

Non-Elite Hunters in the Roman World

Roman hunting has traditionally been studied as an object of symbolism. That is, hunting in the Roman world was conducted by elite Roman men as a leisure activity and a demonstration of their virtue. Furthermore, their expeditions are manifested in the great hunting mosaics of Roman villas, such as at Piazza Armerina, where their representational value is communicated to the guests of the *dominus*, reinforcing his social prestige. Ancient hunting manuals support and augment these iconographic representations, allowing for (at least partial) reconstructions of these hunting expeditions and their role in elite Roman society. However, these same sources also offer information on non-elite participation in these ventures. Moreover, zooarchaeological and ethnographic evidence sheds light on the broader participation of subsistence-level Romans in the practice of hunting. Supported by this evidence, this paper reconstructs the role of hunting in the lives of non-elite Romans as well as the varying experiences and methods.

This paper begins with an examination of the iconographic and literary evidence. Mosaic representations of elite hunting expeditions, which became popular from the late second century CE (Dunbabin 1978, 46–47), demonstrate the practices described in the hunting manuals by Arrian and, despite his much earlier date, Xenophon. Ancient authors describe the necessity of slave labor for the success of these hunts (*e.g.*, Xen., *Cyn.* 2.3–9). At sites like the Villa Romana del Casale near Piazza Armerina, attendants can be seen engaged in a number of activities, such as tending hounds and horses, coursing hares, transporting animal carcasses, chasing deer into nets while on horseback, assisting the *dominus* with the slaying of a wild boar, and preparing meals. Additionally, literary sources recount the role of slaves in the process of breeding and training hunting dogs (Phillips and Willcock 1999: 136n11).

The second half of the paper considers the hunting practices of non-elite Romans outside the context of elite hunting expeditions. It is an “obvious fact that, in a rural society, farmers and shepherds have to hunt,” so wrote C. M. C. Green when he asked, Did the Romans hunt (Green 1996: 226)? Subsistence-level Romans must have hunted wild game during the agricultural offseason in order to supplement their diets. Moreover, farmers and herders pursued wild animals, as a form of pest control, to protect their crops and livestock. These practices are supported by the zooarchaeological record as well as ethnographic evidence from traditional agricultural societies that also routinely engaged in hunting.

Bibliography

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