

The Absence of Indigenous Peoples in Scenes of the Capture and Transport of Exotic Animals in Roman Hunting Mosaics

From the days of the Republic through imperial times, untold numbers of wild animals were exploited for the entertainment of the Roman public in the amphitheater games called *venationes*, or wild beast hunts (Jennison 1937, 1–9, 42–98). Adventures to capture exotic animals took place on the frontiers of the Roman world and involved a variety of dangerous techniques to ensnare and transport them to the amphitheaters (Jennison 1937, 137–53). Such expeditions are the subjects of several Roman mosaics. The reliability of these depictions, however, has long been doubted. The presence of a griffin, for example, in the magnificent Great Hunt mosaic from Piazza Armerina in Sicily raises questions about its correspondence to reality (Dunbabin 2006, 208–15). Unable to take the mosaic representations at face value, scholars have needed to test the artistic evidence against the literary record and other data in order to uncover the true nature of these hunts. One aspect that scholars have explored is the involvement of indigenous peoples in these expeditions (MacKinnon 2006).

This paper first considers the scholarship on the composition of the hunting parties. Epplert, for example, presents epigraphic and papyrological evidence, consistent with the artistic and literary record, identifying such hunts as military operations (Epplert 2001). Others have added evidence for the presence of professional hunters and native peoples (MacKinnon 2006).

Next, I briefly survey representations of indigenous peoples in Roman mosaics and other art. Two important pieces are the Nile mosaic of Palestrina depicting black African hunters (Snowden 1970, 4) and a Pompeian fresco portraying African pygmies slaying a hippopotamus and capturing a crocodile. Although this latter scene does show natives engaged in the capture of

an exotic animal, pygmies were often represented in Roman art with grotesquely large phalli, perhaps indicating that they were included for novelty and humor rather than historical accuracy.

I then examine mosaic scenes of the capture and transport of exotic animals for the *venationes* for evidence of native participation. Agreeing with other scholars that native peoples were likely heavily involved and finding a notable absence of their depiction in the mosaics of this kind, I consider possible reasons for their exclusion. I argue that such mosaics are commissioned in order to promote the self-image of the villa owners, evidencing their immense wealth capable of financing such extraordinarily expensive expeditions, casting themselves as benefactors of the people, and demonstrating their heroism and virtue. The mosaics also, in many cases, ignore the less noble techniques used in the hunts. In Piazza Armerina's Great Hunt scenes, for example, the common use of pits is absent, but the mosaicists included a fanciful procedure whereby a rider flees from a tigress dropping cubs at intervals to distract the mother long enough for him to escape (Jennison 1937, 142–47). As such, the portrayal of the *dominus* closely supervising a tight-knit band of soldiers and professional hunters in a heroic effort to subdue dangerous animals is consistent with the exclusion of peoples who might actually have been most intimately engaged in the riskiest aspects of the hunts.

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