

The Emperor and his Animals: The Acquisition of Exotic Beasts for Imperial *Venationes*

The Roman games never lose their alarming fascination, particularly among scholars of Roman culture. And now that the economic history of the ancient world inspires such interest, the games have become important also as one of the empire's largest state-driven economic enterprises, third only to the Roman army and the supply of food to Rome. But the means by which the emperors went about supplying these games have received uneven treatment in modern scholarship. Many have written on the great Mediterranean-wide system of imperial gladiatorial schools (*ludi*) that funneled gladiators into Rome for imperial games (Robert 1972; Ville 1981), or upon the arrangement of imperially sponsored chariot races (Cameron 1976). But comparatively little attention has been paid to the means by which emperors gathered the exotic wild animals so frequently displayed in their spectacles.

This disparity in the modern scholarship does not reflect a disparity in the relative importance of wild animals and other types of performers such as gladiators or charioteers. All signs indicate that emperors spent just as lavishly on the importation of exotic wildlife as they did on any other aspect of their spectacles. The emperor Titus, for example, is said to have had 9,000 animals killed in the inaugural games of the Flavian Amphitheater (C. Dio 66.25). Other emperors seem to have emphasized quality over quantity, importing never-before-seen beasts like bison or zebra from the very edges of the earth (*CIL* 3.7449; C. Dio 76.14). To provide a *venatio* in keeping with imperial dignity must have been not only costly, but also required a developed system through which animals were acquired in distant lands, transported alive, and kept in good health for an extended period near Rome.

One reason there has been less scholarly interest in imperial beast-supply arrangements is that there is less surviving evidence for them than for the systems that supply other commodities

to Rome. The result has been that research into it has tended either to speak of the beast trade more generally (i.e., the means by which all benefactors across the empire secured animals) or focused upon a single aspect of imperial animal procurement (such as the use of soldiers to acquire beasts) (For the former, Jennision 1937; Betrandy 1987; Bomgardner 2000; Mackinnon 2006. For the latter, Epplert 2001). But when the evidence for imperial beast supply is compared to that for the *Annona* (the system by which grain and other necessities were brought into the city), or the imperial ludi, similarities with these better known procedures emerge that suggest how imperial beast procurement might have been structured, how it operated, and how it developed.

In its administrative structure, the imperial beast system most resembles the imperial gladiatorial system. This should come as no surprise, given the close association between *venationes* and gladiatorial games in the imperial period. In its manner of operation, the imperial animal acquisition seems to have used both incentives to encourage the for-profit transport of animals to Rome by entrepreneurs, as well as prohibitory laws that limited the scope of non-imperial *venationes*. This use of both carrot and stick is highly reminiscent of the *annona*, and this similarity further suggests that, like the *annona*, the imperial beast procurement may have relied more upon encouragement than coercion, and we should read the evidence for the imperial beast system with this in mind. Finally, it has been argued for the *annona* that its development was not the result of a coherent plan, but rather the gradual accretion of short-term solutions designed to meet the needs of the moment (Casson 1984). This model of development by accretion also fits the evidence we have for imperial beast procurement. All told, these similarities suggest that the means by which the emperors attained exotic wildlife were

influenced by other systems of imperial supply, and that research into any of these systems might benefit by considering all of them together.

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