Looking at Athletics in the Fourth Century: The Unification of the Spectacle Landscape in East and West

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Games and the Roman Empire

The western and eastern Mediterranean both had their own traditions of what scholarship today usually calls ‘games’: events held in large structures, often in stone, with hundreds or thousands of seats arranged around a central stage, on which a few protagonists were engaged in demanding feats of sports or arts that excited the assembled crowd. Although the word ‘games’ is a translation of *ludi*, it is in reality a modern category that covers a far larger spectrum of events than this Latin term. In the Greek cultural tradition, games were usually organized in the competitive format of the *agon*: free citizens voluntarily competed against their peers in athletics or in performing arts. In the Roman Republic, *ludi* were not necessarily competitive; chariot races were of course a contest, but theatrical shows were not. At the *munera* in the amphitheater, gladiators fought each other or *venatores* fought wild animals. The protagonists of the *ludi* and *munera* were not highly respected citizens who had volunteered to participate, but a mix of slaves and free men, whose citizen rights had been confined.

Research of the previous decades has convincingly shown how, despite the obvious differences, both traditions of games could play a comparable socio-political role in the political culture of the Roman Empire, because they shared a central feature: they offered the ruling classes the opportunity to make a positive connection with the crowd. Euergetism was a central element of the political culture in East and West alike. The organization of any type of games required a considerable organizational effort by wealthy sponsors, which was acknowledged by the community, which in return honored them with their cheers and other signs of appreciation. The benefactor in this way converted


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his economic capital into social capital, and saw his elevated position in society confirmed. Games not only confirmed the power of the local ruling classes, but also of the emperor. It was indeed important for a Roman emperor to be present at the games, for these were occasions where he interacted closely with the people. They could approach him with petitions and he was expected to react to these in an interested, civil manner. This climate even allowed for criticism, but riots were a rare event. The normal state was social harmony, for the exuberant atmosphere at the games normally created positive emotions towards the ruler, who was loudly acclaimed.2

Emperors were hence present at all kinds of games in the capital: he (or a carefully chosen representative) attended ludi or munera in Rome, which he had sponsored from his own fortune or which had been sponsored by Roman magistrates as part of their office. When he travelled through the Empire, he attended locally organized games. In the Greek-speaking part of the Empire these were typically agones. Already during the first decades of the Empire, Augustus showed that such athletic games were perfectly acceptable alternatives to the more traditional Western games. He famously attended the Sebasta in Naples shortly before he died.3 In AD 86, Domitian even introduced a permanent agon in Rome, the Capitolian games.4

Even without imperial presence, games could be used to send out ideological messages. The exotic animals and ethnic stereotypes in the munera sent a strong message of power because they visualized the extent of the Empire. Ludi were often organized on imperial feast days (to celebrate a birthday, an anniversary of the reign, or a military triumph). In the eastern Mediterranean, emperors were more likely to celebrate an important event with an agon. Augustus, for example, celebrated his triumph at Actium with the construction of

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3 Suetonius, Augustus 98.5; Velleius Paterculus 2.123.1. The Sebasta in Naples were not instituted by Augustus. According to Cassius Dio 55.10.9, the people of Naples wanted to honor their emperor to thank him for his financial help after an earthquake.