's became too powerful at home. According to George Jennison's work *Animals*

⁹ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Life of Julius Caesar*, ed. H.W. M. Parr (London: Macmillan), 48

¹⁰ Suetonius, *Divus Claudius*, ed. Donna W. Hurley (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 21.

¹¹ Toynbee, J.M.C. *Animals in Roman Life and Art* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973), 62.

¹² *Ibid.*

for Show and Pleasure in Ancient Rome “from Augustus to Nero something is known of the exceptionally a large number of lions, leopards or ‘African beasts’ appearing at a particular *ludi* for the time from Nero to Trajan information on this sort is completely lacking.”¹³ No one knows how many animals were brought to Rome during that time, much less how many were shown in the games.

The games held at Circus Maximus before the construction of the famous Coliseum ever began foreshadowed the ideas of exotic animal games that would be held there. Writers such as Dio, Suetonius, Seneca, and even the poet Calpurnius recorded many of these games. Lions and tigers were killed by “heros” in mythical re-enactments. Bears were a favorite way to execute criminals.

Martial in his *De Spectaculis* writes, “For a representation of Diana hunting wild animals, a pregnant wild sow was killed, which in its death, gave birth to its young.”¹⁴ This was seen as a reference to Diana’s function as Lucina, the goddess of birth. Jennison mentions another passage in which a *damma*, a type of deer or antelope, chased by hounds fled to where the emperor sat, and seemed to be “imploring his protection.” While in the Emperor’s presence the hounds refrained from attacking.¹⁵

Jennison also discusses the poet a bit further. He mentions that the poem, *The Seventh Eclogue of Calpurnis*, dealt with two bears (apparently) fighting over a seal. This account, if it is to be believed, says Jennison, is the first ever account of Polar

¹³ Jennison, George. *Animals for Show and Pleasure in Ancient Rome* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1937), 46

¹⁴ Martial, *Epigrams*, ed. Walter C.A. Ker (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1968), 15: 12-14

¹⁵ Jennison, George. *Animals for Show and Pleasure in Ancient Rome* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1937), 30

Bears.¹⁶ If that is indeed the case, then that makes these animals the most exotic species to be shown in Rome. Their appearance also begs the question how did Polar Bears make it to Italy in the first century A.D.

Clearly the exploitation of wildlife from lands conquered by Rome reinforced the displays of power and rule that the early Emperor's needed in order to control the public. What benefits did the everyday Roman receive from the animal shows? Obviously with thousands of people packing the stands at the Circus, and later the Coliseum, every time the games were held, there had to be something. The broadest answer is that is provided a distraction from the toils of everyday life. Without many personal accounts from average Roman citizens it is difficult to ascertain what exactly that draw was.

Fragment accounts from ancient text from Martial and others show that the public often consumed meat from animals killed in the arena. Meat was expensive at that time, and wild game was prized. The officials who staged the games could increase their popularity by providing free food for the lower classes. The wealthy people of Rome also liked to impress their friends by serving meat from exotic animals.¹⁷

Displaying wild animals in Rome was one thing; dealing with the wildlife in their home territory was an entirely different manner. The ancient texts reveal very little on provincial and local practices dealing with "problem" wildlife. How were animals as large as elephants and as dangerous as lions acquired when needed? How were they treated when they were not being hunted? Under the Empire, Jennison writes, there is no

¹⁶ Ibid. 71.

¹⁷ Martial, *Epigrams*, ed. Walter C.A. Ker (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1968), 12: 9

evidence as to how the imperial administration obtained animals. At the same time hunting became more bureaucratic.

The Empire required special licenses from the imperial government in order to take elephants and for some time they became necessary for the hunting, killing, or capture of lions.¹⁸ In the early 5th century however, people living in Roman provinces where lions also dwelled would not be penalized for having killed a lion in self-defense or in protecting livestock.

The importance of the difficulty that the Romans had in obtaining the animals and transporting them to the cities of the empire cannot be understated. Organizers of the shows worked with provincial governors to assess the availability of animals. Governors then sent out large parties of local hunters or army units trained to capture wild animals. Some animals were trapped in a pit with a pillar of earth in the center, upon which a lamb or goat would be placed as bait. Others were chased on horseback and caught in nets

As mentioned the two chief means of capture were the pit and the net. The net was used for smaller game such as antelope, deer, zebra, or other game animals. The pit was reserved for animals either too large or too dangerous to be netted. These included the elephant, and Africa's big cats. The pit was a very straightforward, and easiest way to capture these animals alive.

The men dug the pit and left in its center a pillar of earth, stone, or wood on which the live bait was placed. The bait, a kid or lamb for lions or a puppy for leopards, were restrained in such away to make them bleat or howl to attract the predator. Along the pit's edge a wall or a fence was constructed. When the lion or leopard jumped over this

¹⁸ Jennison, George. *Animals for Show and Pleasure in Ancient Rome* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1937), 141

obstruction to get at the bait, he would fall into the pit. A cage, baited with meat, was then lowered into the pit and once the cat was secured inside the cage would be raised and the animal was ready for transport.¹⁹

Elephant pits were less elaborate, but took more time from capture until the elephant was ready to be sent to Rome. Pliny mentions that [African] Kings organized elephant hunts in which horsemen would drive the herd into an artificial hollow where the animals would find themselves shut in by the steep sides of the depression and ditches.²⁰

In India those men driving the herds toward the pit were on other elephants and not horses. Pliny calls this an “Indian device.” There is no evidence that this method was ever used in Africa during Roman times. Pliny does describe how the captors would tame the elephants so they were easier to handle during transport. Starvation was mitigated by barley juice, which Jennison calls a type of beer. Once the animals were near death they became docile enough for the handlers to control. There is no record of how many of the animals perished due to this practice.

The journey with the captured animals from remote provinces to the urban centers of the empire was long and arduous, with a grueling overland march often followed by a voyage in cramped quarters across the Mediterranean. The trip to Rome from Carthage required four to six days, while the voyage from Alexandria or Antioch took more like a month. Along the way, many animals died from fright, illness caused by unfamiliar food, or mistreatment. Since the animals were being taken to cities for the purpose of being

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Pliny, *Natural History*, ed. H. Rackman (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1938), 24-5

killed, little attempt was made to replicate familiar surroundings or otherwise make the trip less traumatic for them. The fact that a substantial percentage of the animals would not survive the trip was factored into the cost of the shows.

Once the animals were captured and transported to Rome the games could begin. Did they have a purpose to fulfill besides imperial bloodlust? The games as a whole, throughout their tenure and in all their forms, were a very simple way for the leaders of Rome to broadcast their power on the one hand and to deter crime and punish criminals on the other. Wild, and usually half starved, animals were used to execute criminals of all sorts. Most famous of these sentences is throwing of Christians to the lions. Hardly a subtle approach but this method kept some crime levels down, as well as drive major cults that threatened Rome's stability underground.

The hunting of wild animals as public entertainment in the arena began in 186 B.C. Now, not only were the animals hunted and trapped in their own home range, but also they were again hunted and slain in the Rome. Then in 167 B.C., the practice of having these animals execute criminals was introduced. Such events, like the gladiatorial fights, proved to be very popular, and they grew in scale over time. During the course of his reign, the emperor Augustus sponsored games in which a total of 3,500 wild animals were killed.²¹ The infamous emperor Nero once had four hundred bears and three hundred lions killed in a single day.

So many exotic animals were imported from Africa that eventually certain types became more expensive and difficult to locate. The Romans used up all the lions in Libya, for example, a fact for which the Libyans were no doubt grateful. In addition, a

²¹ Fik Meijer, *The Gladiators: History's Most Deadly Sport*, (New York: Paw Prints, 2010), 61.

rise in the amount of cultivated land in northern Africa drove wild animals further south. By the third century A.D., the scarcity of some animals and an economic recession led organizers of animal shows to substitute grazing animals for the more expensive carnivorous varieties.²²

Gladiators who fought each other and those who fought animals were the superstars of their day. Most were slaves, although some Romans too poor to survive took up the jobs as well. The men, and sometimes, women, could fight their way to the top of fame and even fortune. If they survived long enough, some were even granted their freedom, although this was rare.

In one particular instance an animal aided the freeing of a slave. The slave Androcles, while wondering in the desert had shared a cave with a lion. He removed a thorn that was in one of the pads of the lions paw and the lion from then after always greeted Androcles with a furious tail wagging and almost “caninely manner.” The protection of Androcles by the lion that recognized him as a former keeper so moved the Emperor that he granted Androcles and the lion both their freedom. Toynbee writes that the lion became his constant companion, even accompanying Androcles around to the shops, accepting bouquets and collecting money for his friend.²³

In this case both slave and lion were lucky. Granting freedom to slaves was a rare occurrence, and granting freedom to an animal happened even less frequently. Slaves and animals in the world of the Roman games were expensive. To let one or the other free meant monetary losses; to free both was almost unheard of.

²² Ibid.

²³ Toynbee, J.M.C. *Animals in Roman Life and Art* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973), 35.

While the animals displayed either in shows or games did give the allure of power, they were not always as successful as the founders had intended. In her book *The Medici Giraffe* Maria Belozerskaya portrays many examples of exotic animals garnering power for their owners. One account is particularly important to this study of understanding how complicated the idea of power and nature was.

Belozerskaya shares the story of Pompey and his staged elephant shows in the Circus Maximus. Things began as usual with music, pomp, and circumstance. Animals were led out to do battle with their human adversaries. A few of the beasts were dispatched swiftly amid great cheers from the crowd. One group, however, finding themselves cornered, panicked and stampeded through the iron railing that enclosed the arena. Pursued at spear point the elephants raised their trunks in the air and according to Dio Cassius' account "were crying out against the oaths...and were calling upon Heaven to avenge them"²⁴

The audience found sympathy for the elephants, even those that had to flee when they came through the stands. The people begged Pompey to spare the animals who had obviously asked for his mercy. Pompey thought his power would be greater enforced if he were to dispose of the creatures and had them slain. The people were appalled and in the end Pompey's games went down in history as a failure.

Following the elephant debacle, Pompey never regained the popular support he had enjoyed before. A host of things happened to Pompey and his political career began to come to a close. He has lost a good portion of the public support after slaying the elephants, and Julius Caesar garnered it for himself. After Caesar came to power he

²⁴ Belozerskaya, Maria. *The Medici Giraffe and Other Tales of Exotic Animals and Power* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2006), 82

would utilize that public support for everything he undertook as Emperor, including all but erasing Pompey from history.

The games continued throughout imperial Rome. The more depraved and unpopular the Emperors became, the more often the games were held, and the more elaborate they became. Exotic animals became a mass political misdirection campaign. This slight of hand was costing Rome more and more to continue. Costs were going up to capture, transport, house, and feed all the exotic beasts from Rome's vast empire. The very thing that was allowing the Emperors to hold on to Rome by a thread was plunging it deeper and deeper into debt. The house of cards eventually fell, animals and all.

Today it seems all but inevitable that such blood sport would eventually lose popularity and die off. But that is not entirely an accurate assumption. Presently there are still bullfights and cockfights held legally around the world. Dog fighting has been made illegal throughout much of the world, but there are, however, some instances of it occurring clandestinely in just as many places. Bull and Bear baiting have ceased but many people see circuses, traveling menageries, and small roadside zoos just as cruel.

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