Venationes Africanae: Hunting spectacles in Roman North Africa: cultural significance and social function
Sparreboom, A.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Conclusion

Amphitheatrical hunting spectacles and gladiatorial combat were introduced in North Africa in the early imperial period. The institutionalisation of civic munificence and game-giving and the construction of amphitheatres were a consequence of the establishment of Roman power in the area, but should not be seen as a simple result of ‘Romanisation’. In North Africa as well as in Rome, venationes did not evolve in a cultural vacuum; their development was a result of cultural interaction and exchange between different peoples in the ancient Mediterranean and their cultures and traditions. Many aspects of venationes in Rome were not ‘Roman’; for example, the wild beasts and the specialised hunters that were imported from North Africa. Likewise, hunting spectacles in North Africa were not completely ‘African’; they were held in the context of civic euergetism, which was a (Graeco-)Roman phenomenon, and were often staged in amphitheatres, which were Roman inventions. However, a number of other aspects are typical for the context of Roman North Africa: the early marginalisation of gladiator games in the second century, and in the late antique period, the great popularity of venationes, the existence of sodalities of venatores and the prominence of venatorial imagery in art. In the third and fourth century, beast fights were of greater cultural importance in North Africa than gladiatorial combat had ever been.

This dissertation investigated this late antique African enthusiasm for wild beast shows, asking firstly: why were venationes so popular? And secondly, what were their cultural significance, social function and attractive power? In order to answer these questions, the African venationes were approached as cultural performances, events during which people enact, relive, remember and pass on beliefs and knowledge through performing them. Cultural performances are occasions that have the potential to shape, represent and thus confirm cultural and social norms, social identities and a community’s perception of itself. During such events, beliefs, knowledge and social norms and cultural values are enacted, relived, remembered and passed on through performing them. In order to do justice to the layerdness and complex cultural significance of these events for many different groups, each chapter investigated a different phase of the performance and the (groups of) people (and animals) involved in that phase: in chapter 2 the process of preparation and the role of African wild beasts, hunters, traders, transporters and
producers, in chapter 3 the considerations of the producer in his capacity of game-giver (*munerarius*), and in chapter 4 the performance itself, with the beast-fighters, the animals and the spectators, and the relations between them. After all, also within the same provincial culture, different people (editors, performers, spectators, hunters and captures) will have had different reasons for seeing the cultural performance as a meaningful event. And, not only the event itself, but also the period that preceded it, as well as the memory of the show after it had taken place, gave meaning to the cultural performance.

It has become clear that the presence of wild beasts in North Africa, and particularly that of lions and leopards, the *ferae africanae*, and the danger that they posed to humans, were at the basis of the African enthusiasm for *venationes*. This is hardly surprising, but the exact relation between the natural presence of *ferae africanae* in the northern African provinces and the great cultural significance of *venationes* in that area has never been investigated before. This book focusses on that relation, by exploring the connections between the wild beasts that were used for hunting spectacles, and the people who were involved in these cultural performances. Also historical circumstances, such as the pre-Roman traditions of royal hunting by Numidian and Mauretanian kings and the historical development of *venationes* in Rome were taken into account.

Starting with the animals, we have seen that North Africa was ‘full of wild beasts’; the diverse landscapes were the habitats of forest elephants, lions, leopards, ostriches, hartebeest, cheetas, hyena’s, bears, wild boar, gazelles, deer, onager (wild ass), wild horses and many other species. For *venationes*, particularly lions, leopards, bears and ostriches appear to have been popular, dangerous animals which were also in great numbers exported for *venationes* Rome and elsewhere. Of these animals, especially lions and leopards constituted a realistic threat to herdsmen and farmers and their cattle in the interior of North Africa, but also to villagers in the fertile area along the Mediterranean coast. Because of this, the practice of hunting dangerous felids had a long history before the arrival of the Romans in North Africa and continued into the twentieth century, when lions and leopards became virtually extinct in the area. Especially the Mauretanian and Numidian royal hunting traditions may have provided a fertile breeding ground for the enthusiastic adoption of Roman-style *venationes* in the early Roman period. The cultural significance of the skillful elimination of dangerous lions and leopards by a powerful or even royal hunter had been expressed, relived and confirmed in
Mauretanian and Numidian hunting traditions and was continued and passed on in the Roman-style hunting shows in the African amphitheatres. And also the fact that, along with animals, (indigenous) African hunters who had expertise and experience in hunting wild beasts were brought to Rome to perform in hunting spectacles, is likely to have had a stimulating effect on the enthusiasm for producing *venationes* in North Africa itself. Another result of the natural presence of felids in North Africa was that Africans, most likely also indigenous hunters, were closely involved in the capturing and trading of wild beasts for *venationes* in Rome and at other destinations. This close professional involvement of many Africans in the preparatory process of *venationes* in Rome and elsewhere, as well as the presence of the infrastructure of capture, transport and trade of wild *venatio*-beasts, contributed greatly to the cultural prominence and significance of *venationes* in Roman Africa.

For the African donors of hunting spectacles, producing a *venatio* was not simply an expensive gift to the people, or an obligation that came with the acceptance of a public office, but most importantly an effective way of presenting themselves as the heads of the community who facilitated and presided over the skilful, but worthy elimination of powerful and dangerous beasts. The fact that lions and leopards were an actual danger on the African countryside will have contributed to the result that they intended to achieve; presenting themselves as protectors and leaders of the assembled community. In doing this, they used these performances to express, demonstrate and therewith confirm the social hierarchy with themselves at the top, and the cultural and social norms in which dangerous and powerful beasts had to be destructed by even more powerful and skilled hunters. By producing hunting spectacles instead of gladiatorial combat, donors could make efficient use of the available infrastructure that supplied wild beasts for the games in Rome and Italy, as well as the culturally embedded fear of wild beasts and the consequential enthusiasm of African spectators for artificial hunts and single combat between man and beast. Even though the *ferae africanae* were more closely available than in Rome, African donors of *venationes* still had to go to great lengths to produce the most spectacular events; they needed not only time, substantial financial investments and a dosis of good luck, because capturing and transporting exotic beasts was a complicated and dangerous activity, but also contacts and mediators who could help them to communicate with and manage complex networks of hunters, transporters and traders. In order to make these efforts worthwhile, they attempted to establish and
perpetuate the memory of their *venatio* on public inscriptions, private domestic mosaics and ARS lanxes which they distributed among acquaintances, emphasising how many beasts they had provided of each species, how much they had spent or by underlining that their hunting shows had been more expensive and more impressive than those of others. By thus inciting their social peers to do the same, the sponsors of *venationes* established and confirmed ideas and norms regarding the generosity that was expected of local elites and the cultural importance of skilled hunting and the dominance of man over dangerous beasts.

*Venationes* were not only useful in the self-representation of donors, but they also established and expressed the social identity of the beast-fighters who performed in them, and – to a lesser extent – that of the spectators. The African *venatores*, often of indigenous descent, were *infames* and therefore in theory social outsiders, but their performances in the amphitheatres, in North Africa and elsewhere, as well as their membership of a sodality of beast-fighters also shaped their social identity in a positive way; courageous, fast and skilled beast-fighters were admired and could become very popular because they embodied the local cultural values that were celebrated in the amphitheatre, that of human domination in a ‘fair’ confrontation with powerful beasts and supreme hunting skills. For African spectators of *venationes*, not only seeing the skilled elimination of powerful beasts which represented a real threat in their living environment, but also the prospect of seeing a famous star-venator must have been an important part of the attraction of wild beast shows. Like for *venatores*, the rivalling African *venatio* sodalities provided an opportunity for enthusiastic spectators to shape their identity; by supporting one of these teams, they became part of a social group of fans that shared the same values and norms. For many of them, not only seeing the skilful elimination of natural enemies or the overwhelming entertainment and excitement of hunting shows, but also cheering for an admired venator and supporting his sodality, were important attractions of the arena spectacles with hunting shows.

It has become clear that the popularity of *venationes* in Roman North Africa can be explained by the opportunities that these cultural performances provided for shaping, expressing and confirming social identity and also, more banally, jobs and income, for many different groups in Romano-African society. In addition, the Roman-style hunting spectacles celebrated cultural values which had always been important in this area, also in the pre-Roman period, such as the supreme skill of hunters who eliminated wild beasts, most
importantly the *ferae africanae*, which were a real danger to herdsmen, farmers and their cattle and others who were active on the African countryside. Furthermore, the presence of the expertise and infrastructure for the supply of large numbers of African beasts for *venationes* in Rome and elsewhere in Italy enabled African editors to procure wild animals and *ferae africanae* for their own local hunting shows more easily than benefactors in other provinces. By staging amphitheatre shows in which the African beasts were skilfully eliminated, sponsors not only styled themselves as the generous protectors of the assembled community, after the example of the Roman emperors, but also propagated a world in which courageous hunters overwon the most powerful and dangerous wild African beasts.